

What is Yoga?

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What comes into your mind when you hear the word Yoga?

Well, if you think of women in seemingly impossible poses, then you may have an inkling of what Yoga is. But that's just it - an inkling. You've got a long way to go before fully understanding Yoga.

Yoga is an ancient Indian body of knowledge that dates back more than 5000 years ago. The word "Yoga" came from the Sanskrit word "yuj" which means "to unite or integrate." Yoga then is about the union of a person's own consciousness and the universal consciousness.

Ancient Yogis had a belief that in order for man to be in harmony with himself and his environment, he has to integrate the body, the mind, and the spirit. For these three to be integrated, emotion, action, and intelligence must be in balance. The Yogis formulated a way to achieve and maintain this balance and it is done through exercise, breathing, and [Meditation](#) - the three main Yoga structures.

In Yoga, the body is treated with care and respect for it is the primary instrument in man's work and growth. [Yoga Exercises](#) improve circulation, stimulate the abdominal organs, and put pressure on the glandular system of the body, which can generally result to better health.

Breathing techniques were developed based on the concept that breath is the source of life. In Yoga, students gain breathing control as they slowly increase their breathing. By focusing on their breathing, they prepare their minds for the next step - Meditation.

There is a general misconception that in Meditation, your mind has to go blank. It doesn't have to be so. In Meditation, students bring the activities of the mind into focus resulting in a 'quiet' mind. By designing physical poses and [Breathing Techniques](#) that develop awareness of our body, Yoga helps us focus and relieves us from our everyday stress.



Six Branches of Yoga

- Hatha Yoga or Yoga of Postures

Hatha Yoga is perhaps the path of Yoga you are most familiar with since this is the most popular branch of Yoga in the West. This branch of Yoga uses physical poses or Asana, Breathing Techniques or Pranayama, and Meditation to achieve better health, as well as spirituality. There are many styles within this path - Iyengar, Integral, Astanga, Kripalu, and Jiva Mukti to name a few.

If what you want is a peaceful mind and a healthy body to go along with it, Hatha Yoga may just be the path for you.

- Bhakti Yoga or Yoga of Devotion

Bhakti Yoga is the path most followed in India. This is the path of the heart and devotion. Yogis who practice this branch see the "One" or the Divine in everyone and everything. Bhakti Yoga teaches a person to have devotion to the "One" or to Brahma by developing a person's love and acceptance for all things.

- Raja Yoga or Yoga of Self-Control

Raja means "royal". This path is considered to be the King of Yoga and this may be due to the fact that most of its practitioners are members of religious and spiritual orders. Raja Yoga is based on the teachings of the Eight Limbs of Yoga found in the Yoga sutras.

A Raja Yogi sees the self as central, and as such, respect to oneself and for all creation are vital to this path. They achieve self-respect by first learning to be masters of themselves.

If you wish to learn discipline, then Raja Yoga would perfectly suit that need.

- Jnana Yoga or Yoga of the Mind

Jnana Yoga is the path of Yoga that basically deals with the mind, and as such, it focuses on man's intelligence. Jnana Yogis consider wisdom and intellect as important and they aim to unify the two to surpass limitations. Since they wish to gain knowledge, they are open to other philosophies and religion for they believe that an open and rational mind is crucial in knowing the spirit.

- Karma Yoga or Yoga of Service

Karma Yoga is the path of service for in this path, it is believed that your present situation is based on your past actions. So by doing selfless service now, you are choosing a future that is free from negativity and selfishness. Karma Yogis change their attitude towards the good and in the process, change their souls, which leads to a change in their destiny.

- Tantra Yoga or Yoga of Rituals

Perhaps the most misunderstood of all the paths, Tantra Yoga is about using rituals to experience what is sacred. Although sex is a part of it, sex is not the whole of it since this path aims to find what is sacred in everything we do. Tantra Yogis must possess certain qualities like purity, humility, devotion, dedication to his Guru, cosmic love, and truthfulness among other things.

There are still a lot of misconceptions about Yoga, for instance, Yoga being a religion. Yoga is not a religion. It is more of a set of techniques for us to find spirituality. In fact, Yoga is being practiced by a lot of people from different religions like Christians, Jewish, Buddhists, and Muslims.

Another misconception is that Yoga is an exercise, a way for us to keep fit. It is partly true, but if you think that Yoga is just that then you are greatly mistaken. Yoga develops the body since a weak one is a hindrance to spiritual growth. It does not simply focus on the physical but on the mental and spiritual aspects as well.



Yoga in Your Life

You may ask, "Is Yoga for me?"

Definitely, yes! Yoga is for anyone who is willing to learn its ways and ideas. It does not actually require any special equipment or clothing. What it requires is your will to have a healthier, stress-free self.

You may first approach Yoga as a way to achieve a great body or to keep fit and that is perfectly alright. Yoga really does help in improving your health for stretching can tone your muscles and exercise your spine and your entire skeletal system.

Do not just take advantage of what Yoga can offer. Yoga encourages you to reflect on yourself and to find your inner peace. It exercises not just your body but your mind as well. With a healthy body and mind, you're on your way to a more fulfilling life.