

## YOGA AND WELL-BEING IN THE MODERN ERA

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**Summary:** Nowadays, yoga has become very popular and is known and practised almost all over the world. It is very difficult to define what yoga is, and even more difficult to interpret it in our modern understanding. There are many uncertainties about its origins, many assumptions, and little evidence. Theories rather than evidence have emerged, and thousands of books have been written about it, taking each other's ideas or changing them slightly by the author(s). There are few original written records because it is an oral tradition. For centuries, yoga masters and their followers have kept yoga alive, and it has developed in many different directions. It came to the Western world in the last century and spread very rapidly in popularity. Over time it has evolved and adapted to different ages, cultures, and peoples. Yoga is the embodiment of well-being, which understands health holistically, in its physical, mental, spiritual, and social unity. It cannot be given a single meaning or interpreted in a uniform way. Everyone interprets it according to their own needs and expectations in their own cultural context. Therefore it means different things to different people. Yoga offers various forms of health maintenance and health promotion, as well as health-conscious behaviour that encourages individuals to follow the path of yoga, regardless of age, gender, religion, or health status. From the perspective of the individual, yoga views well-being as a state of being derived from the inner sphere of the person used to achieve, improve, and maintain health while being socially adaptable.

**Keywords:** *holistic health, India, yoga, yoga practitioners*

### INTRODUCTION

Yoga has long been unknown beyond the borders of Eastern cultures. As early as the 13th century, Marco Polo was one of the first European travellers in India who mentioned that a group of people lived very virtuous lives. They neither ate meat nor drank wine and had very good teeth through the use of herbs. They did not kill animals and slept on the earth without covering; nonetheless they preserved their health. One of them, called Cuigui, was supposed to be of an extraordinary age of even 150 or 200 years based on Marco Polo's description [1]. These Hindu ascetics were probably yogis. Later, as travel opportunities expanded, travellers to India observed performances of various postures, which demonstrated the practitioner's great mobility, flexibility, and strength. These exercises were performed on the street, undisturbed by the hustle and bustle around them. The spread of yoga is due to the monks and yoga practitioners of the East, who began to popularise yoga in the West. But do we really know what yoga is?

### *Origin of yoga*

The origins of yoga are disputed. Archaeological excavations have found many artefacts from the ancient Indus Valley civilization (Harappa Civilization), which flourished around 2500–1700 BC [2]. Stone seals from these excavations showed figures sitting cross-legged with arms outstretched and resting on knees. Archaeologists and historians assume that they depict meditating figures, and this civilization already knew and practised yoga. (Figure 1) Another piece of artefacts is a small male torso in seated postures with hands pressed together such as in Namaskar pose (or Anjali mudra) [3] and as if he was doing abdominal breathing. However, these associations with yoga practice are only hypothetical [4]. (Figure 2)



Pasupati Seal  
DK 5175/143  
Steatite  
Mohenjodaro  
C. 2500-2400 BC  
1-6/16 x 1-6/16x ¼ Inches

This seal with anthropomorphic form of ithyphallic Shiva is one of the most significant Indus finds attesting the prevalence of Shiva-cult, his personalized Mahayogi or Pashupati form as also his aniconic 'ling' form, as early as Indus days. This seal with buffalo-horned figure almost unanimously identified as Shiva in his form as Pashupati, portrays him as seated cross-legged, in Yogic 'padmasana and wide-armed. Natural enemies, wild and virile animals, buffalo, leaping tiger, rhinoceros and elephant all amicably surround the figure. The un-deciphered script is arranged horizontally in the space above the headdress.

**Figure 1.** *Figure meditating in Lotus pose exhibited in the Harappan Gallery of National Museum, India*



Seated male in Namaskar pose  
3072/388  
Terracotta  
Harappa  
2700-2100 B.C.E  
L: 5 Ht: 4 W: 2 cm

It is evident that the Harappan potters and artists portrayed figurines practising exercises and several other postures. This artefact depicts a man seated in Namaskara pose. M.S.Vats, a well-known archaeologist, discovered this male figurine from the excavations at Harappa. It is cream coloured and hand-modeled. The seated male is depicted with legs outstretched and slightly raised knees. Hands are folded in Namaskar mudra and some parts of the feet are missing. His head, mouth and nose are pinched; eyes are depicted with round pellets. The fingers of the hands and the legs are not rendered individually.

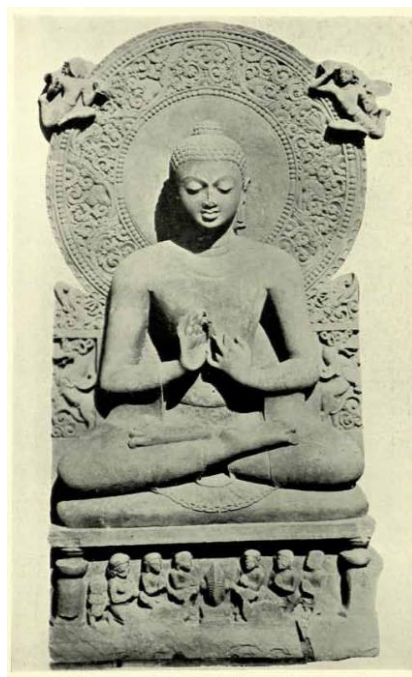
**Figure 2.** *Seated male in Namaskar pose exhibited in the Harappan Gallery of National Museum, India*

These are the first archeological findings that point to the possible existence of yoga even in those centuries [2].

The earliest form of yoga was meditation. In ancient oriental art, the Buddha was often characterised in meditation with his knees bent, one of the classic yoga sitting positions (padmasana). This was the first asana, practised by masters to enable them to meditate for long periods in a stable pose without moving. (*Figure 3* and *Figure 4*)



**Figure 3.** *Buddha from Bengal in Museum of Fine Art, Boston, USA*



**Figure 4.** *Buddha preaching the First Sermon, Archeological Museum, Sarnath, India*

### ***First written records***

The first written records were the Vedas which are a collection of canonical Hindu texts, Sanskrit hymns, and philosophical writings. The Vedas (Rig, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda) and their supplementary commentaries, the Upanishads, are the preserved sources of Hindu philosophy. The earliest is the Rigveda probably written between 1500–1000 BC [5].

‘Yoga’ was first mentioned in the Rigveda in various senses such as yoking or harnessing an animal, achieving the unachieved, connection, and the like. Yoga meant that in war, the chariot was pulled by yoke animals, and this chariot was called yoga together with the yoke, the yoke animal, and the warrior. However, the meanings of aspiration, recipe, method, strategy, care, endeavour, combination, zeal, contact, diligence, and work of alchemists have also appeared in Indian epic poetry

under the term yoga [6]. Dasgupta found the term ‘yoga’ had gradually diminished in its original meaning (control of steeds) as it began to be used in the sense of yoking the senses (control of the senses) [7]. On the website of the Ministry of External Affairs, Ishwar V. Basavaraddi, Director of Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga explained “*Yoga is about harmonising oneself with the universe. It is the technology of aligning individual geometry with the cosmic, to achieve the highest level of perception and harmony*” [8].

The fact is that there are many different explanations when trying to analyse the concept of yoga. It should be mentioned that Vedas are not the original ones, as composed by the original authors. The Vedas were passed down by word of mouth, like most ancient works. Even the first one described must have been destroyed in the course of time. Thus, many copies of the original work, slow and time-consuming hand copies, may have survived. The original ideas may have been transformed and given new meaning after repeated copying. Rigveda is available in the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute in Pune, Maharashtra, India and can be uploaded freely [9].

### ***Yoga Sutras***

The teachings of yoga were summarised in the Yoga Sutras, which are considered the foundational work of classical yoga attributed to the work of Patanjali. In this collection of aphorisms, he describes that our goal is to quiet our mind, to reach a state where we are purified from thought. To achieve our goals, we must set a path for ourselves and follow it. The Yoga Sutras contain 196 short aphorisms (sutras). These are the basics of classical yoga. It is a summary of an earlier system and all works written after that are based on it. These aphorisms were written between 4 BC and 4 AD. It is very difficult to understand because of its extreme brevity and because it describes things that the reader has never experienced. It seems the author knew the depth of yoga and gained his knowledge through personal experience. The ultimate goal is sustained meditation and its deepening to attain enlightenment, the state of Samadhi. “*Samādhi or concentration is that state in which the contemplative consciousness is lost in the contemplated object and has no awareness of itself.*” [10] It includes a description of raja (royal) yoga. Many commentaries and insights have been written just to interpret the sutras. These commentaries explain the context and deeper meanings of the aphorisms. The text would remain incomprehensible to the contemporary reader without knowledge of the Sanskrit language and ancient Vedic literature. It is difficult to understand esoteric ideas without context.

According to Yoga Sutras, the complex yoga system covers eight limbs: yama (abstinences), niyama (observances), asana (yoga postures, in Patanjali’s sense it was only a steady and comfortable seated pose), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (penultimate phase to samadhi) and samadhi (absorption). The first two are the ethical principles. An individual can progress on the path of yoga if he/she can accept and follow the rules. Yama has five ethical rules student has to follow: ahimsa (non-violence, non-harming other living beings), satya (truthfulness), asteya (respect for property, non-

stealing), brahmacharya (abstinence, self-restraint), aparigraha (non-possessiveness, non-hoarding, keeping only what is necessary for subsistence). Whereas, Niyama are regulations, five rules to be observed: shaucha (external and internal purity of mind, speech, and body), santosha (contentment, satisfaction with the circumstances), tapas (self-discipline, asceticism, persistence), swadhyaya (self-study and self-education through the study of sacred scriptures), and Ísvara-praṇidhana (total devotion to the Divine). Through the practice of Ashtanga (eight limbs) yoga, the students can control their intellect, mind, emotions and willpower. This creates a state of equilibrium that allows them to look at all aspects of their life impartially. [10]

### ***Writings in Sanskrit***

In Yoga Sutras and other writings, the Sanskrit words have several meanings and it is tough to guess which words best describe the already symbolic terms. Yoga was a secret teaching that the guru (the master) passed on orally to his disciples (students), many of whom lived with him for many years, and then these disciples grew up with him, became masters, and passed on their knowledge to their own disciples. And so it went on for centuries, for millennia. They were not put in written form. Profound knowledge is gained through the relationship between master and disciple, which requires the guru to be genuine and authentic, the disciple to respect his master and be fully committed, devoted, and obedient to him. This is how the disciple acquires the knowledge that the guru imparts to him. Each disciple needs a different path to progress, and each master imparts knowledge in a slightly different way, and as a result, different styles of yoga have evolved. Thus, instead of yoga having a single line of yoga, several schools developed, and within these schools, several branches have developed, which have either survived, disappeared, or merged over time (karma yoga, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga, raja yoga). Patanjali calls the yoga in the strict sense raja yoga when we quiet our five senses and reconnect with the supreme self within. We can make strong assumptions that there are differences between the yoga in the scriptures and the yoga in the traditional secret teachings. [11]

### ***Yoga in the contemporary era***

Since the end of the 19th century, individual teachers have come to the West and introduced a number of new yoga styles that have no basis in the Indian tradition but are the most widespread in the world today throughout Africa, America, Eurasia, Australia, and Europe. Yoga has become very popular among people, and it has adapted to the culture, circumstances, and expectations as a holistic approach to health and well-being and can benefit people of all ages and physical abilities. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) is one of the Hindu philosophers who introduced Vedanta and yoga to the Western world [12]. His speech at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893 was well-known. He gained popularity and the appellation of the word 'yoga' has entered the vocabulary of modern people. Vivekananda was followed by several other monks and teachers such as Sri Swami Shivananda, Shri T. Krishnamacharya, Sri Aurobindo, Maharshi Mahesh Yogi,

Yogacharya, BKS Iyengar, Sri Pattabhi Jois, Swami Vishnu Devananda, Selva Raja Yesudian and the like. These teachers adapted the philosophy of yoga to the thinking and expectations of Westerners. Many new yoga trends and schools have spread, moving away from the original Yoga Sutras teachings. As the popularity of yoga increased, indigenous teachers and instructors delved into “yoga science”, opened clubs, and started their own yoga classes. The majority of these classes focus on postural yoga (asanas synchronised with breathing, and relaxation, sometimes concentration and meditation). More and more new yoga styles appeared and more or less qualified yoga instructors began to work in this business.

It should be mentioned yoga exercises (asanas) were not recorded in the premodern writings, even the lotus sitting. The recently used yoga is based on Hatha yoga, however, the ultimate goal of Hatha yoga is to restore inner balance, so the yogi can sit in meditation and can “attain a state of spiritual perfection in which the mind is withdrawn from external objects” [13]. Traditionally, Hatha yoga is said to have originated with Matsyendra Natha and Goraksha Natha in the ninth or tenth centuries CE and branched off as it gained popularity [14]. Hatha Yoga Pradipika written by Swatmarama in the 14th–15th century CE is the first written text that mentioned asanas, pranayama, mudras, and Samadhi. In this writing 15 asanas are described, however, completing these asanas are rather difficult [15]. (*Figure 5*)

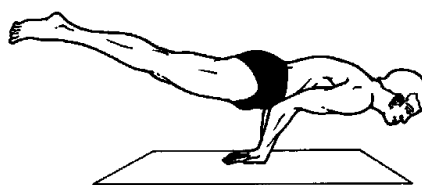


FIGURE 7

*Figure 5. Mayurasana*

### ***Ashrams in India***

India has typically dominated and treasured yoga as its own tradition, and since the 19th century it has been used as a tourist destination. Classical yoga was transformed in India into a more usable form to practise it in rehabilitation, medicine, and physical culture [16]. Ashrams are open to welcome practitioners who spend more or less time in India. Ashram is “*a place where a group of Hindus live together away from the rest of society, or a place where Hindus can go in order to pray*”. [17]

Ashram is traditionally referred to as a centre where a group of people can live religiously or spiritually, in seclusion. Today, an ashram does not necessarily imply religious living. Most of the ashrams have been reshuffled for the comfort of Western visitors. These ashrams are more of a tourist attraction than a cradle of authentic yoga. Rishikesh is considered the yoga capital of the world [18]. (*Figure 6*) People hoping to find “authentic” yoga, and everyone is welcome in these ashrams no matter how far they have progressed in yoga. Many people may think they are meeting the real guru, someone they can take their word from. The real guru does not want

publicity; they could be found in a place where there is no way for the everyday person to go. But would the everyday person be able or even want to have the qualities expected of a true chela (disciple)? That is, to renounce all worldly possessions and abandon loved ones to reach the depths of yoga.



**Figure 6** Ashram in Rishikesh, in Northern India

***What is yoga, how do we understand the concept of yoga?***

In the postmodern era, almost all assumptions about yoga theory date back to the previous century. As the semantic meaning of yoga is very wide, everyone was able to tailor the processes to their own ideas and needs. *“Every group in every age has created its own version and vision of yoga. One reason this has been possible is that its semantic field—the range of meanings of the term ‘yoga’—is so broad and the concept of yoga so malleable, that it has been possible to morph it into nearly any practice or process one chooses.”* [19] It is best to define yoga in the context of the society and community in which we live. What do we expect from it, what is our purpose? We can transform Hindu ideas into our present way of life and adapt them to our needs and perceptions. If we think of yoga as a way of life that develops our personality and physical abilities, we can abstract from its religious and transcendental character. The ultimate goal of yoga is to attain the state of Samadhi, but this requires a lot of practice, which is not available to man today, and perhaps is not the goal of man today. The purpose for which one enters the path of yoga is to develop a sense of well-being, improve physical condition, maintain mental health, and shape character traits in a holistic way. Postural yoga, which has evolved from Hatha yoga, is suitable for this purpose. This is no longer the direction of authentic Hindu yoga. Geoffrey also believes that modern yoga should not be approached from the direction of authentic Indian practice but as a creative adaptation of the postmodern era [20].

Our knowledge of physiology has evolved over the decades, helping us to develop correct movement patterns and newer forms of movement that benefit our health. Movement synchronised with slow breathing can be controlled by

information from the proprioceptors. This prevents injury and makes us more agile, flexible, coordinated, strong, and enduring while performing the exercises. We reach and always push our limits a little further. Each movement is performed with total concentration, and the practitioner observes himself through his inner senses. The aim is to create a body-mind-soul balance, to master awareness of our inner physiological processes. It's not a sport, we don't want to beat our partner, we don't want to outdo them, we just want to outdo ourselves. Although you can see yoga competitions even in India, it has nothing to do with the simplest ideas of yoga [21]. The Hungarian professor of anatomy Béla Vígh (1932–2016) wrote extensively about the practice and effects of yoga asanas in his books. The savasana position is particularly suitable for practising relaxation, which is an excellent tool for stress management and daytime relaxation [22, 23]. (Autogenic training, used in psychiatry, has its origin in yoga.)

Yoga offers the opportunity to maintain and improve physical and mental health. It offers something for individuals of all ages and health conditions. It is not bound to any religion and can be adapted to all cultures. More specifically, the individual applies yoga in their own culture, in their own environment, according to their own needs. This is how it can become a fulfilling way of life and create a sense of well-being in its practitioner.

## CONCLUSION

There is no static definition of yoga, it has had different meanings in every age and every religion. It is a way of being in which we live, think, and act. In practice, yoga can mean anything to anyone. Yoga leads to a natural way of life and a holistic approach to health. In reality, yoga is not a science, although some books claim it is, yoga is the present in which we exist then and there. It is a philosophy from the premodern era. It doesn't matter when we step onto the path of yoga, it doesn't matter where we are at that moment. We are in the right place then and there. It is a lifelong process, a learning process, in which we come to know our truest form. Verse 6.20 of the Bhagavad Gita says, "Yoga is the journey of the self through the self to the self". We do yoga alone, we go our own way. We learn to sense our body's signals to satisfy its desires. This is the most effective way to stay healthy and develop a perception of well-being.

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