

Introduction to Yoga

What is Yoga?

The definition for an individual with a medical background would best describe it as a complimentary treatment module for prevention of disease and maintenance of homeostasis or balance of body-mind-spirit. It is a unique 5000 year old system originating from India that unites the individual with the "inner self" through union of body, mind and spirit. Yoga literally means "yoke" or "unite" in Sanskrit the ancient language of India. It symbolically means union of body, mind and spirit.

When the word yoga is mentioned, it exudes visions of people doing contortionism! This is a very limited version of what yoga truly is. Yes, it is partly true that certain yoga practitioners are really flexible. What is even more intriguing is the flexibility and control they can achieve with the breathe and even involuntary controls such as heart rate and blood pressure. Finally the true meaning of yoga which surprises people is that the physical aspect or "asanas" (poses or postures) were simply designed to provide the individual a body of perfect health agility and strength so that the individual may pursue deeper into the "self" by sharpening the mind with clarity, calmness and inward focus via complete mastery of the mind. Therefore the practice of asanas were simply developed for the purpose of sitting in "lotus" (sitting indian style) and achieving meditation.

Hatha Yoga is the most popular form of yoga being practiced in the west. Hatha as a word in sanskrit means "sun" or "ha", and "tha" means "moon". Yoga symbolically means the union between sun and moon, or mind and body.

Traditional hatha yoga classes teach three essential components: 1. asanas (physical poses or postures) 2. pranayama (breathing exercises and techniques) 3. relaxation, concentration and meditation exercises.

Hatha yoga classes do pay attention to and focus on some or all eight limbs of yoga. The eight limbs are to be addressed individually or simultaneously in the strive towards enlightenment and bliss. This eight limbed path to yoga was described progressively in the "Yoga Sutras" one of the most influential yoga texts that is the foundation of Hatha yoga. The father of Hatha Yoga and the author of this text is a Brahman sage named Patanjali who decided to describe 185 compressed axioms which are "sutras" or "threads " of truth setting out very systematic ways of living and achieving true yoga as union with the divine. This path he described can only be achieved by following the eight limbed path or observances. Here are the eight limbs of yoga:

1. Yama (abstinence) - Ahimsa meaning non-harm, Satya applying truth, Asteya meaning non-stealing, brahmacharya containing sexual energy, control of appetite emotions etc.

2. Niyama (observance)- Swadhaya meaning self study and reflection. Applying saucha which means cleanliness inside and outside body, as well as environment. Santosha meaning contentment. Ishwara pranidhana meaning to "surrender to the Divine or God"

3. Asana (posture) physical discipline via yoga practice daily

4. Pranayama (breath control)

5. Pratyahara (sense withdrawal) - draw the senses inward so that this practice cultivates mental control amidst the outside chaos present in the world and provide a sense of calm for the individual

6. Dharana (concentration)

7. Dhyana (meditation)

8. Samadhi (supreme joy or bliss)

Due to the tremendous increase in popularity of Hatha Yoga a variety of styles leaning towards different variations of the three components (asana, pranayama, meditation) now exist to give the choice of concentrating on whatever suits the individual at that time. The basic asanas remain the same, the approach may be very different in terms of breath control while doing the asanas, the length of time in the pose, focusing more on alignment vs. flowing movement , or focusing more on meditation rather than asanas.

Hatha yoga can therefore be divided in various styles or schools of thought with emphasis on different aspects of the three components. Astanga yoga involves the practice of set postures in set dynamic flowing sequences called vinyasas which flow to the the rhythm of the breath. Next, is Integral yoga which integrates equally all eight limbs of yoga and the three components which are the asanas, breathing and meditation as part of a complete hatha yoga practice. Iyengar yoga is another favorite form of hatha yoga which is wonderful for those recovering from injury, or those that really want to avoid injury since it is a structurally based practice focusing very strictly on proper alignment and precision work in physical postures which is the main focus and meditative potential. The use of blocks and other props help the individual to reach full extension in a posture. Viniyoga is a style of yoga that is a tailored program for the individual utilizing choreographed sequenses of poses or vinyasas linking the breath with movement emphasizing meditation in motion.

Sivananda yoga is one of the largest schools of yoga involving chanting, pranayama (breath exercises), postures and meditation as well as taking it off the mat and applying the 5 pillars of yogic balance which will be described below.

Kundalini yoga is a more esoteric but very effective form of yoga that is also growing in popularity. It is less athletic and focuses more on breath work as well as focusing on raising "kundalini" energy or latent energy present in the chakra or energy centers in our body rising from the root chakra in the sacrum. This is all accomplished through mantras, breathing exercises, and meditation. There are many other styles of hatha yoga but these are the most popular in the west.

According to the Sivananda school of yoga the 5 pillars of yoga are:

1. Right or proper exercises: Exercise with good intention according to your age, health and needs for the body.
 2. Right breathing: establishing the breath as the main component to a healthy balanced life. Yogis recognize that oxygen is not only vital to the organs but that each breath brings the "prana" or energetic force within us as one of the key components to complete health. Focusing on reestablishing the deep belly breathing of a child energizes the body to full capacity.
 3. Right thinking: removing mental scatter arriving at mental focus with a mind full of clarity intent and cultivation of positive thinking. It is the development of the intellect so that the mind is razor sharp according to Sri Swami Satchidananda. It is a mind detached from frivolous wasteful thoughts.
 4. Right nutrition: You are what you eat so be careful what you put in your body. Be mindful to take care of the body in order to properly fuel it and focus on fresh foods high in "prana" energy rejecting dead food absent of any prana or life force. This includes a healthy portion of fresh fruits, vegetables, legumes and nuts. Avoid processed foods, sugar and always apply moderation in eating.
 5. Right relaxation: balancing all the activity in your life with proper rest. Everyone needs to recharge the battery! We need to restore physical, mental, emotional and energetic relaxation in order to restore balance.
- The aim of yoga is simply to take it beyond the mat and integrate yoga into your life so that it is not just a form of physical, mental, and spiritual exercise, but rather a mindful awareness of living with intention, positive thinking, healthy clean living and moral integrity respecting all life and recognizing the divine in everything.