

The Origins of Yoga

The word Yoga originates from the Sanskrit¹ word "Yuj" (literally, "to yoke") and is generally translated as "union" - "integration" - to yoke, attach, join, unite. A modern definition of Yoga is a systematic technology to improve the body, understand the mind, and free the spirit. Yogis tend to be more flexible, stronger, more energetic and more youthful than people who do not do yoga. And what's happening on the outside is a reflection of what's happening to every system of the body. With the practice, you are strengthening and calming the nervous system. You are increasing the blood flow to internal organs, and bringing more oxygen to your cells. You are clearing the mental clutter that can wreck your life, allowing you to see things more clearly. You are cultivating the spiritual muscles in a way that can make you happier, less anxious, and more at peace.

Little is known about the origins of yoga, because it predates recorded history. Yoga developed in more than one ancient civilization. Archaeological discoveries confirm forms of yoga in ancient Chinese, Mayan cultures as well as in India and Tibet. A time line would be as follows:

500,000 BCE	Homo Sapiens (archaic)
196,000 BCE	Homo Sapiens (modern)
40,000 BCE	Tibetan scrolls describe recognizable forms of yoga ²
3,000-2,000 BCE ³	<i>Rig Veda</i> , earliest of the four Hindu religious scriptures mentions yoga as a yoking of body and spirit.
200 BCE-200 CE	<i>Yoga Sutras</i> by Patanjali.

¹Sanskrit is one of the earliest of the Indo-European Languages.

²Shakta Kaur Khalsa's *Guide to Yoga*, 2001

³ The *Vedas* had a long oral tradition and were passed from teacher to disciple for many centuries before first being written down.

Yoga Sutras

The beginning of classical yoga is the *Yoga Sutras.*, written by Patanjali. He was a physician-sage who systematized and codified the science of yoga into the eight limb path of Ashtanga yoga. The sutras are 196 terse verses or aphorisms.

The first definition of Yoga at the beginning of the Sutras is *yoga citta vritti nirodhah* which means “yoga is the calming of the mind.”

Patanjali defines the Eight Limb Path as follows:

1. **Yamas** - encourages moderation and discourage violence, stealing, lying and possessiveness.
2. **Niyama** - encourages purity, contentment, self study and awareness.
3. **Asana** - the physical practice or postures to make the body strong
4. **Pranayama** - conscious breath control
5. **Pratyahara** - inner focus or sense control
6. **Dharana** - concentration and withdrawal from the senses
7. **Dhyana** - deep meditation or contemplation
8. **Samadhi** - absorption in the Infinite

Each limb is a stepping stone to the next - each depends on the strong foundation of the previous limb. Pantanjalis tells us that without the yamas, all other attempts at the practice of yoga will fail.

The Branches of the Yoga Tree

There are seven branches of yoga. The three that you would most likely hear of are:

1. **Hatha Yoga** - This is what most of us in the west think of as yoga, physical postures or poses, and exercises that work on the body and in turn on the mind. The attraction for us is the immediate benefits, it relaxes the body, calms the mind, and creates greater awareness.
2. **Raja Yoga** - “Royal” yoga, the focus is on training the mind to serve the spirit through meditation.
3. **Karma Yoga** - Serving others without any thought of personal gain or reward.

The Yoga that we practice is a form of Hatha Yoga.

Yoga Comes West

Hatha Yoga was first introduced to the West in New York in 1919 by Yogendra Mastamani. The following year Paramahansa Yogananda was invited to the International Congress of Religions in Boston. He stayed in the U.S., lectured and traveled and five years later founded the Self Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles. His book *Autobiography of a Yogi*, written over 50 years ago is recognized as one of the top ten spiritual books of the last century and has done more to introduce yoga to the Western world than any other publication.

What you are studying traces back from teacher to student in a continuous line from today to 200 years after the birth of Christ.