*What is Yoga?*

Yoga is a philosophical contribution to the debates of philosophy. That is, it is not only a perspective that contributes to what we can disagree about in philosophy, it also clarifies philosophy, the discipline.

As a philosophical theory, Yoga is the view that our minds and bodies are the parts of natural world that we, as persons, must take responsibility for, so that they reflect our interests as people. Our interests as people is personified in the ideal of persons: the Lord, or Īśvara, which is both unconservative (not constrained by pass choices) and self-governing (not externally interfered with).

A person who is Lordly is free from their own self-sabotage, and social hindrances. Our practical challenge is to embrace a practice devoted to this ideal, so that we ourselves, in time, reflect the ideal. But this involves transforming our world into one defined by external pressures of nature, to one safe for people to be masters of their own life.

As a person is a creature with an interest in their own Lordliness, Yoga entails that many beings, whether they are other animals, or the Earth, are persons for they thrive given their own Lordliness. To be committed to yoga is to be committed to a common ideal that explains what it is for everyone to thrive.

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Classical sources for the philosophy of Yoga include: the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Yoga Sūtra*.

The overall philosophy of yoga is about connecting the mind, body, and spirit.

There are six branches of yoga. Each branch represents a different focus and set of characteristics.

The six branches [are](https://www.ekhartyoga.com/articles/practice/the-6-branches-of-yoga):

* **Hatha yoga:** This is the physical and mental branch that aims to prime the body and mind.
* **Raja yoga:** This branch involves meditation and strict adherence to a series of disciplinary steps known as the eight limbs of yoga.
* **Karma yoga:** This is a path of service that aims to create a future free from negativity and selfishness.
* **Bhakti yoga:** This aims to establish the path of devotion, a positive way to channel emotions and cultivate acceptance and tolerance.
* **Jnana yoga:** This branch of yoga is about wisdom, the path of the scholar, and developing the intellect through study.
* **Tantra yoga:** This is the pathway of ritual, ceremony, or consummation of a relationship.

**Astangika Yoga: Meaning and Type**

The eightfold path is called *ashtanga*, which literally means “eight limbs” (*ashta*=eight, *anga*=limb). These eight steps basically act as guidelines on how to live a meaningful and purposeful life. They serve as a prescription for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline; they direct attention toward one’s health; and they help us to acknowledge the spiritual aspects of our nature.

1. **Yama**

The first limb, *yama*, deals with one’s ethical standards and sense of integrity, focusing on our behavior and how we conduct ourselves in life. [Yamas](https://www.yogajournal.com/article/teach/teaching-the-yamas-in-asana-class/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) are universal practices that relate best to what we know as the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

**The five yamas are:**

[**Ahimsa**](https://www.yogajournal.com/article/yoga-101/beginning-journey/): nonviolence

**Satya**: truthfulness

* **Asteya**: nonstealing
* **Brahmacharya**: continence
* **Aparigraha**: noncovetousness

**2. Niyama**

*Niyama*, the second limb, has to do with self-discipline and spiritual observances. Regularly attending temple or church services, saying grace before meals, developing your own personal [meditation](https://www.yogajournal.com/category/meditation/) practices, or making a habit of taking contemplative walks alone are all examples of niyamas in practice.

**The five niyamas are:**

**Saucha:** cleanliness

**Samtosa:** contentment

* **Tapas:** heat; spiritual austerities
* **Svadhyaya:** study of the sacred scriptures and of one’s self
* **Isvara pranidhana:** surrender to God

**3. Asana**

[*Asanas*](https://www.yogajournal.com/category/poses/), the postures practiced in yoga, comprise the third limb. In the yogic view, the body is a temple of spirit, the care of which is an important stage of our spiritual growth. Through the practice of asanas, we develop the habit of discipline and the ability to concentrate, both of which are necessary for meditation.

**4. Pranayama**

Generally translated as “breath control,” this fourth stage consists of techniques designed to gain mastery over the respiratory process while recognizing the connection between the breath, the mind, and the emotions. As implied by the literal translation of *[pranayama](https://www.yogajournal.com/poses/types/pranayama/)*, “life force extension,” yogis believe that it not only rejuvenates the body but actually extends life itself. You can practice pranayama as an isolated technique (i.e., simply sitting and performing a number of breathing exercises), or integrate it into your daily hatha yoga routine.

These first four stages of Patanjali’s ashtanga yoga concentrate on refining our personalities, gaining mastery over the body, and developing an energetic awareness of ourselves, all of which prepares us for the second half of this journey, which deals with the senses, the mind, and attaining a higher state of consciousness.

**5. Pratyahara**

[*Pratyahara*](https://www.yogajournal.com/yoga-101/philosophy/return-stillness/), the fifth limb, means withdrawal or sensory transcendence. It is during this stage that we make the conscious effort to draw our awareness away from the external world and outside stimuli. Keenly aware of, yet cultivating a detachment from, our senses, we direct our attention internally. The practice of pratyahara provides us with an opportunity to step back and take a look at ourselves. This withdrawal allows us to objectively observe our cravings: habits that are perhaps detrimental to our health and which likely interfere with our inner growth.

**6. Dharana**

As each stage prepares us for the next, the practice of pratyahara creates the setting for *[dharana](https://www.yogajournal.com/live-be-yoga-featured/dharana/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*, or concentration. Having relieved ourselves of outside distractions, we can now deal with the distractions of the mind itself. No easy task! In the practice of concentration, which precedes meditation, we learn how to slow down the thinking process by concentrating on a single mental object: a specific energetic center in the body, an image of a deity, or the silent repetition of a sound. We, of course, have already begun to develop our powers of concentration in the previous three stages of posture, breath control, and withdrawal of the senses.

In asana and pranayama, although we pay attention to our actions, our attention travels. Our focus constantly shifts as we fine-tune the many nuances of any particular posture or breathing technique. In pratyahara we become self-observant; now, in dharana, we focus our attention on a single point. Extended periods of concentration naturally lead to [meditation](https://www.yogajournal.com/poses/types/pranayama/).

**7. Dhyana**

Meditation or contemplation, the seventh stage of ashtanga, is the uninterrupted flow of concentration. Although concentration (*dharana*) and meditation (*[dhyana](https://www.yogajournal.com/live-be-yoga-featured/dhyana/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*) may appear to be one and the same, a fine line of distinction exists between these two stages. Where dharana practices one-pointed attention, dhyana is ultimately a state of being keenly aware without focus. At this stage, the mind has been quieted, and in the stillness, it produces few or no thoughts at all. The strength and stamina it takes to reach this state of stillness is quite impressive. But don’t give up. While this may seem like a difficult, if not impossible task, remember that yoga is a process. Even though we may not attain the “picture perfect” pose, or the ideal state of consciousness, we benefit at every stage of our progress.

**8. Samadhi**

Patanjali describes this eighth and final stage of ashtanga, *samadhi*, as a state of ecstasy. At this stage, the meditator merges with his or her point of focus and transcends the Self altogether. The meditator comes to realize a profound connection to the Divine, an interconnectedness with all living things. With this realization comes the “peace that passeth all understanding”; the experience of bliss and being at one with the Universe. On the surface, this may seem to be a rather lofty, “holier than thou” kind of goal.

However, if we pause to examine what we really want to get out of life, would not joy, fulfillment, and freedom somehow find their way onto our list of hopes, wishes, and desires? What Patanjali has described as the completion of the yogic path is what, deep down, all human beings aspire to: peace. We also might give some thought to the fact that this ultimate stage of yoga—enlightenment—can neither be bought nor possessed. It can only be experienced, the price of which is the continual devotion of the aspirant.

*Why do we need Yoga Philosophy?*

*Implications in Education:*

The difference between merely going to the gym and practicing yoga is the philosophy! Yoga the philosophy provides a personal context for getting the most out of practices such as posture flow, breathing exercises, or mental meditational practices. And if one adopts a philosophical approach to Yoga, then all activities are limbs in support of one’s own Lordliness and mastery over life.  Without yoga philosophy, practices such as posture flow, or breathing exercises, can become fetishes and hindrances to one’s own Lordliness.