

yoga

## Yoga practice and intention

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In Hinduism, Yoga is considered to be the ultimate way of attaining Enlightenment. The earliest written accounts of yoga appear in the Rig Veda, which began to be codified between 1500 and 1200 BCE. Some historians believe that this 5000-year-old sculpture is of a yogi.

Modern yoga practice often includes traditional elements inherited from Hinduism, such as moral and ethical principles, postures designed to keep the body fit, spiritual philosophy, instruction by a guru, chanting of mantras (sacred syllables), quieting the breath, and stilling the mind through meditation. These elements are sometimes adapted to meet the needs of non-Hindu practitioners.

Proponents of yoga see daily practice as beneficial in itself, leading to improved health, emotional well-being, mental clarity, and joy in living. Yoga advocates progress toward the experience of samadhi, an advanced state of meditation where there is absorption in inner ecstasy.

The goals of yoga are expressed differently in different traditions. In theistic Hinduism, yoga may be seen as a set of practices intended to bring people closer to god - to help them achieve union with god. In Buddhism, which does not postulate a creator-type god, yoga may help people deepen their wisdom, compassion, and insight. In Western nations, where there is a strong emphasis on individualism, yoga practice may be an extension of the search for meaning in self, and integration of the different aspects of being. The terms Self-Realization and god-Realization are used interchangeably in Hindu yoga, with the underlying belief that the true nature of self, revealed through the practice of yoga, is of the same nature as god.

The ultimate goal of yoga is the attainment of liberation (*Moksha*) from worldly suffering and the cycle of birth and death (*Samsara*). Yoga entails mastery over the body, mind, and emotional self, and transcendence of desire. It is said to lead gradually to knowledge of the true nature of reality. The Yogi reaches an enlightened state where there is a cessation of thought and an experience of blissful union. This union may be of the individual soul (*Atman*) with the supreme Reality (*Brahman*), as in Vedanta philosophy; or with a specific god or goddess, as in theistic forms of Hinduism and some forms of Buddhism. Enlightenment may also be described as extinction of the limited ego, and direct and lasting perception of the non-dual nature of the universe.

For the average person still far from enlightenment, yoga can be a way of increasing one's spiritual awareness, or cultivating compassion and insight. While the history of yoga strongly connects it with Hinduism, proponents claim that yoga is not a religion itself, but contains practical steps which can benefit people of all religions, as well as those who do not consider themselves religious.

## Origins

Images of a meditating yogi from the Indus Valley Civilization are thought to be 6 to 7 thousand years old. The earliest written accounts of yoga appear in the Rig Veda, which began to be codified between 1500 and 1200 BC. It is difficult to establish the date of yoga from this as the Rig Veda was orally transmitted for at least a millennium. The first Yoga text dates to around the 2nd century BC by Patanjali, and prescribes adherence to "eight limbs" (the sum of which constitute "Ashtanga Yoga") to quiet one's mind and merge with the infinite.

The first full description of the principles and goals of yoga are found in the Upanisads, thought to have been composed between the eighth and fourth centuries BC. The Upanisads are also called Vedanta since they constitute the end or conclusion of the Vedas (the traditional body of spiritual wisdom). In the

Upanisads, the older practises of offering sacrifices and ceremonies to appease external gods gives way instead to a new understanding that man can, by means of an inner sacrifice, become one with the Supreme Being (referred to as Brāhman or Māhātman) -- through moral culture, restraint and training of the mind.

### **The word "yoga"**

The word "yoga" derives from the Sanskrit root *yuj* ("to yoke"); which is cognate to modern English "yoke". Both derive from the Proto-Indo-European root \*yeug- meaning "to join" or "unite" [1].

It is generally translated as "union of the individual atma (loosely translated to mean soul) with Paramatma, the universal soul." This may be understood as union with the Divine by integration of body, mind, and spirit. Thus, in essence, one who attempts yoga may loosely be referred to as a *yogi* or in Sanskrit, a yogin (masculine) or yogini (feminine). These designations are actually intended for advanced practitioners, who have already made considerable progress along the path, towards yoga.

### **Diversity of yoga**

Over the long history of yoga, different schools have emerged, and there are numerous examples of subdivisions and synthesis. It is common to speak of each form of yoga as a "path" to enlightenment. Thus, yoga may include love and devotion (as in Bhakti Yoga), selfless work (as in Karma Yoga), knowledge and discernment (as in Jnana Yoga), or an eight-limbed system of disciplines emphasizing meditation (as in Raja Yoga). These practices occupy a continuum from the religious to the scientific<sup>[citation needed]</sup>. They need not be mutually exclusive. (A person who follows the path of selfless work might also cultivate some knowledge and devotion.) Some people (particularly in Western cultures) pursue Hatha yoga as exercise divorced from spiritual practice.

Other types of yoga include Mantra Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Iyengar Yoga, Kriya Yoga, Integral Yoga, Nitya Yoga, Maha Yoga, Purna Yoga, Anahata Yoga, Tantra Yoga, Tibetan Yoga, etc. It is often helpful to check the teacher and lineage to be sure how these terms are being used. Another name for Raja Yoga ("royal yoga") is Ashtanga Yoga ("eight-limbed yoga"), but this should not be confused with the Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga developed by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, which is a specific style of Hatha Yoga practice.

### **Yoga and religion**

In Hinduism, Yoga is described as the ultimate way to attain God.

In the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain traditions, the spiritual goals of yoga are seen as inseparable from the religions of which yoga forms a part. Some yogis make a subtle distinction between religion and yoga, seeing religion as more concerned with culture, values, beliefs and rituals; and yoga as more concerned with Self-Realization, i.e., direct perception of the ultimate truth. In this sense, religion and yoga are complementary. Sri Ramakrishna likened religion to the husk, and direct experience to the kernel. Both are needed, "but if one wants to get at the kernel itself, he must remove the husk of the grain."

Some forms of yoga come replete with a rich iconography, while others are more austere and minimalist. Hindu practitioners of yoga are proud of their religious traditions, while non-Hindu practitioners claim that yoga may be practiced sincerely by those who have not accepted the Hindu religion.

While the yoga tradition remains rooted in India, the fact that some modern yogis like Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda came to the West suggests that they saw hope the yoga tradition could also flourish there. Critics of yoga as practiced in the West charge that it is sometimes watered down, corrupted, or cut off from its spiritual roots (e.g. the popular view that yoga is primarily physical exercises).

If yoga is one of India's great gifts to the world, the widespread acceptance of that gift - with the concomitant diversity - is sometimes incomprehensible to traditional Hindu practitioners of yoga<sup>[citation needed]</sup>. Yet the sheer number of people practicing yoga outside India suggests the need to define yoga both by its historical roots and its modern adaptations.

### Common themes

Common to most forms of yoga is the practice of concentration (*dharana*) and meditation (*dhyana*). *Dharana*, according to Patanjali's definition, is the "binding of consciousness to a single point." The awareness is concentrated on a fine point of sensation (such as that of the breath entering and leaving the nostrils). Sustained single-pointed concentration gradually leads to meditation (*dhyana*), in which the inner faculties are able to expand and merge with something vast. Meditators sometimes report feelings of peace, joy, and oneness.

The focus of meditation may differ from school to school, e.g. meditation on one of the *chakras*, such as the heart center (*anahata*) or the third eye (*ajna*); or meditation on a particular deity, such as Krishna; or on a quality like peace. Non-dualist schools such as *Advaita Vedanta* may stress meditation on the Supreme with no form or qualities (*Nirguna Brahman*). This resembles Buddhist meditation on the Void.

Another common element is the spiritual teacher (*guru* in Sanskrit; *lama* in Tibetan). While emphasized to varying degrees by all schools of yoga, in some the guru is seen as an embodiment of the Divine. The guru guides the student (*shishya* or *chela*) through yogic discipline from the beginning. Thus, the novice yoga student is to find and devote himself to a *satguru* (true teacher). Traditionally, knowledge of yoga--as well as permission to practice it or teach it--has been passed down through initiatory chains of gurus and their students. This is called *guruparampara*.

The yoga tradition is one of practical experience, but also incorporates texts which explain the techniques and philosophy of yoga. Many gurus write on the subject, either providing modern translations and elucidations of classical texts, or explaining how their particular teachings should be followed. A guru may also found an ashram or order of monks; these comprise the institutions of yoga. The yoga tradition has also been a fertile source of inspiration for poetry, music, dance, and art.

When students associate with a particular teacher, school, ashram or order, this naturally creates yoga communities where there are shared practices. Chanting of mantras such as Aum, singing of spiritual songs, and studying sacred texts are all common themes. The importance of any one element may differ from school to school, or student to student. Differences do not always reflect disagreement, but rather a multitude of approaches meant to serve students of differing needs, background and temperament.

The yogi is sometimes portrayed as going beyond rules-based morality. This does not mean that a yogi will act in an immoral fashion, but rather that he or she will act with direct knowledge of the supreme Reality. In some legends, a yogi--having amassed merit through spiritual practice--may then cause mischief even to the gods. Some yogis in history have been naked ascetics--such as Swami Trailanga, who greatly vexed the occupying British in 19th century Benares by wandering about in a state of innocence.

### Bikram Yoga

**Bikram Yoga** is a style of yoga developed by Bikram Choudhury. He claims that his method is the only true hatha yoga practiced in the West. This claim is not accepted by many other schools. Bikram has designed a sequence of 26 yoga postures (or asana) and two breathing exercises that are performed in a heated room. The postures are vigorous and demand a lot from the students. The heated room, typically around 95–105 °F (35–40 °C), makes muscles more pliant and encourages sweating which purportedly acts as a purifier. People of all levels, ages and body types practice together with a teacher acting as a guide, taking the class through the ninety-minute series.

Bikram teaches at the Yoga College of India in Mumbai and other locations around the world, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Paris and Tokyo.

### **Intellectual property controversy**

Bikram recently secured federal copyright registration under 17 U.S.C. Section 410 for his original work of authorship in his sequence of asana and pranayama. Through registration of this work, the United States Copyright Office acknowledges Bikram's exclusive right to the distinct series of postures and breathing exercises comprising the sequence. Together with an unvarying script of dialogue, this sequence makes up **Bikram's Beginning Yoga Class**.

This development is controversial within the United States yoga community. Some practitioners object to the idea that Bikram can have exclusive control over a series of postures derived from traditional practices. Also, some object to the way Bikram conducts his business, and particularly to his stated plans to create a formal franchise of studios.