

# Finding "The Right" Yoga Practice

by Lisa Dunsdon

## What is yoga?

The word yoga is often interpreted as "union" or a method of discipline from the Sanskrit word "yuj" (to yoke or bind). A male practitioner is called a **yogi**, a female practitioner, a **yogini**.

## The Postures ....

The contemporary western approach to yoga is not based on any particular belief or religion, however Yoga does have its roots in **Hinduism** and **Brahmanism**. Yoga was developed by *seers* or *ascetics* living primarily in the southern parts of India. The seers observed nature and lived as close as they could to the earth, studying the many aspects of nature, the animals and themselves. By observing and emulating the different postures and habits of the animal kingdom they were able to develop grace, strength and wisdom.

It was through these very disciplined lives that the practice of the yoga postures were developed. It was necessary to develop a series of postures to keep the body lithe and able to endure long periods of stillness when in meditation.

## The Writings ....

Brahmanism dates back to containing sacred scriptures called "the Vedas". These scriptures contained instructions and incantations. It was in the oldest text "*Rg-Veda*" from the scriptures that the word Yoga first appeared, this was nearly 5000 years ago. The fourth text called "*Atharva-Veda*" contains mainly spells for magical rites and health cures many of which use medicinal plants. This text provided the average person with the spells and incantations to use in their everyday life and this practice of "*Veda*" can still be seen in the streets of India today.

*The Bhagavad-Gita*, another ancient work on spiritual life describes itself as a yoga treatise, although it uses the word Yoga as a spiritual means. It was from this literature that **Patanjali's "eight limbs of yoga"** were developed. Yoga Sutra's are primarily concerned with developing the "*nature of the mind*" and I will explain more of this in the next section.

## The Breadth ....

The *vratyas*, a group of fertility priests who worshipped *Rudra*, god of the wind would attempt to imitate the sound of the wind through their singing. They found that they could produce the sound through the control of their breath and through this practice of breath control was formed "**Pranayama**". Pranayama is the practice of breath control in yoga.

## The Paths ....

The *Upanishads*, which are the sacred revelations of ancient Hinduism developed the two disciplines of **karma** yoga, the path of action and **jnana** yoga, the path of knowledge. The paths were developed to help the student liberate from suffering and eventually gain enlightenment.

The teaching from the *Upanishads* differed from that of the *Vedas*. The Vedas demanded external offerings to the gods in order to have an abundant, happy life. The *Upanishads* through the practice of **Karma** yoga focused on the internal sacrifice of the ego in order to liberate from suffering. Instead of the sacrifice of crops and animals (external) it was the sacrifice of the inner ego that would become the basic philosophy, thus yoga became known as the path of renunciation.

Yoga shares some characteristics also with **Buddhism** that can be traced back through history. During the sixth century B.C., Buddhism also stresses the importance of Meditation and the practice of physical postures. *Siddharta Gautama* was the first Buddhist to actually study Yoga.

## ***What is Yoga Sutra and how did the Philosophy of Yoga develop?***

Yoga Sutra is a compilation of 195 statements which essentially provide an ethical guide for living a moral life and incorporating the science of yoga into it. An Indian sage called **Patanjali** was believed to have collated this over 2000 years ago and it has become the cornerstone for classical yoga philosophy.

The word **sutra** means literally "a thread" and is used to denote a particular form of written and oral communication. Because of the brusque style the sutras are written in the student must rely on a guru to interpret the philosophy contained within each one. The meaning within each of the **sutras** can be tailored to the student's particular needs.

The *Yoga Sutra* is a system of yoga however there is not a single description of a posture or asana in it! Patanjali developed a guide for living the right life. The core of his teachings is the "**eightfold path of yoga**" or "**the eight limbs of Patanjali**". These are Patanjali's suggestions for living a better life through yoga.

Posture and breath control, the two fundamental practices of yoga are described as the **third and fourth limbs** in **Patanjali's eight-limbed path to self-realisation**. The third practice of the postures make up today's modern yoga. When you join a yoga class you may find that is all you need to suit your lifestyle.

### ***The eight limbs of yoga***

#### 1. The **yamas** (*restraints*),

These are like "Morals" you live your life by: Your social conduct:

- **Nonviolence (ahimsa)** – To not hurt a living creature
- **Truth and honesty (satya)** – To not lie
- **Nonstealing (asteya)** – To not steal
- **Nonlust (brahmacharya)** - avoid meaningless sexual encounters – moderation in sex and all things.
- **Nonpossessiveness or non-greed (aparigraha)** – don't hoard, free yourself from greed and material desires

#### 2. **niyamas** (*observances*),

These are how we treat ourselves, our inner discipline:

- **Purity (shauca)**. Achieving purity through the practice of the five Yamas. Treating your body as a temple and looking after it.
- **Contentment (santosa)**. Find happiness in what you have and what you do. Take responsibility for where you are, seek happiness in the moment and choose to grow.
- **Austerity (tapas)**: Develop self discipline. Show discipline in body, speech, and mind to aim for a higher spiritual purpose.
- **Study of the sacred text (svadhyaya)**. Education. Study books relevant to you which inspire and teach you.
- **Living with an awareness of the Divine (ishvara-pranidhana)**. Be devoted to whatever is your god or whatever you see as the divine.

#### 3. **asana** (*postures*) –

These are the postures of yoga:

- To create a supple body in order to sit for a lengthy time and still the mind. If you can control the body you can also control the mind. **Patanjali** and other ancient yogis used asana to prepare the body for meditation.

Just the practice of the yoga postures can benefit one's health. It can be started at any time and any age. As we grow older we stiffen, do you remember the last time you may have squatted down to pick something up and how you felt? Imagine as you age into your fifties, sixties, seventies and on being able to still touch your toes or balance on one leg. Did you know that the majority of injuries sustained by the elderly are from falls? We tend to lose our balance as we grow older and to practice something that will help this is surely a benefit.

The **fourth** limb, breath control is a good vehicle to use if you are interested in learning meditation and relaxation.....

4. **pranayama** (*breathing*) – the control of breath:

inhalation, retention of breath, and exhalation

- The practice of breathing makes it easier to concentrate and meditate. *Prana* is the energy that exists everywhere, it is the life force that flows through each of us through our breath.

5. **pratyahara** (*withdrawal of senses*),

- Pratyahara is a withdrawal of the senses. It occurs during meditation, breathing exercises, or the practice of yoga postures. When you master Pratyahara you will be able to focus and concentrate and not be distracted by outward sensory.

6. **dharana** (*concentration*), - teaching the mind to focus.

- When concentrating there is no sense of time. The aim is to still the mind e.g. fixing the mind on one object and pushing any thoughts. True dharana is when the mind can concentrate effortlessly.

7. **Dhyani** (*meditation*), - the state of meditation

- Concentration (dharana) leads to the state of meditation. In meditation, one has a heightened sense of awareness and is one with the universe. It is being unaware of any distractions.

8. **samadhi** (*absorption*), – absolute bliss

- Absolute bliss is the ultimate goal of meditation. This is a state of union with yourself and your god or the divine, this is when you and the universe are one.

All eight limbs work together: The first five are about the body and brain— yama, niyama asana, pranayama, and pratyahara — these are the foundations of yoga and provide a platform for a spiritual life. The last three are about reconditioning the mind. They were developed to help the practitioner to attain enlightenment or oneness with Spirit.

## How do you choose the type of yoga right for you?

The type of yoga you choose to practice is entirely an individual preference and thus why we are looking into here to help you start. Some types hold the postures longer, some move through them quicker. Some styles focus on body alignment, others differ in the rhythm and selection of postures, meditation and spiritual realization. All are adaptable to the student's physical situation.

You therefore need to determine what Yoga style by your individual psychological and physical needs. You may just want a vigorous workout, want to focus on developing your flexibility or balance. Do you want more focus on meditation or just the health aspects? Some schools teach relaxation, some focus on strength and agility, and others are more aerobic.

I suggest you try a few different classes in your area. I have noticed that even between teachers within a certain style, there can be differences in how the student enjoys the class. It is important to find a teacher that you feel comfortable with to truly enjoy and therefore create longevity in what you practice.

Once you start learning the postures and adapting them for your body you may feel comfortable to do practice at home as well! All yoga types have sequences that can be practiced to work different parts of your body. To A fifteen minute practice in the morning may be your start to the day. Your body will feel strong and lithe within no time and with knowledge, the choice is there for you to develop your own routines.

## The Major Systems of Yoga

The two major systems of yoga are **Hatha** and **Yoga Raja Yoga**. **Raja** yoga is based on the "Eight Limbs of Yoga" developed by Pananjali in the Yoga Sutras. Raja is part of the classical Indian System of Hindu Philosophy.

**Hatha** yoga, also **Hatha vidya** is a particular system of Yoga founded by *Swatmarama*, a yogic sage of the 15<sup>th</sup> centry in India. *Swatmarama* compiled the "*Hatha Yoga Pradipika*", which introduced the system of Hatha Yoga. Hatha yoga is derived from a number of different traditions. It comes from the traditions of Buddhism which include the Hinayana (narrow path) and Mahayana (great path). It also comes from the traditions of Tantra which include Sahajayana (spontaneous path) and Vajrayana (concerning matters of sexuality). Within Hatha yoga there are various branches or styles of yoga. This form of yoga works through the physical medium of the body using postures, breathing exercises and cleansing practices.

The **Hatha** Yoga of *Swatmarama* differs from the **Raja** Yoga of *Patanjali* in that it focuses on *Shatkarma*, "*the purification of the physical*" as a path leading to "*purification of the mind*" and "*vital energy*". *Patanjali* begins with "*purification of the mind and spirit*" and then "*the body*" through postures and breath.

## The Major Schools of Yoga

There are approximately forty-four major schools of Yoga and many others which also lay claim to being Yogic. Some of the major schools are **Raja Yoga** and **Hatha Yoga** (as mentioned above). There are also **Pranayama Yoga** and **Kundalini Yoga** which stem from *Hatha*. **Jnana, Karma, Bhakti, Astanga and Iyengar** stem from *Raja*.

## The Yoga Styles that stem from Hatha include:

### Pranayama Yoga

The word pranayama means **prana**, *energy* and **ayama**, *stretch*. Breath regulation, prolongation, expansion, length, stretch and control describes the action of **pranayama yoga**. Some Pranayama breath controls are included in the *Hatha* Yoga practices of a general nature (to correct breathing difficulties).

This school of yoga is entirely built around the concept of Prana (life's energy). There are about 99 different postures of which a lot of these are based around or similar to physical breathing exercises.

*Pranayama* also denotes cosmic power, or the power of the entire universe which manifests itself as conscious living being in us through the phenomenon of breathing.

### Kundalini Yoga

**Kundalini** yoga is in the tradition of *Yogi Bhajan* who brought the style to the west in 1969. It is a highly spiritual approach to hatha yoga involving chanting, meditation, breathing techniques all used to raise the *kundalini* energy which is located at the base of the spine.

## The Yoga Styles that stem from Raja include:

### Raja Yoga/Ashtanga Yoga

**Raja** means royal or kingly. It is based on directing one's life force to bring the mind and emotions into balance. By doing so the attention can then be focused on the object of the meditation, namely the Devine. **Raja Yoga** or **Ashtanga Yoga** is one of the four major Yogic paths of *Hinduism*. The others are **Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Bhakti Yoga**. **Raja or Ashtanga** are derived from the "**eight limbs of Yoga**" philosophy composed by *Patanjali*.

## Power Yoga

**Power** Yoga has been devised through the teachings of **Sri K. Pattabhi Jois**, a renowned Sanskrit scholar who inspired Western Yogis with his **Ashtanga** Yoga Style and philosophies. It is therefore often referred to as the western version of India's **Ashtanga** yoga.

**Power** yoga is vigorous and athletic and is therefore very popular with men. It works with the student's mental attitude and perspective and incorporates the eight limbs of yoga into practice.

## Jnana Yoga

**Jnana** (sometimes spelled "Gnana") means wisdom and a Jnani is a wise man. Sometimes referred to as the "yogi of discernment".

This form of yoga focuses on studying inner life and adhyatmic subjects, the practice of certain relaxations and contemplative, meditative **kriyas**. The main purpose of jnana meditation is to withdraw the mind and emotions from perceiving life and oneself in a deluded way so that one may behold and live in attunement with reality or spirit. This form of yoga focuses on meditation to work towards transformation and enlightenment.

## Karma Yoga

**Karma** means "action". **Karma yoga** is based around the discipline of action based on the teachings of **Bhagavad Gita**, a holy scripture of **Hinduism**. This yoga of selfless service focuses on the adherence to duty (dharma) while remaining detached from the reward. Karma is the sum total of our acts, both in the present life and in the preceding births.

## Bhakti Yoga

**Bhakti yoga** has many phases to its practice. **Bhakti** means "devotion" and **Guna Bhakti** is to worship according to your nature. A practitioner of **Bhakta Yoga** is not limited to any one culture or religious denomination, the approach is more to the inner life rather than the wholly devotional. The self within worships the self of the universal nature.

**Bhakti yoga** is the state of being in contact with our existence and being and the existence and being of all things. It doesn't matter if you believe in something or you don't the only quality is the openness to the mind and heart, unexpected and unknown.

Those who have read about **Quantum physics** where each and every atom in the universe is connected to the underlying reality will be able to liken this to the philosophy behind **Bhakti yoga**.

## Iyengar Yoga

**Iyengar Yoga** was developed in India by B.K.S Iyengar, born 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1918. At the age of 16, he was introduced to yoga by his Guru Sri T. Krishnamacharya. **Iyengar Yoga** is now one of the most popular styles practiced in the west.

Instructors are very knowledgeable about the anatomy and precise body place for each posture. There is less focus on pranayama or breathing techniques and mediation and thus why the practice is popular in the west.

Iyengar Yoga emphasizes more on the correct placement of the feet to ensure the spine and the hips are in alignment. Iyengar has developed many different props and techniques to cater for individuals in their practice.

## Other Styles

### Integral Yoga or Purna Yoga

**Integral** yoga is a yoga of synthesis, harmonizing the paths of **karma, jnana** and **bhakti yogas**. It was developed by Swami Satchidananda.

It is also considered a synthesis between **Vedanta** (Indian system of philosophy) and **Tantra** (Asian beliefs and practices using the principle that the divine energy creates and maintains the universe, channelling the energy within the human microcosm). It also been explained as a synthesis between Eastern and Western approaches to spirituality.

Postures are gentler than other forms of yoga and classes normally end with extended periods of deep relaxation, breathing and meditation. **Integral Yoga** is an all round approach to **hatha yoga**.

### Sivananda Yoga

Sivananda yoga offers a gentle approach. It includes meditation, chanting and deep relaxation in each session. Students are encouraged to be healthy which includes being vegetarian.

### Bikrams Yoga

**Bikrams** yoga was founded by *Bikram Choudhury* who was taught by *Bishni Ghosh* the brother of *Paramahansa Yogananda*. *Bikrams* Yoga is taught generally in a room the temperature set between 95 and 105 degrees.

The heat helps soften the muscles and ligaments. There are approximately 26 postures and this yoga produces a real workout because of the heat is quite intense. This yoga therefore places more emphasis on the physical performance of the postures, not the sides of relaxation and meditation.

### Some of the Great Teachers...

All styles share a common lineage. The founders of two of the major styles of yoga **Raja/Ashtanga** and **Avenger** were all students of the same great teacher named **Krishnamacharya**.

**Shri T. Krishnamacharya**, was born in the village of Muchukunte, Karnataka State, in 1888. His formal Education, largely in Sanskrit, included Degrees from several universities in North India. He studied for seven years under a distinguished yogi in western Tibet: *Rama Mohana Brahmachari* who instructed him the therapeutic use of *asanas & pranayama*. Then he returned to South India and established a school of yoga in the palace of the Maharajah of Mysore. He passed away at the age of 101 years in 1988.

**Integral Yoga** and **Sivananda Yoga** were also founded by students of another great teacher named **Sivananda**. *Swami Sivananda Saraswati* was born Kuppuswamy in Pattamadai, Tamil Nadu, India. A Hindu by birth, he is a well-known proponent of yoga and *vedanta* (a principal branch of Hindu philosophy).

He is reputed to have written over 300 books, on these and related subjects, during his life. In 1936 he founded the new religious movement "The Divine Life Society" on the bank of the holy Ganges River. He died on the 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1963.

## So which type is right for you?

These are not all the types of yoga available, however you can see from the short explanations of each that Yoga practice can differ dramatically. Each one makes use of the physical postures and breathing to strengthen the body for meditation, an inherent part of yoga practice.

This is where it is important for the student to understand what they want out of their yoga practice and choose a style which will cater for this. If you try one and don't think it is physical enough, try another as it will be totally different. If you start one that is too demanding than again switch around until you find the practice for you.

Some of us want to just work on body and some want more focus on a method of searching for self realisation, whatever the reason I am sure there are enough styles out there and more developing each day to cater for our needs.

You are never too old to start yoga, I have met people in their seventies starting for the first time and experiencing life changing affects. If you've ever sat and watched your cat or dog awake in the morning what is the first thing they do? stretch. If we stop for just a moment and watch what we can learn from nature and the animal kingdom we will realize that just the simple act of stretching has been lost somewhere through our evolution.

The table below shows the rating between 1 and 10 I have given to explain the degree of Physical and degree of Meditation/Relaxation in each Yoga practice (10 being the highest)

<b>Name of Yoga</b>	<b>Physical Rating</b>	<b>Meditation &amp; Relaxation Rating</b>
<b>Pranayama Yoga</b>	4	8
<b>Kundalini Yoga</b>	6	8
<b>Raja Yoga/Ashtanga Yoga</b>	10	6
<b>Power Yoga</b>	10	2
<b>Jnana Yoga</b>	6	8
<b>Karma Yoga</b>	6	8
<b>Bhakti Yoga</b>	6	8
<b>Iyengar Yoga</b>	8	4
<b>Integral Yoga or Purna Yoga</b>	6	8
<b>Sivananda Yoga</b>	6	8
<b>Bikrams Yoga</b>	10 (due to the heat)	2

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