

# What is Yoga?

The word Yoga means 'unity' or 'oneness'. It is derived from the Sanskrit word 'yuj', which means 'to join'. But what is it that we are trying to unite? Given the different branches of yoga, for different people the answer to this question has different implications.

Let us take a look at a few definitions of Yoga:

## The Bhagavad Gita

Yoga is equanimity in the success and failure (2:48)

Yoga is skill and efficiency in action (2:50)

Yoga is the supreme secret of life (4:3)

Yoga is serenity and loss of attachment to worldly things (6:3)



## Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

Yoga is the cessation of the modifications of the mind

## Swami Sivananda

Equanimity is Yoga. Serenity is Yoga. Skill in action is Yoga. Anything by which the best and the highest in life can be attained is also Yoga. Yoga is thus all-embracing, all-inclusive and universal in its application, leading to all-round development of body, mind and soul.

Yoga is the integration and harmony between thoughts, words, deeds, or the integration between head, heart and hands.

## Swami Ramananda

Yoga is both the complete experience of our essential Spiritual Self and the practices done to reveal that true nature. It is both a science of self-mastery and the art of pursuing that goal with self-discipline, compassion and contentment.

Notes:

- The Bhagavad Gita is composed of 700 Shlokas (or Sanskrit verses), that is part of the Hindu epic Mahabharata.
- The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali is one of the foundation texts of Yoga, composed of 196 aphorisms (Indian sutras).
- Sri Swami Sivananda was a major spiritual voice at his time (1900s) guiding thousands of spiritual seekers from all over the world.
- Swami Ramananda is the President of the Integral Yoga Institute in San Francisco and a greatly respected senior teacher in the Integral Yoga tradition.

# Branches of Yoga

Yoga can be seen as a comprehensive way of life that includes several branches, each like a pathway leading to the same mountaintop. Like a tree, each branch of yoga can grow and develop at the same time.

Though Yoga emerged in ancient India as one of six schools of Hindu philosophy, all of these paths, teachings and practices remain timeless tools for personal transformation.

## **Raja Yoga (or Classical Yoga)**

This is known as the royal path and it is the most influential school of Yoga tradition. It is the path of mental mastery and is presented in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. The purpose of Raja Yoga is to calm the fluctuations of the mind.

## **Hatha Yoga**

The Yoga of physical balance. It is the most popular branch of Yoga in the West. This branch of Yoga uses physical poses or Asana, Breathing Techniques or Pranayama, and Meditation to achieve better health, as well as spirituality. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika is the classical text on the philosophy of this branch.

## **Jnâna Yoga**

The Yoga of intuitive knowledge and discriminative wisdom. The practitioner is constantly asking questions like "who am I?". The study of classical texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Vedas and the Upanishads form the basis of Jnâna Yoga.

## **Karma Yoga**

This is the Yoga of action through selfless service. It involves performing duties with a focused mind and loving intention, without attachment to the outcome or to personal reward. This path is described in detail in the Bhagavad Gita.

## **Bhakti Yoga**

This is the path of love and devotion to God in some form or a higher power. Through faith and devoted service one can rise above the illusion of a separate self and experience union with the Spirit that dwells within everything, including oneself.

*"Yoga means having an easeful body, a peaceful mind and a useful life."*

Sri Swami Satchidananda

Sources: The Isha Center. Yoga Teacher Training (2012); Iyengar, BKS. (1966). Light on Yoga. Great Britain: George Allen & Unwin; Yogi Nomad Training Manual (2012); Frawley, David (translation and commentary). Patanjali Yoga Sutras (Yoga Darshana). Retrieved from the American Institute of Vedic Studies; Swami Ramananda. Yoga: A True Harmony of Head, Heart and Hands. Retrieved from the Integral Yoga Institute of San Francisco.

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