Here is an extended commentary of the famous Hatayogapradīpikā of Swami Svatmarama. The work is of recent origin in comparison to Sri Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras which is at least 3000 years old. Many distinguished schools could have flourished in the interim. Most if not all are indebted to the Patanjala Sutras, being the most ancient compilation and most profound one too. The present work running into 444 pages reflects the commentary of Jyotsnāyutā, namely Jyotsna commentary of Sri Brahmananda who is thought to have lived in the 18th century of this era. A detailed introduction by the author takes us through the historical background to the above statements. The author says, “Jyotsna, which literally means moonlight, true to its name, provides a gentle and comforting understanding of the powerful and profound teachings of Hathayogapradīpikā.”

The Sanskrit original of Sri Brahmananda is included along with translation and explanation where needed.

It is also brought out that Hatha neither means nor advocates forceful yoga asana practices. Hatha relates to the “strength of prana” and it is also said that it is “essentially the highest form of pranayama practice.” Thus, uniting the sun and the moon, namely prana and apana, is said to be Hathayoga practice.

Another authoritative text on this subject has this to say: “In order to make the subject clear, it was termed hatha, i.e. ha and tha yoga, a combination of two Beeja mantras. It has been explained in Hathayoga that ha represents prana, the vital force, and tha represents mind, the mental energy. Hence, Hathayoga means the union of the pranic and mental forces. When union between the pranic and mental forces takes place, then a great event occurs in human. This is the awakening of higher consciousness…. When Kundalini is established in Sahasrara Chakra, that is called yoga, not Hathayoga. This is the difference between yoga and Hathayoga.”

There are four chapters to this text; asana, pranayama, mudras, and finally, samadhi. Thus, the chapters are in the ascending order of complexity, of course each supporting the other in this progression. The asanas and pranayama are limited to those that bring immediate result to the movement of prana in the subtle body. Mudras – along with kriyas – facilitate this movement, and since this movement should be carefully accomplished to avoid any untoward expression of this potent energy, a competent teacher is required for overseeing the progress. There are esoteric aspects of these practices that are of importance and the book provides an overview of these also.

The author is very clear to advocate yoga practices not as prescriptive; the practices and the reference to any health-related problem in the text should be taken contextually to bring a balance in the subtle order in the body. Thus, the first three chapters of this text are toward cleansing butas (elements), indriyas (senses), in the psychology (through pranayama), and the harnessing of jātarāgni (inner fire) through mudras to complete the process of purification.

The great yoga master Sri Krishnamacharya seems to have defined yoga as a process of mastering daily death; he also mentioned that Mahamudra as described in this text is the means for achieving this. Thus, the text describes important asanas, Pranayama, mudras, and the last specifically for opening the central channel of Sushumna so that prana could start ascending in that space. This is toward attaining higher levels of consciousness and for attaining siddhis.

It is clearly stated in the text that Hathayoga is a stepping stone for Rajayoga. They are not in conflict with each other; on the contrary, it is clear that unless Hathayoga is perfected (as enunciated in this text), reaching subtler aspects of Rajayoga is not possible.

The author is very clear in exposition of his ideas related to Hathayoga and Rajayoga as well as classical interpretation of the present text. It is a commendable effort, given there are very few commentaries for this text, perhaps due to a perception that Pāthanjala Sutras are more important. However, these are linked seamlessly as the author points, Hatha practices culminating in Rajayoga of Sage Pāthanjali. The emphasis might be different, and given the fact that the texts originated in entirely different social and philosophical milieu, this is not surprising. Thus, to study one and relegate the other is not proper.

The book provides an excellent view of HathaPradipika from a classical angle; its presentation and production are both pleasing and flawless. The book presents original
Sanskrit verses, transliteration, word for word meaning, Sri Brahmananda’s commentary in Sanskrit, and an English translation of the commentary. Further, the translations have also many footnotes to explain the contents suitable to the present-day audience. There is also an appendix to the text which lists all the classical texts (such as Amarakosha) and a brief explanation of the sources, so the reader does not have to search for them from other sources. This should be helpful to students for a quick introduction to the sources. However, there are two aspects wherein the book could improve: the commentary by this author is in fine print which is often difficult to read. Second, an index at the end of the book would add value to many students and scholars who will find the book of great value.

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