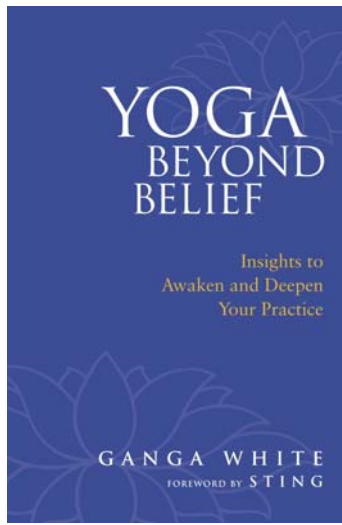


Excerpts from  
Yoga Beyond Belief—*Insights to Awaken and Deepen Your Practice*  
By Ganga White [www.whitelotus.org](http://www.whitelotus.org)



Some Insights from the chapter:

## **Finding the Ah-Ha in Hatha Yoga:**

### **The Asanas are Tools not Goals**

“Have No Goal!” Here is a common expression we hear attributed to Eastern philosophies. We’re told that goals lead to pressure and conflict—between the present actuality and the desired possibility. The message encourages us to live only in the moment, but is this even possible? Deeper questions often end in paradox, or perhaps a better word is polarity. Does time exist or is there only eternity? Is light matter or energy? These questions have no single answer. The answer depends upon how you look at the question. Should I have goals in my practice or no goals? The answer is both. We can have goals of strength, endurance, and flexibility. We may want to attain a certain asana or master certain techniques. But underlying the goals a softer core of *non goal awareness* is needed. We begin to see that our abilities, like all things, wax and wane. The process and constant attunement with the actuality of the moment is more important than any attainment. When goal orientation no longer drives us, we can move from an inner place of being rather than from the harder outer place of doing. It is important to balance *attaining* with *attuning*. We may want to attain a stronger, better asana but it should not be at the expense of attuning to our body’s capabilities in the moment. See if you can have goals *and* have no goal at the same time.

In addition to balancing our overall goal orientation with an inward approach we need to consider how we tend to make each asana a goal in and of itself. We see the Lotus pose, a beautiful backbend, or the Headstand and it becomes our goal to achieve it. This desire can create an aggressive or competitive practice and lead to injury. It is a common mindset to try to power through our weaknesses. I recall an over anxious student who, regardless of all warning and advice, zealously pushed his legs toward the Lotus posture. He would sit with his foot on his thigh, alternatively bouncing each of his knees down to loosen them. Then he would force his legs into the posture, sitting with a winced smile on his face for the two seconds he could maintain it. Eventually he injured his knees and it was years before he healed and could do the pose again. Sometimes going slower is going faster.

Another lesson we can learn when we begin to see yoga practices and asanas in the context of tools is that we need to learn the proper and skillful use of these tools. It is important to understand that asana

practice isn't automatically beneficial. Yoga practices can heal, but they can also injure. Although they are predominantly benign and in most cases beneficial, it is more intelligent to be aware of potential harm and endeavor to increase our skills in the personal application of yoga.

Asanas are tools, used to work on our bodies, to heal or to build strength, flexibility and endurance, much more than asanas are goals. They are also great metaphors to see our nature, our character, and the ways we move through life. *The asanas are tools and their purpose is to serve our bodies, minds and spirits.* They are not just goals to be attained. A story of a famous tailor in India named Hamsa-ji illustrates this point as well. One day Hamsa-ji was in a hurry to leave his shop when a customer, walking tall, came in to buy a suit. He said he must have the suit right away so he could use it for a special occasion that very evening. Hamsa-ji pulled out a suit and gave it to the man to try on. The man quickly slipped into the suit and stood before the great tailor in front of a mirror. The right leg and left arm were a bit too long and the jacket seemed large, so the man asked that they be fixed, but it was late and Hamsa-ji had no time. "The problem is all in your posture!" asserted the tailor. He instructed his customer, "Please lift your chest, now drop your right shoulder a little. Good. Now please, raise your right hip when you walk. Look in the mirror now, my dear sir. Does this suit fit or does it not?" The man smiled at his contorted figure in the mirror. The suit was a perfect fit, so he happily paid Hamsa-ji and hobbled out of the shop in his new outfit and new posture. A couple of the neighboring shopkeepers were chatting in the street as he left. One commented, "Brother, look at that poor cripple. Only Hamsa-ji, the great tailor, could fit a man like that!" We shouldn't try to cram ourselves into asanas like Hamsa-ji did to that man; rather we can learn how to use and adjust the asanas to our needs.

Postures and practice should be adjusted to the needs and levels of each practitioner, not the other way around. Yet more often than not, students approach limitations in reverse and force themselves into postures. Goals have their place. They give us energy and move us forward. They give purpose and direction and motivate us to achieve. However, focusing excessively on goals can cause aggressive practice that takes us out of the moment and out of attunement to the journey. Softening our goal orientation can help overcome aggressiveness and efforting in yoga practice so we are more able to enjoy the journey. Goals are the finish line of a race, whereas yoga is an ongoing process throughout life. We need goals, and we need to keep them in their place.

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## **The Long View**

Being present in your practice is balanced and tempered by keeping a long view, a lifetime perspective. Every body ages. A person twenty years of age is less apt to pay attention to this inevitability than a sixty year old, but the earlier we become aware of aging the more we will learn from the process. How would you act if you received a wonderful new car when you were sixteen years of age but were told that this was to be your only vehicle for your entire lifetime? How would you care for it? Although our bodies change and are self-healing we do in fact have only one body for our lifetime.

Acknowledging this fact and treating the body accordingly is an important part of taking the long view. We are all subject to setbacks from circumstance, accident, injury or illness. Yogis learn and gather tools to rebalance themselves and to become self-healers. Practice with the long view by holding an entire lifetime in perspective so that looking back years from now we'll be content with ourselves.

## **Strength and Flexibility**

An important aspect of working with physical polarities is to understand the interplay of strength and flexibility. Our bodies require healthy integration of both in the right balance to function properly. When yoga first arrived in the West it generated an enormous fascination with flexibility, probably due to the exotic pretzel contortions the early yogis demonstrated. Even now many people associate yoga

with flexibility postures. A common response I hear when I mention that I do yoga is, “Yes, I do some stretching too.” A yoga practice involves far more than merely being limber.

The syllable, *Ha* in *Hatha* means sun which implies masculine energy and symbolizes heating, expansion and strength; *Tha* means moon which refers to feminine energy and symbolizes cooling, contraction and flexibility. It is vitally important to bring these principles into balance. Too much flexibility and cooling can be as problematic as too much strength. Flexibility without strength leads to fragility. Strength without flexibility leads to rigidity. As you practice, become attuned to the relationship of these principles and aware of which principle needs emphasis. Watching the interaction of strength and flexibility is one of the things that can hold your interest and keep your practice fresh.

## **Tension Is Your Friend**

Muscular tension is necessary. The body constantly adjusts and changes its levels of muscle tension to support the skeletal structure, to protect the joints, and to absorb shock. The musculature of the body acts on the skeletal system like a series of interrelated springs and tensions that are constantly resetting each other at levels appropriate to the particular activities we engage in. These “springs” are composed of multiple processes of varying tensions, strengths, flexibilities, and hard and soft structures. Tensions interact and combine in many variations to reach higher levels of order and performance.

Stiffness is not a hostile adversary; rather, it is the operation of intelligence in the body. It is probably more appropriate to think in terms of keeping tension in the right balance than of eliminating it. A construction worker needs a different balance from that of a dancer. Hard work carrying lumber and bricks strengthens and hardens the musculature in different relationships than a dancer might desire. When we hike or do heavy work, the body naturally tightens. When we sit for a long time, the body adjusts its tensions accordingly. When we stand up and walk after sitting for a long time, we feel stiff. What we’re feeling is residual stiffness from the previous activity dissipating as the body resets its tensions for the new activity. If we do not keep the muscles pliable and able to reset, we may create imbalances that result in stiffness, pain, immobility or lack of skeletal alignment.

Both our activities and our inactivities affect the tension balance in our bodies. One purpose of yoga practice is to keep limits of strength, flexibility, tightness, and softness malleable and transformable. Broadening the limits of flexibility and the body's capacity to adjust is one of the purposes—and effects—of the asanas. Yoga practice leads to spring tensions that are more easily set and changed and can reach the right balance for the lifestyle we lead. Simply put, with a regular yoga practice, the body can more easily restore equilibrium after stiffening from hard work, strenuous physical activity, or even from periods of inactivity.

## **Flow and Grace**

As you progress in your asana practice it is very beneficial to develop qualities of grace and flow in moving between the poses. In the same way that we compartmentalize our lives, we may tend to fragment our practice into a series of syncopated movements. We may focus on the goal of reaching the posture we are moving towards and pay less attention to interesting processes of transition. This static focus leads to mechanical movements and less graceful practice. You can bring a gracefulness and fluidity to your movements by making the journey between postures as important as the destination of the finished pose.

Great dancers or athletes seem to glide and float effortlessly through their movements. They have worked hard to attain their performance levels, but they are no longer forcing it. They are moving in grace and joy. *Laghima*, or *floating*, is a combination of strength, flexibility, flow, and balance. It may be difficult to describe, but we have all seen it and any of us can learn it. This lightness and

floating sensation also relates to balancing the flows of upward and downward moving energies, and the relationship of control and surrender. Even a beginner can start learning to flow gracefully through the practice. Remember *Siva*, the mythological first yogi was also the great dancer. By learning to dance through our practice we will find more benefit and more joy.

## **Enjoy Your Practice**

Students who enjoy their yoga are the ones who stay with it over the long term. Some people make their practice, if not their lives, a constant struggle. They seem to be always pushing their limits, working on their form, or weighing and measuring themselves—trying to get to *where they should be*. Their approach becomes forced and tense. It can serve us to approach yoga more softly—to learn to enjoy it. We need to work hard and with discipline, but we also have to lighten up and remove the tendency towards regimentation. Even beginners with limited abilities, can find an enjoyable level of practice. I have taught more than one person in wheelchair who discovered more joy of movement than many of us may ever find. We can also work hard and still stay within enjoyment. We can all push the envelope and work near our maximum edges. Perhaps we need to make special efforts at times in order to make progress, but if we always struggle to do our utmost, we loose energy and tire. We all have a range of movement where we must exert and another range where we can move more freely. We can find that range of movement where we feel good, flowing in the joy of exercise and motion, and visit it often. We can learn to use yoga to get into higher, elevated states, making it fun, enjoyable. This is a great secret for maintaining a lifelong practice of yoga.

From the Chapter,

### **Hatha, the Yoga of Sun and Moon:**

#### **The Ten Body-Mind Systems:**

Hatha yoga, intelligently practiced, has extraordinarily beneficial effects on many levels, physically, mentally, and spiritually. As has been handed and expanded down through the centuries it has evolved, and continued to evolve, into the most complete and sophisticated system of physical culture, health and well being ever known to humanity. Yoga practices work with and balance many interrelationships within body and mind. In order to have a more holistic understanding of how yoga works, ten body mind systems can be taken into account. The spectrum of the ten systems, from the dense, physical bones of the skeletal system to amorphous consciousness of the mental system is a holographic parallel to the matter energy continuum of the physical universe and to the levels of energy of the chakra system which we will explore in a later chapter. These ten systems are closely interrelated and their functions overlap. Getting a sense of the actions and relationships of these ten can be very useful in the practice and understanding of yoga. How yoga affects and balances each system will be explained in this chapter.

#### **The Ten Systems**

- The Skeletal System
- The Muscular System
- The Circulatory System
- The Respiratory System
- The Digestive System and the Eliminative System.
- The Endocrine System
- The Nervous System
- The Pranic Energy System
- The Mental-Emotional Systems

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**Ganga White** is author of the new book, *Yoga Beyond Belief—Insights to Awaken and Deepen Your Practice*. The ground breaking book has been endorsed by Sting, Andrew Weil, MD, Jack Canfield, and many leading yoga teachers. Ganga is the founder-director of the renowned White Lotus Foundation yoga retreat in Santa Barbara. For more information on the author and book, visit [www.whitelotus.org](http://www.whitelotus.org) or call 805-964-1944.

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