



## Myths and Misunderstandings of Yoga



Many people have preconceived and incorrect notions of yoga, tainted by widely spread images of exotic yogis in loincloths up in the Himalayas or athletic yoginis in fashionable training wear doing acrobatic postures. These superficial ideas have either attracted those desiring only physical challenges or scared off many who saw yoga as too esoteric or as impossible contortionist acts. Yoga is neither of these misperceptions nor is yoga something to be blindly followed. Yoga is experiential and a lifestyle in which each individual must apply their discernment to decipher its true value. Nothing demonstrates this point more than the tradition of Yoga Shastra, teachings of the discipline of yoga, which encourages open debate and discussion between the teacher and the students on yogic matters. Students are encouraged to ask questions so that they may clear any doubts and engage whole-heartedly in yoga practices. Therefore, the Shanti Mantra is recited at the beginning of each class to foster mutual respect between the teacher and students so that both parties may learn from one another and to maintain open communication.

### Shanti Mantra

Om Sahanaa Vavatu  
Sahanau Bhunaktu  
Sahaveeryam Karavaavahai  
Tejasvi Naavadheetamastu  
Maa Vidvishaavahai  
Om Shantih Shantih Shantih  
Hari Om

Om May we all be protected  
May we all be nourished  
May we all work together with great energy  
May our study be effective  
Let there be no animosity among us  
Om Peace, peace, peace  
(Mantra to remove suffering)

In this darshan, the misunderstandings and misconceptions of yoga and how they were created will be explored in order to understand the purpose and value of yoga.



## What is the correct definition and purpose of Yoga?

There are several theories of the origins of the word yoga but the root comes from the Sanskrit word yuj, which means to yolk, highlighting the aim of the practice to join and balance the mind, body and spirit. The tradition of yoga is 5,000 years old and is mainly attributed to Sage Patanjali, who transcribed the book, The Yoga Sutra, over 2,000 years ago. Patanjali defined yoga as “Yoga chitta vritti nirodhah,” which means “Yoga is the removal of the fluctuations of the mind.” “Chitta” is mind or consciousness, “vrittis” are thought impulses and “nirodah” is removal. In other words, the main purpose of yoga is for us to evolve as better human beings physically, mentally, environmentally and on an energy level.

## What does it mean to evolve spiritually?

According to yogic philosophy, there are 14 lokas, or realms / worlds of consciousness, which range from the lowest level of consciousness to divine beings. Yoga is the method and tool for humans to ascend these levels of existence. The seven higher realms, Sapta Urdhvaloka, represent the heavenly realm, with the lowest of the seven realms representing earth. The seven upper realms of consciousness include the human world (Bhu loka) as well as the realm of those who have been released from the cycle of rebirth (Satya loka). The lower realms, Patalas, is also subdivided into 7 lokas representing the underworld where beings and animals dictated by primal instincts and negative consciousness prevail.

14 Lokas (14 Realms)

Sapta Urdhvaloka (7 Upper Realms)

### Heavenly/Godly Realm

1. Satya loka / Brahma loka: The highest state of conscious awareness and the realm in which atman and Brahman are reunited eternally.
2. Tapa loka: A pure state of consciousness
3. Jana loka: God-consciousness
4. Mahar loka: Consciousness of Rishi (possess divine behavior and can see the past, present and future)
5. Svar loka: Mastered their emotions and have no attachments
6. Bhuvar loka: Have found contentment and fulfillment in their life, but also have a higher state of conscious awareness

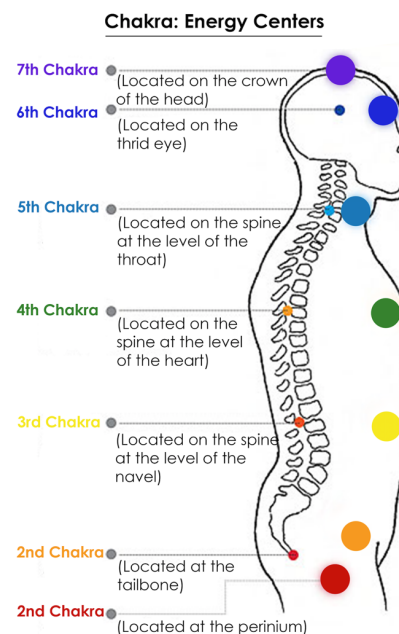
### Earthly Realm

7. Bhu loka: Earthly realm and is the state of consciousness for most humans

### Underworld Realm

Patalaloka (7 Lower Realms)

Similarly, the 7 chakras, energy centers located along the spine, are a sequential roadmap to our evolution. The root chakra, mooladhara, is the lowest of human chakras but is the highest in the animal kingdom. This energy center is responsible for all human actions necessary for survival. As humans, we must move beyond basic life instincts and strive towards activating the highest chakra, sahasrara, to reunite with the divine source. Consequently, this chakra, located in the crown, is the base energy center for Gods. The third eye chakra, ajna, is the point in which energy channels meet and creates steadiness and stillness in the body and mind. Developing the frontal brain and opening of the ajna chakra results in great mental focus and allows access to the guidance of universal consciousness. Practicing yoga allows us to develop and elevate our levels of consciousness to maximize our potential.



## Why are there so many different traditions of Yoga?

The long history of yoga and teachings passed down verbally rather than written until recent times, are the main reasons why so many different traditions of yoga developed. The influences of yoga teachers and socio-geographical impacts gave birth to the variety in yoga. Standardization of yoga practices was impossible to establish as each yoga student propagated what he or she was taught by their guru and further added their own interpretations to it.

One commonality among all yoga traditions is the belief that the origin of yoga preceded the Yoga Sutra and is attributed to Lord Shiva as the first Yogi (Adiyogi) and Parvati, his wife, as the first student. The union of Shiva (consciousness and knowledge) and Parvati (creative energy, shakti) symbolizes the completion of the whole through the fusion of the male and the female energies. It is also symbolic of the balance that the practice of yoga creates within us and the evolutionary process that all humans should aspire to.

It is said that Parvati asked Lord Shiva, “Why is there suffering.” In response, he taught her all that there is to know about Tantra (Yogic practices, theories, and philosophy on how to live life and evolve). There are many variations to this story, but the gist is there was a fish swimming by the river as Shiva imparted his wisdom to Parvati. Realizing the importance of Shiva’s lecture, Matsya, the fish, diligently listened to Shiva and learned all that it could. As a result of receiving the knowledge and wisdom from Lord Shiva, the fish evolved into a human. He was named Matsyendranath by Shiva and became the first propagator of Hatha Yoga. Matsyendranath passed on Shiva’s teachings to his disciple Gorakhnath, who spread Hatha Yoga and earned the title as the father of Hatha Yoga.



## Yoga: Lifestyle of Practices

Yoga is one of one of the 6 theists (Astika) philosophies stemming from the Vedas, and closely associated with Samkhya, also one of the Astikas. Both aim for personal evolution but yoga gains understanding through practice, whereas Samkhya is an intellectual pursuit which leads to instant understanding. For most people, reaching a state of higher consciousness through only theory is unlikely and difficult. The yogic lifestyle of practice to prime the body for meditation to reach higher consciousness is a surer path.

## Hatha Yoga

Hatha Yoga initially did not include asana practices and focused primarily on 6 purification practices called Shatkarma. The six cleansing practices prepare the body and mind for advanced meditation practices as well as enhancing the body’s healing power and prevent against diseases. Shatkarma consist of neti (nasal cleaning), dhauti (digestive tract cleansing), nauli (abdominal massage to promote bowel movement), basti (colon cleansing), kapalbhati (respiratory cleansing and purification of the frontal lobes) and trataka (eye cleansing through blinkless gazing).

Later, other practices were incorporated to Hatha Yoga, resulting in 5 practices with emphasis on physical aspects.

## 5 Hatha Practices (Pre- Patanjali’s The Yoga Sutra)

1. Asana (physical postures)
2. Pranayama (breathing practices)
3. Mudra (hand gestures)
4. Bandha (body locks)
5. Shatkarma (6 cleansing practices)



## Patanjali's The Yoga Sutra

Approximately by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, the first widely distributed yoga document emerged; Patanjali's, The Yoga Sutra. It is a compilation of 196 aphorisms outlining how to live a yogic lifestyle with the purpose of personal evolution. The Eight Limbs of Yoga in The Yoga Sutra was first structural framework of Raja Yoga (Yoga of controlling the mind) to be documented.

### The Eight Limbs of Yoga

Also known as Ashtanga Yoga (eight limbs), the Eight Limbs of yoga is a method of self-realization in 8 progressive steps.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Limb: Yamas

The first limb is the Yamas, 5 codes of social conduct. Yamas are external disciplines to help people live harmoniously in society and to direct their energy positively. Prior to The Yoga Sutra, Hatha Yoga practices did not include social and personal codes of conduct.

#### Yamas

1. Ahimsa: practice non-violence and non-harm physically, verbally, and emotionally to others as well as to oneself
2. Satya: practice truthfulness and honesty
3. Asteya: No stealing, materially, personally, and intellectually
4. Bramacharya: Behave with restraint and good intentions (Traditionally known as the practice of celibacy but the aspect of "Godly behavior" is the focus of this practice, not the celibacy.)
5. Aparigraha: practice non-possessiveness

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Limb: Niyamas

The second limb is the Niyamas, 5 codes of personal conduct, rules of internal discipline, to help us live harmoniously with others, prevent personal accumulation of negative karma and, ultimately, to reduce unnecessary suffering for ourselves. In effect, both the Yamas and the Niyamas create guidelines for people to live mindfully and in peace, while avoiding creating negative energy. It takes more energy to be in conflict with others, maintain lies or be jealous than live a wholesome life with honesty and contentment. All religions incorporate the codes of conducts similar to Yamas and Niyamas, highlighting the universal appeal of yogic aspirations and values.

#### Niyamas

1. Saucha: practice of physical and mental cleanliness
2. Santosha: practice of contentment, be satisfied with what you have
3. Tapas: practice discipline



4. Svadhyaya: practice self-reflection, awareness of one's mind and actions
5. Ishvara Pranidhana: practice of devotion to align one's energy to higher consciousness and to the ideals of one's pure awareness

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Limb: Asana

Asana is the practice of mastering the body to sit still in meditation. The Sanskrit etymology of the word means cushion, which is used for sitting in a meditative pose. The physical postures, purposefully created for the asana practice, must be done with body, mental and breath awareness. Without awareness, nor adhering to the yamas and niyamas, the practitioner is only doing physical exercise, not yoga. For example, the first Yama, ahimsa (non-violence) must also be practiced during asana practice. Treat the body as a friend and move gently into the posture, never using force. Steadiness and ease of asana postures can be gained through daily practice, and gradually, the body becomes stronger, more flexible and leaner. The third niyama, tapas (discipline), is also necessary to make asana practice a sadhana (daily practice). Getting to know our physical bodies is the first step to gaining self-awareness and preparing ourselves for the breathing and meditation practices. Many people misunderstand asana to be the entirety of yoga or over emphasize the practice. It is crucial to remember that the physical postures are only one aspect among the Eight Limbs of Yoga.

### 4<sup>th</sup> Limb: Pranayama

Pranayama is breathing practice to control the flow of prana, the vital life force, and to deepen one's physical and mental awareness in deep relaxation. The word pranayama is a compound Sanskrit word. Prana means subtle energy and yama means dimension or medium to direct. Although the physical benefits of the practice are undeniable, ranging from controlling the heart rate to purifying the lungs, it also balances the mental and emotional state of a person. It is the first stage of advanced yoga practices as a preparation for the meditative limbs of yoga. In pranayama, the breath acts as a bridge to connect the body and mind. Asana and pranayama practices gradually opens our deepest personal conditioning and makes us aware of the suffering this conditioning generates.

### 5<sup>th</sup> Limb: Pratyahara

Pratyahara is the practice of detaching from the sense organs. It brings us to a state of complete relaxation and leads our awareness inward, getting closer towards stilling the mind. Often a calming sensation of "coming home" is experienced by the practitioner. The word pratyahara is composed of two Sanskrit words. Prati means "against" or "away" and ahara means "food" and together conveys the meaning of gaining mastery over external influences. Yoga Nidra is an example of a pratyahara practice where a person lays in a relaxed position on his or her back with the neck and spine straight and is guided by a teacher through a sensory awareness meditation.



The purpose of this practice is to give full focus on one sensation at a time while detaching from other senses in a deep state of relaxation.

#### 6<sup>th</sup> Limb: Dharana

Dharana is the practice of one pointed concentration where an actual object or a visualized image in the mind is used as a focal point of awareness in order to prevent the mind from wandering. This stage of practice marks the practitioner's arrival at "the door to the house" of meditation. A teacher can guide a student up to this stage of development. From here on forward, the student must practice and venture him or herself to the next level of meditation. An example of dharana practice is Trataka, where a practitioner stares at the tip of the wick of a lit candle flame while sitting still in a meditative posture, and later visualizing the flame with eyes closed. Using visual aid to lock one's concentration, the ability to be in the present moment, without mind chatter, can be prolonged.

#### 7<sup>th</sup> Limb: Dhyana

Dhyana is the practice of meditation where the practitioner is fully in the present moment for a period of time. This state can be achieved only through complete stillness of the body and the mind and is the culmination of all the previous practices. Meditation eliminates mind's afflictions of ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and longing for life, and thus prepares us for the final limb of yoga.

#### 8<sup>th</sup> Limb: Samadhi

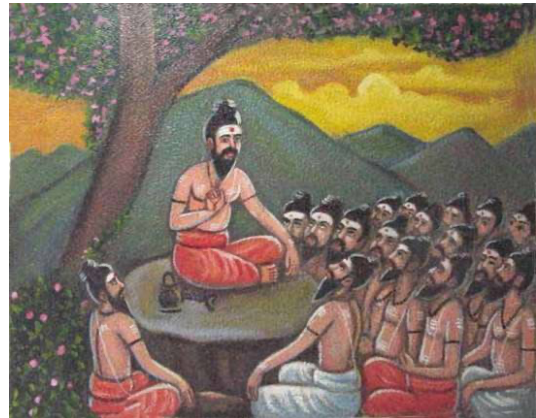
Samadhi is the indescribable state of experiencing unity with all that is in the universe. It is the awakening to the divine essence of who we really are and thus gaining access to all knowing. The mind no longer dominates our awareness and stops comprehending the world in dualities. The true self, the divine essence, takes charge of the mind and the body to live authentically without afflictions and to be free from the vicious cycle of karma. Yogic discipline takes us to this ultimate stage of human evolution by balancing and opening the body's 7 energy centers (chakras), working up from the root up to the final crown chakra in progression.

### Yoga; Not a Physical Exercise

There is a common misconception that yoga is mostly a physical practice consisting of only asanas, but a closer look at Patanjali's The Eight Limbs of Yoga (Ashtanga) makes it evident that asana is only 1/8<sup>th</sup> of the practices. What most people commonly know as Ashtanga Yoga is not the original Eight Limbs of Yoga but is a challenging sequence of asanas of the Mysore tradition. The focus is predominantly on physical practices, thus perpetuating the misconception of yoga as a "no pain, no gain" type training. It is important to know that yoga is 1% theory and 99% practice but the practice is not only asana. It is a balanced practice of all aspects of the Eight Limbs of Yoga in order to elevate the human consciousness.

## Traditional Yoga Education and the Gurukul System / Impact on the Misunderstanding of Yoga

The gurukul is a traditional education system in India where a student pledges discipleship to a guru and lives and studies with the guru. The word guru means dispeller of darkness and thus he or she is not only a teacher to the students but a lifelong mentor with an unbreakable bond established on mutual trust and complete dedication to the guru. Physical, mental, and spiritual developments of the students were nurtured through learning asana, pranayama, mantra, scriptures, and meditation.



The guru imparted his knowledge (shastra) and fighting / taming skills (shasti) to the students. The upkeep of the gurukul was also considered part of the curriculum such as doing seva (service) of cleaning, cooking, and collecting alms. The guru needed the help of the students to maintain and finance the school. For example, a guru may train his students impressive postures to perform in front of villagers so that they may receive more alms from them. These postures were taught for show rather than practice but the blindly dedicated students often passed on these asanas to their future students without understand why. This is one of the reasons why emphases on difficult postures were incorrectly placed in some traditions of yoga.

A guru would teach students according to their individual needs. If a student were to become a soldier one day, then practices would be tailored accordingly to make him physically strong and mentally obedient. A future king would need other practices to foster discrimination and leadership. Similarly, individualized punishment was given when a guru believed it would benefit a student's development. For example, a naughty student with too much energy maybe told to do 108 sun salutations to burn off his excess fire element to balance his energy level. The particular punishment was useful to the student at the time. However, when that student matures and becomes a teacher himself, he may misunderstand the 108 sun salutations as some special accomplishment rather than a one-off punishment and make all his students do the same and thus start a meaningless practice. Common sense would dictate that overuse of the body would rather harm than do good and only deplete energy. Even today, some rural schools use yoga practices such as Thoppukaranam (squatting up and down while holding opposite earlobes) as punishment to misbehaving young pupils like they did in the days of the gurukul.



**Asana as punishment  
Thoppukaranam**

Misconceptions of yoga and fragmented yoga traditions were partly the result of the oral teaching style of the gurukul system and the lack of written

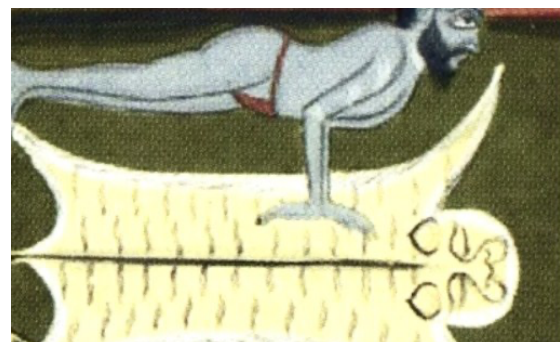


teachings by the guru. This led the disciples to propagate their narrow understanding of their guru's teachings and personal experiences to taint the original wisdom and know-how of yoga. There are exceptions where the disciples were able to propagate the teachings of their gurus rather than the master himself. For example, Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was an enlightened spiritual teacher who was guru to the likes of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) who spread yoga to the west and many other great disciples. Ramakrishna was a devotee of Goddess Kali and had an ashram in Kolkata. Because he was not a public speaker or writer, he was misunderstood by society as being an eccentric. It was only through his disciples that the world came to know his great wisdom and power. Swami Vivekananda was a brilliant communicator and thus translated the experiential knowledge of yoga into words and began to validate yoga analytically to spread yoga in the west.

Although many gurus of the past did not record their teachings, most were Sanskrit scholars and have studied the sacred Sanskrit texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Yoga Sutra. As are most ancient written languages, some words or phrases in Sanskrit have multiple meanings thus leaving room for various interpretations. This is another reason why gurus had slight differences in their teachings of yoga.

The students' inability to question their gurus about the relevancy of some yoga practices is another catalyst contributing to the misunderstanding of yoga. The well-intended Indian traditional value of respecting the elderly has made the society assume the older people are wiser than the young. This belief discouraged students to voice their doubts or ask questions to their elders and left some students with inaccurate understanding of practices.

In ancient times, a guru and his disciples often lived secluded in the jungles and had to protect themselves from dangerous animals such as poisonous snakes. As a result, some practices were created to address their immediate needs. For example, it was believed that peacocks were resilient to snake venom and therefore the guru taught the peacock pose (mayurasana) to his disciples as a way to ward off snakes. The peacock pose has been passed down from teachers to students in various yoga traditions though the practice outlived the days when the students were surviving in the jungles. In fact, without proper training, trying to do the peacock pose could cause injury and is no longer necessary or relevant to today's lifestyle.



**Peacock Pose**  
***Myurasana***

## Extreme Practices perpetuating Myth of Yoga as a Circus Act.

Eagerness and misguided practices to attain enlightenment also deepened the misconceptions of yoga. In sincere desire to reach the highest realm of consciousness, ancient yogis did extreme practices in hopes to speed up their self-evolutionary process. Some have promoted the headstand as a way to use gravitational force to direct vital energy to the crown chakra. Headstands maybe enjoyed as a physical practice but are not as a shortcut to reach enlightenment. More accessible inverted poses, such as the shoulder stand, can have the desired physical benefits to improve the circulation of energy in the body without taking any potential injury risks. Some Hatha yogis of past engaged in magic show like practices such as sleeping on a bed of nails, never lying down, or standing on one leg or surviving only on drinking milk to strengthen their discipline. These Hatha yogis attracted attention and notoriety among the spectators and fueled the image of yoga as a lifestyle for only ascetics.



A healthier and safer way to elevate your consciousness is by practicing the codes of conduct listed in the Yama and Niyama in the Eight Limbs of Yoga. Start by picking one from each and incorporate that into your lifestyle. You will begin to follow the other codes of conducts as your awareness of your own actions becomes heightened. For example, if you commit to being truthfulness (satya) and self-reflection (svadhyaya), you will naturally try to align yourself with your higher consciousness and would practice no stealing (asteya).

## Hatha Yoga: Balancing and promoting Flow of Prana

True Hatha yoga practices are not the extreme practices of the Hatha yogis. The word Hatha is a compound Sanskrit word meaning the sun (ha) and the moon (tha), representing the masculine / physical energy of the sun and the feminine / mental energy of the moon, representing the union of dualities which creates life. Hatha yoga practices aims at balancing and to ensure smooth flow of energy (prana) in the major energy channels (nadi) in the body. The correct understanding of prana is essential in comprehending yoga and how life is sustained.

Prana is the universal energy or life force which remains subtle and motionless in a static state but is dynamic when activated by vibration and manifests as heat, light, electricity, and magnetism. The word prana comes from the Sanskrit prefix, pra, meaning constant and the root word, an, meaning movement. The etymology of the word, “constant movement”, refers to the vibrational characteristics of energy. It is the building blocks of our existence. A fetus shares its mother’s prana and exists as part of the universal consciousness until its fourth month. From there on forward, it begins to form its own consciousness and develops into its individual prana unit. All



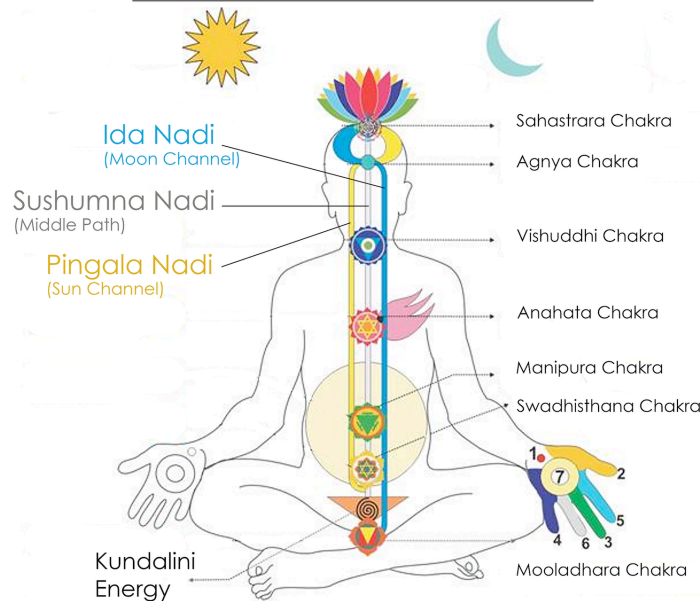
activities expend energy. We use prana when we move, speak, think, perceive with our senses and to exist. A healthy person is full of vitality and has a good flow of prana. Diseases are caused by improper distribution of prana due to blockage in energy centers and channels. Prana is fueled and replenished by our intake of food, water, solar energy and, most importantly, air. A basic understanding of the distribution of prana in our bodies is crucial in appreciating how yoga balances our bodies, minds and spirits. The awareness of the flow of prana in our bodies amplifies the benefits of the yogic practices.

Prana is distributed to every cell in the body through a complex system of 72,000 energy channels called nadis, sourcing energy from the mooladhara, root chakra, located at the base of the spine. The word nadis comes from the Sanskrit word, na, meaning flow, indicating the purpose of the channels to flow through prana. Among the many energy channels, there are three major nadis which acts as prana's main highways to distribute energy to the different organs and parts of the body. From these major nadis, minor nadis branch out to reach every cell.

### Three Major Nadis

- 1) Pingala Nadi, which correlates with the sympathetic nervous system, emanates from mooladhara chakra, and starts on the right side of the spine, then curves and passes through the other six chakras. This nadi ends at the right side of ajna, third eye chakra, where energy is collected for further distribution. Pingala nadi conducts prana shakti, the energy which governs the physical functions and is associated with the solar and positive energy.
- 2) Ida Nadi emanates from the mooladhara chakra and starts from the left side of the spine, then curves and passes through the other six chakras. Ida Nadi ends at the left side of ajna, third eye chakra, where energy is collected for further distribution. It is like the mirror opposite to the pingala nadi. Ida nadi conducts chitta shakti, the energy which governs the mental functions and is associated with the moon and negative energy.
- 3) Sushumna Nadi emanates from the mooladhara chakra and runs straight up the spine ending at sahasrara, crown chakra. It conducts the atma shakti, spiritual energy, which connects us to higher consciousness. The Pingala and ida nadis spiral in and out of the sushumna nadi, highlighting how a balanced and unhindered flow of prana in all three major nadis is necessary for spiritual awakening of the body.

## Energy Centers & The Subtle System



Therefore, the purpose of Hatha practices is to promote prana flow and, ultimately, to release the Kundalini Shakti from the root chakra (mooladhara) through the sushumna nadi to the eyebrow center chakra (ajna), to reach a lasting state of higher consciousness.

There is also a second definition of the word Hatha, forceful, which has caused misunderstandings to yogis to engage in extreme practices. Practices that are self-harming such as staying in a headstand for an extended period is known to cause eyes, brain and heart damages. As a result of these practices, intelligence, energy level and creativity are reduced and therefore counterproductive to creating a union of the body, mind and spirit. However, forceful Hatha practices were useful in training soldiers to intentionally rid intellectual discernment and to foster blind obedience. Making soldiers march by pounding the feet in unison reduced cognitive abilities. The historical need to train soldiers has negatively influenced the original purpose of Hatha yoga practices to this day.

The greatest contribution of Hatha yoga lies in its therapeutic practices. In the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, Yogi Svatmarama completed a detailed Hatha yoga manual, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, documenting cleansing, asana, breathing, hand gesture and body lock practices to restore health and balance to the body and mind. The title means, “light on the union of the sun and the moon”, suggesting that the book is a manual on how to balance the physical and mental energies. This book is evidence to how documented teachings can withstand the test of time and avoiding misinterpretations.

## Contemporary Yoga Traditions: Northern & Southern India Yoga

Generally, there are two established schools of yoga in modern India, the Northern and Southern traditions. The Northern school indicates the geographic area of the yogic tradition and focuses more on meditative practices. The Southern school originated in Southern India and emphasized more on physical practices. Yogic traditions are attributed to two sources of origin, Vedanta and Tantra. Vedantic tradition is based on the ancient sacred texts, the Upanishads, which outlines the ultimate truth of the universe as non-dualistic. It emphasizes the philosophical and mental aspects of yoga and the ultimate goal of the practices are to be awaked to the unity of all existence. On the other hand, Tantric tradition places more emphasis on various physical yoga practices, rather than philosophy, to self-discovery.

### Northern India Yoga

Though Northern India is the birthplace of yoga, five millennia of history shrouded precious wisdom of yoga with complex teachings, conflicting lineages and myths which made yoga inaccessible to the masses. It was only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century that a movement began to unearth yogic philosophies and practices to improve the lives of people by Swamis with vision, such as Swami Vivekananda. Subsequent disciples have carried on this goal to plant the seeds of yoga around the world for the benefit of humanity, crossing cultural and religious barriers. This ambitious goal to evolve humanity one person at a time by balancing the body, mind and soul would not have been possible through the teaching of a single sage, but through a lineage of gurus. However, one guru stands out in his contribution in making yoga accessible to the modern man. Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1923-2009) took it to heart when his Paramguru, Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887-1963), missioned him to “spread yoga from door to door, shore to shore.” Swami Sivananda brought yoga out of philosophy and into practice and spread the understanding that yoga was a practical and scientific way to evolve people’s lives. In 1964, Swami Satyananda founded the Bihar School of Yoga in Munger, India, to impart yogic training to sannyasins (devoted seekers) and householders to further his guru’s teachings by reviving and evolving ancient yogic science to better suit the demands of those living in the current world.



***Swami Sivananda  
Saraswati***



***Swami Satyananda  
Saraswati***



***Swami Niranjanananda  
Saraswati***



Swami Satyananda promoted and preserved the classical Vedanta tradition as a philosophy but he also saw the need of the practical benefits of Tantric yoga as means to bring relief to people suffering from physical, mental, emotional, moral and spiritual imbalances. He was aware that yoga was not just a way to spiritual salvation for the few who have renounced the material world, but a necessary lifestyle for lay people to excel in their lives. Additionally, he understood that his integral approach to yoga must be validated by science to gain credibility in the modern world. He initiated scientific research in laboratories in Europe and the USA and obtained scientific evidence supporting the healing properties of yoga. By identifying the need for change in the approach to yoga, he and his successor, Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati (1960 – present), spread yoga across the globe.

The Hallmark of Satyananda Yoga, also known as Bihar Yoga, is its integral approach by incorporating various yogic traditions. Swami Satyananda recognized that all yogic traditions had their benefits and limitations, and these traditions would need to be brought together in a systematized fashion for yoga to be beneficial for all people. He designed sequence of practices to promote physical and mental balance through Hatha yoga and pranayama practices, and mental and emotional stability through meditative practices. He said yoga is the state where the head, heart, and hand work in coordination.

Swami Satyananda identified the positive attributes of Vedic and Tantric practices and integrated the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of yoga into one complete system. Bihar Yoga adopted jnana, bhakti, karma, and raja yoga practices from the Vedic tradition. Jnana yoga, the path of knowledge, is the practice of self-questioning, reflection, and conscious illumination through the study of the Four Pillars of Knowledge, consisting of viveka, discrimination between real and unreal, vairagya, detachment, shatsampa, six virtues, and mumukshutva, yearning for truth. Jnana yoga develops the ability to observe oneself and the world with a peace of mind. Bhakti yoga, the path of devotion, is useful in channeling emotions in a positive way. Karma yoga, the path of selfless service, controls the ego and reduces self-induced frustration. Raja Yoga, also known as Patanjali's Eight Limbs of Yoga, fosters awareness and understanding of human nature and encourages balance in mind, body and spirit. From the Tantric practices, kriya, kundalini, mantra and other yoga practices were incorporated. Kriya Yoga, once a secret practice reserved for yogis, and Kundalini yoga, practice to awaken the shakti/energy, both deepen the yoga experience. Mantra yoga practice brings positive energy through alignment with sound vibrations and creates heightened awareness. Also, Hatha yoga, from the Southern school, was valuable in promoting physical and mental balance.

Swami Satyananda made significant contributions in evolving yoga to be a systematic practice but yet flexible enough to meet the needs of all practitioners. The creation of the Pawanmuktasana series (PM Series 1-3), therapeutic yogic asana practices divided into 3 groups, allowed practitioners of all physical aptitudes, to benefit from its healing properties. These practices removed stiffness from the joints, excess gas from the intestines and strengthened abdominal muscles and improved



energy flow to all parts of the body. All PM series are effective in improving the elasticity of muscles in the area of focus and thus promoting healthy circulation of blood and energy and setting forth a powerful healing force.

Hatha yoga practices of the 6 cleansing techniques, pranayama breathing practices, hand gestures and body locks were also incorporated to purify the body and mind to promote vital energy flow.

Unique to Bihar Yoga is Yoga Nidra, also known as yogic sleep, is a unique guided pratyahara practice (withdrawing of the senses) which induces a conscious state between sleep and wakefulness. Swami Niranjanananda revived, developed, and elevated Yoga Nidra from its ancient Tantric origins to bring deep and lasting relaxation to the body and mind. Benefits of this practice are multiple. The relaxation experienced during Yoga Nidra induces a meditative state and eradicates deeply rooted psychological and psychosomatic ailments. It cures insomnia and rejuvenates a person from a pranic level. Memory and learning capacity are increased to absorb external information as well as receive wisdom from within. Heightened awareness to intuition is beneficial in making the right choices in life. Yoga Nidra is one of the most important contributions that Bihar School of Yoga has made to the world and the practice has spread to all corners of the world.

Bihar yoga developed tantric meditation practices by taking a more scientific approach to spiritual knowledge. Swami Satyananda was aware that various meditation practices had different effects on people. By making multiple meditation methods available to practitioners, he increased the effectiveness and efficiency of the practices. Antar mouna, ajapa japa, dharana, prana vidya were Tantra meditation practices adapted into Bihar Yoga for maximum results.

Prana vidya practices are conscious manipulation of energy. The prana is raised through the ida and pingala nadis and collected at the eyebrow center, the ajna chakra, then redistributed by will to particular parts of the body. Vital energy can also be transferred through the recitation of mantras. These are advanced practices for seasoned practitioners.

The most important aspect of Satyananda Yoga is the cultivation of awareness of the body, mind and spirit during all yoga practices. Without awareness, asanas will be merely exercise, pranayama, only automatic breathing and meditation, a practice of daydream. Through dedicated practice, the gross awareness shifts to subtle awareness, detecting movement of prana energy and deeper levels of consciousness. Swami Satyananda also developed the principal of SWAN which allows a person to meditate and keep a log of his or her Strength, Weakness, Ambition and Needs to foster self-awareness through introspection. This is a powerful and practical method to analyze one's personality and to the first step to transforming oneself.

Relaxation of the body and mind is given prime importance in order to benefit from the yoga practices. Only in a relaxed state can a person expand his or her awareness both physically and mentally.

Based on Patanjali's ancient text, the Yoga Sutras, Satyananda Yoga propagates drashta bhav, the ability to witness one's actions and thoughts with detachment. By cultivating awareness, the practitioner becomes the seer of his or her own actions, emotions and intents and develops personal discipline to make conscious actions rather than reacting to life's circumstances

Swami Satyananda categorized and grouped different yoga practices to create systematized and balanced sequences, giving clear instructions and categorized classes according to students' physical aptitude. Bihar yoga instructions can be characterized by its awareness, approach, and attitude (the 3 As). The instructor must identify where the student's awareness should be at any given time. Incorporation of mantra chanting prepares the practitioner on a pranic level so that he or she can benefit more from the asana and pranayama practices.

Swami Satyananda also propagated the concept of yoga as a lifestyle. He said, "Yoga is not a circus. It is a lifestyle." He identified yoga as a process of continuous transformation of a person, which can be achieved by regular, systematic practice done with awareness. Bihar Yoga's systemized practices made making yoga a lifestyle easier than in the past. By creating a modern step-by-step approach to yoga, Swami Satyananda triggered a revolution in transforming a society to evolve, one person at a time.

By integrating various traditions of yoga, Bihar Yoga vigilantly safeguards yoga from misconception and myths. By giving clear instructions to their students on any practice, each student should be aware why they are doing any given practice.

### Southern India Yoga

Mysore Kingdom located in Karnataka State was ruled predominately by the powerful Wadiyar Dynasty from 1399 to 1956. The development of the Southern Indian tradition of yoga is closely linked to the growth of the kingdom and the patronage provided by the Mysore Maharaja. Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888 – 1989) was the central yogi in developing the Hatha based Vinyasa style of yoga to train the



***Tirumalai Krishnamacharya***

soldiers of the kingdom. He studied at the Parakala Matha in Mysore, the official monastery and gurukul of the kingdom. After returning from further studies near Mt. Kailash, he returned to open a yoga school at the Mysore Palace to train soldiers. One





of his disciples was K. Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009), mentioned earlier, who popularized the Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga, now commonly known as the Mysore style. He also had support of the Mysore Kingdom and got exposure abroad, especially in the U.S. The athletic nature of Ashtanga yoga practices initially attracted many Americans who were physically strong. However, the difficulty of the postures reinforced the image that yoga was more of a physical practice and meant for the fit and healthy. The southern tradition of yoga was created for strong soldiers therefore it is no wonder that the practices are not meant for everybody.

After the independence of India from British rule and the ending of the Mysore Kingdom, Krishnamacharya moved to Chennai where he focused more on therapeutic yoga, as there was no longer need to train soldiers. His young brother-in-law, B.K.S. Iyengar (1918-2014), studied under Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois and popularized his own style of yoga, coined the Iyengar Yoga, where he used props for therapeutic yoga. Another prominent yogi was the son of Krishnamacharya, T.K.V. Desikachar (1938-2016) who created a contemporary version of Hatha Yoga called the Yin Yoga. The influence the socio-political history of Mysore had on the yoga tradition in the South is evident. During the height of the Mysore Kingdom, the focus was on Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga to train a strong army. After the fall of the kingdom, the style shifted to therapeutic yoga to meet the needs of the time.

## How to choose a Yoga Teacher

Finding a qualified teacher is crucial in starting your yoga journey. Find a teacher who gives you understanding of yoga and not information. The teacher should be able to explain the purpose of each practice. Just because a person can do postures nicely does not make them good teachers. A 200-hour yoga teacher certificate is not a sufficient qualification to teach yoga. Going to an unqualified teacher is like going to a pharmacist rather than a medical doctor. A pharmacist may know every drug available, just as most yoga teachers may know many asanas, but only a doctor may diagnose which medication is necessary for a patient. In the same way, a good yoga teacher can understand the student's issues and cater practices according to their needs.

Yoga practices need not be complicated. There are many traditions for various purposes but many people misunderstand the yogic path and hurt themselves by only doing challenging asanas. After 3 to 4 years of only practicing asanas, practitioners feel they are not benefitting from the challenging postures and quit yoga all together. If a student can only do 2 out of 10 postures rather than 9 out of 10 in a yoga class, it is understandable that he or she feels discouraged and quits. Interestingly, the student retention factor in Bihar style yoga, focusing on accessible practices, is higher than other traditions. Yoga needs to become a lifestyle in order for it to make a positive impact in a person's life. Short-lived practices are useless and taking unnecessary risks by doing harmful postures is dangerous.

A yoga teacher should offer a class with a sequence of practices which results in a good flow of prana by opening all body parts. Without good flow of energy, there is



no health and no productivity. There are some yoga instructors who focus more on showing off their asana abilities rather than giving correct instructions to the students. Such teachers are actually harming themselves if they are talking too much while showing postures because that impacts their energy flow. Yoga practices are ultimately energy work. Anything that interferes or blocks prana flow in the body, such as touching students too much while making corrections in their postures is counterproductive. The aim of asana practices is to increase energy flow, not perfection of the posture. Achieving the postures correctly and with ease will come naturally with daily practice. The priority of the teacher should be to create good energy flow rather than perfection of the asanas.

As the breath is the carrier of prana to all parts of the body and providing oxygen to every cell, a teacher must give correct breathing instructions to the students. Although there are some pranayama practices through the mouth, most breathing practices should be done through the nostrils. Inhaling and exhaling through the nostrils and making abdominal breathing a habit is vital in achieving energy flow. Simultaneously, the teacher must instruct the students to develop awareness of their body and breath. With focus, practices give energy rather than deplete energy, relax the body and mind and result in improved flexibility. Some yoga teachers may only teach breath awareness in synchronicity with the asana but this does not replace the pranayama practices. Each pranayama practice has targeted effects. For example, the alternate nose breathing balances both sides of the brain and body and can be done even if a person is ill. Breathing practices to create heat such as Kapalhati improves the metabolism.

Yoga teachers are susceptible to their own egos like everybody. Desire for recognition may influence them to bring in unnecessary practices into their teachings to distinguish themselves. Lore has it that even enlightened Buddha and Mahavira (spiritual teacher of Jainism), both used to boast about who had more followers, demonstrating how difficult it is to rid one's ego. Each great yogi wants to leave their mark in the history of yogic traditions. Some come up with original names and incorporate difficult set sequences of asana practices and make it seem as if only achieving complex postures could bring about personal development. Does this mean those who cannot do those postures should not practice yoga? This is simply not true. Risking injuries or becoming fatigued as a result of yoga practices is not the purpose of yoga. The practices are no longer yoga but a workout. Some traditions use props to distinguish their practices. Props are useful for rehabilitation purposes but making students who do not need props only encourages dependency on them and hinders their development. Often, giving appropriate options for postures is more effective than using blocks or straps.

Some yoga teachers have succeeded creating temporary fads which are actually harmful to the practitioners. Hot yoga became very popular, especially in the U.S., during the 1980s to about 2010 due to its novelty and celebrity following. It is a set sequence of 26 asanas and 2 pranayama to be practiced in a room heated up to 40C. However, practitioners began to complain of injuries and ailments. Artificially raising body temperature is not healthy. It causes hair loss, acidity in the digestive tract,



heart problems, miscarriage and reduces fertility. It can also cause injuries because the heated muscles and joints in the body may unnaturally overextend. Hot yoga is merely an exercise aimed only to burn fat. It is important to remember that some fat is necessary for the body to function optimally. According to yoga, 42% fat in women and 33% fat in men are considered ideal.

As a yoga practitioner, it is important to be familiar with the various styles offered and what influenced the practices so that he or she can make an educated choice of yoga traditions and yoga teachers.

## Misunderstanding of the Sun Salutations

The sun salutation (Surya Namaskar) is the most well-known dynamic sequence of 12 asanas in yoga. The traditional sun salutation is a practice for the mind, body and spirit, thus a complete practice in itself. Roots of Surya Namaskar can be traced back to the ancient Vedic period when the sun was worshiped as the symbol of spiritual consciousness and the source of all life force (prana). The main purpose of this practice is to create a good energy flow of the Prana Shakti (energy flowing through the pingala nadi energy channel, associated with energy necessary for physical activity) and to activate the solar plexus chakra (manipura chakra) where Prana Shakti is stored. In order to activate the solar plexus chakra, each energy center must be activated. Every posture in the sun salutation is responsible for activating a particular energy center one by one and simultaneously works on stretching every body part to create space for better energy flow. The sun salutation is Hatha Yoga in origin but was not a dynamic series of movements at first. The old texts describe individual postures but not in a particular sequence. The sun salutation evolved, not only into a dynamic physical practice but is also as a dynamic meditation practice. The Surya Namaskar Mantra chanted along with the sequence aligns the energy in our body with a higher frequency. Done with awareness of the body, breath and the corresponding energy centers, the sun salutation is the perfect overall health practice.



| Posture No. | Surya Namaskar Mantra           | Activated Chakra                | Breath |
|-------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------|
| 1           | <b>Om mitraya namah</b>         | Heart<br><b>Anahata</b>         | normal |
| 2           | <b>Om ravaye namah</b>          | Throat<br><b>Vishuddha</b>      | inhale |
| 3           | <b>Om suryaya namah</b>         | Root<br><b>Muladhara</b>        | exhale |
| 4           | <b>Om bhanavah namah</b>        | Third eye<br>Ajna               | inhale |
| 5           | <b>Om khagaya namah</b>         | Throat<br><b>Vishuddha</b>      | exhale |
| 6           | <b>Om pushne namah</b>          | Solar plexus<br><b>Manipura</b> | hold   |
| 7           | <b>Om hiranyagarbhaya namah</b> | Root<br><b>Muladhara</b>        | inhale |
| 8           | <b>Om maricaya namah</b>        | Throat<br><b>Vishuddha</b>      | exhale |
| 9           | <b>Om adhityaya namah</b>       | Third eye<br><b>Ajna</b>        | inhale |
| 10          | <b>Om savitre namah</b>         | Root<br><b>Muladhara</b>        | exhale |
| 11          | <b>Om arkaya namah</b>          | Throat<br><b>Vishuddha</b>      | inhale |
| 12          | <b>Om bhaskaraya namah</b>      | Heart<br><b>Anahata</b>         | exhale |

However, some traditions have altered the practice which changes the intended effect of the sun salutations. For example, strong Hatha Yoga classes and Vinyasa classes replaces the knee-chest-chin pose (Ashtangasana, 6<sup>th</sup> posture) with the plank (Chaturanga), incorporating a weight bearing posture when it was intended to activate the solar plexus energy center (Manipura chakra) and to gain flexibility in the lower back. Planks are good training for soldiers but not necessary for people leading a civilian life. Another common replaced posture is the downward dog (Ado Mukha Svanasana) instead of the mountain pose (Parvatasana, 5<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> postures). Excessive repetitions of downward dog pose can cause unnecessary shoulder injury. Replacing the cobra pose (Bhujanga asana) with the upward facing dog pose (Urdhva Mukha Savanasana) puts unnecessary pressure in the lower back and can cause injury. Difficult posture does not mean one gets more benefits. It is vital to understand that doing accessible practices with awareness and with regularity is more effective in reaching your optimal level of health than risking injuries doing challenging asanas.

### Additional Misconceptions and Myths of Yoga

**Over Emphasis on Physical Flexibility:** It is misunderstood that achieving incredible physical flexibility is one of the main goals in practicing yoga but it is quite the contrary. Flexibility is necessary for physical mobility but using force or over stretching the muscles only cause injuries. Improving elasticity and toning the muscles is much more important. Elasticity allows the muscles to lengthen and stretch when needed but can go back into the original shape to maintain firmness and tone.

**Asana postures as pure exercise:** Many practitioners do not understand nor appreciate the significance of the asana practices. It is not a random exercise but



takes into consideration the stretching of various body parts, building strength, creating an energy circuit flow in the body and mental focal points. Each geometrical shapes of asana create different prana circuits. For example, in the triangle pose, the energy flows from the hand to the leg that it is holding, then back up the body, then goes down the arm again. The shape of the triangle signifies stability and the placement of the limbs has specific symbolisms. The placement of the front foot represents the future, the back foot, the past and the hand reaching straight up represents the present. The head faces the hand reaching up, signifying the importance to bring one's focus on the present moment. Hand gestures (Mudras) and body locks (Bandhas) also create prana circuits and have symbolic significance as well. The more the practitioners learn the significance of each practice, the more they can benefit from them.

Yoga is not about the look: Dress comfortably and sensibly when practicing yoga. Flexible clothing which allows mobility without causing distraction to oneself or others should be worn. Thanks to technological advancement, there are many comfortable athletic wear which allow airflow and movement. However, some practitioners and even teachers think it necessary to be topless during practices. The motivation for this maybe to either show off their perfect bodies or to emulate yogis of the past who practiced in only loin clothes. When washing clothes by hand was the norm and yogi survived only on alms with hardly any personal belongings, practicing in a loin cloth made practical sense. Fortunately, we have washing machines and clothes to wear so dress sensibly.

Yoga is not about the gears and props: As yoga became globally popular, it has also become a global enterprise. Many yoga accessories, props and gears are available to enrich the yoga industry and students began to bring many things into the practice room. Dependency on props like blocks and straps, fitness watches, bags, huge water bottles and even mobile phones are logged into the classroom. The practice of yoga should be done with total focus when a student spends time with him or herself for the hour without any distractions. Any unnecessary objects brought into practice only interfere with concentration and encourages material attachment. The only things one needs are a yoga mat and a towel. Mobile phones should not be brought into the practice room because it emanates electromagnetic pollution which interferes with the flow of prana in the body and mentally disturbs practitioners with messages and calls.

Drinking water during yoga practices: Although hydration is important, drinking water during yoga practices is counter-productive because it breaks the prana flow which the asana and pranayama practices just created. Prana is energy and by adding water into the body, a similar reaction occurs like when water reacts with electricity on a subtle level. Of course, pregnant women and if one is desperately thirsty, a sip of water maybe taken but its best to consume water before or after practices.



## Exercise Discernment and Common Sense

Yoga is a lifestyle for the process of self-evolution which can be applied in the real world. To stay on the true path of yoga, it is important to understand the practices that you do under the guidance of a qualified teacher. Go to a teacher who gives you understanding of yoga. Students must use their discernment and commonsense in choosing a yoga tradition and in doing their practices. Do not become addicted to asana practices because that is creating an unhealthy dependency. Attachments are source of discontentment and distort perception. Even attachment to yoga is not desirable. Yoga is not about exhausting oneself. It is about conserving energy so that one may accomplish one's goals and be productive members of society so do not overuse your body in asana practice and harm oneself. Treat your body as your friend and be patient with your progress. Perfection will come with practice. Remember; do not fall in love with the guru but with his or her teachings. Gurus and good teachers can only show you the yogic path but it is up to you to make a resolve and commit to the practices.