

## WHAT IS YOGA

by EdB

Many of us think of yoga as a form of exercise , and it couldn't be further from the truth. Yoga, a Sanskrit word from India, originates from the word “Yuj” meaning to yoke; harness, unite. Yoga is actually one of six schools of old Hindu *Philosophy*, focusing on the path to self knowledge and liberation; a discipline applied to the development of mind, body & soul.

The science of yoga, designed to directly experience a higher consciousness, helps us to keep the body luminous, vibrant and pure. Hindu text establishing the basis for yoga include spiritual contemplations, spiritual songs & verses, spiritual aphorisms, physical poses and a whole lot more. In western society yoga is mainly associated with the physical aspect ; the poses, asanas. In India yoga is associated with spiritual and physiological mastery, a whole system in which the asanas actually play a small part.

\*\*\*Yoga is the path which cultures the body and senses, refines the mind, civilizes intelligence and takes rest in the soul, which is the core of our being.\*\*\* B.K.S. Iyengar

## SOME HISTORY

The history of yoga is obscure and uncertain due to its oral transmission of the sacred text. Yoga originates in India, and although yoga focuses on the self, it originally was community oriented. Sacred scriptures of Brahmanism called The Vedas, written about 3000 B.C. , contain the oldest known yogic teachings. Characterized by rituals and ceremonies praising divine power, they strive to surpass the

boundaries of the mind. This is considered vedic yoga; veda means knowledge. In those days rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies were their means of making a connection with the spirit world.

The scriptures of the Upanishads, composed over several centuries, further explain the teachings of the Vedas, describing the inner vision of reality. The Upanishads explain the *ultimate reality*, the *transcendental self*, and the **relationship** between the two. Taking the idea of the ritual sacrifice of vedic yoga, the Upanishads internalized it, teaching the sacrifice of the ego through self knowledge, action and wisdom.

Just as the Upanishads further the Vedas, The BhagavadGita incorporates the tenets found in the Upanishads. The Bhagavad Gita, The Lord's Song, stresses the importance of opposing evil. The Gita is a conversation between Prince Arjuna and Krishna on the battlefield. These songs and verses are a glorious story that tries to bring together loving devotion, knowledge & contemplation, and selfless actions.

The Yoga Sutras, written by Pantjali, a famous Indian sage, around the second century, were an attempt to define and standardize classical yoga. Pantjali is often considered the father of yoga, and the book of sutras is a milestone in the history of yoga. The word Sutra is Sanskrit and means thread, referring to the thread that holds prayer beads together. The Yoga Sutras, Pantali's vision of oneness, are composed of 195 aphorisms (meant to be memorized) with its underlying principle; Pantjali's eight fold path, the eight limbs of yoga.

A few centuries after Pantjali the yoga masters created a new system of yoga practices designed to rejuvenate the body and prolong life. Rejecting ancient vedic teachings they embraced the physical body as a means of enlightenment. With radical techniques to cleanse the body and mind, they tried to “break the knot that binds us to our physical existence”. The physical/spiritual connection is called Hatha yoga, which is the most physical exercise of all yoga types, and is used mostly in western society. The word

Hatha means sun/moon, referring to the union of opposites.

Hatha yoga is actually one of the main traditions of Tantra yoga. Tantra yoga is a holistic approach to the study of the universal from the view of the individual. Tantra yoga studies the Tree of Life as opposed to limiting to a single branch; all encompassing. Tantra yoga is a system which includes ayurveda, asanas, breath work etc. Tantrikas aim to expand awareness by identifying the factors that influence thoughts & feelings and by transcending the obstacles. By refining our thoughts and feelings, peace / harmony & order can be created inside of us. We all know that to change the world we must start with ourselves.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s yoga masters traveled west, and the practice of yoga was slowly integrated into Western Society. In 1947 Indra Devi opened her first Hatha Yoga Studio in Hollywood and yoga has since then generated a continual growing interest. Modern life has emphasized the material, external aspect of yoga, to the detriment of its deeper potential. Pantjali describes a comprehensive system of yoga in which the asanas (poses) play a small part. Unfortunately these asanas have been blown out of proportion, and make us miss the “whole” point. Though the asanas are important, without the understanding of its value in relation to the whole practice, it means nothing.

\*\*\*Freedom is attained when the mind breaks free from the confinement of the body and comes to rest peacefully in the lap of the soul.\*\* B.K.S. Iyengar

## THE EIGHT LIMBS

The eight limbs of yoga are the core of yoga. It is an eight fold path that forms the structural framework for yoga. The practice of yoga can be divided into three parts. Internal, external and innermost; mind, body, spirit. In the first tier of yoga, social and individual ethical disciplines are discussed (the do's and

don'ts) ; Niyama and Yama, the first two of the eight limbs. The second tier leads to the evolution of individual understanding of the self. We work towards this individual understanding through the body's interpretation. This involves the practice of poses (here we find the asana), the practice of breath (pranayama), and the practice of controlling the senses (pratyahara); the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> limb. In the last tier of yoga we experience and enjoy the “wealth” of yoga, in other words the result, the fruit of the tree. This involves concentration & complete attention (dharana), meditation (dhyana), and union with the universal spirit (samadhi). This last tier, the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> limb, brings the experience of the sight of the soul.

## YOGA TODAY

We are currently undergoing a surge of positive energy in the world. Many of us are becoming aware of the changes that occur in the universe due to our own ignorance. We are also beginning to realize the spiritual unity behind all the diversity in the world; it is our one connection. As members of one universal family a lot of us are seeking harmony within. As our contribution we seek to attain our own “natural state” of harmony & balance. We do this by watching our own experience daily and reflecting on it, noticing things and how we feel about it inside. This will expand our awareness, and broaden our perspective. It also brings a constant flow of new sensations and our awareness opens to infinite possibilities. Self reflection promotes continual change and growth. Every day we are given an opportunity to adjust, tweak, re-establish and re-invent a new self. While we explore the unlimited possibilities and opportunities it is important to keep our bodies in optimum health and keep our senses under control. We try to attain a calm, clear and well disciplined mind with a razor sharp intellect. We try to be strong yet pliable, while we walk with an open heart full of unconditional love and compassion and our ego is pure. This is where our mind, body and spirit unite (yolk) and merge with the universal

spirit.

A tree has millions of leaves. Each leaf is different, yet they are all part of the same tree. You also have many leaves in your various thought waves, actions, reactions, feelings, failings and restraints, but they are all connected to the same root, the core of the being.

\*\*\*Practicing yoga leads us through the layers of our being until we come to live and experience the ambrosia of the fruit of yoga, which is the sight of the soul.\*\*\* B.K.S.Iyengar