

FAQs What is Yoga?

The Roots of Yoga

The word Yoga comes from the Sanskrit word "Yuj" meaning to yoke, join or unite. This implies joining or integrating all aspects of the individual - body with mind and mind with soul - to achieve a happy, balanced and useful life, and spiritually, uniting the individual with the supreme.

In India, Yoga is considered one of the six branches of classical philosophy and is referred to throughout the *Vedas* - ancient Indian scriptures and amongst the oldest texts in existence. The *Upanishads* are also broadly philosophical treatises which postdate the *Vedas* and deal with the nature of the "soul" and universe.

However, the origins of yoga are believed to be much older than that, stemming from the oral traditions of Yogis, where knowledge of Yoga was handed down from *Guru* (spiritual teacher) to *Sisya* (spiritual student) all the way back to the originators of Yoga, "the *Rishis*," who first began investigation into the nature of reality and man's inner world.

Legend has it that knowledge of Yoga was first passed by Lord Shiva to his wife Parvati and from there into the lives of men.

The Aim of Yoga

According to the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, the ultimate aim of Yoga is to reach "*Kaivalya*" (emancipation or ultimate freedom). This is the experience of one's innermost being or "soul" (the *Purusa*). Then one becomes free of chains of cause and effect (*Karma*) which tie us to continual reincarnation. In *Kaivalya* one is said to exist in peace and tranquility, having attained absolute knowledge of the difference between the spiritual which is timeless, unchanging and free of sorrows, and the material which is not.

This is considered desirable as life is analyzed as ultimately full of sorrows and pain- even pleasure and joy leave pain and loss when they have gone as nothing in the material world is permanent.

Yoga is therefore a spiritual quest. However, along the path of yoga, the aspirant also gains health, happiness, tranquility and knowledge which are indicators of progress and an encouragement to continue their practice. Buddhism and other Eastern spiritual traditions use many techniques derived from Yoga.

The Paths of Yoga

There are said to be 4 main paths (*Margas*), according to the *Bhagavad Gita*, by which to reach the ultimate goal of Yoga - "*Kaivalya*." There is the path of Knowledge (*Jnana Marga*) in which one learns to discriminate between what is real and what is illusory, the path of selfless work (*Karma marga*), the path of devotion (*Bhakti Marga*) and the path of control of the mind (*Yoga Marga*) where all the activities of the mind and consciousness are studied and brought under control. From these have come the various paths of yoga which can be followed.

- *Raja* yoga involves mastery of the mind and senses in *Samadhi*; essentially the advanced aspects of Patanjali's *astanga* yoga.
- *Hatha* yoga is the yoga of the will which involves cultivating ones energy to arouse *Kundalini* primarily by means of *asana* and *pranayama*.
- *Mantra* yoga involves reciting sacred syllables to reach perfection.
- *Laya* yoga involves absorption in god to experience ultimate bliss.
- *Bhakti* yoga requires absolute devotion to god to achieve the ultimate goal.
- *Karma* yoga achieves this through selfless work without thought of personal reward.
- *Jnana* yoga is the yoga of knowledge cultivating the discrimination between spiritual reality and the illusion of the material world.

It must be realised that there are no clear cut boundaries between these various paths and all draw on the practices and philosophy of the others; effectively all paths have the same goal and "tread the same terrain." They are different views of the same topic.

The Schools of Yoga

Various schools or styles of Yoga have grown around each of these paths, which emphasize different aspects of these paths, or a combination of them, in their practical methodology. Usually these schools are established by renowned teachers or gurus and reflect their methodologies and ways of practicing, teaching and following the path of yoga. Some of the most well known modern schools or styles of yoga include: Iyengar, Astanga, Vini, Ananda, Anusara, Bikram, Integral, Kali Ray Tri, Kripalu, Kundalini and Sivananda. (See [this article](#) for a brief explanation of the differences between some of these schools at a practical level in terms of how classes are run.) Interestingly, 3 of the most popular schools today - Iyengar, Astanga and Vini Yoga - were all developed by students of Sri T. Krishnamacharya.

Particular styles or methods may be considered more effective than others or may suit an individual's temperament better. That said, it must always be remembered that all these are merely different methods of reaching for the same ultimate goal. They are all aspects of the overall philosophy of Yoga.

The Philosophy of Yoga

The philosophy of Yoga comes from many sources and has been presented in many fashions with differing emphasis depending on the understanding of the author.

The *Vedas* and *Upanishads* give some of the earliest references to the paths of yoga. These scriptures form the basis of Indian religious practices but contain many varied references to yoga and other things.

There are the *Puranas*, also ancient, which deal with the nature of the universe.

Famous epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* contain stories of the gods and lectures on moral and philosophical subjects with references to yogis and yogic practices.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a particularly famous part of the Mahabharata which contains a detailed discourse on yoga by Krishna to Arjuna.

Other texts such as the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* are more "technical manuals" of yoga which go into detail on technique as opposed to just the theory.

In general all these texts discuss Yoga from the particular standpoint of the authors and the paths to Yoga they have followed. In many ways this subject can be confusing for lack of a clear overview. This need is answered in the Yoga *Sutras* of Patanjali.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

The varied philosophies and methodologies of Yoga itself were clearly and methodically brought together and presented by the sage Patanjali in his set of 196 aphorisms called "The Yoga *Sutras*," written some 2200 years ago. The *Sutras* bring together all the various strands of theory and practice from all sources of yoga and present them in one concise, integrated and comprehensive text. How all the aspects interrelate and form part of the whole body of yoga are clearly elucidated. There are 8 disciplines to yoga as presented by Patanjali (thus Astanga yoga - 8 limbed yoga) which must be practiced and refined in order to perceive the true self- the ultimate goal of Yoga:

1. *Yama* - Universal ethics: Non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, sexual restraint and non-acquisitiveness.
2. *Niyama* - Principles of self conduct: purity, contentment, intense dedication or austerity, study of self and scriptures and self-surrender.

3. *Asana* - practice of the poses.
4. *Pranayama* - Breath control.
5. *Pratyahara* - withdrawal and control of the senses.
6. *Dharana* - concentration.
7. *Dhyana* - meditation.
8. *Samadhi* - a state of higher consciousness where the sense of self (ego) dissolves in the object of meditation and the individual self exists in its own pure nature.

In the four chapters of his sutras he explains the levels of higher consciousness (*Samadhi*) which the aspirant must experience before reaching *Kaivalya* (emancipation) and the end of this world's spiritual pursuit. The second chapter deals with the methodology which must be followed to reach *Samadhi* and the hindrances which may be encountered. The unusual powers that may develop are also described with the warning that their lure must be avoided, while the final chapter covers the achievement of *Kaivalya* in detail.

These *Sutras* were and are still considered a most profound and enlightening study of the human psyche. Patanjali shows how through the practice of Yoga, we can transform ourselves, gain mastery over the mind and emotions, overcome obstacles to our spiritual evolution and attain the goal of yoga: liberation from the bondage of worldly desires. Written in Sanskrit, many commentaries and translations have been written over the centuries by various scholars and practitioners; each interpreting as per their era and understanding.

BKS Iyengar is one amongst several contemporary authors, having completed [Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali](#) in the light of his own hard practice and experience, but using modern day language and concepts.