

# The History and Origin of Yoga System

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**Abstract:** Yoga is a Hindu spiritual and ascetic discipline, a part of which, including breath control, simple meditation, and the adoption of specific bodily postures, is widely practiced for health and relaxation. The word Yoga first appeared in the oldest sacred texts, the Rig Veda and is derived from the Sanskrit root “Yuj” which means join or unite. According to the Yogic scriptures, the practice of Yoga leads an individual to the union of consciousness with that of universal Consciousness. It eventually leads to a great harmony between the human mind and body, man & nature.

**Keywords:** Rigveda, Upanishads, Smrti, Epics, Patanjali, Hathyoga.

## Introduction

Yoga, most people believe, is just asanas and pranayamas that are meant to keep a person in good health. But there’s more to this ancient art and science that seeks to harmonize body, mind, and spirit. The word ‘Yoga’ is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘yuj’, meaning ‘to join’ or ‘to unite’. It is meant to help the individual overcome suffering and help him/her evolve spiritually to the ‘state of liberation’. One of the oldest sciences in the world, Yoga originated in India. According to mythology, Lord Shiva was the first one to impart the knowledge of yoga. Yoga, dating back to 2700 BC, is an offering of the Indus valley civilization that seeks to promote both the material and spiritual well-being of humanity. Basic human values are at the heart of Yoga.

The earliest mention of ‘yoga’ is in the Rig Veda. The Atharva veda mentions ‘breath control’, but it is not possible to pin down exact dates because the Vedas were passed down orally. But much before this—2700BC—several seals depicting Yoga asanas were found in the Indus-Saraswati civilization. The main sources that provide information about Yoga and associated literature are available in the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, teachings of Buddha, Panini, the epics, the Puranas, etc.

500 BC to 800 AD is considered the classical period and also the richest period in the growth of Yoga. The commentary by Vyasa on Yoga Sutras was written during this period, and two great religious teachers—Mahavira and Buddha—made their appearance during this time. The eight-fold path by Buddha can be considered as the precursor of Yoga Sadhana. More elaborate explanations can be found in the Bhagwad Gita which presents, in greater detail, the concept of Gyan Yoga, Bhakti yoga, and Karma yoga. They are timeless and are relevant even today. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, besides focusing on various aspects of yoga, is identified with the eight-fold path of yoga. During this period, the focus was on the mind; Yoga seeks to bring both body and mind under control to experience equanimity.

The Post-classical period stretches from 800 A.D. – 1700 A.D. During this period, Adi Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya were the more prominent contributors, and the teachings of Suradasa, Mirabai,

Tulsidas also gained prominence. Matsyendranath, Gorkshanatha, Suri, Gheranda, Shrinivasa Bhatt were responsible for spreading Hatha yoga during this period.

Later, in the mid-nineteenth century, Swami Vivekananda took Yoga to the West. Raja Yoga was developed by Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, K Pattabhi Jois, Paramahansa Yogananda. Shri Yogendraji made a vital contribution to the field of yoga by demystifying it and making it available to the householder; this way yoga became accessible to millions, many of whom had believed till then that yoga was only for mystics and recluses. Briefly, this has been the long journey that Yoga has taken into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yes, it has changed and grown over the years, but its essence remains the same, which is becoming self-realized.

A union of the mind and body (calm mind = calm body). Yoga is the art and science intimately linked to the coming together of the individual consciousness with the universal consciousness. The term Yoga has its roots in the Sanskrit word ‘Yuj’, which stands for a union. This union of the mind and body presents a human being’s relationship with nature. In our busy lives, our connection with other beings and consequently with nature is lost. By taking a minute and simply breathing the right way, we can understand and reconnect with nature and the universal consciousness. The controlled yogic breathing called Pranayama, stimulates life energies.

Yoga brings an individual closer to nature and to their own higher natural state (think when you are/imagine yourself trekking in the mountains or swimming in the ocean). It attunes one to become one with all. Many yoga poses are named after nature and animals like the cat pose, the snake pose, the eagle pose, the lion pose and the mountain pose, which help us connect through movement, breath, and meditation.

Those who have experienced the joys of yoga, talk about the importance of the mind to the yoga path. Can our mind, which is always muddled with worldly distractions, ever achieve the detachment that yoga requires? *Well, Yoga isn’t limited to just that.* It has benefits that go beyond the constraints of flexibility. It aids in strengthening physical and mental health, alike. This beautiful art has evolved over numerous centuries. **It is a spiritual discipline that aims to achieve eternal peace and harmony between body and mind and soul.** It aims at cleansing our mind of the mental pollutants along with making our body physically fit.

### **Yoga — A Cultural Blessing**

‘Yoga’ has its roots from the Sanskrit word ‘yuj’ which means to join or unite. The very origin of the word speaks volumes. It aims to connect your mind and body and to help them work together in peace and as one. It works on leading to the union of your consciousness to the universal consciousness. The person who experiences this unity and bond between nature and himself is said to have attained moksha (ultimate liberation). Yoga aims to achieve self-actualization and peace, even when faced with the most difficult tasks. That is when you truly achieve kaivalya (freedom). It imparts basic human values and pushes human beings towards a sustainable lifestyle filled with joy, peace and gratitude.

### **Yoga through the Ages**

There is Yogic lore that says Yoga has been as old as the dawn of civilization. In this lore, Lord Shiva is said to be the first yogi or Adiyogi. Passed down through generations, these story talks of a time when Lord Shiva imparted and taught Yoga to seven of his disciples. These seven disciples went in different directions to spread the knowledge of Yoga far and wide. Their knowledge reached areas like Asia, the Middle East, Northern Africa and South America. However, there is no proper evidence of when this discipline started. It is believed that it originated in Northern India, approximately 5000 years ago.

### **1. Pre-Vedic Period**

Dating back to 2700 BC, in the Indus-Saraswati valley civilization, seals and fossils have been found with people doing Yoga Sadhana. This hinted at the practice of Yoga starting at such early times, although it was an undocumented period.

### **2. Vedic Period**

The word 'Yoga' was first mentioned in the ancient Sanskrit texts of Rig Veda which dates back to 1500 BC. This old text mainly spoke of rituals, mantras and songs that the Vedic priests used in their life.

Later, in the Atharva Veda (around 900 BC), the importance of controlling breath was stressed upon. However, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact era as the Vedas were originally passed down through stories and by word-of-mouth. Vedic priests avoided self-indulgences and performed sacrifices called yajnas. They used poses that researchers believed have now evolved into modern Yoga postures.

### **3. Pre-Classical Period**

This 2,000 year period in the history of Yoga is predominated by the Upanishads. They explain the meanings of Vedic literature, reading between the lines and explaining how the body and mind works. Moreover, it talks of spiritual teachings.

Out of the 108 written documents, 20 of them were Yoga Upanishads. They focus on different yogic techniques that are still used, like pranayama (breathing exercises), pratyahara (withdrawing senses), breathing modulation, sound and meditation in complete peace. At this time period, Yoga was divided into two forms - karma Yoga and jnana Yoga.

### **4. Classical Period**

The classical period of Yoga lasted from 500 BC TO 800 AD. The importance of a peaceful mind, as a consequence of Yoga, was put into the limelight during this period. It was in this period that Yoga seeped its way into Buddhism and Jainism. Lord Buddha was known to be the first Buddhist to study Yoga. Buddhist literature laid emphasis on meditation and yogic poses that helped attain enlightenment. Jainism imbibed Yoga, too, with the help of Lord Mahavira. He stressed on the importance of meditation to attain salvation and moksha.

The Bhagavad Gita, a 700-verse compilation of conversation between Lord Krishna and Prince Arjuna, explains the importance of dharma, jnana Yoga, karma Yoga and bhakti Yoga. In this renowned text,

Lord Krishna says, “Samatvam Yoga uchyate”, i.e. Yoga is a balanced state. Yoga strives for oneness between man and nature. It takes us back to our joyous state.

Maharshi Patanjali, the Father of Yoga, was the first yogi to truly understand and explain the meaning of Yoga and the true purpose behind it, in his Yoga Sutras. This was called Raja Yoga.

The first commentary on the Yoga Sutras by Veda Vyasa was written in the classical period. The deep-rooted relationship between the philosophy of Yoga and Samkhya philosophy (one of the six Indian philosophies) was unearthed and talked about.

Nata dances and martial arts used the techniques written in the Yoga Sutras, to help accentuate their dance and martial forms, respectively. The classical period focused on the importance of mindfulness in yoga. Yoga seemed to flourish in this period.

### **5. Post-Classical Period**

The post-classical period ran up to 1700 AD. It brought forward names of numerous Yoga teachers who worked towards the development of this beautiful, cultural art form. Some of the yogis include Acharya Trayas-Adi Shankaracharya, Madhvacharya, Ramanujacharya, Meera Bai and Purandara Dasa.

Adi Shankaracharya devoted his time to the continuation of jnana Yoga and Raja Yoga. He dedicated a large part of his life to developments and tweaks in the yogic cultures. Meditation was also stressed upon to clear the mind of negative thoughts.

Other yogis like Tulsidas and Purandara Dasa worked on the science of Yoga. The Yoga of physical postures and breathing techniques or Hatha Yoga was popularized and is still widely renowned today.

### **6. Modern Period**

Swami Vivekananda was one of the primary yogis to spread Yoga in the modern period, that is from 1700 AD upto now. The period focused on Yoga as a manner of being physically strong.

Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, BKS Iyengar, K Pattabhi Jois, Paramhansa Yogananda, and Vivekananda held parts in the spread and popularity of Hatha Yoga, Vedanta Yoga and Bhakti Yoga.

Yoga has undergone a wide number of changes over the centuries. Over this span of time, many people have been propounding numerous theories for the spread of its culture. But even as it walks into the 21st century, the essence and soul of Yoga lies with the feeling of oneness with the spirit, mind, body and nature.

### **Conclusion**

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 utilize the body; bhakti yoga, where we utilize the emotions; gyana yoga, where we utilize the mind and intellect; and kriya yoga, where we utilize the energy. Each system of Yoga we practice would fall within the gamut of one or more of these categories. Every individual is a unique combination of these four factors. "All the ancient commentaries on Yoga have stressed that it is essential to work under the direction of a Guru." The reason being that only a

Guru can mix the appropriate combination of the four fundamental paths, as is necessary for each seeker. Yoga Education: Traditionally, Yoga Education was impacted by knowledgeable, experienced, and wise persons in the families (comparable with the education imparted in convents in the west) and then by the Seers (Rishis/Munis/Acharyas) in Ashramas (compared with monasteries). Yoga Education, on the other hand, aims at taking care of the individual, the 'Being'. It is presumed that a good, balanced, integrated, truthful, clean, transparent person will be more useful to oneself, family, society, nation, nature and humanity at large. Yoga education is 'Being oriented'. Details of working with 'being oriented' aspect have been outlined in various living traditions and texts and the method contributing to this important field is known as 'Yoga'.

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