

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HATHA YOGA

by Michele Hébert

“Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind.” Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Sutra 2.

It is estimated that there are more than 88,000 asanas or poses in Hatha Yoga with variations of over one million. Certainly the benefits to the physical body in terms of flexibility, improved circulation and increased energy levels are reason enough to practice regularly. However, the asanas have an effect on all levels of our being: physically mentally, and emotionally. Anytime we have a healing in one of these areas, there will be a healing on all other levels.

In the Walt Baptiste Method of Raja Yoga, a system in which asanas are held for longer periods to experience a deeper physical and mental release, we work with the mind and the breath while holding each pose. We do this by becoming the observer of ourselves in the pose. First, we let the breath become calm and even and become the easy breathing person within ourselves and within the posture or circumstance that life brings us. This, in itself, has far reaching effects on the brain chemistry stimulating serotonin, the messenger molecule of well-being.

When we hold the asanas longer, we observe that distinct thought patterns and feelings emerge within certain poses. Each posture brings out different parts of the mind and emotions that are stored in particular areas of the body. The mental repetition of mantra or positively charged words such as *peace, harmony, well-being* or *joy, peace, bliss* while relaxing in the asana serves to replace habitual thought patterns with new and inspired ones. In this way, we are able to actually reprogram the subconscious mind and free ourselves of deep subconscious conditioning. Also, as we repeat these meaningful words, every cell of your body will rejoice.

Ultimately, in each asana we want to relax through the difficulty and find that place within ourselves that is perfect well-being. As the breath becomes calm, there is a corresponding effect on the nervous system. Any sense of difficulty begins to fade with relaxed, calm breathing. As you learn to achieve this state in each yoga pose, your subconscious mind begins to look for this state of well-being in your daily life and affairs. More and more, it becomes your natural state of being. You become the easy breathing person in and through life's many postures and circumstances.

Mastering an asana has a far deeper meaning than physical accomplishment alone. Each yoga pose is a metaphor for a posture in life. As we gain mastery over a pose, somewhere in our outer life there is a corresponding healing. This is a direct reflection of the interconnectedness of ourselves as body, mind, and spirit, and with the universe of which we are a part.