



An Introduction to Yoga

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Editors note: This is the fourth in a series of articles examining various self-care options.

A Short History of Classical Yoga

Many people in western culture are aware of yoga and that it is a physical regimen/workout to stretch and strengthen the body. However, the series of postures that is known to most of us as yoga is actually only one part of a larger system of well being. It is this larger system that is yoga, with the physical postures for stretching and strengthening referred to as asanas. Like Qigong and Tai Chi, yoga is an ancient practice, having originated over 5,000 years ago. Around 2,000 years ago the practice of yoga was collated into a single treatise known as the Yoga Sutra. In this treatise yoga is divided into eight 'limbs' or steps to be followed (see right), and thus is referred to as Ashtanga Yoga ("ash" meaning eight, and "tanga" meaning limbs). Yoga is not a religion, but a spiritual path developed alongside/within Hinduism and Buddhism, and is still often associated with both of them. In translation, yoga means 'to join together', 'union', or 'a method of discipline'. Therefore, it originally is a discipline aimed at bringing the practitioner into union with the divine.

The term Hatha Yoga is one that is commonly encountered, often with some confusion. Hatha Yoga often is used to denote the physical postures, or asanas, but Hatha seems to most correctly refer to all four of the first four limbs. The word Hatha is actually a combination of two words: "Ha," meaning sun and "tha," meaning moon, which re-emphasizes the uniting, balancing nature of yoga. These first four limbs are designed to prepare the practitioner for the last four limbs which culminate in Samadhi, or self-realization and ultimately lead to uniting with the divine.

There are different branches of Yoga, with different styles within each branch. Each branch applies the eight limbs of the Yoga Sutra differently. Raja Yoga (raja means royal) uses meditation as its focal point and involves strict adherence to the eight limbs. Karma Yoga refers to the 'path of service' and places an emphasis on selfless service to others. Bhakti Yoga is the path of devotion, or seeing the divine in all of creation. Jnana Yoga is the path of the mind with its emphasis on serious study of scriptures and texts, much like Kabalistic scholars or Jesuit priests. The final and most misunderstood branch is Tantric Yoga, which is the path of ritual. People often associate sexual practices with Tantric Yoga, when actually most tantric schools recommend a celibate lifestyle. People that follow tantric yoga often see ritual in various places, such as a Japanese tea ceremony, church proceedings, etc. There are a number of physical yoga styles that range from vigorous routines that make you sweat to gentle, meditative routines, as well as styles that combine elements of both. For a list of various styles and their descriptions, go to <http://www.yogajournal.com/newtoyoga/1365.cfm> .

The Eight 'Limbs' of Classical (Ashtanga) Yoga:

1. *Yama* (controls or restraints)
 - nonviolence
 - truthfulness
 - non-stealing
 - non-indulgence
 - non-possessiveness
2. *Niyama* (observances or actions)
 - purifying body, mind, and spirit
 - contentment
 - self-discipline
 - self-study
 - self-surrender to a higher power
3. *Asanas* (postures)
4. *Pranayama* (life energy/breath control)
5. *Pratyahara* (control of the senses)
6. *Dharana* (concentration / focusing the mind on one point)
7. *Dhyana* (meditation - sustaining the mind on one point)
8. *Samadhi* (self-realization / transcendence)

Modern Applications of Yoga

Even though it developed as a spiritual path in conjunction with certain religions, yoga has proven very adaptable. Yoga attracts people of different cultural and religious backgrounds. Most new practitioners in western cultures turn to yoga for its physical benefits, especially as a workout regimen. For some people that is all they want to get out of it, and that is understandable considering the long list of benefits (see right). Others naturally begin to adapt other aspects of yoga to use as an adjunct

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to their own spiritual/religious practices. In fact the practice of the asanas may open up some people to a spiritual path for the first time in their lives. Practitioners may begin to see how various aspects of their lives can connect to different parts of the eight limbs and/or different branches of yoga. For example:

- The part of Niyama concerning purifying the body connects to what they eat and drink.
- The part of Niyama concerning surrender to a higher power connects to their current religious beliefs.
- The parts of Yama concerning nonviolence, non-stealing, truthfulness, and non-indulgence connect to the moral code within their own religion.
- The focus on ritual within tantric yoga connects to the church services and functions they attend, to weddings, to praying before meals, and more.
- The focus on selfless service to others within Karma Yoga connects with the volunteering they do at the local soup kitchen.
- The focus on scholarly study within Jnana Yoga connects with the study of their own religious texts. Perhaps they are drawn to study texts from other religions as well.

Additionally, modern practitioners who open up to the larger practice of yoga may come to see it as a vehicle for creating union not just with the divine, but in various aspects of their lives:

- Union/integration of different parts of the physical body
- Union of body, mind and spirit
- Union of conscious mind and unconscious mind
- Union of lower self and higher self
- Union of one's male side and one's female side
- Union of Yin and Yang
- Union of our "Everyday" nature and our "True" nature

Benefits of Physical Yoga

- Improves flexibility and joint mobility
- Strengthens, tones, and builds muscles
- Improves posture and musculo-skeletal conditions affecting posture such as bad knees, muscle tightness, swayback, and scoliosis
- Eases back pain
- Increases stamina
- Increases circulation
- Lowers blood pressure
- Improves respiratory function
- Boosts immune system response
- Decreases cholesterol and blood sugar
- Increases body awareness
- Relieves symptoms of arthritis, arteriosclerosis, chronic fatigue, diabetes, asthma
- Creates mental clarity and calmness
- Relieves chronic stress
- Relaxes the mind
- Sharpens concentration

References

Various articles. Yoga Journal. <http://www.yogajournal.com>

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