

WHAT IS LILIAS YOGA?

What is “Lilias yoga”? Folks ask me this question all the time, for good reason. Lilias yoga has appeared in *TV Guide* listings for years. The name originated with my television show, and as I developed my own particular style of teaching and became known for my gentle yet very effective approach, the name just stuck. Then, my first two books were *Lilias, Yoga and You* and *Lilias, Yoga and Your Life*—but honestly, there is no such thing as Lilias yoga.

In the ancient picture, no type of yoga was named after a human being (no Tom yoga, no Mary yoga, no Lilias yoga). But these days you hear all kinds of names before the word “yoga.” The practice of yoga has been handed down and taught by such luminous yogis as Holy Master Swami Sivananda, B.K.S. Iyengar, and Mataji Indra Devi. I’m sure their enthusiastic and devoted students named particular yoga styles after their teachers—the teachers themselves didn’t do it. These giants in the world of yoga all taught the same Down Dog pose. Any differences came from how the knowledge was interpreted, enhanced, and delivered.

I first began to establish the distinctive “Lilias” style of yoga in a darkened TV studio, teaching to a red light. But I never felt alone in that studio—I could always sense my unseen class. I pictured each student getting off the couch and

sitting with me on the floor. Because I could not see my students, their comfort and safety in poses was always a prime concern. Going slowly through the postures, pulling them apart, and being clear about details and alignment became a style of teaching. The cameras used the body as a blackboard so the audience could see the poses and breathing from all angles. It was very important for me to explain everything I could about each pose and make sure I gave all the information needed to practice effectively and without injury. This was the beginning of Lilias yoga.

With all my talk about safety and comfort, though, I do have a confession to make. What ever possessed me to teach Headstand on television, I will *never* know. But I did. Talk about injury possibilities! Thank goodness, out of 500 taped yoga classes, I only once demonstrated this challenging posture. As chance would have it,

that 5-minute Headstand became a very amusing moment in the classic movie *Being There*. Peter Sellers, in the character of Chauncey Gardiner, showed Shirley MacLaine how he had learned to stand on his head: while in bed, watching me on television. I think it's ironic that the one Liliās yoga moment that appeared in a major movie was an example of what Liliās yoga definitely is *not*: difficult and risky.

To understand where Liliās yoga fits into the big picture, I want to tell you a little about a core text of yoga philosophy called the *Yoga Sutra*. The *Yoga Sutra* explains that yoga is often compared to a big tree with eight limbs or branches, each limb representing a branch of yoga. Only one of these branches is *asana* (posture), the type of yoga that most of us in the United States are familiar with. It is actually a very small branch of this big tree. Yet, this small branch is a household word to many millions throughout the world. Some of the other branches are *pranayama* (breath control), *dhyana* (meditation), and *dharana* (concentration), which I'll also discuss in this book. Please don't be intimidated by all these unfamiliar words! Along the way, I'll be introducing you to Sanskrit terms, but I won't be expecting you to remember them.

All branches of yoga seek to achieve the same final goal: enlightenment. Hatha (pronounced haht-ha) uses the body, breath, and mind, your closest natural environment, as the perfect place to begin your study of the Self. The body, with all its layers, needs to be properly prepared to handle the increased energy of other stages of

yoga, such as meditation. "Ha" in Sanskrit represents the sun energy; "tha," the lunar force.

Hatha is the balancing and integration of those energies, helping them to move well throughout your body by means of the physical practice of yoga, through postures (*asanas*) and breathing (*pranayama*). Since the yoga I teach involves *asana*—incorporating the body, breath, and mind—it is a style of *hatha yoga*.

With so many "yogas" today, it's easy to get confused, and I want you to understand exactly what I'm teaching in this book—and what I'm not. Here, I'll describe just a few styles I am familiar with.

ANUSARA YOGA means "to step into the divine current of will." Developed by John Friend, this is a heart-opening *hatha yoga* practice. It is based on the three areas of attitude, alignment, and action.

ASHTANGA YOGA was developed by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois of Mysore, India. This is a continuous flowing practice, more physically intense than some styles, to build strength of mind and body.

POWER YOGA was developed by Beryl Bender Birch and is a Western adaptation of *Ashtanga yoga*. It is more athletic and often done with contemporary music.

VINIYOGA acknowledges the whole person, integrating postures, breath, and philosophy. Developed by T. K. V. Desikachar, this style is renowned for its therapeutic applications for assistance in recovery from injury and illness. Poses are customized to fit the needs of the practitioner.

SIVANANDA YOGA is based on the teachings of Holy Master Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, India. Brought to the West in 1950, this system includes postures, breathing, chanting, and meditation, along with the study of yoga as it applies to one's life.

IYENGAR YOGA was developed by B. K. S. Iyengar of Pune, India, whose teachings are one of the most influential and well-known forms of hatha yoga. The focus is on precise alignment and subtleties within each asana. Using props helps the student adapt each pose to suit any body. To build strength, flexibility, and mind focus, the postures are held longer than they are in most traditions.

BIKRAM YOGA, known as “hot yoga,” was founded by Bikram Choudhury and is practiced in a heated room. Twenty-six hatha yoga poses are done in a specific sequence, offering the opportunity to sweat and detox the body.

All of these approaches have much in common, yet they offer a wide variety of yoga study to fit all sorts of personalities. I have taken much of my teaching style from T. K. V. Desikachar, whose Viniyoga is known for being specific to the needs of the student, particularly anyone with special physical or emotional needs.

MISCONCEPTIONS

Lilias yoga has often been misunderstood, as has the entire discipline. *Lilias! Yoga and You* first aired on PBS in 1972. By the mid-1980s, the series was airing daily nationwide. I loved teaching

yoga on TV, but I also really enjoyed getting out and teaching in person as often as possible.

My longtime friend and yoga buddy, psychologist Richard Miller, and I decided to hold a yoga workshop together near San Francisco. Today, yoga workshops are held every weekend all across the United States. But then, in the early 1980s, there were very few. Even though my show aired daily on KQED in San Francisco, I felt very insecure about people actually coming to the workshop. Wringing my hands, I voiced these concerns and worries to Richard as we drove to the studio: “Will anyone come? What if *nobody* comes?” Richard, in his quiet, humorous way, quickly guided my agitated thinking to a calmer, confident level.

Finally we pulled into the parking lot. We saw dozens of cars and what seemed like multitudes of people milling around the front door.

“Richard,” I said joyously, “look at all the people who have come to take our workshop!”

As we got closer, we noticed something odd: everyone was carrying placards. They were not there to *take* the workshop; they were there to *picket* our workshop.

As we walked through the milling crowd, I peeked at the signs and leaflets being handed out. “YOGA—THE WORK OF THE DEVIL,” in bold print. “YOGIS WORSHIP THE MONKEY GOD, HANUMAN, AND THE ELEPHANT GOD, GANESHA.” It felt shocking and hurtful to come face-to-face with so many misunderstandings and outright lies about yoga.

That day, many yoga students did push through the picketers and attend our workshop. But the

experience left me with more questions than answers. I knew in my bones that yoga is not the work of the devil. (I also loved the round, friendly elephant called Ganesha, whose job was to remove obstacles in life, and I felt inspired by Hanuman, so devoted to the service of God.) But I still wasn't absolutely, positively clear about what yoga is and is not. How did yoga fit in with my Christian roots? Slowly, answers would come, as yoga concepts and truths became integral to my own personal experience, not just something I had read in a book. I will share many of these answers with you in the following chapters and show you how to come to your own conclusions as well.



This is me practicing Upward-Facing Bow on the PBS set of *Lilias! Yoga and You*, 1972.

Yoga has long been associated with the Hindu religious traditions. It is true that yoga emerged from India as a set of practices with spiritual content; however, it is not married to any particular religious tradition.

Yoga means to join—the unification of two things. For some, this means joining hands to toes in a forward bend. Others understand it to mean joining the human heart with the heart of God. Either way is correct. It is a process. Whether you're touching hands to feet or reaching for God, there must be movement. This movement is yoga.

The physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of yoga are well documented. Hatha yoga is practiced in Buddhist and Christian monasteries and convents around the world. It is also a vital part of Dr. Dean Ornish's hospital program for reversing heart disease.

Yoga is not about adopting any particular set of beliefs but about coming to *know* through your own experience. It is not about blindly following anything or anyone, but it is about assisting *you* on your chosen path. Nothing in yoga competes with any religious pathway or system of belief. Yoga is the science and study of the Self. It is a vehicle for inner growth and development. Yoga emphasizes the doing and the practice. It can be adapted to fit every body, no matter what size, shape, age, or physical condition—all are welcome!