

Meaning of Yoga

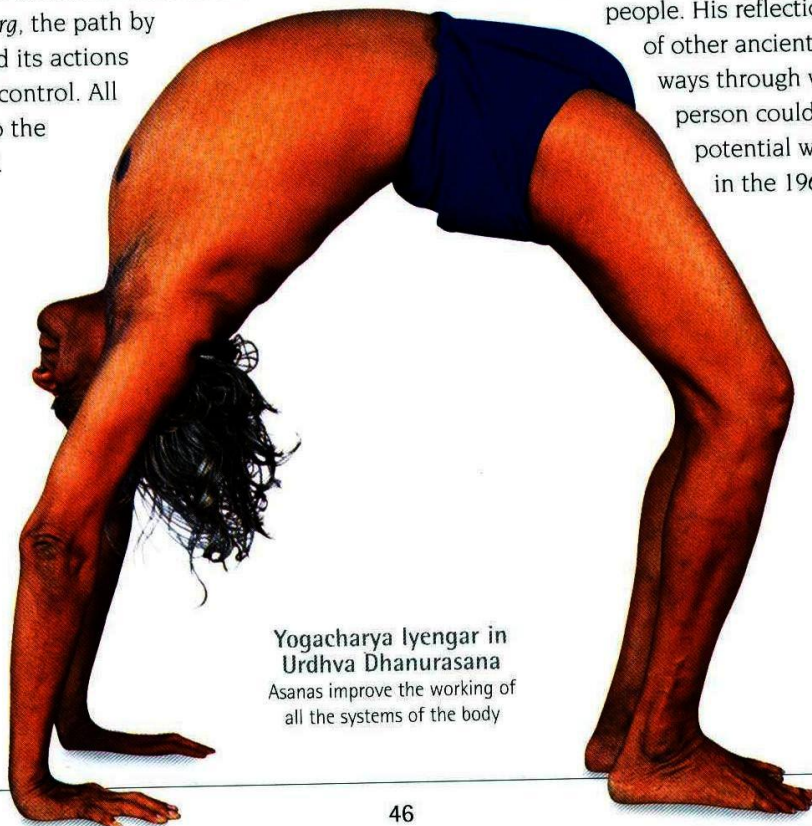
Yoga is an ancient art based on an extremely subtle science, that of the body, mind, and soul. The prolonged practice of yoga will, in time, lead the student to a sense of peace and a feeling of being at one with his or her environment.

Most people know that the practice of yoga makes the body strong and flexible. It is also well known that yoga improves the functioning of the respiratory, circulatory, digestive, and hormonal systems. Yoga also brings emotional stability and clarity of mind, but that is only the beginning of the journey to *samadhi*, or self-realization, which is the ultimate aim of yoga.

The ancient sages, who meditated on the human condition 2,000 years ago, outlined four ways to self-realization: *jnana marg*, or the path to knowledge, when the seeker learns to discriminate between the real and the unreal; *karma marg*, the path of selfless service without thought of reward; *bhakti marg*, the path of love and devotion; and finally, *yoga marg*, the path by which the mind and its actions are brought under control. All these paths lead to the same goal: *samadhi*.

The word "yoga" is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj* which means "to join" or "to yoke"; the related meaning is "to focus attention on" or "to use." In philosophical terms, the union of the individual self, *jivatma*, with the universal self, *paramatma*, is yoga. The union results in a pure and perfect state of consciousness in which the feeling of "I" simply does not exist. Prior to this union is the union of the body with the mind, and the mind with the self. Yoga is thus a dynamic, internal experience which integrates the body, the senses, the mind, and the intelligence, with the self.

The sage Patanjali was a master of yoga and a fully evolved soul. But this great thinker had the ability to empathize with the joys and sorrows of ordinary people. His reflections and those of other ancient sages on the ways through which every person could realize his full potential were outlined in the 196 *Yoga Sutras*.



Yogacharya Iyengar in
Urdhva Dhanurasana
Asanas improve the working of
all the systems of the body

Where yoga can take you

According to Patanjali, the aim of yoga is to calm the chaos of conflicting impulses and thoughts. The mind, which is responsible for our thoughts and impulses, is naturally inclined to *asmita* or egoism. From this spring the prejudice and biases which lead to pain and distress in our daily lives. Yogic science centers the intelligence in two areas: the heart and the head. The intelligence of the heart, sometimes also called the “root mind,” is the actual agent of *ahankara* or false pride, which disturbs the intelligence of the head, causing fluctuations in the body and mind.

Patanjali describes these afflictions as *vyadhi* or physical ailments, *styana* or the reluctance to work, *samskaya* or doubt, *pramada* or indifference, *alasya* or laziness, *avirati* or the desire for sensual satisfaction, *bhranti darshana* or false knowledge, *alabdha bhūmikatva* or indisposition, *angamejayatva* or unsteadiness in the body, and, lastly, *shvasa-prashvasa* or unsteady respiration. Only yoga eradicates these afflictions, and disciplines the mind, emotions, intellect, and reason.

Astanga yoga

Yoga is also known as Astanga yoga. *Astanga* means “8 limbs” or “steps” (see page 52) and is divided into 3 disciplines. The *bahiranga-sadhana* discipline comprises ethical practices in the form of *yama*, or general ethical principles, *niyama*, or self-restraint, and physical practices in the form of *asanas* as well as *pranayama*.

The second discipline, *antaranga-sadhana*, is emotional or mental discipline brought to maturity by *pranayama* and *pratyahara*, or mental detachment. Lastly, *antaratma-sadhana* is the successful quest of the soul through *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi* (see page 52).



Krishna driving the chariot of the warrior, Arjun
Their discourses are narrated in the Bhagvad Gita, the main source of yogic philosophy

In this spiritual quest, it is important to remember the role of the body. The *Kathopanishad*, an ancient text compiled between 300–400 BC, compares the body to a chariot, the senses to the horses, and the mind to the reins. The intellect is the charioteer and the soul is the master of the chariot. If anything were to go wrong with the chariot, the horses, the reins, or the charioteer, the chariot and the charioteer would come to grief, and so would the master of the chariot.

But, writes Patanjali in *Yoga Sutra* 11.28, “The practice of yoga destroys the impurities of the body and mind, after which maturity in intelligence and wisdom radiate from the core of the being to function in unison with the body, senses, mind, intelligence, and the consciousness.”

“The aim of yoga is to calm the chaos of conflicting impulses.”