

The Global Yogi *Beginner's Guide to Yoga*

by Michelle Taffe



WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

This guide is for beginner yogis who are relatively new to yoga, who may have done a few classes and are hungry to learn more and deepen their understanding of yoga, or who have already been attending yoga classes for some time but don't yet have a good overview of yoga philosophy.

WHAT IS IN THIS GUIDE

This guide will give you a definition of yoga, a basic overview of yoga philosophy and the origins of yoga, a short description of the different styles of yoga common today and some advice on finding a yoga style, a yoga teacher and developing a regular yoga practice.

WHAT ISN'T IN THIS GUIDE

This guide doesn't explain how to do yoga postures (*asanas*), or describe how to meditate (*dhyana*), or practise yogic breath control techniques (*pranayama*). I will leave this to your yoga teacher.

WHAT IS YOGA?

Yoga is an ancient philosophy of living that evolved some 5000 years ago in India, and was subsequently documented by a yogi (a yoga practitioner) named Patanjali in his 'Sutras', written in Sanskrit between 500 and 200 BC. Sutra translates to 'thread' in English. Each sutra or 'thread' is a kernel of yogic knowledge, and all of the threads make up the philosophy of yoga. Yoga is not a part of, or linked with any religion, though given its origins in ancient India, yoga philosophy has many similarities with the Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and belief systems.

WHAT DOES 'YOGA' MEAN?

Yoga is a Sanskrit word that means union, literally – to yoke. It is derived from the root *yuj* meaning to join, to unite, or to attach. It refers to the union of body, mind and soul.

ARE THE POSTURES OR ASANAS YOGA?

Yoga postures, or **Asanas** form one branch of the eight limbs of yoga. The others limbs are

The Yamas – The Five Moral Restraints

1. Ahimsa – Nonviolence
2. Satya – Truthfulness
3. Asteya – Nonstealing
4. Brahmacharya – Moderation
5. Aparigraha – Nonhoarding

The Niyamas – The Five Observances

1. Saucha – purity
2. Santosha – contentment
3. Tapas – zeal, austerity
4. Svadyaya – self-study
5. Isvara-pranidhana – devotion to a higher power

Pranayama – Mindful Breathing

Pratyahara – Turning Inward

Dharana – Concentration

Dhyana – Meditation

Samadhi – Union of the Self with the Object of Meditation

In the West, most yoga classes still focus primarily on the *asanas*, neglecting the seven other limbs of yoga. Thus, many Western yoga students who haven't started to delve further into yoga philosophy, or attended a teacher-training, are under the impression that the *asanas ARE yoga*. They think that yoga is a series of exercises we do to keep fit and healthy. And yoga is this – in part – but this is just one aspect of it.

This limited understanding of yoga common in the West is well illustrated by the ancient Indian story of the blind men and the elephant. Six blind men are asked to describe an elephant. Each man feels a different part of the elephant and then they get together to discuss what an elephant is. One man describes the elephant as like a water spout (trunk), another as like a fan (ear), another claims that an elephant is like a pillar (leg) and a fourth as akin to a throne (back). Each is so adamant in his knowledge of what an elephant is that a big discussion ensues, with each man claiming the rightness of their description over the others. Those who are under the impression that yoga is only *asana* are like the blind Indian men – they only have a grasp of one limb of the yogic elephant!

The origin of the eight-limbed path of yoga is the *Yoga Sutras – Teachings on Yoga* written by the yogi Patanjali between 200 and 500 BC. The *Sutras* themselves are succinct teachings expressed in point form and written in Sanskrit, the language of ancient India, which is no longer spoken today. Though there are countless books on Patanjali's *Sutras*, we are just going to touch briefly on the meaning of each limb in the eight-limbed path.

THE YOGA SUTRAS OF PATANJALI

Like a treatise on how to live, Patanjali created a map through life when he wrote his *Yoga Sutras*. Patanjali's *Sutras* are not easy to read, as they are written in a short, very concise style, with each thread being the concentrated form of a teaching. Each thread is expressed in point form, inviting the reader to meditate on the subject of the thread to come to an understanding of its meaning. For example, Sutra number 12 in Chapter 1 of the *Yoga Sutras* states

- *Both practice and nonreaction are required to still the patterning of consciousness.*

(Source: Appendix B of Stephen Cope's book *The Wisdom of Yoga* – See Recommended Reading at the end of this guide.)

The following two *Sutras* or 'threads' then proceed to expand on this one, explaining the meaning of both practice and nonreaction.

The Yoga Sutras explain the causes of human suffering and pinpoint a path out of this suffering, guiding the student of yoga to a clearer understanding of their situation as human beings and providing a route out of suffering and towards a happier, more peaceful and fulfilled life.

The *yamas* and the *niyamas* form the basis of a yoga student's life – they are the foundation on which to build a life, in accordance with Patanjali. Setting the tone of one's relationship to oneself and others, the student of yoga

observes the *yamas* and *niyamas* in their daily life to ensure a harmonious, peaceful, fruitful and contented path through life.

Asana, or yoga postures, fine-tune our bodies, bringing us into a deeper awareness of our sense perceptions and enhancing our powers of concentration, which in turn facilitates the experience of meditation.

Pranayama or mindful breathing, brings us into direct relationship with the life force – the breath. Practising mindful breathing elevates our consciousness, bringing us to a place of peaceful acceptance of ourselves and our life experience in the present moment.

Pratyahara is the withdrawal from the senses – literally turning inward. *Pratyahara* leads to the development of concentration – or *Dharana*.

Dhyana and *samadhi* are the last two limbs of the yogic path – signifying the surrender of the individual self to the universal self, *dhyana* being meditation and *samadhi* being the union of the self with the object of meditation – an experience of oneness, where you are no longer separate from the whole.

Dhyana, or concentrated meditation is a practice where the person focuses their mind on a meditation object – be it the breath, a physical object or a thought – in order to calm their mind and in the process reach a heightened state of spiritual awareness.

Following *dhyana*, *samadhi* is the last limb on the eight-limbed path and has been described as a state of consciousness induced by complete meditation. A break down of the term *samadhi* into its parts – *sam* meaning together or integrated *ā* meaning towards and *dhā* meaning to get, or to hold – helps us understand the meaning of *samadhi* as a state of wholeness, or truth.

Indian spiritual teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj described Samadhi as follows

When you say you sit for meditation, the first thing to be done is understand that it is not this body identification that is sitting for meditation, but this knowledge 'I am', this consciousness, which is sitting in meditation and is meditating on itself. When this is finally understood, then it becomes easy. When this consciousness, this conscious presence, merges in itself, the state of 'Samadhi' ensues. It is the conceptual feeling that I exist that disappears and merges into the beingness itself. So this conscious presence also gets merged into that knowledge, that beingness – that is 'Samadhi'.

(Source: Wikipedia entry for Samadhi.)

Even though the original text of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* is quite brief, the knowledge and guidance contained within it are profound, and warrant deep and prolonged study. Whole books have been written on the *Yoga Sutras*,

some by Sanskrit scholars interpreting the text directly and others based on the translated text. For further reading refer to the references at the end of this guide.

WHAT KIND OF YOGA SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?

All of the different styles of yoga taught around the world today incorporate the eight-limbed path of yoga – meaning not just the *asanas* but also *pranayama*, the *yamas*, the *niyamas* and the other limbs of the path – in their own particular way.

The original form of yoga practised throughout the centuries in India is Hatha Yoga. In Sanskrit 'ha' means sun and 'tha' moon – thus *Hatha* yoga is the union of the opposite (positive and negative) forces. Astanga Yoga also has a long tradition and literally means eight-limbed yoga. Some of the styles outlined below derive their name from the dominant method in the practice (such as *Vinyasa* – meaning flow, or *Kundalini* – referring to the kundalini energy harnessed in the practice) while others are named after the person who created the style (such as *Iyengar*, *Bikram* and *Sivananda*) and still others were given Sanskrit names by their Western yogi creators (*Purna Yoga*, *Anusara Yoga*).

THREE COMMON YOGA STYLES

Three of the most common forms of yoga found in the world today are *Hatha*, *Astanga* and *Iyengar*. Hatha yoga is a good style for beginning students, with Iyengar yoga placing more emphasis on postural alignment, while Astanga is quite a physically challenging style and can be difficult for absolute beginners.

HATHA

Hatha Yoga is the original form of yoga, as documented by Yogi Swatmarama, a Hindu sage of 15th century India. In Sanskrit 'Ha' means sun and 'Tha' moon thus Hatha yoga signifies the union the opposite positive (sun) and negative (moon) currents in the system. A Hatha yoga class is usually a series of *asanas* with pauses or rest periods between each posture.

IYENGAR

Iyengar Yoga is named after its founder, BKS Iyengar, an Indian yogi born in 1918 who is one of the most prominent yoga teachers in the world. Iyengar yoga is characterised by a focus on alignment within the postures. Props such as straps, blocks and ropes are used to facilitate the desired body alignment in each posture, with the goal being perfect postural alignment in each *asana*.

ASTANGA

Astanga (sometimes spelt 'Ashtanga') Yoga, often known as 'power yoga' literally means 'eight-limbed yoga' and was made famous by Sri Pattabhi Jois, a student of Krishnamacharya, who started teaching Astanga yoga from his yoga shala in Mysore in 1948. Pattabhi Jois' descendants now continue his teaching practice, instructing yogis from around the world who come to south India to study Astanga. There are three levels of asanas in the Astanga series – the degree of difficulty progressing with each level. Astanga is quite a physically challenging form of yoga – given it is a flowing style with no breaks between postures – thus it is not a style recommended for absolute beginners.

Below I have outlined some of the defining characteristics of a number of other yoga styles practised in the world today. This is not an exhaustive list – there are many other yoga styles currently being practised around the world – these are just some of the more common styles available in many studios today.

ANANDA

Ananda Yoga is named after the famous Indian yogi who brought yoga to the US – Paramahansa Yogananda. It is based on the Raja Yoga / Kriya Yoga tradition that Yogananda taught. It is gentle for beginning students, with the practice becoming more challenging with experience. Ananda Yoga is an inwardly directed practice, never aggressive or aerobic. Unique to Ananda Yoga are the Energization Exercises – a series of thirty-nine special energy-control techniques that Yogananda developed in order to help the practitioner increase focus, and control the life force.

ANUSARA

American yoga teacher John Friend developed **Anusara Yoga** in 1997. Anusara yoga is derived from Iyengar yoga and Hatha yoga and also incorporates elements of Siddha yoga. The Anusara website states that this style of yoga is 'grounded in a Tantric philosophy of intrinsic goodness'. Again according to the Anusara website, the term means 'flowing with Grace', 'flowing with Nature', and 'following your heart'. This is in turn an interpretation of the Sanskrit *Anusāra*, meaning 'custom, usage, natural state or condition.'

BIKRAM

Bikram Yoga – often termed 'hot yoga' – was developed from traditional Hatha yoga by Bikram Choudry in the 1970s. It consists of a set of twenty-six postures and two breathing exercises performed over an hour and a half in a heated room (usually about 105 degrees Fahrenheit or 40.6 degrees Celsius). The heated room is designed to enable deeper stretching and prevent injuries while reducing stress and tension.

JIVAMUKTI

Jivamukti Yoga is a style of yoga that was established in New York in the early 1980s by Sharon Gannon and David Life and now has centres worldwide. According to the Jivamukti website, the term *jivamukti* is derived from the Sanskrit *jivanmukti* which means 'liberation while living'. Each Jivamukti class focuses on a theme, which is accompanied by Sanskrit chanting, readings, references to yogic texts, music, spoken word, asana sequencing and yogic breathing practices.

KUNDALINI

Kundalini Yoga is a discipline that combines yoga and meditation in order to 'wake up' the kundalini energy that resides at the base of the spine. The ultimate goal of kundalini yoga is awakening the kundalini energy in the body so that it can rise up through the chakras, open the heart and lead to ultimate enlightenment of the practitioner – the attainment of self-realisation and God consciousness.

PURNA

Purna Yoga is a yoga style established by John Ogilvie of Byron Bay yoga centre (in Australia), with *purna* being a Sanskrit term that translates to 'integrated', or 'complete' in English. According to their website, *Purna Yoga* 'represents a holistic approach to yoga integrating not just the physical postures but also philosophy, meditation, pranayama breath control and the yogic personal and social code of ethics.'

SIVANANDA

Sivananda Yoga is named after Swami Sivananda, a famous Indian spiritual teacher of the twentieth century. One of his disciples established the first Sivandanda Ashrams in India, and the non-profit organisation now has centres around the world. Sivananda centres teach traditional Hatha yoga, and have a well-established teacher-training program where students qualify in the Sivananda tradition. The original *Sivananda Yoga Ashram* is in Rishikesh; a holy town at the foot of the Himalayas in Northern India.

VINYASA

Vinyasa is another Sanskrit word which has many different meanings; the linking of body movement with breath, a specific sequence of breath-synchronized movements used to transition between sustained postures and lastly setting an intention for one's personal yoga practice and taking the necessary steps toward reaching that goal.

Vinyasa Yoga is a flowing style of yoga where each posture leads seamlessly into the next, without pauses in between postures. This can be quite challenging as it requires a fairly reasonable level of fitness to get through a whole one and a half hour class. Vinyasa yoga is often done to a music soundtrack.

YIN

Yin Yoga is a style that focuses on long deep stretches that in turn facilitate a state of deep relaxation. Generally postures are held for longer than usual, with students encouraged to deepen their stretch and relax into the pose, bringing about a meditative state.

HOW CAN YOGA HELP YOU?

First and foremost, yoga *asanas* can help you to become more aware of your body. Though you may be an exercise nut with a daily gym routine, oftentimes we do our exercise like a mouse running on the wheel. Our body is moving, perhaps even vigorously, while our head is elsewhere – either going over last night's argument with a partner, or going forward to next week's project at work, or even projecting to next year's holiday.

Doing asana helps us to slow down our thoughts, and slowly become conscious of our bodies. We become aware of how it feels to stretch out our legs deeply. In such a position, it is difficult for the mind to keep chattering on. It naturally slows down and comes into awareness of and connection with the body.

Asana practice is a good introduction to yoga as a whole. As we practise asana, we grow in awareness of our body, we become more receptive to the signals coming from our sensory perception, our mental chatter slows down and little by little, our experience of life becomes more harmonious and peaceful. This then leads naturally to an interest in yoga philosophy, meditation and related yogic practices, which can bring us to a deeper understanding of life, bringing more joy and presence into our everyday life experience.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHICH YOGA IS BEST FOR YOU?

The best way to find a yoga style or teacher that suits you is to try out a few different classes in your local area. Often yoga schools offer free trial classes, or even multiple classes for the price of one class for new students, allowing them to get a feel for the style and the teacher before choosing to follow the class. It is best for absolute beginners not to begin with a very difficult or challenging yoga style such as *Astanga* or *Vinyasa*, for the obvious reason that they may be quickly discouraged at the degree of difficulty and the level of the other students. A standard *Hatha* class is an ideal starting point for any new student of yoga.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD YOU DO YOGA?

Initially it is a good idea to practise *asana* once or twice a week for beginning students. Of course if you are immediately drawn to yoga and want to do more than this, there are no dangers in increasing the number of classes per week, as long as you are always in touch with your body and are careful not

to push it too much to the point where you may get muscle strain. This is definitely not the desired outcome of any *asana* class and if you find that you are straining your body, you are either doing too much yoga too fast or perhaps you are not doing the postures correctly, thus causing unnecessary stress on your muscles and joints.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED

Asana – Yoga postures

Astanga – Eight-limbed yoga

Dharana – Concentration

Dhyana – Meditation

Hatha – Sun ('ha') and moon ('tha') – the union of opposite forces

Kundalini – Literally 'coiled' – kundalini is described as a powerful force that is like a coiled up sleeping serpent and resides at the base of the spine until awakened

Niyamas – The Five Observances

Patanjali – Author of the *Yoga Sutras*

Pranayama – Mindful Breathing

Pratyahara – Turning Inward

Sadhu – A holy man, sage or ascetic

Swami – A spiritual master / teacher

Samadhi – Union of the self with the object of meditation

Sanskrit – The language of ancient India and that of the *Yoga Sutras*

Sutra – Thread or 'kernel' of knowledge

Vinyasa – The linking of body movement with breath; a specific sequence of breath-synchronized movements used to transition between sustained postures; setting an intention for one's personal yoga practice and taking the necessary steps toward reaching that goal

Yamas – The Five Moral Restraints

Yoga – Union, or to yoke: the union of mind, body and soul

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Here are just a few texts on yoga and yoga philosophy that I have found useful in my research into yoga.

Meditations from the Mat, by Rolf Gates and Katrina Kennison, Anchor Books 2002

This is a beautiful book of 365 meditations – one for each day of the year. Drawn from Rolf Gate's life experience as well as his investigation into yoga philosophy – this book is designed to be read slowly – one page per day. There are many insightful quotes scattered throughout the book drawn from yogis, scholars, poets and other wise souls and the authors seamlessly integrate them into this discussion of yoga philosophy and the path towards spiritual growth.

The Wisdom of Yoga, by Stephen Cope, Bantam Books 2006

This is a very personal and intimate book written by Stephen Cope, who is director of the *Institute for Extraordinary Living* at the Kripalu Centre for Yoga and Health in Massachusetts, North America. This book documents the personal journeys of six friends (one of them Cope himself) over a summer of yoga, introspection, picnics in the woods and friendship at Kripalu. All of the characters are going through some big life changes, and making re-assessments of their life paths. Cope masterfully weaves in Pantajali's *Yoga Sutras* to the narrative threads of his friends' lives – shining the light of yogic wisdom on life's problems and difficulties in a way that pinpoints how we can use such experiences for personal growth and transformation.

Autobiography of a Yogi, by Paramahansa Yogananda, The Self Realization Fellowship 1953

A seminal text for any student of yoga, this is the life story of Paramahansa Yogananda – an Indian yogi credited as one of the first people to introduce yoga to the West. With his spiritual path clear to him from a very early age, Yogananda's early life was somewhat conflictive given his desire to leave school early to go and study with his guru. Finishing school at the request of his father and his spiritual teacher, he then set off towards the Himalayas to meet his guru. His is an amazing story of spiritual and self-realization, dotted throughout with many tales of his encounters with spiritual masters along the way who demonstrate a level of wisdom and insight into the human experience that is very often nothing short of astonishing.

The Journey Home: Autobiography of an American Swami, Mandala Publishing 2010

This is another amazing story of self-realisation that documents the author's spiritual journey – as he heads to Europe from America as a young man in the seventies and then finds his way onto the hippy trail via a 'hop on hop off' bus that takes pilgrims and travellers across the European continent from London to India. Following his instincts at all times, and guided by a powerful spiritual calling, this is the story of how a Jewish boy from middle America renounces the material life to become a wandering Sadhu and then a Swami before returning to the States to live in an ashram. Fascinating reading for anyone interested in looking inwards to discover their true self and becoming aware of their life's purpose.

If you have found this guide useful please feel free to share it with your friends using [this link](#) and clicking on the 'share this' button.

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