

What is the Meaning of Yoga?

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What is the Meaning of Yoga?

Interest in yoga, meditation and mindfulness is on the rise as we find ourselves living and working in an environment where we are constantly available and the responsibilities of daily life can sometimes seem endless. We “connect” with our friends and family through social media, use email instead of sending letters or making phone calls and are always looking for better ways to do more in less time.

It can be hard to unplug and find time to just “be” when we’re continually striving at work, maintaining a home, building a family life and potentially caring for extended family at the same time. How can we learn to be “still” and re-connect with our inner selves to experience a daily sense of joy and contentment? Yoga, as a daily practice, can bring you peace, help you to be mindful in your daily life and build physical as well as inner strength.

The meaning of yoga is multi-faceted: using your body to access your inner Self, quieting your mind and learning to pay attention, to be present in the moment. It also fuels your spirit to reach a state of supreme bliss, called “Samadhi.” For further insight into yoga and its practice, this video explains the basic elements and benefits of practicing yoga: What is Yoga by Dharma Mittra <http://www.gaia.com/video/what-yoga>,

So, what Exactly is Yoga?

What does yoga mean as a spiritual practice? Yoga is a sacred discipline that includes simple meditation, breath control and the use of specific postures to bring you a sense of peace, health, strength and relaxation. The word “yoga” is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘connection’ or ‘union’ and can also have the meaning of ‘connection with the Supreme Being or the Divine.’ The practice of yoga is meant to produce a sense of connection (or union) to your inner being, your body and your intentions.

Experiencing an intentional connection allows you to feel a state of joy, peace and fulfillment as well as a sense of awareness that is part of the ability to move inward, to reach the true meaning of yoga. The benefits are not only found in the opening of your mind and spirit, but also in toning and strengthening your body, all systems working together as one.

“Children who practice yoga may not only be better able to regulate their emotions, manage stress and calm themselves, studies now show that they may also choose better foods to eat and engage in more physical activity than children who do not.” ~ Binzen, Mira “Yoga for Children—Now Proven Effective!”

There isn’t any one definition of yoga, but it is a pursuit of your own truth and a process you can use to understand your eternal Self.

There are Many Paths to Finding your Connection

There are many paths you can take to awaken your consciousness and find your highest truth. Each one has its own approach to focus on greater awareness and connection. The answer to “what does yoga mean” is in your

own personal journey. Below is a brief introduction to some basic yoga styles so you can understand the variety, purpose and benefits of different practices:

- **Hatha:** This style is great for beginners and combines poses (called asanas) with controlled breathing techniques, (pranayamas). The goal is to develop balance and flexibility and the ability to breathe into each pose and movement, creating a feeling a restoration and relaxation. In this video, Flowing Hatha Yoga, you'll get a taste of the classic postures and some breathing techniques.
<http://www.gaia.com/video/flowing-hatha-yoga>
- **Vinyasa:** This is a more fast-paced style where you're moving continuously throughout the practice. You can expect a flowing series of lunging, bending and stretching asanas, and you'll likely break a sweat as you synchronize your breathing with a variety of changing poses.
- **Bikram:** You practice this style in a "hot and humid room" in order to deepen your stretches and flush toxins from your body. It builds stamina, but is not recommended for pregnant women and those with certain heart conditions. Contact your doctor if you have any questions before you begin.
- **Yin:** Yin uses mediation and passive postures to target connective tissue in the body, particularly the hips, pelvis and lower spine. This is a good way to quiet your mind and release any tension in your joints.
- **Restorative:** Think relaxation: healing your mind and body by holding poses for an extended period, often with the help of props, such as pillows, blocks or straps. This is a wonderful complementary practice to more rigorous styles or for those recovering from illness or injury.
- **Iyengar:** This is ideal for those with back or neck problems. It focuses on proper alignment of your body to strengthen muscles and support your joints.

What is Namaste?

Within each practice you'll encounter postures (asana), breathing techniques (pranayama), mantras, meditation and visualizations that enhance your experience. Each practice concludes with the teacher (yogi) saying "Namaste." You bring your hands together in front of your chest, bow your head and close your eyes, allowing you to surrender your mind to a moment of meditation.

Namaste is an ancient Sanskrit word still used today as a greeting. It translates to "I bow to the God within you" or "The Spirit within me salutes the Spirit in you," conveying the meaning that we are all made from the One Divine Consciousness. While Namaste is typically done at the end of class, it can be done both at the beginning and the end of your practice. It is a symbol of gratitude made by the teacher to the students, inviting them to acknowledge that we are all one in our hearts.

The Benefits of Daily Practice and Awareness

Practicing yoga daily is a process of becoming more and more aware of who you are and promoting health, balance and potential. As you feel more connected to your Self, you will continue along the path toward deeper self-discovery and self-realization.

This ancient art is based on a system of bringing your body, mind and spirit into harmony. Eventually, you experience a sense of peace, well-being, clarity and stability in your daily life, which brings you closer to the meaning of yoga.

What are Chakras?

Chakras are centers of energy in the body. The literal translation of the word is "wheel" or "disk." There are 7 main chakras starting at the base of the spine and up through the top of your head. The energy of the "spinning disk" (the chakra) at each of these centers is a vital life force, called prana. It's what keeps us healthy and vibrant in our lives.

When you experience imbalances in these energy centers it triggers symptoms such as anxiety, fatigue and digestive issues. Yoga is all about connecting with your spiritual Self and keeping these energy centers free of blockages by focusing inward and maintaining awareness.

We find harmony with our spiritual and physical selves when our lower energies, or survival/primal tendencies are harmonized with our lighter energies, our heart-felt spiritual selves. Each chakra or center of our being has a special role in creating the balance of energies that bring us to health, stability and bliss.

To learn more read about the importance of the main chakras in the body (<http://www.chopra.com/ccl/what-is-a-chakra>) by Michelle Fondin.

Is Yoga Another Type of Fitness or Religion?

Yoga is different from just stretching or other kinds of fitness routines in that it involves more than just physical movement. Because yoga connects your movement with controlled breathing and mindfulness, you are directing your focus inward which helps you recognize patterns of thinking that are habitual. You become more aware of being “in the moment” and that awareness is what you are cultivating with the practice of yoga. Your body will become stronger and more flexible and so will your mind.

"Unlike traditional exercises, yoga blends moves that enhance circulation, flexibility, balance and strength, along with meditative techniques, including deep breathing," according to Larry Payne, Ph.D., A yoga director at Loyola Marymount University, and co-author of Yoga Rx."

Similarly, yoga is not a religion. It is an ancient philosophy thought to have begun in India about 5,000 years ago. While the question “what does yoga mean” sometimes introduces some nuances of Hinduism or Buddhism, it is not a study of those religions. This video about yoga and its relationship to religion will offer more insight into this discussion. <http://www.gaia.com/video/yoga-religion>.

The Yoga Sutra is a set of guidelines taken from older traditions and compiled by Patanjali, the father of classical yoga. It is the framework for living a meaningful and purposeful life and describes the “eight-limbed path” for spiritual growth and physical mastery. The Yoga Sutra expresses these teachings in short verses call sutras. Living an ethical life is the first step on the true path. These yamas, or ethical guidelines in the Yoga Sutra, are not intended to control your behavior, but simply to imply that our chosen behavior will result in certain results. Learning and practicing the yamas in your daily life leads to a state of yoga where we reach our purest selves.

What Do I Need To Begin Practicing Yoga?

When you’ve decided to begin practicing yoga, it’s helpful to wear clothing that allows you to move freely. Yoga pants or leggings are inexpensive and widely available. You can wear a t-shirt, as long as it’s not too baggy. You don’t need any special shoes since you will likely be barefoot. Your class will have mats, blocks and props for you to use and you may want to bring a towel with you.

Take a look at the types of yoga listed above and choose a class in the style that suits you. You may want to try several different classes to see what’s best for your current fitness level. Hatha and Vinyasa are typically a good place to start. If you don’t have access to classes in your area, videos are available (<http://www.gaia.com/search/sp/videos>) online that provide an instructor to follow and visual demonstrations of the poses and movements.

You should expect to do some gentle stretching or sit in a cross-legged position while waiting for class to begin. The teacher may do a short meditation or breathing exercise at the beginning, followed by some warm-up movements leading into more dynamic poses. Teachers will often move around the class and adjust your alignment or give assistance if you need it.

The class ends with a final relaxation pose, called savasana. (<https://www.verywell.com/corpse-pose-savasana-3567112>). This gives your body and mind time to process all the benefits of your yoga practice. Try to remain aware and present during this 10-minute period. This is a time to relax your body and your mind as you try a basic meditation or focus on your breathing. When the time is up, gently wiggle your fingers and toes, breathe deeply and do a full body stretch. Bring yourself to a sitting position, roll to your hands and knees and slowly stand.

Be aware that you may be a little sore after your first class. It's common to experience some soreness the next day or two since you're likely using muscles you haven't engaged in a while.

So, what IS the Meaning of Yoga?

The meaning is found in the ancient spiritual practices that offer a means to still your wandering thoughts and calm your body. Yoga is a process of reversing that outward flow of energy so your mind is no longer focused on your senses, but looking inward to your true Self. By choosing to practice yoga, you begin to enter a state of quiet where you can reach a level of joy and understanding; a "union" of your individual consciousness with the Universal Spirit that connects us all. That's what yoga is all about.

For more information about the meaning of yoga and the benefits of its practice, please browse these articles available on the Gaia website:

Finding Lifelong Inspiration in Yoga <http://www.gaia.com/article/finding-lifelong-inspiration-yoga>

Yoga Beyond Bending <http://www.gaia.com/article/yoga-beyond-bending>

Ultimate Satya and Yoga Philosophy <http://www.gaia.com/article/ultimate-satya-and-yoga-philosophy>