

## A Historical Analysis of Yoga

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### Introduction

Yoga is a family of spiritual practices which originated in ancient India, where it remains a vibrant living tradition and is seen as a means to enlightenment. Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Raja Yoga are considered the four main yogas, but there are many other types. In other parts of the world where yoga is popular, notably the United States, yoga has become associated with the asanas (postures) of Hatha Yoga, which are popular as fitness exercises. Yoga as a means to enlightenment is central to Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism, and has influenced other religious and spiritual practices throughout the world. Important Hindu texts establishing the basis for yoga include the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika.

### What is Yoga?

The word "yoga" has been derived from the Sanskrit root "yuj" which means to unite. It is generally translated as "union of the individual atma (loosely translated to mean soul) with Paramatma, the universal soul." This may be understood as union with the Divine by integration of body, mind, and spirit. Thus, in essence, one who attempts yoga may loosely be referred to as a yogi or in Sanskrit a yogin (masculine) or yogini (feminine).

### Origin

The evidence of origin of yoga is found from the Indus Valley civilizations. Images of a meditating yogi from the Indus Valley Civilization are thought to be 6 to 7 thousand years old. The earliest written accounts of yoga appear in the Rig Veda, which began to be codified between 1500 and 1200 BC. It is difficult to establish the date of yoga from this as the Rig Veda was orally transmitted for at least a millennium. The first Yoga text dates to around the 2nd century BC by Patanjali, and prescribes adherence to "eight limbs" (the sum of which constitute "Ashtanga Yoga") to quiet one's mind and merge with the infinite.

The first full description of the principles and goals of yoga are found in the Upanisads, thought to have been composed between the eighth and fourth centuries BC. The Upanisads are also called Vedanta since they constitute the end or conclusion of the Vedas (the traditional body of spiritual wisdom). In the Upanisads, the older practices of offering sacrifices and ceremonies to appease external gods gives way instead to a new understanding that man can, by means of an inner sacrifice, become one with the Supreme Being (referred to as Brahman or atman) through moral culture, restraint and training of the mind.

We do find yoga in different forms in different kinds of texts which are given below.

### Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita notably distinguishes several types of "yoga", corresponding to the duties of different character of people. Capturing the essence and at the same time going into detail about the various Yogas and their philosophies, it constantly refers to itself as such, the "Scripture of Yoga". The book is thought to have been written sometime between the 5th and the 2nd century BC. In it, Krishna describes the following yogas:

1. Karma yoga, the yoga of "action" in the world.
2. Jnana yoga, the yoga of knowledge and intellectual endeavor.
3. Bhakti yoga, the yoga of devotion to a deity (for example, to Krishna).

### Patanjali

The *Yoga Sutras* were compiled around 400 CE by Patanjali, taking materials about yoga from older traditions. Perhaps the classic description of yoga is the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, which form the basis not only of the darshana called "yoga" - one of six such "orthodox" schools of Hindu philosophy, but also of the practice of yoga in most ashrams (to the extent these can be distinguished). The school (dharshana) of Indian philosophy known as "yoga" is primarily Upanishadic with roots in Samkhya, and some scholars see some influence from Buddhism. The Yoga philosophy fully believes in the epistemology of the Samkhya school, as well as its concept of the individual spirits (Purusha) and the Nature (Prakriti) but differs from Samkhya's atheism.

Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras presents the goal of yoga as 'the cessation of mental fluctuations (cittavrtti nirodha), an achievement which gives rise to the possibility of stable meditation and thus deeper states of absorption (dhyana or samadhi). This requires considerable restraint (yama) and self-discipline (niyama; see below for Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga)). Patanjali's yoga is sometimes called Raja Yoga (Skt: "Royal yoga") or "Ashtanga Yoga" ("Eight-Limbed Yoga"), in order to distinguish it from Hatha yoga. It is held as authoritative by all schools. Patanjali is also known for writing

commentaries (Mahabhashya) on the Sutras of the great Sanskrit grammarian Panini. In fact, Panini, Patanjali and Katyayana are regarded as the highest authority not only in Sanskrit but also in the whole of Linguistics.

Patanjali's text sets forth eight "limbs" of yoga practice. Interestingly, only one of them involves physical postures (and these mainly involve seated positions). The eight are:

1. Yama (The five "abstentions"): violence, lying, theft, (illicit-) sex, and possessions
2. Niyama (The five "observances"): purity, contentment, austerities, study, and surrender to God
3. Asana: This term literally means "seat," and originally referred mainly to seated positions. With the rise of Hatha yoga, it came to be used of these yoga "postures" as well.
4. Pranayama: Control of prana or vital breath
5. Pratyahara ("Abstraction"): "that by which the senses do not come into contact with their objects and, as it were, follow the nature of the mind." — Vyasa
6. Dharana ("Concentration"): Fixing the attention on a single object
7. Dhyana ("Meditation")
8. Samadhi: Super-conscious state or trance (state of liberation)

### **Hatha Yoga**

Over the last century the term yoga has come to be especially associated with the postures (Sanskrit asanas) of hatha yoga ("Forced Yoga"). Hatha yoga has gained wide popularity outside of India and traditional yoga-practicing religions, and the postures are sometimes presented as entirely secular or non-spiritual in nature. Traditional Hatha Yoga is a complete yogic path, including moral disciplines, physical exercises (e.g., postures and breath control), and meditation, and encompasses far more than the yoga of postures and exercises practiced in the West as physical culture. The seminal work on Hatha Yoga is the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, written by Swami Svatiarama. Hatha Yoga was invented to provide a form of physical purification and training that would prepare aspirants for the higher training that is called Raja Yoga (see above). This is still true today. Despite this, many in the West practice 'Hatha yoga' solely for the perceived health benefits it provides, and not as a path to enlightenment.

### **Natya Yoga**

The guide to Natya (Dance) Yoga was written by Bharata Muni. Sage Narada along with Gandharvas were the first to practise Natya Yoga, which comprise all the four main yoga's. Natya Yoga was practised by the medieval devadasis, and is currently taught in a few orthodox schools of Bharatanatyam and Odissi.

### **Buddhist Yoga**

Within the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism yoga likewise holds a central place, though not in the form presented by Patanjali or the Gita. (For example, physical postures are rarely practiced.) An example would be "guru yoga," the union with the mind of the spiritual teacher which must be done at the beginning of the spiritual path and regularly throughout. In the tantric traditions a number of practices are classified with the name "yoga", for example, the two of the four general classifications of tantras like "Yoga Tantra" and "Highest Yoga Tantra".

A system of 108 bodily postures practiced with breath and heart rhythm timing in movement exercises is known as Thrul-Khor or union of moon and sun (channel) prajna energies. The body postures of tibetan ancient yogis are depicted on the walls of the Dalai Lama's summer temple of Lukhang. As the whole buddhist lineage transmission of Kagyu school came to Tibet over the Indian Yogis Naropa, Tilopa, Marpa then Milarepa, Gampopa, authentic old buddhist yogic practices have been passed over to students still following these instructions throughout many Kagyu Monasteries and institutes worldwide. Yogacara ("Yoga Adepts"), which is also known as Cittamatra ("Consciousness Only") is an important philosophical school within Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.

### **Yoga and Tantra**

Yoga is often mentioned in company with Tantra. While the two have deep similarities, most traditions distinguish them from one another. They are similar in that both amount to families of spiritual texts, practices, and lineages with origins in the Indian subcontinent. It should be noted however that for the most part, we are speaking of different families of texts, lineages, etc. Their differences are variously expressed. Some Hindu commentators see yoga as a process whereby body consciousness is seen as the root cause of bondage, while tantra views the body as a means to understanding, rather than as an obstruction. It must be said that in India, tantra often carries quite negative connotations involving sexual misbehavior and black magic. Nevertheless, most forms of tantra follow more mainstream social mores. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika is generally classified as a Hindu tantric scripture.

Tantra has roots in the first millennium CE, and incorporates much more of a theistic basis. Almost entirely founded on Shiva and Shakti worship, Hindu tantra visualizes the ultimate Brahman as Param Shiva, manifested through Shiva (the passive, masculine force of Lord Shiva) and Shakti (the active, creative feminine force of his consort, variously known as Ma Kali, Durga, Shakti, Parvati and others). It focuses on the kundalini, a three and a half-coiled 'snake' of spiritual energy at the base of the spine that rises through the chakras until union between Shiva and Shakti (also known as samadhi) is achieved. Some Hindu yoga teachers, however, have adopted these concepts.

Tantra emphasises mantra (Sanskrit prayers, often to gods, that are repeated), yantra (complex symbols representing gods in various forms through intricate geometric figures), and rituals that range from simple murti (statue representations of deities) or image worship to meditation on a corpse. On the other hand, tantric texts and teachers (e.g. Abhinava Gupta) may seem odd and highly arcane from the point of view of classical yoga, that these incorporate yoga concepts seems clear.

In Tibetan Buddhism, which embraces both, yoga is seen as a synonym for "spiritual practice," while "tantra" refers to a specific category of texts and practices, etc that are roughly analogous to the Hindu ones described above. In that spirit other Buddhist traditions, such as Theravada, practice a form of "yoga" but reject "tantra."

### **Intention and practice of Yoga**

The goals of yoga are expressed differently in different traditions. In theistic Hinduism, yoga may be seen as a set of practices intended to bring people closer to God or to help them achieve union with God. In Buddhism, which does not postulate a creator-type God, yoga may help people deepen their wisdom, compassion, and insight. In Western nations, where there is a strong emphasis on individualism, yoga practice may be an extension of the search for meaning in self, and integration of the different aspects of being. The terms Self-Realization and God-Realization are used interchangeably in Hindu yoga, with the underlying belief that the true nature of self, revealed through the practice of yoga, is of the same nature as God.

The ultimate goal of yoga is the attainment of liberation (Moksha) from worldly suffering and the cycle of birth and death (Samsara). Yoga entails mastery over the body, mind, and emotional self, and transcendence of desire. It is said to lead gradually to knowledge of the true nature of reality. The Yogi reaches an enlightened state where there is a cessation of thought and an experience of blissful union. This union may be of the individual soul (Atman) with the supreme Reality (Brahman), as in Vedanta philosophy; or with a specific god or goddess, as in theistic forms of Hinduism and some forms of Buddhism.

### **Types of Yoga**

Over the long history of yoga, different schools have emerged, and there are numerous examples of subdivisions and synthesis. It is common to speak of each form of yoga as a "path" to enlightenment. Thus, yoga may include love and devotion (as in Bhakti Yoga), selfless work (as in Karma Yoga), knowledge and discernment (as in Jnana Yoga), or an eight-limbed system of disciplines emphasizing meditation (as in Raja Yoga).

Other types of yoga include Mantra Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Iyengar Yoga, Kriya Yoga, Integral Yoga, Nitya Yoga, Maha Yoga, Purna Yoga, Anahata Yoga, Tantra Yoga, Tibetan Yoga, etc. It is often helpful to check the teacher and lineage to be sure how these terms are being used. Another name for Raja Yoga ("royal yoga") is Ashtanga Yoga ("eight-limbed yoga"), but this should not be confused with the Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga developed by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, which is a specific style of Hatha Yoga practice.

### **Yoga and religion**

In the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain traditions, the spiritual goals of yoga are seen as inseparable from the religions of which yoga forms a part. Some yogis make a subtle distinction between religion and yoga, seeing religion as more concerned with culture, values, beliefs and rituals; and yoga as more concerned with Self-Realization, i.e., direct perception of the ultimate truth. In this sense, religion and yoga are complementary. Sri Ramakrishna likened religion to the husk, and direct experience to the kernel. Both are needed, but if "one wants to get at the kernel itself, he must remove the husk of the grain."

Some forms of yoga come replete with a rich iconography, while others are more austere and minimalist. Hindu practitioners of yoga are proud of their religious traditions, while non-Hindu practitioners claim that yoga may be practiced sincerely by those who have not accepted the Hindu religion. While the yoga tradition remains rooted in India, the fact that some modern yogis like Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda came to the West suggests that they saw hope the yoga tradition could also flourish there. Critics of yoga as practiced in the West charge that it is sometimes watered down, corrupted, or cut off from its spiritual roots (e.g. the popular view that yoga is primarily physical exercises). Hence, Yoga is one of India's great gifts to the world. Yet the sheer number of people practicing yoga outside India suggests the need to define yoga both by its historical roots and its modern adaptations.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, from historical point of view Yoga had its origin in the Indus valley civilization in ancient India. In the Vedic period, it took a definite shape and started flourishing. In the later period of history, it further expanded and spread to other parts of the world. In the present world, yoga is being emphasized even in the western world in a more vigorous form. Today, it has become a part of life irrespective, caste, creed, colour and religion.

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