

## The Power of Sun Salutations



By Mas Vidal

The Sun Salutation sequence is one of the signature rituals of the Hatha branch of yoga that is popular for its dynamic use of the body. However, the gesture of saluting the sun suggests the importance of light in the yoga tradition and encourages the yogi to follow the light. The sun salutation sequence can be considered the most important gesture or practice of the entire hatha yoga system.

The world is filled with chaos, disease and heartless acts of violence and if we remain distracted by such activities, inevitably, feelings of sadness and fear will constantly overwhelm us. As the sun rises each day it's a bold reminder that life is positive, delightful and good overall, if that's what we focus on? Ultimately, dark things (the negative aspects of life) distract us, or take us away from life's purpose and light (positive) things increase our magnetic qualities of attraction, inner radiance and abundance. As human beings we all want to attain a sense of value or self worth. One way to understand this is, in knowing it is the same sun that shines on every living being and so in this way humanity shares a common thread.

The practice of the famous sun salutation series awakens the sacred *agni*, a subtle transforming fire that dwells with in us. The word agni itself comes from the root (ag) with the small part (ni) added to the end. The root (ag) comes from the root (a), meaning, "to be or exist" the (g), gives the idea to propel or force, therefore leaving us the meaning of existing with force. Mentally, this fire represents the potential to increase our awareness. Physically, agni functions as the fire of digestion or metabolism. Strengthening and balancing the digestive fire is one of the central themes of Ayurveda. In yoga, agni is the source of expanding consciousness as mental capacities beyond thought. Interestingly, we know that there is a direct link between our digestion and our state of our mind when we have that "gut feeling" about certain things. Most ancient traditions include some form of sun or light worship. The Rig Veda includes many slokas or hymns praising the sun. The great sage Sri Aurobindo called this the mystic fire. "Agni himself is the supplier of surya." Surya is the Sanskrit term for the sun and was revered as a God during the Vedic times

and was also highly worshipped in other ancient civilizations. In the Vedas the idea of will is essentially knowledge put into the form of force. Agni, therefore is a mental force and our ability to concentrate at one point to apply ourselves and accomplish any given task. The sun gives the yogi strength, vitality, radiance and a conquering ambition. The Egyptians in the east and the Mayans in the west as well as the Aztecs and the Incas practiced a form of sun worship that allowed them to build tremendous temples-pyramids, some dedicated to the sun. Still today many are baffled by these architectural feats, accomplished so long ago. These are examples of cultures empowered by the sun through acts of reverence that provides knowledge as power. These types of architectural accomplishments are sacred rituals in themselves, exercises that develop the sacred agni, and they cherished these rituals as offerings to the Gods, a way to connect to the higher forces in nature and with the mega-soul as the Sun. The mythos for humanity to live by is one, which demonstrates that work should not be fully focused on tangible gains but on cultivating a sacred alignment with the higher forces all sourced in the one magnificent creator, Brahman.

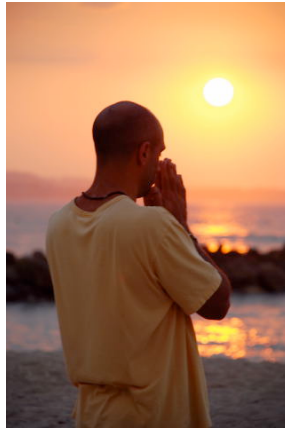


In life we all need a certain amount of fire (as drive and inspiration) to fulfill our worldly responsibilities and to follow our bliss or divine purpose (dharma), as fire can give us great insight and the power of tapasya (fire of discipline). The Sun as a planet also reflects the grandest symbol of life, cosmic consciousness and the fully enlightened state of awareness. The sun salutation is actually a series of gestures that prepares the physical spine to awaken our human potential by connecting the mind with the super spine (sushumna). The sun provides the vibration for optimism, humility and intuition that life so much requires.

According to the yoga tradition human beings are made up of both sun and moon qualities. The moon's relationship to the feminine is symbolized as the dark goddess Kali. In this moon symbolism we find the hidden force of maya or illusion, where habits and seed tendencies are created and bind us to the physical body and the five senses. The light of our right actions symbolized by the sun must eventually illuminate the moon, thus removing its shadow, our habit tendencies. Socially speaking, men must find their moon inside and women must find their sun outside, unless the two are balanced, it will continue to leave humanity in disarray as we have witnessed in countless centuries of recent human history.

The popular public greeting “Namaskar” means to salute, or to bow to the eternal spirit as the sound or word, from the root word *nam*. The palms of the hands come together to symbolize the union of sun-moon or male-female, honoring the indwelling spirit in all living beings. This reminds us that we are neither male or female. This simple but yet profound gesture (mudra) teaches us to have reverence to the highest power of life that lies within us as the inner light of our soul or jiva. The sun salutation begins and ends with this humble gesture. The sun salutations as an asana (postural yoga) series is not merely a bundle of physical positions for creating a flexible body but should be recognized as a vehicle for awakening our inner sun, our own

initiative to transcend the physical body and empirical knowledge into that of an individualistic guiding intuition. In embracing such an approach, the yogi connects the mind and the body to the highest aspect of existence as the inner Self.



Life itself provides us with a many opportunities to surrender and offer all our actions to the divine but they often pass us by because of fear, judgment and blame. These life opportunities can become useful ways to offer instead salutations of mindfulness, service and introspection to promote growth and wellbeing. Observation of the breath is a simple yet profound technique of the raja yoga branch that allows one to stay connected to the body and thus promotes awareness of energy blocks. The motivation to grow must come from within and through our experiences, although our environment is our greatest influence, initially it is helpful to be with the right people and in the right places until that mental power is established. The American mystic author, Emerson writes in his essay on Self Reliance...*The power, which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.*

Aside from the mystical energetic qualities of saluting the sun, it also offers many therapeutic benefits to the physical body. The kidneys (urinary system) are gently massaged especially during bhujanagasana (cobra pose) and the crouching tiger position, also known as the eight point pose. When flow of blood is consistent we reduce the risk of kidney stones. It is a series of spinal compressions and extensions that has a direct effect on the central nervous system. The endocrine system (glands) controls the production and the secretion of hormones. These are energetic substances, which are released into the bloodstream and are distributed to various parts of the body and its organs. This is done through the pituitary gland or master gland, which increases flow of blood to the head. The pineal gland in the brain, which is the portal to higher consciousness, is esoterically connected to the third eye, a common symbol of the sun. The sun salutation does very well to maintain activity and stability of this gland. The thyroid gland controls the rate of metabolism. This is the rate at which the food we ingest is transformed by the body. When the activity of the thyroid is slow this condition is called hypo-thyroidism. Its opposite is hyper-thyroid where all the functions are sped up. The alternate compressions and stretches of the throat in the salutation bring balance and restore normality of secretions. This gland is linked to the vishuddha chakra or throat center of speaking our truth. The para-thyroid deals with the function and absorption of calcium and phosphorus, which support and strengthen the skeletal structure. The thymus gland below the throat and into the chest deals with production of antibodies, which fight off diseases and bacteria. This is stimulated in the first and twelfth positions (prayer pose). Having good fire as balanced pitta in ayurveda is crucial to proper endocrine function.

When the adrenal glands secrete a number of different hormones known as adrenalin they can have an immediate effect on all of the body's vital functions. The salutation series is also very productive in toning and regulating both male and female reproductive organs. Often menstrual irregularities can be corrected. In the pancreas the glands produce the hormone insulin, which regulate the body's ability to store and utilize sugar. When insulin is not produced sufficiently the body does not adequately utilize ingested sugar, which is released into the blood and through the urine. This disease is commonly known as diabetes. During the standing backbends and the cobra posture, the abdominal organs press onto the pancreas thereby providing pancreatic stimulation and massage.

Whether we develop a physical practice of the sun salutation or embrace it as a spiritual symbol we can always feel the power of the sun. It has served humanity for thousands of years, sustaining life on earth and will continue to remind us of the One love we seek in our own hearts.