

YOGA



Yoga is a philosophical system (ideas and practices) that dates back possibly 4,000 to 5,000 years. The literal meaning from the Sanskrit verbal root *yuj*, is to yoke or to join. Campbell (1974) explains, “What is to be joined through yoga is consciousness to its source, so that one lives in the knowledge of identity with that source and not merely with the limited ego of the daylight personality” (p. 303).

Throughout time and across cultures, yogis studied the effects of physical positions, mental attitudes and breathing techniques on the body, mind and spirit. They discovered that when performing certain movements with a meditative focus, the body is able to relax and to become still. When the body is relaxed, the mind becomes calm. Certain breathing techniques lead to an experience of peace and tranquility. The system of yoga was first codified by the Sage Patanjali around the time of Christ. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali is the text on Classical Yoga. It has been widely translated and is readily available today.

YOGA AS A METAPHOR FOR LIFE

The lessons learned on the yoga mat parallel those we stumble upon in life. According to Ryan (1995), yoga can be a metaphor for life:

Yoga became a metaphor for life, a place wherein my friend became conscious of internal attitudes, insecurities and fears. By allowing the body, in its own wisdom, to stretch and hold as much as it could without the interference of derogatory mental comments and unrealistic expectations, she began to develop a trust and a faith in her body and in herself. (p. 141)

The lessons encountered on the yoga mat mirror the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual challenges of life. The practice is to remain present and observant of what comes up as it comes up. It is an opportunity to become aware of what lies beyond the surface, and to reprogram habitual patterns of thinking and moving. The way to progress is to accept your condition unconditionally. The practice of yoga is done without striving and without forcing. We practice accepting ourselves as we are, in the present, changing from one moment to the next.

YOGA ON AND OFF THE MAT



The beauty of yoga, is that it can be practiced anywhere, any time. Formal daily practice on the yoga mat seeps out into one's life in the world. Yoga is a guidebook which leads you through the terrain of body, mind and spirit on the journey of transformation. With dedication to regular practice, you begin to live your life in the conscious, meditative, accepting attitude with which you learn to practice. The fruit of the practice is a life full of joy.

KINDS OF YOGA

- **Karma Yoga** is the active path of selfless service. According to Easwaran (1995), Krishna tells Arjuna:
Every selfless act is born from the eternal, infinite Godhead who is present in every act of service. All life turns on this law. Whoever violates it, indulging his senses for his own pleasure and ignoring the needs of others, has wasted his life. (p. 76)
- **Jnana Yoga** is the contemplative path of spiritual wisdom. The path of selfless service leads to wisdom. Easwaran (1985) translates Krishna's message to Arjuna, "The wise see that there is action in the midst of inaction and inaction in the midst of action. Their consciousness is unified, and every act is done with complete awareness. The awakened sages call a person wise when all his undertakings are free from anxiety about results" (p. 87).
- **Bhakti Yoga** is the way of love. The Buddha said; "Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let your thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world" (as cited in Borg, 1997, p.25). The Christ said; "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (as cited in Borg, 1997, p.24).
- **Hatha Yoga** is defined by Feuerstein (1998) as a "physical discipline, aiming at the awakening of the serpent power (kundalini-shakti) and the creation of an indestructible divine body" (p. 455).
- **Raja Yoga** is a holistic and comprehensive approach to physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. According to Feuerstein (1998), Raja Yoga is "a late designation of Patanjali's Eightfold Yoga, invented to contrast it with Hatha-Yoga" (p.458). It is also commonly known as The Royal Yoga.
- **Classical Yoga** refers to the eightfold Yoga described by Sage Patanjali in the source text, The Yoga Sutras. Bachman (2004) provides the following translation of this yoga from Sanskrit (pp. 18--19):
 1. YAMA: social ethics.
 - Ahimsa: nonviolence, reducing harm.
 - Satya: truth.
 - Asteya: non-stealing.
 - Brahmacharya: appropriate use of one's vital energy.
 - Aparigraha: nonpossessiveness.

2. NIYAMA: personal ethics.
 - Saucha: purity, cleanliness.
 - Santosa: contentment.
 - Tapas: practice causing change.
 - Svadhyaya: study/ observation.
 - Isvarapranidhana: devotion, surrender to a higher force.
3. ASANA: posture, sitting.
4. PRANAYAMA: breath regulation.
5. PRATYAHARA: internalization of the senses, “drawing back”.
6. DHARANA: focus, concentration.
7. DHYANA: maintaining focus, meditation.
8. SAMADHI: complete absorption.

YOGA IN THE WEST

Yoga was first studied academically in the West as Eastern Philosophy in the 1930s. By the late 1950s and 1960s prominent yoga masters began sending their disciples to the West to introduce yoga as a way of life for the average citizen. Swami Vishnu-devananda, a disciple of Swami Sivananda Saraswati summarized the complex philosophy and practices of yoga with the following five principles of yoga (Sivananda Yoga Center, 1983):

- 1) Proper exercise.
- 2) Proper breathing.
- 3) Proper relaxation.
- 4) Proper diet.
- 5) Positive thinking and meditation.

Yoga asana practice promotes health of all of the organ systems of the body. Asana practice done with focused concentration and deep breathing enhances mental clarity and promotes relaxation. Yogic breathing techniques enhance our vital energy. Pranayama -- literally, extension and control of the breath -- gives us the tools that we need to calm our mind and diminish the effects of chronic stress on our bodies. Yoga Nidra is a technique used to induce complete spiritual, mental, and physical relaxation. Of all of the yoga practices, yogic relaxation is one of the most powerful for bringing all of the body systems into balance. Yogic diet is vegetarian. Foods that are natural, pure and easily digested are recommended. The yogi eats to live. She does not live to eat. In order to change our physical reality, we must first change our thinking. As we learn to step back and observe our thinking mind, we begin to develop the ability to respond to life's circumstances rather than to react in ways that are habitual and destructive.