

The Origins of Yoga

The word "Yoga" means union. Linguistically, it is related to the Old English "yoke." Traditionally, the goal of Yoga is union with the Absolute, known as Brahman, or with Atman, the true self. These days the focus is often on the more down-to-earth benefits of Yoga, including improved physical fitness, mental clarity, greater self-understanding, stress control and general well-being.

Yoga is union between mind and body.

Hatha yoga: which is the physical form of yoga is amazing physical exercises (known as Asanas) that work in every single area in the body. This is combined with balancing postures, brilliant breathing techniques and relaxation. All these work together to get the body into the best physical state possible leaving the mind calm, clear and relaxed to help his / her unique potential.

The yogis (a person who practices yoga) of ancient India, had a tremendous understanding of how the body, mind and spirit were interconnected and for total health, must work together harmoniously, a feeling that we find very difficult to understand in the west.

The origins of yoga date back well before the birth of Christ, in fact, traces of yoga postures have been found in ruins dating back to 5000BC in India and even Egyptians had their own form of yoga as is depicted in their hieroglyphics.

Stones have been found in Tibet that date from over 10,000 years ago that show early signs of yoga postures!

Yoga was developed by ancient Indian Sages, as a physical, psychological and philosophical approach to living harmoniously with ourselves and the world around us.

The techniques developed by the Yogis to transcend also help us take away the things that try to define us albeit wrongly i.e. the emotions, sensations, desires, achievements and failures of daily life. Through yoga we learn to develop greater awareness of our physical and psychological states.

As a result, we're in a position to better manage our reactions to these disruptive thoughts, feelings and responses we have to the various situations we deal with every day.

Yoga is first mentioned in the ancient Hindu texts: the *Vedas* (3000 - 1200BC), the Upanishads, about 800BC and the Bhagavad-Gita written about 500BC. All of these are beautiful texts in their own right, however you interpret them, either as wonderful poetic picturesque stories or as a religious text like the Bible.

Patanjali in about 200BC wrote the classical yoga system, which incorporates every aspect of lifestyle, as the Yoga Sutras.

We are told, that the Goddess Parvati, prayed for the solution to all human suffering. In a dream, Lord Siva revealed to her the greatest all of sciences, for the perfect physical and mental development of mankind, the science of Hatha yoga!

This was handed down from Guru (teacher) to pupil, then, in the 16th century AD, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika was written down by Svatanmarama and is the classic work on Hatha, or physical yoga and these two texts (The Sutras and Pradipika) are traditionally the unrivalled resource on classical yoga.

Since then, yoga has continued to be handed down and now Hatha Yoga is the most practised form of yoga in the west. The yoga of the body.

There are other forms other forms of yoga apart from Hatha, that you may only vaguely be away of without even knowing them as forms of yoga and this will be discussed later on.

So what is yoga?

Yoga is a way to prepare the body to be as healthy as possible in order for the mind to be clear, still and open for meditation and spiritual devotion.

Yoga should be respected not only for its wonderful effects aesthetically on the body but for the effects it has internally and on the mind.

Yoga not only creates, strong, lean, flexible muscles but works on all of the bodies systems – skeletal, muscular, digestive, endocrine, respiratory, nervous, circulatory....

In fact yoga works on every part of the body all of the time.

One question I always get asked is 'how can I loose weight with yoga when I'm not working the body as hard as if I were at the gym?'

The answer can be found in all of the above. We regulate weight through yoga due to the wide range of postures and breathing exercises and techniques.

There are moves such as shoulderstand and fish that work the thyroid and parathyroid glands in the neck. These glands stimulate the metabolism, which helps us to regulate and correct weight issues and appetite control.

In every yoga posture or asana every muscle is working, whereas in a gym, only one set of muscles is working at one time. This is why yoga builds strength and flexibility throughout the whole body.

There are moves to help digestion and the elimination process which again helps with weight, bloating, constipation and other weight related problems.

Correct deep breathing in yoga called Pranayama also aids the body in working correctly. Breathing deeply oxygenates our whole system and uses the diaphragm and whole of the lungs whereas usually we are used to shallow breathing.

Correct breathing is essential for a healthy body and calm mind and is why it is so important in the practice of yoga.

It is sometimes helpful to think of yoga as a toolbox, for any problem the individual has there is a move to help. There are moves for headaches, backaches, joint problems, stomach ailments, depression, anxiety...the list is endless and this is why yoga is so popular as its benefits are numerous and obvious.

I briefly mentioned depression above and yoga can help greatly with this as it calms the mind and alleviates a low mood. Forward bends are soothing and relaxing. Headstands change the direction of blood flow filling the heart, the lungs and the head with fresh oxygenated blood, which invigorates us.

Doing yoga postures creates a calm mind and still the body though concentration and though the deep breathing. This prepares the mind for relaxation and meditation.

With yoga there is no restriction on who can or can't do yoga based on their religious beliefs. Although yoga originated in the Hindu faith, it doesn't mean that if you're Christian that you cannot practice it as the benefits will still be the same and you can devote your meditation to your own belief system. There are many styles of yoga to accommodate everyone's needs, desires, beliefs and passions.

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

In yoga aside from all the wonderful physical benefits, there are numerous mental benefits which are all mentioned in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras previously mentioned. These stanzas are the essence of an age-old system.

Even though there has been such a variety in the development of the styles the teachings and the essence of the practice remains the same, based around these eight limbs of morals, actions, disciplines

and development. In all yoga practice, we urge that some essence of the limbs be practiced and not just the physical form, however for many, yoga is only about the Asanas and Pranayama and not yoga as a lifestyle of belief and discipline – there is no right and wrong in yoga and you choose to take from it what you want.

They are set out in an eightfold path that are made up of mental and physical disciplines known as limbs as outlined below: -

1. Yama – 5 principles or morals that act as a guide to living in harmony. These are similar to what is written in the New Testament. Yoga teaches us that happiness is within us not brought on by external objects.

Ahimsa – non-violence

Satya – truthfulness

Asteya – not stealing

Bramacharya – chastity

Aparigraha – not over consuming

2. Niyama – 5 physical and mental disciplines for daily life

Saucha – purity

Santosa – contentment

Tapas – Devotion and dedication

Svadhyaya – study and observation

Isuar Pranidhana – devotion to oneness or god

3. Asana – physical postures to cleanse the body of toxins and to prepare for a quiet mind. It is said that there is over 840,000 postures!

4. Pranayama – breathing deeply to enhance Prana (energy or life force) within the body, it help clears the Nadis (channels) that carry the Prana allowing it flow freely through the Chakras, which are the energy centres in the body. Often when even one of these is blocked, this is when illness of some form occurs in the body. When the blockages have gone, the cycle through the body works in sync. Pranayama increases this energy that we need everyday.

5. Pratayara – withdrawal of the senses to focus within, to become peaceful and calm.

6. Dharana – concentration for calming the mind, this is done through yoga balances

7. Dhyana – meditation. A powerful tool for freeing the mind.

8. Samadhi – enlightenment. The result of our total efforts. It is the state of union with the universal spirit or God.

As you can see, yoga is not just about the physical postures of meditation that it is often only known for.

It is a way of life that we can take as much or as little from it as we like and fit it into our lifestyles or we can choose to fit our lifestyles into the yogic way of living.

Yoga is like a tree, there are many branches and from them, even more branches!

Yoga has many principles and here are the other forms that make up the full system: However, you need not learn or practice these unless you so desire, but it helps to know and understand them. These are more to do the yogic philosophy and lifestyle, rather than the physical exercises we associate with yoga in the west. However, in everyday life we can apply a little of each of these disciplines of yoga as a guide to living a better life.

With greater awareness comes the sensitivity and skill to find and remove the physical and psychological blocks that often keep us from being our true and happy selves.

Whether yoga is pursued as a spiritual path or for its psychological-physiological benefits, yoga is a methodology for developing a deeper experience of ourselves and the world around us.

That is, its not about self-absorption, despite the fact we talk of withdrawal of the senses etc. its about union and being part of it. Most books, videos and websites focus on yoga postures, breathing and meditation, which is all good as some for some people, this is all they require of yoga, however the tradition also emphasizes love, compassion, knowledge and right action as paths toward union and the branches of yoga listed below show this as well as the eight limbs of Patanjali's Sutras.

Other styles or branches of yoga: -

1) Raja Yoga: the yoga of the mind, this yoga involves exercising and calming the mind through meditation. This is known as the Royal Yoga as it encompasses most other forms, for which Hatha (physical yoga) is a part of.

If you think of Raja as the main tree trunk, the hatha (physical) yoga is a branch to help the minds development and then within Hatha, there are eight other branches known as the Eight Limbs, these include the breathing techniques, postures, meditation, concentration as well as the yogic morals and philosophies. Again this refers back to the eight limbs of yoga.

2) Karma yoga: the yoga of action and selfless service. You may have heard people say that Karma will come back on a person if they have done wrong. Karma yoga is to be kind to all other living things as well as yourself, otherwise; perhaps in another life you will suffer the consequences.

3) Hatha Yoga: Union through bodily control and movement, the physical yoga.

4) Bhakti yoga: the yoga of devotion, for many this is where the confusion lies about yoga, as it was born out of Hinduism, it is seen as a religion. This is not true, yoga is for everybody. There has even been Christian churches that would not allow yoga to be practised in the halls they owned as it was 'against' their religion. This is misguided and completely the opposite of the yoga belief. Bhakti yoga is simply devotion, and this could be to any god of your choosing, any religion of your choosing, in fact it could be devotion to anything you have a passion or desire for, even to be true to a loved one.

5) Jnana yoga: Union by knowledge. The yoga of the intellect, again this is the yoga of the mind, keeping the mind fit and working, studying, reading, listening and learning.

6) Tantric Yoga, the yoga of love and sexual energy.

7) Mantra Yoga: Union by speech and sound

8) Laya or Kundalini Yoga: Union through creative energy

In some ways we practice all of these to some extent in whatever yoga we practice.

Because yoga cleanses the systems, it allows the body to function better and thus clears the mind.

Body and mind work together and if one is not functioning to its best this reflects in the other. Same as if we feel low emotionally, we feel sluggish and lethargic physically. If we feel ill or achy, this in turn will make us feel low. Yoga works on both to create a positive healthy balance.

By practicing yoga daily for a little or as long as you like, eating healthily, breathing deeply and fully and thinking positively through relaxation and mediation. We live to the optimum fitness that we can physically and mentally.

Yoga is an elixir of youth, filling us with vitality and energy that other forms of exercise just cannot do as they work solely on the body and only by doing one thing at a time. In all other exercise regimes, breathing, stretching, relaxation, meditation are all but simply overlooked.

Other Physical Styles of yoga

There are many variations on the Hatha or physical side of yoga, here is a brief description of some of the most popular forms.

Kundalini – This works on the principle that we all have an inner energy source at the base of our spine like a curled snake and we need to just tap into that source of hidden energy and awaken it to get the best out of life. This form of yoga works on this

Ashtanga - an energetic free flow dynamic style of yoga that uses Locks or Bandhas to hold the energy in and move up the body and Ujjayi breathing where the glottis at the back of throat is contracted to make a deep hissing sound. All of these techniques create heat in the body and allow the pupil to go deeper into moves.

Bikram - sometimes also called hot yoga as it's practiced in a very hot room. Some say that they have found this to be the most easiest form to meditate after due to the effects of the heat. This is open to question as the heat may simply have just caused mild exhaustion! But what works for one, may not work for another, but there always something for everybody.

There are many other styles (Integral, Iyengar, Viniyoga....) each with their own benefits and differences, Basically all physical yoga is the same and varies only in its practice and technique.

Yoga Therapy

Another technique that has seemingly developed in recent years is the use of yoga for its therapeutic values in regard to restoring health. This is known as Yoga Therapy but essentially all yoga is therapy for the mind and body but it has been tailored to every individuals needs, be it injuries, nutritional help, remedial massage techniques through the ancient wisdom of yoga and modern medicine

Correct eating and Yogic nutrition

Yoga teaches us to enjoy food. It seems so strange that when food is in the mouth and we are tasting it that we spend such little time chewing and enjoying the flavours and taste in favour of just swallowing quickly. Digestion starts in the mouth, so we aim in yoga to teach to eat slowly and mindfully, to enjoy the food we eat, thus we derive much more from the experience than simply to stop feeling hungry.

A key to learning to change your lifestyle and eating better is to describe everything in your mind as you eat it.

It is also vital to drink plenty of fresh water. We take in Prana (life force or energy) from everything around us, air, food, and water. So fresh food and water is essential to maintaining our health and energy supply.

So to summarise - Why do yoga?

- Promotes a feeling of well-being – by toning both mind and body.

- Increases an awareness and strength in the body
- Works on internal organs (liver and kidneys become cleansed), cells, glands (such as thyroid which regulates weight), and the endocrine system, regulates the metabolism and in turn appetite and weight control.
- Improves posture and delays the “ageing” process
- Improves digestion and elimination process
- Improves circulation, skin tone, hair growth.
- Can be done by “everyone” – all age’s shapes and sizes. For the inflexible it will make them such, great for kids too as its fun and something to learn.
- It can be restorative for mild injuries, muscle pulls and aches and pains.
- Creates strong muscle foundations for other sports or exercise but is perfect at toning in itself with many styles to choose from.
- Creates strong bones and joints. Keeps the spine young and strong. A flexible strong spine is the key to youth and posture as well it being a second brain that feeds and functions the organs around it.
- Promotes a positive happier attitude and rewards the practising individual with the “Feel-Good Factor”
- Alleviates depression through concentration, relaxation and meditation. Calms the individual helping with sleep problems
- For every problem, there is a yoga move to help as previously described. There are forward bends that help lift mood, back bends that keep you young, supple and open out stiffness as well as helping with Asthma. There are twists for stomach, wind and digestion problems. The list is endless....
- Yoga can also help with addictions, be it food, alcohol, tobacco....
- Yoga teaches us to withdraw from the stresses of external life and helps us to look inwards for eternal happiness. By having a healthy body and calm mind this is achieved through homeostasis

Yoga put simply makes you feel really good and is the best gift we can give ourselves for healthy mind and body.