

Introduction to Yoga

Yoga is essentially a spiritual discipline based on an extremely subtle Science which focuses on bringing harmony between mind and body. It is an art and science for healthy living. The word "**Yoga**" is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj* meaning "**to join**", "**to yoke**" or "**to unite**".

According to Yogic scriptures, the practice of Yoga leads to the union of individual consciousness with universal consciousness. According to modern scientists, everything in the universe is just a manifestation of the same quantum firmament. One who experiences this oneness of existence is said to be "**in Yoga**" and is termed as a yogi who has attained a state of freedom, referred to as Mukti, nirvāna, kaivalya or moksha.

"**Yoga**" also refers to an inner science comprising of a variety of methods through which human beings can achieve union between the body and mind to attain self-realisation. The aim of Yoga practice (sādhana) is to overcome all kinds of sufferings that lead to a sense of freedom in every walk of life with holistic health, happiness and harmony.

Brief history and development of Yoga

The science of Yoga has its origin thousands of years ago, long before the first religion or belief systems were born. According to Yogic lore, Shiva has been seen as the first yogi or ādiyogi and the first guru or ādiguru. Several thousand years ago, on the banks of lake Kantisarovar in the Himalayas, ādiyogi poured his profound knowledge into the legendary saptarishis or "seven sages". These sages carried this powerful Yogic science to different parts of the world including Asia, the Middle East, northern Africa and South America. Interestingly, modern scholars have noted and marvelled at the close parallels found between ancient cultures across the globe. However, it was in India that the Yogic system found its fullest expression. Agastya, the saptarishi who travelled across the Indian subcontinent, crafted this culture around a core Yogic way of life.

Yoga is widely considered as an "immortal cultural outcome" of the Indus Saraswati Valley Civilisation – dating back to 2700 BC – and has proven itself to cater to both material and spiritual uplift of humanity. A number of seals and fossil remains of Indus Saraswati Valley Civilisation with Yogic motifs and figures performing Yoga sādhana suggest the presence of Yoga in ancient India. The seals and idols of mother Goddess are suggestive of Tantra Yoga. The presence of Yoga is also available in folk traditions, Vedic and Upanishadic heritage, Buddhist and Jain traditions, Darshanas, epics of Mahabharata including Bhagawadgita and Ramayana, theistic traditions of Shaivas, Vaishnavas and Tantric traditions. Though Yoga was being practiced in the pre-Vedic period, the great sage Maharishi Patanjali systematised and codified the then existing Yogic practices, its meaning and its related knowledge through Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

After Patanjali, many sages and Yoga masters contributed greatly for the preservation and development of the field through well documented practices and literature. Yoga has spread all over the world by the teachings of eminent Yoga masters from ancient times to the present date. Today, everybody has conviction about Yoga practices towards the prevention of disease, maintenance and promotion of health. Millions and millions of people across the globe have benefitted by the practice of Yoga and the practice of Yoga is blossoming and growing more vibrant with each passing day.

The Fundamentals of Yoga

Yoga works on the level of one's body, mind, emotion and energy. This has given rise to four broad classifications of Yoga: Karma Yoga where we utilise the body; Jnāna Yoga where we utilise the mind; Bhakti Yoga where we utilise the emotion and Kriya Yoga where we utilise the energy. Each system of Yoga we practice falls within the gamut of one or more of these categories.

Every individual is a unique combination of these four factors. Only a guru (teacher) can advocate the appropriate combination of the four fundamental paths as is necessary for each seeker. "All ancient commentaries on Yoga have stressed that it is essential to work under the direction of a guru."

Traditional schools of Yoga

The different philosophies, traditions, lineages and guru-shishya paramparas of Yoga led to the emergence of different traditional schools. These include Jnāna Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, Pātanjala Yoga, Kuṇḍalinī Yoga, Haṭha Yoga, Dhyāna Yoga, Mantra Yoga, Laya Yoga, Rāja Yoga, Jain Yoga, Bouddha Yoga etc. Each school has its own approach and practices that lead to the ultimate aim and objectives of Yoga.

Yogic practices for health and wellness

The widely practiced Yoga sadhanas are: Yama, Niyama, Āsana, Prānāyāma, Pratyāhara, Dhāraṇa, Dhyāna, Samādhi, Bandhas and Mudras, Shatkarmas, Yuktāhāra, Mantra-japa, Yukta-karma etc. Yamas are restraints and Niyamas are observances. These are considered to be pre-requisites for further Yogic practices. Āsanas, capable of bringing about stability of body and mind, "kuryat-tadasanam- sthairyam", involve adopting various psycho-physical body patterns and giving one an ability to maintain a body position (a stable awareness of one's structural existence) for a considerable length of time.

Prānāyāma consists of developing awareness of one's breathing followed by willful regulation of respiration as the functional or vital basis of one's existence. It helps in developing awareness of one's mind and helps to establish control over the mind. In the initial stages, this is done by developing awareness of the "flow of in-breath and out-breath" (svāsa-prasvāsa) through nostrils, mouth and other body openings, its internal and external pathways and destinations. Later, this phenomenon is modified, through regulated, controlled and monitored inhalation (svāsa) leading to the awareness of the body space getting filled (puraka), the space(s) remaining in a filled state (kumbhaka) and it getting emptied (rechaka) during regulated, controlled and monitored exhalation (prasvāsa).

Pratyāhara indicates dissociation of one's consciousness (withdrawal) from the sense organs which connect with the external objects. Dhāraṇa indicates broad based field of attention (inside the body and mind) which is usually understood as concentration.

Dhyāna (meditation) is contemplation (focussed attention inside the body and mind) and Samādhi (integration). Bandhas and Mudras are practices associated with Prānāyāma. They are viewed as the higher yogic practices that mainly adopt certain physical gestures along with control over respiration. This further facilitates control over mind and paves way for higher Yogic attainment. However, practice of dhyāna, which moves one towards self-realisation and leads one to transcendence, is considered the essence of Yoga Sādhana.

Yoga for Health and wellness

The yoga of the body. All elements of yoga are equally important when creating a necessary balance for those individuals who practice it. Yoga is considered by society as part of a wellness practice for adults and is widely accepted in many workplaces as having clear benefits to employee work production and personal well-being as seen by the recent increase in wellness programs being implemented in major corporations. For example, Microsoft implemented a Weight Management program in 2005 to increase the physical fitness of employees and therefore reduce employee absenteeism (McPherson, 2005). Yoga helps us to take away the stress and frustration improve physical and mental health to increase personal satisfaction and well-being Yoga is specifically mentioned as an example of a fitness activity in the new curriculum under the larger category of Movement Competence (Health and Physical Education, 2010, pg.140). A study published in the Journal of Asthma looked at six young asthmatics with a history of childhood asthma that went through yoga training for two years. The study concluded that practicing yoga is beneficial for asthmatics because it “increased pulmonary function and exercise capacity” (Jain, 1991, pg.440). Researchers have discovered that the regular practice of yoga may produce many health benefits, including increased fitness and normalization of blood pressure. Yoga is a renowned antidote to stress. Over time, yoga practitioners report lower levels of stress and increased feelings of happiness and wellbeing. This is because concentrating on the postures and the breath acts as a powerful form of meditation. Yoga is non-competitive and suitable for anyone, regardless of their age or fitness level. Your yoga teacher should carefully guide and observe you, and modify postures when necessary. An asana should never cause pain. If it hurts, ease back on the stretch or don't do it at all. It is important to keep within your physical limits. If you are over 40, haven't exercised for a long time or have a pre-existing medical condition, you should check with your doctor before starting any regular exercise routine.

Yoga Benefits for health

The physical building blocks of yoga are the posture (asana) and the breath. A series of poses held in time with breathing, exercises every part of the body. Benefits include: Yoga is increased strength, endurance, flexibility, and balance, which also translates into an increased ability to perform activities, have more energy, and get a more restful sleep. Most of the diseases take their origin in over-eating, sexual excess and outbursts of anger and hatred. If the mind is kept cool and calm at all times, you will have wonderful health, strength and vitality. Energy is depleted by fits of anger. The cells and tissues are filled with morbid, poisonous materials, when one loses his temper and entertains deep hatred. Various sorts of physical ailments crop up. The blood becomes hot and thin and consequently night pollution results. Various kinds of nervous diseases are attributable to excessive loss of the seminal energy and frequent fits of explosive anger or wrath.

Yoga Builds muscles strength: Strong muscles do more than look good. They also protect us from conditions like arthritis and back pain, and help prevent falls in elderly people. And when you build strength through yoga, you balance it with flexibility. If you just went to the gym and lifted weights, you might build strength at the expense of flexibility.

Yoga improves posture: Increased flexibility and strength helps you improve your posture. With better core strength and the body awareness you create by practicing yoga, you are more likely to recognize when you are slouching or have bad posture and correct it. Poor posture can cause back, neck, and other muscle and joint problems.

Yoga Prevents cartilage and joint breakdown: Each time you practice yoga, you take your joints through their full range of motion. This can help prevent degenerative arthritis or mitigate disability by “squeezing and soaking” areas of cartilage that normally aren't used. Joint cartilage is like a sponge; it receives fresh nutrients only when its fluid is squeezed out and a new supply can be soaked up. Without proper sustenance, neglected areas of cartilage can eventually wear out, exposing the underlying bone like worn-out brake pads.

Yoga Increases blood flow: Yoga increases blood flowing. The relaxation exercises can help your circulation, especially in your hands and feet. Yoga also gets more oxygen to your cells, which function better as a result. Twisting poses are thought to wring out venous blood from internal organs and allow oxygenated blood to flow in once the twist is released.

Yoga Drains lymphs and boosts immunity: When you contract and stretch muscles, move organs around, and come in and out of yoga postures, you increase the drainage of lymph (a viscous fluid rich in immune cells). This helps the lymphatic system fight infection, destroy cancerous cells, and dispose of the toxic waste products of cellular functioning.

Lowers blood sugar: Yoga lowers blood sugar and LDL (“bad”) cholesterol and boosts HDL (“good”) cholesterol. In people with diabetes, yoga has been found to lower blood sugar in several ways: by lowering cortisol and adrenaline levels, encouraging weight loss, and improving sensitivity to the effects of insulin. Get your blood sugar levels down, and you decrease your risk of diabetic complications such as heart attack, kidney failure, and blindness.

Maintains nervous system: Some advanced yogis can control their bodies in extraordinary ways, many of which are mediated by the nervous system. Scientists have monitored yogis who could induce unusual heart rhythms, generate specific brain-wave patterns, and, using a meditation technique, raise the temperature of their hands by 15 degrees Fahrenheit. If they can use yoga to do that, perhaps you could learn to improve blood flow to your pelvis if you’re trying to get pregnant or induce relaxation when you’re having trouble falling asleep.

Yoga gives a peace of mind: Yoga quells the fluctuations of the mind, according to Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra. In other words, it slows down the mental loops of frustration, regret, anger, fear, and desire that can cause stress. And since stress is implicated in so many health problems from migraines and insomnia to lupus, MS, eczema, high blood pressure, and heart attacks if you learn to quiet your mind, you’ll be likely to live longer and healthier.

Eases your pain: Yoga can ease your pain. According to several studies, asana, meditation, or a combination of the two, reduced pain in people with arthritis, back pain, fibromyalgia, carpal tunnel syndrome, and other chronic conditions. When you relieve your pain, your mood improves, you’re more inclined to be active, and you don’t need as much medication.

Yoga is the perfect example of holistic health because of this combination of mind and body. After all the body cannot exist without the mind and vice versa. Yoga has become more popular than ever, with celebrities, politicians, business people, and almost every walk of life currently practice. Yoga is a multidisciplinary tool extremely useful to purify the mind and body and gain control over our minds and emotions. Yoga is also the most popular means for selftransformation and physical wellbeing. It is useful for both the wordily people seeking mental peace and ascetics seeking liberation. Yoga helps you to become a better person, a better human being and a better devotee

General guidelines for Yoga Practitioners

Before The Practice

- Śauca means cleanliness - an important prerequisite for Yogic practice. It includes cleanliness of surroundings, body and mind.
- Yogic practice should be performed in a calm and quiet atmosphere with a relaxed body and mind
- Yogic practice should be done on an empty stomach or light stomach. Consume small amount of honey in lukewarm water if you feel weak.
- Bladder and bowels should be empty before starting Yogic practices.
- A mattress, Yoga mat, durrie or folded blanket should be used for the practice.
- Light and comfortable cotton clothes are preferred to facilitate easy movement of the body.
- Yoga should not be performed in state of exhaustion, illness, in a hurry or in acute stress conditions.
- In case of chronic disease/ pain/ cardiac problems, a physician or a Yoga therapist should be consulted prior to performing Yogic practices.
- Yoga experts should be consulted before doing Yogic practices during pregnancy and menstruation.

During The Practice

- Practice sessions should start with a prayer or invocation as it creates a conducive environment to relax the mind.
- Yogic practices shall be performed slowly, in a relaxed manner, with awareness of the body and breath.
- Do not hold the breath unless it is specially mentioned to do so during the practice.
- Breathing should be always through the nostrils unless instructed otherwise.
- Do not hold body tightly, or jerk the body at any point of time.
- Perform the practices according to your own capacity.
- It takes some time to get good results, so persistent and regular practice is very essential.
- There are contra-indications/ limitations for each Yoga practice and such contra-indications should always be kept in mind.
- Yoga session should end with meditation/ deep silence / Śhānti paṭha.

After Practice

- Bath may be taken only after 20-30 minutes of practice
- Food may be consumed only after 20-30 minutes of practice.

Food For Thought

A few dietary guidelines can ensure that the body and mind are flexible and well-prepared for practice. A vegetarian diet is usually recommended, and for a person over 30 years, two meals a day should suffice, except in cases of illness or very high physical activity or labour.

How Yoga Can Help

Yoga is essentially a path to liberation from all bondage. However, medical research in recent years has uncovered many physical and mental benefits that Yoga offers, corroborating the experiences of millions of practitioners. A small sampling of research shows that:

- Yoga is beneficial for physical fitness, musculoskeletal functioning and cardio-vascular health.
- It is beneficial in the management of diabetes, respiratory disorders, hypertension, hypotension and many lifestyle-related disorders.
- Yoga helps to reduce depression, fatigue, anxiety disorders and stress.
- Yoga regulates menopausal symptoms.
- In essence, Yoga is a process of creating a body and mind that are stepping-stones, not hurdles, to an exuberant and fulfilling life.

INTRODUCTION TO COMMON YOGA PROTOCOL

While addressing the 69 session of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on September 27, 2014, the Honorable Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi urged the world community to adopt an International Day of Yoga.

"Yoga is an invaluable gift of ancient Indian tradition. It embodies unity of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature and a holistic approach to health and well-being. Yoga is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with ourselves, the world and Nature. By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help us to deal with climate change. Let us work towards adopting an International Yoga Day," Shri Modi said.

On December 11, 2014, the 193 member UNGA approved the proposal by consensus with a record 177 co-sponsoring countries a st resolution to establish 21 June as "International Day of Yoga". In its resolution, the UNGA recognised that Yoga provides a holistic approach to health and well-being and wider dissemination of information about the benefits of practicing Yoga for the health of the world population. Yoga also brings harmony in all walks of life and thus, is known for disease prevention, health promotion and management of many lifestyle-related disorders. This booklet intends to give a brief overview about Yoga and Yogic practices to orient one towards comprehensive health for an individual and the community.