

AN OVERVIEW OF YOGA

This is the first in a series of brief articles on yoga theory and practice.

Yoga is a living tradition, a philosophy and methodology which cultivates creativity, health, and happiness. The word *yoga* is probably best translated as integration. In simple terms, it means to yoke or to unite the body, mind, and spirit. Yoga practice induces peace and well-being on every level of our lives: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Yoga practice gathers the energies of our bodies and minds and gently opens our awareness. It reveals the key to establishing and sustaining vitality, contentment and wisdom in our lives. Just as an automobile could be defined as a means of transportation from one destination to another, so yoga could be defined as a means to a destination, a place of balance and joy.

Yoga has always been an oral tradition. It is not an orthodoxy. It was not established on scripture, but on an evolving understanding and direct experience of life. This direct experience has been passed on from teacher to student and from master to disciple over generations. It forms the living link of yoga knowledge. The practice of yoga does not require a belief in a specific doctrine or philosophy. Therefore, yoga is compatible with any religious faith. Yoga students are given methods and encouraged to realize this direct and personal experience for themselves through their own practice, self-discipline, and study.

Yoga is not really a philosophy, as many people think, but is a series of techniques. It is a wonderful system of psychological and physiological self-disciplines, which lead to a rebalancing of the body and mind. Although not a philosophy, Hatha Yoga methods are often taught in conjunction with one of the six major schools of yogic philosophy. Yet the philosophy remains independent of the techniques, and students do not need to embrace it in order to benefit from Hatha Yoga practice.

Though primarily an oral tradition, over the millennia in which yoga has existed, certain aspects of its practices have been committed to writing. One of the primary texts utilized by yogis is the *Yoga Sutras*, collected by the Indian sage, Patanjali. Patanjali codified, but certainly did not canonize, the oral tradition which preceded him. He took this existing oral tradition and organized it into four short books which presented a pattern for memorizing and studying yoga.



The Yoga Sutras are said to have been written between 500 and 200 B.C.E. However, it is well known that Patanjali's text is a reconstruction of a much older text which preceded him by hundreds of years. From evidence found in Northern India, it is known that 800 years earlier, yoga texts were not written down at all, but were transmitted verbally. This indicates that the system is at least 5,000 years old.

In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali describes yoga as an eight step process known as Ashtanga (*ash* = eight and *anga* = limbs).

The eight limbs of Patanjali's Ashtanga system are:

1. Yama (restraints)
 - non-violence (ahimsa)
 - non-lying (satya)
 - non-stealing (asteya)
 - non-sensuality (brahmacharya)
 - non-greed (aparigraha)
2. Niyama (observances)
 - purification (shaucha)
 - contentment (santosha)
 - austerity (tapas)
 - self-study (svadhyaya)
 - attunement (Ishvar-pranidhana)
3. Asana (postures)
4. Pranayama (regulation of prana or the life force)
5. Pratyahara (sense withdrawal)
6. Dharana (concentration)
7. Dhyana (meditation)
8. Samadhi (contemplation)

The first four limbs, Yama, Niyama, Asana, and Pranayama, form the primary techniques practiced by the beginning student. Among these first four essential limbs of Patanjali's system, we find the focus of our study: asana or Hatha Yoga, which is the

ability to form and hold a posture that is stable and comfortable while regulating the breath.

The eight limbs of the Ashtanga system were structured to be practiced sequentially and simultaneously, indicating that stillness and integration of the body, breath, and mind, supported by a balanced lifestyle, are essential to sustain physical and mental health. Without these fundamental skills and the benefits of their practice, deeper and advanced yoga techniques are difficult or impossible to master. In this program we will discuss all eight limbs of the classical system; but our primary focus will be on asana or Hatha Yoga, pranayama, and meditation.

The Hatha Yoga system builds concentration, poise and stillness of body and mind. Pranayama, or yoga breathing exercises, reduces mental tension, focuses the mind, and increases the body's energy level by oxygenating the blood stream. Meditation, sometimes done in conjunction with hatha practice, helps consciously quiet the mental activity and emotions which constantly absorb the mind. Meditation releases intuitive, creative energies, and reveals insights into the nature of consciousness, the pattern of the mind, and Life itself.

Yoga has been organized into specific types or systems of study. There is a famous maxim, "Truth is one, but the paths are many, and all paths lead to the mountain top." In the same way, there are many different types of yoga. Yet all lead to an expansion of awareness. These different types of yoga are practiced according to an individual's needs, preferences, and personality.

In the West, people generally equate yoga with Hatha Yoga. They often use the terms *yoga* and *Hatha Yoga* interchangeably. Students will say, "I'm taking a yoga class," when in fact they are practicing a specific type of yoga known as Hatha. In truth, the term *yoga* embraces all forms of yoga, of which the hatha system is one of many.

Because of our emphasis on the physical body and on physical health, many people in this country are attracted to the physical aspects of yoga, even though the yoga system offers so much more. As it is taught in the West today, yoga has been modified by the various cultural values of western society. Thus, in the West, yoga is most frequently considered as an exercise system, and associated with methods for relaxing and reducing stress.

However, Hatha Yoga is much more than exercise. It is a system which is designed to give maximum flexibility and strength to the skeletal, muscular and nervous systems. It strengthens the spine, making it supple. The postures massage the internal organs,

regulate circulation, and stimulate the glandular system. Yoga asanas restore the body to its natural equilibrium and alleviate tension so the muscles and nervous system will relax more naturally.

Studies have been conducted to document these beneficial effects of hatha practice. Medical research on yoga has shown some interesting results. It has been found that savasana relieves high blood pressure and that regular practice of Hatha Yoga and breathing techniques can help to alleviate arthritis, arteriosclerosis, chronic fatigue, heart conditions, asthma, and varicose veins. One study indicated that through Hatha Yoga practice, lung capacity and respiration can be significantly increased, body weight can be reduced, the ability to resist stress can be improved, and there can be a decrease in cholesterol and blood sugar levels. Today there is no longer any doubt of Hatha Yoga's effectiveness as both a curative and preventive method.

The yogis who first developed the hatha system in ancient India knew this well, but they used a simple series of eight or ten poses in their practice. These have evolved over the centuries into the vast number of postures we know today. A classical text specific to Hatha Yoga, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, describes the various asanas and breathing exercises, which form the basis of modern hatha practice. It is said to be based on the work of Goraksanatha and was written in the fifteenth century. But even the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* describes only 15 postures. The *Shiva Samhita*, another work on Hatha Yoga, contains 80 postures. From this continuing development of the system, we can see that the oral tradition of yoga is alive and well and still flourishing.

As a teacher, you become a part of this living tradition. Study the system. Practice calmly and consistently. Make it your own. In truth, yoga is much like a tree that bears fruit. The fruit is there for those who find the tree, and recognize that they must partake of the fruit to nourish themselves. Yet once nourished, they transform the gift of Life into a vitality which enriches their life and benefits others.

May the blessings which this ancient science offers bring into your life abundance, wealth, and wisdom. May joy, peace, and contentment be yours. May you live a life that fills you and others with ever greater health and happiness.

May you always remember that the fruit contains the seed, and within the seed is all the potential of the tree.