

What is Yoga? Frequently Asked Questions



★ What Is Yoga?

The word yoga, derives from the Sanskrit word *yuj* means to yoke or bind and is often interpreted as “union” or a method of discipline. A male who practices yoga is called a yogi, a female practitioner, a yogini.

★ What Does Hatha Mean?

The word hatha means willful or forceful. Hatha yoga refers to a set of physical exercises (known as asanas or postures), and sequences of asanas, designed to align your skin, muscles, and bones. The postures are also designed to open the many channels of the body—especially the main channel, the spine—so that energy can flow.

Hatha is also translated as *ha* meaning “sun” and *tha* meaning “moon.” This refers to the balance of masculine aspects—active, hot, sun—and feminine aspects—receptive, cool, moon—within all of us. Hatha yoga is a path toward creating balance and uniting opposites. In our physical bodies we develop a balance of strength and flexibility. It asks us to bring our attention to our breath, which helps us to still the fluctuations of the mind and be more present in the unfolding of each moment.

Hatha Yoga uses postures (asana) and conscious breathing (Pranayama) in combination with mental focus to develop awareness, strength and flexibility, and relaxation.

★ Origins of yoga:

The Indian sage Patanjali is believed to have collated the practice of yoga into the Yoga Sutra an estimated 2,000 years ago. The Sutra is a collection of 195 statements that serve as a philosophical guidebook for most of the yoga that is practiced today. It also outlines **eight limbs of yoga**:

1. **Yamas or restraints**

- The five yamas are oriented toward our public behavior and allow us to coexist harmoniously with others.
- **Ahimsa** - Kindness/compassion to yourself and others
- **Satya** - Truthfulness/not lying - being truthful in our feelings, thoughts, and words, and deeds
- **Asteya** - Not stealing - instead trusting the universe is abundant
- **Brahmacharya** - Continence - using our life force and sexual energy consciously
- **Aparigraha** - Self-reliance - not coveting what isn't ours/a greed rooted in jealousy

2. **Niyamas (observances)**

- The five niyamas are internal practices or observances:
- **Saucha** (Cleanliness) keeping different energy distinct
- **Santosha** (Contentment)- being content with what you have achieved
- **Tapas** (Heat/Perseverance) - doing something you don't want to do that will have a positive effect on you.
- **Svadhya** (self-study) - the study of oneself by looking within and focussing internally
- **Ishvara Pranidhana** (devotion) - it is our intention that counts not the results. We can focus the devotion to something greater than the self and the selfless action of karma yoga

3. **Asana (postures)**

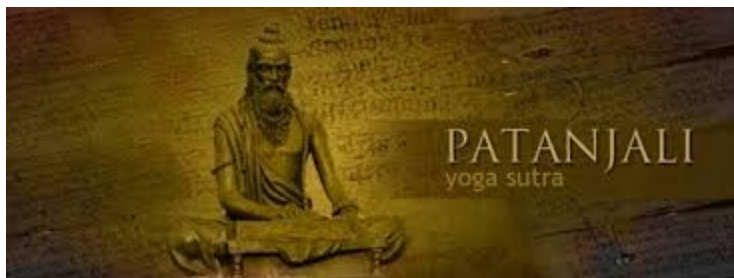
4. **Pranayama (breathing)**

5. **Pratyahara (withdrawal of senses)**

6. **Dharana (concentration)**

7. **Dhyani (meditation)**

8. **Samadhi (absorption)**



As we explore these eight limbs, we begin by refining our behavior in the outer world, and then we focus inwardly until we reach samadhi (liberation, enlightenment).

★ Asana/Postures

Asana translates as “the seat”/“the base” - these are the postures in yoga.

Asanas were Intended primarily to restore and maintain wellbeing, improve flexibility, vitality and help to cultivate the ability to remain in seated meditation for extended periods.

Yoga in the Western world world has become “doing” not “being” Asana allows the clear flow of energy /prana throughout the body.

Alignment in asana - in time - finds grace, stability, ease, health, lightness and eventually leads to meditation in movement rather than pushing or pulling. Alignment is a lifelong practice and the more you get to know the more you realise there is to know!

- In active asana practice the mind is focussed towards the physical postures and the breath.
- In restorative yoga the mind aspires to remain steady and focussed and each moment - it is more about undoing and less about doing. Restorative yoga can have a profound effect on the nervous system and our ability to stay connected with the truth that each moment creates.

Yoga enables the mind to focus - it opens the heart to concentrate its focus and it opens the heart to compassion and patience and it opens a heightened sense of awareness.

Yoga helps us to let go of fixed and rigid belief systems.

★ Pranyama/Breath

Yogis believe breathing to be the most important metabolic function; we breathe roughly 23,000 times per day and use about 4,500 gallons of air, which increases during exercise. Thus, breathing is extremely important to health, and *prana*, or life-force, is found most abundantly in the air and in the breath. If we are breathing incorrectly, we are hampering our potential for optimal health. *Pranayama*, literally the "science of breathing" or "control of life force," is the yogic practice of breathing correctly and deeply.

★ Is Yoga a Religion?

Yoga is not a religion. It is a philosophy that began in India an estimated 5,000 years ago. The father of classical [yoga](#) or the eight-limbed path is said to be Patanjali, who wrote the Yoga Sutra. These scriptures provide a framework for spiritual growth and mastery over the physical and mental body. Yoga sometimes interweaves other philosophies such as Hinduism or Buddhism, but it is not necessary to study those paths in order to practice or study yoga. It is also not necessary to surrender your own religious beliefs to practice yoga.

★ Chakras

Ancient ayurvedic and yogic studies teach that yoga is as much subtle energy as it is solid muscle and bone.

There are 7 main chakras in the body:



1. **Muladhara = Root Chakra** - Represents our foundation and feeling of being grounded.
2. **Svadhistana = Sacral Chakra** - Our connection and ability to accept others and new experiences.
3. **Manipura = Solar Plexus Chakra** - Our ability to be confident and in-control of our lives.
4. **Anahata = Heart Chakra** - Our ability to love.
5. **Vishuddha = Throat Chakra** - Our ability to communicate.
6. **Ajna/Agya = Third Eye Chakra** - Our ability to focus on and see the big picture.
7. **Sahasrara = Crown Chakra** - The highest Chakra represents our ability to be fully connected spiritually.

Practices can increase awareness to these main energy centres. For most people 1 or more chakra is out of balance - yoga practices will assist energy to flow smoothly through the energy cores. The awakening of chakras is a gentle awakening that brightens and strengthens your life force. [“Where thought goes, energy flows”](#)

For example, if you can think of a time that your heart was bursting with love and joy, and the energy that naturally flowed at that time this can help to understand the strength of energy flow in the body.

★ Nadis:

There are 3 main energy lines that flow through and around the spine. The central channel runs up the spine and is called “Sushumna” 2 lateral channels running up each side of the spine are called “ida” and “pingala”

Clearing the nadis and balancing the chakras will clear the path for the rising of energy through the sushumna nadi from the muladhara to the sahasrara chakra.

- **Sushumna Nadi** - the main line of energy through the central canal.
Sushumna Nadi - travels from the root chakra enlivening chakras as it travels to the crown chakra.

The energy flows up and down from the Crown to the root chakra or vice versa.
Energy can be encouraged to travel downwards to calm and/or upwards to stimulate.

- **Ida Nadi** - Left side of the body
Feminine aspects of self - intuition, creativity, the unknown, moon energy and calmness.
Travels between the left nostril to ajna chakra through the spine, crossing each major chakra entering muladhara on the left.

- **Pingala Nadi** - Right side of the body.
The masculine aspect of self - thinking, logical, reacting, the known, sun energy and activity

A dormant kundalini serpent is said to rest at the base of the mooladhara chakra and is thought to awaken through yoga practice and raise the practitioner to new levels of awareness.

The rising of the kundalini energy is a very slow process!! If it's forced to go beyond one's present awareness than a lack of balance can occur. The fact that you're looking to study yoga is a sign that yours is stirring! As we become more conscious this consciousness is increased across the whole planet.

Subtle energies can't be forced open but do so in their own time - if you know your concentration is at times less than you'd prefer try to dedicate yourself to a regular practice - concentration is developed through the practice of concentration!

★ What Does Om Mean?

Om is a mantra, or vibration, that is traditionally chanted at the beginning and end of yoga sessions. It is said to be the sound of the universe.

Somehow the ancient yogis knew what scientists today are telling us—that the entire universe is moving. Nothing is ever solid or still. Everything that exists pulsates, creating a rhythmic vibration that the ancient yogis acknowledged with the sound of Om.

Chanting Om allows us to recognize our experience as a reflection of how the whole universe moves—the setting sun, the rising moon, the ebb and flow of the tides, the beating of our hearts. As we chant Om, it takes us for a ride on this universal movement, through our breath, our awareness, and our physical energy, and we begin to sense a bigger connection that is both uplifting and soothing.

★ Definition of Namaste

Nama means bow, *as* means I, and *te* means you.

Therefore, *namaste* literally means “bow me you” or “I bow to you.”

[How to make the Namaste gesture](#)

To perform Namaste, we place the hands together at the heart chakra, close the eyes, and bow the head. It can also be done by placing the hands together in front of the third eye, bowing the head, and then bringing the hands down to the heart. This is an especially deep form of respect. We bring the hands together at the heart chakra to increase the flow of Divine love. Bowing the head and closing the eyes helps the mind surrender to the Divine in the heart.



For a teacher and student, Namaste allows two individuals to come together energetically to a place of connection and timelessness, free from the bonds of ego-connection. If it is done with deep feeling in the heart and with the mind surrendered, a deep union of spirits can blossom.

Ideally, Namaste should be done both at the beginning and at the end of class. Usually, it is done at the end of class because the mind is less active and the energy in the room is more peaceful. The teacher initiates Namaste as a symbol of gratitude and respect toward her students and her own teachers and in return invites the students to connect, thereby allowing the truth to flow—the truth that we are all one when we live from the heart.

★ [How Many Times Per Week Should I Practice?](#)

Yoga is amazing—even if you only practice for one hour a week, you will experience the benefits of the practice. If you can do more than that, you will certainly experience more benefits. I suggest starting with two or three times a week, for an hour or an hour and a half each time. If you can only do 20 minutes per session, that's fine too. Don't let time constraints or unrealistic goals be an obstacle—do what you can and don't worry about it. You will likely find that after awhile your desire to practice expands naturally and you will find yourself doing more and more.

★ [I'm Not Flexible - Can I Do Yoga?](#)

Yes! You are a perfect candidate for yoga. Many people think that they need to be [flexible](#) to begin yoga, but that's a little bit like thinking that you need to be able to play tennis in order to take tennis lessons. Come as you are and you will find that yoga practice will help you become more flexible.

This newfound agility will be balanced by strength, coordination, and enhanced cardiovascular health, as well as a sense of physical confidence and overall well-being.



★ [Why Are You Supposed to Refrain From Eating Two to Three Hours Before Class?](#)

In yoga practice we twist from side to side, turn upside down, and bend forward and backward. If you have not fully digested your last meal, it will make itself known to you in ways that are not comfortable. If you are a person with a fast-acting digestive system and are afraid you might get hungry or feel weak during yoga class, experiment with a light snack such as yogurt, a few nuts, or juice about 30 minutes to an hour before class.

★ [How Is Yoga Different From Stretching or Other Kinds of Fitness?](#)

Unlike stretching or fitness, yoga is more than just physical postures. Patanjali's eight-fold path illustrates how the physical practice is just one aspect of yoga. Even within the physical practice, yoga is unique because we connect the movement of the body and the fluctuations of the mind to the rhythm of our breath. Connecting the mind, body, and breath helps us to direct our attention inward. Through this process of inward attention, we learn to recognize our habitual thought patterns without labeling them, judging them, or trying to change them. We become more aware of our experiences from moment to moment. The awareness that we cultivate is what makes yoga a practice, rather than a task or a goal to be completed.