

What is Yoga

By Tiffany Twardowsky, MS

The traditional system of yoga originated in India and dates back more than 5,000 years. During this time, there was a strong desire for a long healthy life, greater personal freedom, and a heightened self-realization. This desire was the foundation of a system of physical and mental training called yoga, which was designed to balance and unite the mind, body and spirit. Yoga has since spread throughout the world and was first introduced in the United States in the late 1800's by an Indian yogi named Swami Vivekananda. The branch of yoga initially taught was Râja yoga. It was in the early 1900's that Yogendra Mastamani introduced Hatha yoga, now the most popular branch of yoga in the west.

In Sanskrit, the word yoga means "to join or yoke together," uniting the mind and body into one harmonious experience. The whole system of yoga is built on three main concepts: exercise, breathing, and meditation. The exercises are a series of poses called asanas. These can range from gentle fluid stretches to vigorous flowing movements that invigorate, strengthen and balance the body and mind. Yoga offers many breathing techniques that can help bring out a specific mind/body effect. One of the most useful breathing techniques, called Ujjayi, helps to calm and center the mind, maintain the body's flow of energy and prepare the body for meditation. The goal of meditation is to focus and quiet the mind, to free the mind from the constant stream of thoughts so that it becomes still and silent.

Those who are new to yoga may feel stiff in the beginning. Every participant should always work within their own limits. Just remember to breathe deeply and relax; your body will respond differently with every yoga session. With practice, your body will stretch, adapt and become more flexible. Through regular practice, your body and mind will achieve an overall sense of calmness; a calmness that will become a way of life.

Branches of Yoga

There are a number of branches of yoga (different methods of practicing postures, breathing techniques, meditation and yoga philosophy all working toward the same goal of self-realization) such as the branches of a tree. While Hatha yoga is the most popular yoga practice in the West, there are, at least, five other distinct practices for the purpose of uniting the mind with the body.

Hatha yoga is the yoga of physical health and balance. In Sanskrit, "ha" translates into sun and "tha" into moon. The basis of Hatha yoga is bringing opposing yet complementary forces into balance. Control of the physical self is the path to enlightenment. In the West, Hatha yoga is used primarily for enhancing physical health, strength and endurance while stilling the mind and creating a feeling of relaxation.

Râja yoga, also known as "classical or royal yoga," is considered the highest form of yoga, in which meditation is the primary focus. The goal of Râja yoga is quieting all aspects of body and mind to attain a heightened and integrated state of awareness. This approach involves strict adherence to the "eight limbs" of yoga as outlined by Patanjali in The Yoga Sutras, the most definitive text on the philosophy of classical yoga. The practice of Râja yoga typically starts with Hatha yoga to develop the body's strength and endurance so that one can better focus on achieving this awareness.

Karma yoga is the path of service and selfless action. The fundamental concept of Karma yoga is that our actions from the past affect our life today. Therefore, to ensure a good future, our current behaviors and efforts should focus on surrendering personal desires so that we become liberated from negativity and selfishness. Practicing Karma yoga means striving to live, think, and act in a selfless fashion as a way to serve others. Actions are undertaken for the benefit of greater good, without concern for personal gain.

Bhakti yoga is the path of love and devotion. Seeing the Divine in all of creation, students of this discipline follow the path of the heart to liberation as a positive way to channel emotions. This yoga path presents a way to develop acceptance and tolerance for all living beings by creating a sincere, intense devotion to the meaning of life.

While Bhakti yoga can be considered the yoga of the heart, Jnana yoga is the yoga of knowledge, wisdom, and truth. The development of knowledge through self-inquiry, meditation and contemplation leads students of this approach to insight and wisdom. "Liberation is attained, not by works or ceremony, but by knowledge alone." This path entails development of the intellect through the study of the text, scriptures, and commentaries of the yogic tradition.

Tantra yoga is the study of sacred writings and rituals and is the most esoteric of all the branches. The word "Tantra" comes from a Sanskrit root that means, "to weave or extend." The discipline is based on the realization that everything in the universe is an interwoven unity. Students of Tantra yoga experience the Divine in everything they do. A reverent attitude is fostered and thus supports a ritualistic approach to life.

These are the six individual branches or yoga, however you need not be limited to one expression or path of yoga. In fact, you'll find that many paths naturally overlap. You may practice Hatha yoga, enhancing your physical body, while simultaneously incorporating Râja yoga by including meditation to your practice. A daily practice can be including Karma yoga by engaging in selfless service to others and Bhakti yoga, by expressing kindness and compassion for everyone you meet.

Benefits of Yoga

Yoga entails holding the body in specific poses, thereby improving balance, strength and stamina. It produces a deep relaxation that eases tension and lowers stress. Some postures are designed to help improve circulation, digestion, balance, flexibility and agility. Sustaining the body in certain postures can be quite challenging and necessitate a great deal of strength, balance and concentration. With the need to focus intensely on moving through and holding each pose, the student is consequentially encouraged to clear the mind of any other intruding thoughts. This concentration, or form of meditation, can enhance the vital connection between the mind and body.

Yoga invites the mind to be free of its constant chatter so that the present can be fully appreciated. Incorporating the fundamentals of yoga, participants unite the mind and its emotions with the body to release themselves from tension and stress. With regular practice, yoga empowers us to use our inner strength to restore ourselves to a maximum state of health and well-being.

Some specific ways yoga makes you feel good:

- Yoga postures and breathing exercises help to strengthen the body, clear the mind, and heighten self-awareness creating an abundance of physical and mental energy.
- Yoga teaches special stretching techniques that elongate and relax contracted, tight muscles. This makes yoga an important complement and supplement to any training or exercise program.
- Yoga teaches powerful mind-body breathing techniques that enhance oxygen efficiency and availability and help to regenerate the spirit in everyone.
- Yoga slows down the aging process by generating greater flexibility and movement in the body, strengthening muscles, correcting poor posture, and bringing a sense of inner well being that is unaffected by the passage of time.
- Yoga is teaching us that taking time to relax is very important for good health. When you are relaxed, you are centered. When you are centered, you are calm and peaceful even amid a frenetic, chaotic, competitive world.

Yoga's greatest gift is teaching us to listen to our body and attune to its deep wisdom. This is called mindfulness or awareness. Achieving this awareness unites the body and mind connecting us to an internal reality that is profound, serene, and peaceful. This reality creates a deep understanding of all aspects of our being.

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