THE ASSOCIATION OF YOGA PROFESSIONALS

OFFICIAL STUDY GUIDE

Table of Contents

Introduction

Welcome to the official Study Guide of The AYP. Whether you practice, teach or are simply curious about yoga, we hope this manual will help deepen your understanding of the subject and support you on your path to becoming the most skillful, knowledgeable and inspired student, practitioner and/or teacher you can be.

As with all conversations about yoga, this manual is a living document—a continual work in progress. If you have any questions or would like to share any information that you feel might improve on what's already here, please feel free to email us anytime at: info@theayp.org

With a deep bow of gratitude to all our teachers—past, present and yet to come—and to the Cause… the Source… the God or Divine Cosmic Force that gave us life and grants us the ability and the opportunity to be here at all.

May this guide serve as both a compass and companion as you explore the many dimensions of the vast and ever-expanding realm that is yoga.

Overview

According to the most generous estimates, at the time of this writing—in July of 2025—there are roughly 300,000,000 practitioners of yoga worldwide—a number that may seem substantial at first glance. In terms of the global population, however, it represents less than 5% of people on Earth.

Given the many epidemics of both physical and mental health that have emerged in many parts of the world in recent years, and that continue to be on the rise in many of those places and beyond, and given also that yoga has proven effective in both treating and even helping to prevent many of those same conditions, it is reasonable to conclude that there are a great many more people in the world today who could benefit by practicing yoga than who currently do.

Furthermore, given the relatively short training required in many cases to becoming a yoga teacher, coupled with a widespread misunderstanding both of what yoga is, as well as how it works, it is also likely that many of the people who currently practice yoga could benefit even more than they already do by developing a more informed and skillful practice.

In other words, despite how popular yoga has become in the modern world, there remains tremendous opportunity for growth. The purpose of this study guide is to provide a resource for students and teachers of yoga alike. For students, the hope is that it may help them practice in a way that serves their individual needs as safely and effectively as possible. For teachers, the intention is to offer a resource that will inspire new possibilities in their personal practice and provide a wealth of information to help them better serve their students.

And for both teachers and students, we hope this guide will support an evermore informed, inclusive and impactful yoga community—one that honors tradition while embracing evolution.

A Brief History of Yoga

"There is no subject which is so much wrapped up in mystery
and on which one can write whatever one likes
without any risk of being proved wrong."

—I.K. Taimni, Indian scholar, on the obscurity of yoga

No one knows exactly when or where yoga first came into being. The earliest known use of the word 'yoga' in reference to something that could be said to resemble a practice is in the **Upanishads**, a series of ancient Hindu texts thought to have been composed over the course of several hundred years, beginning in roughly 800 B.C.E., in the far northwestern corner of a land that would later come to be known as India.

There is also evidence, however, in the form of an ancient soapstone carving known as the *Pashupati,* or *Mahayogi* seal—which depicts a human-like figure sitting in what many archeologists interpret as a classical meditative posture, and which is estimated to be roughly 4,500 years old—that yoga might possibly trace at least some of its roots to what is now southeastern Pakistan.

And though further evidence has yet to be found, and indeed may not even exist, some fringe scholars have speculated—based on parallels in ritual and healing—that the seeds of yoga may have actually begun sprouting through various ancient shamanic traditions of northern Africa and the Middle East some 10,000 years ago, possibly far longer.

Whatever the case, there seems to be no doubt that yoga, in some form or another, has been in existence for at least 2,500 years, making it one of the oldest living human traditions. But while the exact when and where of yoga's origins remain a mystery, it is at least somewhat more clear how and why the seeds of yoga took root and began to grow.

Pre-Classical Yoga

The practice of yoga as most people think of it today began in many ways with the ***Vedas***, a series of ancient texts that are thought to have been composed over 3,000 years ago, between 1500-1000 B.C.E., during the Early Vedic Period.

Containing all manner of information—from discussions of philosophy, metaphysics, medicine, astronomy, grammar and ethics to a variety of prayers, hymns, even instructions on how to perform various rituals and fire ceremonies—the *Vedas* form an encyclopedia of sorts of early Indian thought. A record, however rough, of the social, religious and philosophical development of Indian society.

Among the major themes explored in the Vedas are questions about the origins, purpose and nature of existence—*Who or what created the universe? Why are we here? What happens after we die?, etc.*

But while the early *Vedas* contain the seeds of certain philosophical concepts that would later evolve into the foundations of yogic philosophy, the first and arguably most significant impact the Vedas had on the birth and subsequent rise of yoga was the encouragement of a ***varna***, or class system, which called for society to be divided into four social classes, each with their own duties.

In particular, the *Purusha Sukta* hymn of the *Rig Veda* (the oldest of the *Vedas*) presents a cosmic creation myth centered on ***Purusha***, the primordial cosmic being, whose body is sacrificed by the gods to create the universe and human society. The four *varnas* are described as emerging from different parts of *Purusha*'s body.

> *"Brahmin was his mouth, of his arms were made the Kshatriya,*
> *His thighs became the Vaishya, from his feet the Shudra were produced."*
> *(Rig Veda 10.90.12)*

Brahmins were the priest class, responsible for interpreting sacred texts, performing sacred rituals and teaching sacred knowledge. *Kshatriyas* were warriors and rulers, responsible for protection and governance. V*aishyas* were farmers, merchants and artisans, responsible for commerce, trade and agriculture, and *shudras* were the laborers and servants, responsible for supporting the other varnas.

This structure was not immediately embraced throughout India, but over time it grew more and more widespread until eventually becoming the status quo. This was due in large part to the influence of the *brahmins.* As the keepers and teachers of sacred knowledge, they were responsible for composing not only the *Purusha Sukta*, which gave a mythological justification for the emerging social order, but all of the Vedas. This gave them a hugely important role in the developing society. Not only were they the arbiters of all religious and spiritual matters, they were also the only ones who could perform the rituals, benedictions and ceremonies that—according to the *Vedas*—were required to maintain the cosmic order and bring prosperity, fertility, peace, good fortune and health, as well as a successful afterlife in the heavens.

But while the original class system is thought to have been more egalitarian and fluid, with a person's skills and behavior determining their role, over time it gradually hardened into a rigid, birth-based hierarchy that limited not only social mobility, but also access to spiritual knowledge.

Throughout the Late Vedic Period (approx. 1000-500 B.C.E.), *shudras* came to be excluded altogether from participating in Vedic rituals, *vaisyas* came to be permitted only limited access, and if either they or the *kshatriyas* wanted to receive the blessings that *brahmins* alone could provide, they had to pay increasingly more for them as time went by.

It was at least in part because of these shifting social dynamics that a counter-movement began to emerge—one that emphasized internal reflection over external ceremony. This led to the rise of several new religions, most notably Buddhism and Jainism, which encouraged meditation and renunciation as a path to ***nirvana***, i.e., enlightenment, or freedom from suffering.

These movements in turn influenced the Vedic orthodoxy. Instead of performing rituals to maintain the cosmic order and achieve eternal bliss in heaven, many *brahmins* began teaching that the true goal of human existence is to realize ***atman*,** the individual soul or essential Self, as ***Brahman***, the supreme soul or ultimate reality, and in so doing to achieve ***moksha***, liberation of the soul, and thus freedom from worldly suffering.

The more spiritual access became restricted by class, however, the more people began to move away from priestly authority and turn instead toward Self-study and inner knowledge as the path to liberation.

This shift is documented in the ***Upanishads***, another series of ancient texts that are thought to have been composed by a variety of anonymous sages over the course of several centuries, between roughly 800-300 B.C.E. Considered to be the culmination of the *Vedas*, the "fruit", as it were, to the Vedic "tree", the Upanishads are not separate from the *Vedas*, but rather the mature outcome of them.

Along with philosophical discussions about the source of creation, the nature of the Self and the path to liberation, the *Upanishads* also contain accounts of different sages's experiments with a variety of techniques that they believed would help them achieve *moksha*—everything from breathing exercises and fasting to chanting mantras, consuming certain herbs and performing various self-purification rituals.

Most scholars agree that these experiments represent a precursor to the more formalized practice that would later become known as "classical yoga."

Despite their many references, however, to ideas that would later become hallmarks of classical yoga—such as breath awareness, chanting Om and the pursuit of liberation through concentration—the closest the early *Upanishads* come to describing yoga as something even vaguely resembling a method is a passage from the *Katha Upanishad*, thought to have been composed in the late 5th century B.C.E.:

"When the five perceptions are stilled, together with the mind,
And not even reason bestirs itself, they call it the highest state.
When senses are firmly reined in, that is Yoga, so people think.
From distractions a man is then free, for Yoga is the coming-into-being,
as well as the ceasing-to-be."

Just as significant as their references to yoga and proto-yogic practices, however, were the discussions in the *Upanishads* of various philosophical concepts whose seeds had been planted in the Vedas, but whose meanings had since evolved.

In particular, the *Upanishads* discussed *purusha*, not as the primordial cosmic being of the Vedas, but as the human spirit; the eternal, formless Self, i.e., the soul.

At the same time, they also discussed ***prakriti***, which had been referred to in the Vedas as the fundamental power behind creation; the source of everything, much like a cosmic womb. In the *Upanishads*, though, *prakriti* became material reality; all that is subject to change, i.e., everything that is not the soul.

These two concepts would eventually form the foundation of an ancient Hindu school of philosophy called **Sankhya**, which itself would become the foundation of classical yoga.

Literally 'enumeration' or 'taking account', Sankhya asserted that the way to liberation was through rational examination of reality and its component parts. Unlike Vedic philosophy, which saw the Self (*atman*) and the Divine (*Brahman*) as being different expressions of the same ultimate source, Sankhya taught dualism, i.e., that consciousness (*purusha*) and material reality (*prakriti*) are fundamentally separate, and that liberation comes not through uniting the Self with the Divine, but by discerning the distinction between what perceives and what is being perceived, thus freeing our souls to experience themselves as a state of pure awareness, undisturbed by whatever thoughts, feelings and/or external circumstances that might otherwise trouble us or cause us to forget our true nature.

By conceiving of reality as being made up of two independent principles instead of originating from one single source, Sankhya marked a radical shift in the evolution of human consciousness. At the same time, by offering a new way of understanding not only our own existence, but all existence, it presented a compelling means of subverting the class system.

But while the Vedic tradition began to encourage specific actions meant to help people achieve liberation, such as living ethically, fulfilling one's duty and being of service to others, Sankhya was a philosophy only, with no practices associated with it and no clear doctrine about how one might go about the process of freeing their individual consciousness from the distracting/disturbing influence of its physical environment.

That was soon to change, however. As the Vedic age was reaching its end, yoga was only just beginning to emerge in full.

Classical Yoga

With the advent of Sankhya came the eventual composition of several new texts, two of which—the ***Bhagavad Gita*** and the ***Yoga Sutras—***would go on to form the foundation of what is now considered classical yoga. It is not entirely clear when either text was composed, but most scholars place the *Gita* sometime between 300-100 B.C.E. and the

Sutras around 200 C.E. And while it is clear they were both influenced heavily by both the teachings of the Vedas as well as the ideas of Sankyha, they differed from each other in a number of ways, not the least of which was their conception of yoga.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, or 'The Song of God', is part of an epic poem called the ***Mahabharata*.** Said to have been composed by a mythical sage named Vyasa, who is often described as being a divine figure, the *Mahabharata* is actually the longest epic poem in human history—ten times longer than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. It tells the story of two sides of a warring family struggling to gain power in an ancient kingdom (in what is now northern India), and woven throughout the narrative are a variety of philosophical and spiritual themes.

Though it accounts for only a small section of the larger story, the *Bhagavad Gita* is considered by many to be the most important part of the *Mahabharata*. Set on a battlefield where two armies are about to square off, the text consists of a dialogue between a young warrior prince named Arjuna, and his counsellor, Krishna.

As the battle is about to begin, Arjuna despairs, thinking of the violence and death that are sure to follow, and unable to bring himself to take up arms against the opposing soldiers, many of whom are his family, friends and former teachers, he becomes emotional and seeks Krishna's council.

Over the course of the conversation that follows, Krishna reveals himself to be a divine being—an incarnation of *Brahman*—and advises Arjuna to establish himself in yoga, which he describes in a variety of ways, including "perfect evenness of mind," "skill in action," "meditation," "selfless service," devotion to" as well as "union with the divine."

The setting of the battlefield is generally interpreted as an allegory for the struggles of human life, both inner and outer, and the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna covers a wide range of philosophical and spiritual matters that reach far beyond the war Arjuna faces. For this reason, as well as for the ideas it expresses and the way it expresses them, the *Bhagavad Gita* is widely considered to be one of the greatest scriptures not only of Hinduism, but of all world religions.

As far as yoga is concerned, the text is significant for several reasons:

1. It defined yoga clearly for the first time as both a state of being, as well as a discipline that could lead to the attainment of that state; and,

2. It was the first text to present different paths, or branches of yoga, including ***karma yoga,*** the path of selfless service; ***jñana yoga,*** the path of spiritual study; ***bhakti yoga,*** the path of devotion, often called "the path of the heart", which typically involves practices such as chanting of mantras, recitation of prayer and/or group singing, known as *kirtan;* and finally, though it does not use the specific term, the *Gita* also discusses ***raja yoga,*** the path of meditative awareness, also known as the "royal path."

The introduction of the different branches was particularly important because it took a major step toward making yoga inclusive. By offering a variety of paths to liberation, the *Gita* acknowledges that different people have different strengths and weaknesses, and that what works for one may not necessarily work for another. In essence, the branches are the *Gita*'s way of saying that yoga is for everyone.

Perhaps most significant of all, however, is the *Gita*'s suggestion that yoga requires taking action and devoting one's self to being of service in the world. This contrasts sharply with the ethos of the Upanishads, which are generally considered to have encouraged a more ascetic pursuit of liberation.

As for the *Yoga Sutras*, they marked a revival of asceticism, albeit with a much more systematic and philosophically clear framework. Composed by a sage named Patañjali, about whom almost nothing is known, and consisting of 195 or (depending on the translation) 196 *sutras,* the text presents what has become arguably the single most influential framework in history on the theory and practice of yoga.

Literally translated as 'thread' or 'discourse', a ***sutra*** is a short phrase or statement that's meant to contain the seeds of a larger concept. The idea of *sutra* writing is to weave together knowledge of a given subject by condensing as much information as possible into as few words as possible, thus making the concepts easier to remember.

The *Yoga Sutras* are significant in that they represent the first known effort to take all of the many disparate techniques that different people were calling yoga at the time, and codify them into a single method with a clear objective: To learn to realize the Self as pure consciousness (*purusha*), separate and distinct from material reality (*prakriti*).

Known for being somewhat esoteric, the *Sutras* define yoga as *'citta vritti nirodaha',* which has been translated many ways, including 'the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind', 'the ability to focus the mind in a single direction without distraction', 'the ability to overcome the mind's tendency to bend reality', and 'the purification of consciousness and its manifestations', among other similar notions.

Whatever Patañjali's actual meaning, it seems clear and is generally accepted that the practice of yoga as presented in the *Yoga Sutras* is concerned primarily with the activity of the mind and its relationship to consciousness, the overarching idea being that the achievement of Self-realization depends ultimately on learning to calm the mind in order to distinguish what is perceived (*prakriti)* from what perceives (*purusha).*

It is perhaps because their philosophical rigor that the *Yoga Sutras* were originally studied and applied almost exclusively by male *brahminical* renunciates, whereas the *Gita*, with its challenge to the notion of having to retreat from the world in order to free one's self from suffering, was thought to be more for the typical householder.

Interestingly, even though the *Yoga Sutras* list *asana*, or yoga postures, as one of the components on the path of yoga, the word appears only four times in the entire text. But since the *Sutras* are concerned exclusively with r*aja* yoga, it is commonly held that the only postures Patañjali was referring to were those of seated meditation. And likewise with the *Bhagavad Gita*, even though the text describes yoga as a combination of physical and spiritual disciplines that connect the body and mind, it makes no mention whatsoever of the practice of *asana.*

In other words, despite the immense contribution and enduring influence of both the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras* it would be another several hundred years after their publication before yogis would become known for doing downward dogs, headstands and the many other poses that have become the hallmark of yoga as it is generally thought of today.

Tantra and the Rise of Hatha (Post-classical Yoga)

Up until the 5th century C.E., most practitioners of yoga were taught to view the human body as something that limited our sense of being, and thus that needed to be transcended in order to achieve liberation. Paradoxically, this way of thinking limited people's perception and created a very rigid understanding of what it meant to practice yoga.

Things began to change, however, with the emergence of ***tantra****,* another liberation-focused philosophy and set of practices that developed in ancient India, in this case as early as the 5th or 6th century C.E., according to most estimates. Unlike classical yoga, which saw the body as an obstacle, tantra celebrated the body as a temple, and as such saw it as a gateway to liberation.

But while classical yoga remained concerned with calming the mind in order to experience the Self as pure consciousness, *tantra* aimed to transform consciousness to perceive the divine in all things, and thereby to experience one's Self as being in a state of constant union with the divine. And while classical yoga emphasized a rigorous path of self-discipline, meditation and ethical conduct, *tantra* emphasized a variety of rituals that involved the worship of deities, the use of sacred symbols and sounds, as well as the use of bodily experiences and sensory perceptions as a means of awakening spiritual energy and attaining higher states of consciousness.

It was in large part for these reasons that classical yoga and *tantra* remained distinct practices for several centuries. Over time, however, experimentation across both schools led to a cross-pollination of ideas that eventually gave rise to what we now recognize as ***hatha yoga****,* often called 'body-yoga', which focuses on physical postures (*asana*) and breath control (*pranayama*), as well as symbolic hand gestures known as *mudras*, which are believed to influence the flow of energy in the body and mind, and various self-purification techniques known as *kriyas.* Additionally, many *tantric* and *hatha* traditions shared a belief

in subtle energy systems—including *nadis* (energy channels) and *chakras* (energy centers)—whose activation was thought to facilitate spiritual awakening.

Though many interpret *'hatha'* as a union of opposites—*'ha'* meaning 'sun' and *'tha'* meaning 'moon'—a more accurate translation is 'force' or 'effort', referring to the disciplined energy required to transform body and mind.

This is an important point: Unlike the other branches of yoga before it—*karma, jñana, bhakti and raja*—the goal of *hatha* yoga in most cases was not spiritual liberation. While some tantric-influenced schools saw the body itself as a vehicle for liberation, traditional *hatha* yoga was primarily designed as a preparatory discipline for deeper meditative states.

Though the first written references to techniques associated with *hatha* yoga can be found in Buddhist texts from the 11th century, it is believed that the practice began to formulate several hundred years before that. It wasn't until the 15th century, however, that the first manual on *hatha* yoga—the **Hatha Yoga Pradipika**, or 'Light on Hatha Yoga'—was compiled by a sage named Svatmarama Yogin, about whom—like Patañjali before him—almost nothing is known. Though he is listed as the author, most scholars agree that the text is a synthesis of older practices, rather than his own original ideas.

In addition to listing a lineage of thirty-five previous teachers, also about whom very little, if anything, is known, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* discusses a range of topics—everything from the proper time and place to practice yoga to the ethical duties of the yogi.

Best known for listing eighty-four postures, the text also discusses eight breathing exercises, or *pranayamas,* and six energetic seals known as *bandhas,* all of which would become cornerstones of many modern *hatha* practices. Notably, however, the text focuses primarily on the regulation and movement of subtle energies within the body. The postures are not offered as goals in and of themselves, but rather as tools to effect a shift of one's inner state.

Along with the **Shiva Samhita** (15th century) and the **Gheranda Samhita** (17th century), both of which presented further insight on the subject—the Hatha Yoga Pradipika played a central role in systematizing and making the practice of *hatha* yoga more accessible to a wider audience. While rooted in *tantric* views of the body as a conduit for spiritual growth, all three texts focused on more practical methods for achieving physical health and meditative depth.

This all contributed to *hatha* yoga growing in popularity throughout India up until the early-1600's, when it began to be practiced by people from all classes, including the emperor, Akbar the Great, who is considered one of the greatest leaders in Indian history. Known for unifying the kingdoms of India through religious tolerance and the restoration of social mobility within the caste system, he was fascinated by yoga and called for Persian translations of the Yoga Sutras and the Mahabharata, among other yogic texts. He also

called for a systematized study of yoga techniques, as well as verbal and visual documentation of his encounters with yogis.

Despite its early popularity and royal patronage, however, by the mid-17th century the practice began to encounter increasing resistance. As Islamic conquests spread to the north, the social and political climate in India began to change again. With a new emperor came less religious tolerance and more class division. Many urban Hindu and Muslim elites began to view yogis with derision, and for several decades in the late 1600's yogis were even persecuted.

As for whether this turn of events was due primarily to simple prejudice, or whether the yogis of the day had a hand in their own fall from grace is hard to say. There is scant evidence from that time period, but there are reports from the early 1800's that as certain yogis eventually rose again in status, some of them began to abuse their power (not unlike many of the Vedic priests who preceded them), so perhaps this was a factor in the 1600's, as well. Also, as the Hindu and Islamic cultures clashed, there are accounts of well-armed *sadhus,* traditionally considered Hindu holy men, working as mercenaries—sometimes in bands of up to 10,000—throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Whatever the case, it seems clear that by the end of the eighteenth century, the role yogis played in society was very different than the one envisioned by Patañjali, or the *rishis* who laid the foundation before him. As Alistair Shearer writes in "The Story of Yoga":

"Their numbers alone were cause for alarm. Contemporary chroniclers speak of over two million yogi-fakirs… a sizable percentage of the then population. Some of them crowded out temples, pilgrimage sites and public markets with their freak 'yoga' shows, harassing spectators for money, while others worked the pilgrimage routes as con-men, hustlers and footpads (highway robbers). As time went by, they gradually became more domesticated, establishing livelihoods as moneylenders, traders and property owners in all the principal towns of the Gangetic plain. Joining conventional society did nothing to endear them to the locals, however, and their bad reputation lingered doggedly on."

As one Indian scholar put it, yogis were thought of as: "those hideous specimens of humanity who parade through our streets bedaubed with dirt and ash—frightening children and extorting money from timid and good-natured folk."

By all accounts, even though some of the more traditional yogic practices remained popular in various rural areas, this level of disdain toward yogis continued among the ruling class and in the cities of India throughout the British Colonial era (1757-1858) and well into the British Raj (1858-1947).

Because of this, even though the emergence of *hatha* caused yoga to flourish in medieval times in a way the classical branches never had, by the end of the 19th century its popularity was in decline—a situation that was only exacerbated by the rise of British

Orientalism and the introduction of Christian perspectives, both of which viewed yoga as superstition at best, and degenerate asceticism at worst.

Even at its peak, however, *hatha* yoga was still very much in its incubation phase, with only a few disparate schools teaching eighty-four postures—if that. The number is regarded by many scholars as symbolic rather than literal. It would take an auspicious confluence of factors, as well as the influence of several gifted and charismatic teachers to help bring the practice of postures to new audiences in the west and set it on a path toward becoming—for better and worse—the most popular style of yoga in the world.

The Modern Era and Beyond

In September of 1893, the city of Chicago hosted a World's Fair to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage to the Americas. Over the course of six months, from May to October, an estimated twenty-seven million people travelled from all over the world to attend the event. Among them was a thirty year-old Hindu monk named **Swami Vivekananda**, who had traveled to the United States on a mission to present Indian culture as deeper and more sophisticated than most people in the west realized. His goal was to help win new respect and rights for the Indian people, many of whom were oppressed and living in extreme poverty under British rule.

As the highly-educated and charismatic son of a successful lawyer in Calcutta's high court, Vivekananda was cultured, well-dressed and spoke elegant English. He was also blessed with a tremendous intellect and a gift for oration. So impressed were many of the people he came into contact with that soon after arriving in America he secured an invitation to be a delegate and keynote speaker at the Parliament of Religions, an event that had been organized as part of the larger World's Fair to create a global dialogue on faith.

Although it is commonly reported that Vivekananda spoke about yoga at the parliament, based on the available transcripts of his speeches from the event, it appears that this is not actually the case. Instead, he spoke mainly about the problem of religious fanaticism and the need for harmony among all faiths. He also spoke eloquently and passionately about Hinduism, introducing it to many in the west for the first time. His speeches were so well-received and attracted so much attention that Vivekananda spent the next several years lecturing throughout the United States and the United Kingdom. It is during these talks that he seems to have begun discussing yoga.

Whether he spoke about it at the event or not, however, Vivekananda's appearance at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions is generally considered to mark the beginning of yoga's modern era.

But the yoga Vivekananda talked about was not the *hatha* practice that had become popular during the early-to-middle part of the post-classical period. In fact, even though he is said to have practiced and taught some postures, Vivekananda was known for being dismissive of *hatha* yoga, calling it 'gymnastics' and 'queer breathing exercises'. Some

scholars have suggested that this was likely a consequence of him growing up in a culture that still carried a negative impression of filthy con-men and hustlers who called themselves yogis in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Instead, Vivekananda talked about the *karma, bhakti, jñana* and *raja* yogas that had emerged during the classical era. He spoke about yoga as a spiritual path, a way of realizing one's divinity through the practice of selfless service, loving devotion to a personal deity, and meditation to help calm the mind and thus overcome the influence of misguided thought and destructive attachments. He taught that yoga was a matter of philosophy as well as psychology, and that it could help people improve their mental clarity, emotional stability and overall health.

Despite his teachings, however, Vivekananda's own health was not good, and just nine years after his appearance in Chicago, he died of a brain hemorrhage.

This left a vacancy that was filled by an entrepreneurial young American named **Pierre** Bernard. Born in Iowa in 1875, he began teaching a version of *hatha* yoga in his early 20's that he claimed to have learned from an Indian man who had immigrated to the midwest in the 1880's, and who happened to be an accomplished *tantric* yogi.

Though he is widely credited as being the first American to introduce the philosophy and practices of both *hatha* yoga and *tantra* to the United States, Mr. Bernard became controversial for various sexual scandals and occult practices, and ultimately ended up giving yoga a bad reputation in America in the early part of the 20th century.

Meanwhile, *hatha* yoga was experiencing a renaissance in India. Sparked by advances in science and technology, teachers such as **Shri Yogendra**, as well as **Swamis Sivananda and Kuvalyananda** began doing research and conducting studies to test the medical benefits and scientific foundations of various yoga postures and breathing exercises. They made numerous discoveries that would eventually impress many Western researchers, but due to restrictive immigration policies and the upheaval of World War I, their work remained largely unknown in the West until the late 1930's, and then only by a small handful of interested parties.

In 1918, Shri Yogendra founded The Yoga Institute in Bombay, which remains to this day the oldest organized yoga center in the world. The following year he travelled to the U.S. and opened a branch of the institute in the village of Harriman, New York, about fifty miles north of Manhattan. Yogendra's presentation of a science-backed system of *asanas* helped to undo the negative image many people in the west had of yoga at the time, and in many ways it laid the foundation for the modern postural practice to take root there. But Yogendra's approach was more therapeutic and medicinal in nature, rather than exercise-based. This, coupled with the fact that he was denied entry to the U.S. when he tried to return in 1924, prevented his system from gaining widespread popularity.

In 1920, a twenty-seven year-old Hindu monk named **Paramahansa Yogananda** came to America for the first time. He had been sent by his guru on a mission to spread the

teachings of yoga to the west, and over the course of the next thirty-two years he would meet with great success, establishing an organization called the Self-Realization Fellowship, which helped to introduce millions of people in the west to yoga and meditation, and which continues going strong today, with over 600 temples and mediation centers in 62 countries. Additionally, Yogananda's famous book, **"Autobiography of a Yogi",** is considered a yoga classic.

Similar to Vivekananda, however, while he did practice and teach some postures, Yogananda saw *hatha* yoga as "useful but not essential." Instead, he taught a form of yoga known as ***kriya* yoga**, which focuses on the use of meditation and various *mantras* to help practitioners achieve a state of 'God-consciousness'—that is, a state not only of inner peace, but also of harmony with one's fellow man. Thus, even though he played a major role in helping to popularize yoga in the west, many view Yogananda's legacy as being associated much more with tranquility of mind and kindness of spirit than with physical strength or flexibility.

Another notable teacher from the same time period is **Ramana Maharshi**, who was introduced to the west by Paul Brunton, a British journalist who traveled to India in the early 1930's in search of authentic yogis. Brunton's book, **"A Search in Secret India"**, became a best-seller, further cementing yoga's place in the popular consciousness.

But while Sri Ramana, as he was known, is considered by many to be one of the greatest yogis and spiritual teachers of the modern era, similar to both Vivekananda and Yogananda, the yoga he taught was a form of *jñana* yoga that encouraged liberation through self-inquiry, so even though he also helped to popularize yoga in the west, his influence on postural yoga was minimal.

Arguably the teacher who has had the greatest influence on the modern posture practice was **Tirumalai Krishnamacharya**. A scholar and Ayurvedic physician, he claimed to have traveled as a young man to the Himalayas, where he met a legendary guru named Ramamohan Bramachari, who taught him about the Yoga Sutras and *hatha* yoga. Whether this tale is true or not is open to debate. Krishnamacharya was known to change his stories, and if there were ever any records of his teacher, they seem to have been lost to history.

What is not up for debate is that sometime around 1918, Krishnamacharya began teaching yoga himself, and continued essentially until the day he died in 1989, at age 100. By combining his knowledge of wholistic medicine with the practice of yoga, he became well-known in India not only as a teacher, but also as a healer. And by writing and lecturing extensively, as well as giving numerous demonstrations over many years, he left a legacy that spanned generations.

Though he never traveled to the west, Krishnamacharya taught several students who would go on to become very highly-regarded and influential teachers themselves, creating some of the most popular styles of yoga in the world today. For this reason, he is widely regarded as 'the father of modern yoga.' And to those who have studied extensively, he is also considered to be the one who paved the way for *hatha* yoga to evolve into what has

come to be known as **Modern Postural Yoga**, a term that refers to all *asana*-based practices that aspire toward inner freedom through physical exploration.

Though most of his students were both Indian, male and of *brahmin* descent, the first of Krishnamacharya's disciples to bring his teaching to the west was a Russian woman named **Indra Devi**.

Born Eugenie Peterson in 1899 in what is now Latvia (formerly part of the Russian empire), Devi became fascinated with India as a teen after reading a book about yoga. After her father went missing in action during the Russian Revolution, she and her mother fled to eastern Europe, where she began working as an actress and dancer. In 1927, she finally travelled India for the first time and immediately fell in love with the country and its culture. A few months she later moved there permanently, and by 1930 she had adopted her now famous stage name and become a movie star.

In 1938, Devi asked to study with Krishnamacharya, who at first rejected her because she was both a Westerner and a woman. Devi's husband was a diplomat, however, and after using his influence with Krishnmacharya's employer, the Maharaja of Mysore, the revered guru reluctantly accepted her as his first female and first non-Indian pupil.

To his surprise, Devi turned out to be an exceptional student, and a year later when she followed her husband to China for work, Krishnamacharya encouraged her to teach yoga there, which she did, offering what are believed to be the first yoga classes ever taught in China, and eventually opening a studio in Shanghai.

After her husband died in 1946, Devi returned to India and wrote her first book, but soon made the decision to move to the United States. By 1948 she had settled in Los Angeles, where she opened the first yoga studio in America. Aided by her experience as a diplomat's wife, her charismatic personality and distinctive style (she always wore a sari), Devi quickly became successful at attracting a wide variety of students—everyone from celebrities and movie stars to businessmen, athletes, models and housewives.

Mostly, though, Devi was successful because she developed a style of practice that was appealing to many Americans in the post World War II era. By minimizing the emphasis on spirituality and focusing instead on relaxation and stress release, she presented yoga as an elixir for anxiety, as well as a beauty regimen, a health tonic and a path to staying youthful.

Some critics have suggested that Devi's approach transformed yoga from something that was meant to dissolve the ego to something that strengthened it instead, thus laying the groundwork for yoga to be seen in the mainstream culture as an image-focused fitness and wellness routine rather than a spiritual practice. But Devi's fans far outnumbered her critics, and as a result of her enthusiastic and tireless efforts, which contributed greatly to the widespread acceptance of yoga in America and beyond, and which continued until her death in 2002, she eventually became known as 'The First Lady of Yoga.'

It was due in large part to Devi's influence that yoga continued to grow in popularity in the United States throughout the 1950's and beyond. In 1961, inspired by her success, an enterprising young businessman from the Bronx named **Richard Hittleman** launched 'Yoga for Health', the world's first television show to teach yoga. Featuring an easy-to-follow presentation that focused on physical fitness and overall health, the show was an instant hit and ran for almost five years. Through his books, lectures and TV show, it is thought that Hittleman introduced more people to yoga than any other person alive at the time.

But even though yoga was becoming more popular, up until the mid-1960's it still hadn't been widely accepted as a form of exercise, as most of the postures being taught were very basic and of a more gentle, therapeutic nature.

Then in 1966, a prominent Indian teacher named **B.K.S. Iyengar**, who had been one of Krishnamacharya's star students, and who had made a name for himself by bringing yoga to Europe in the mid-1950's, published his first book, **"Light on Yoga"**, which became an international bestseller. With his extraordinarily strong and flexible body, Iyengar was able to demonstrate a variety of postures the likes of which most people had never seen before —stunning arm balances, deep backbends, complex inversions and other feats of contortion that rivaled the world's greatest circus performers. In addition to inspiring a sense of awe, the book ignited a desire in many people to be able to achieve a similar level of fitness. Because of this, the notion of 'yoga as exercise' is generally considered to have begun with Mr. Iyengar.

But that was only one of many significant contributions Iyengar made to the world of yoga. In addition to popularizing the posture practice as a form of exercise, he was also the first to emphasize proper alignment, which helped students deepen their understanding of anatomy and in turn realize more of their potential. He was also one of the first, if not *the* first to film himself doing demonstrations of advanced postures. This was revolutionary, as it allowed people far and wide to see his practice in action. On top of that, he wrote several other books, including a translation of the *Yoga Sutras*, which helped to make classical yogic philosophy more accessible to a wide audience for the first time.

Perhaps most significantly, though, was Iyengar's introduction of the use of props such as blocks, blankets, bolsters, straps and even chairs. Not only did this help expand yoga's popularity even further by making certain postures safer and more accessible to people with physical limitations, it also precipitated the emergence of a whole new style of postural yoga known as **restorative yoga**, which focused on relaxation and healing.

Though Mr. Iyengar is considered to have planted the seeds of restorative yoga when he began offering relaxing sequences as a way of encouraging his students to rest between more physically demanding practices, it was one of his American students, **Judith Lasater**, who developed it into an official practice in the early '70's. A few years later, in 1975, she would also go on to become one of the founders of **Yoga Journal**, a magazine that played a key role in promoting yoga in the United States.

Just as people were beginning to see it as a form of exercise, though, yoga found itself becoming associated with the hippie and counter-culture movement of the late '60's. In 1967, The Beatles included a picture of Yogananda, as well as his two gurus, in the cover art of their seminal album, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, and the following year they famously traveled to India to study Transcendental Meditation with a teacher named **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi**. This introduced many people in the west to yet another branch of yoga known as *mantra* yoga, which aims at liberation through the repetition of sacred words and phrases meant to help the practitioner transcend their ordinary thinking process and replace it with a state of pure consciousness. To some people this was a welcome revelation, but to many others the idea that one could practice yoga without doing any stretching or contorting of their bodies was confusing.

Then in 1969, another teacher from India, **Yogi Bhajan**, arrived in the United States for the first time and introduced people there to his own brand of **Kundalini Yoga**, a derivation of ancient *tantric* practices that emphasized the movement of subtle energies in the body in order to achieve Self-realization. Though Bhajan's method incorporated a few basic postures and physical movements, it focused more on chanting, breathing exercises and various meditations, which was also confusing to a lot of people. Was yoga a form of exercise or not? And since Yogi Bhajan encouraged his followers to dress only in white, many people began to wonder if practicing yoga meant joining a cult.

Finally, in the summer of 1969, a popular guru named **Swami Satchidananda** was invited to give the opening address at Woodstock, the legendary music festival in upstate New York. On the afternoon of August 15th, the fifty-five year old guru with a long white beard and an infectious smile spoke to a crowd of almost half a million young Americans, many of whom were high on cannabis and acid, and encouraged them not to fight for peace, but to find peace within themselves through the sacred power of music, and to recognize that the future of the whole world was in their hands.

For some people, the association with the free love, new-age and drug culture made yoga seem more 'groovy', but to many others it made it hard to take it seriously in any way, let alone as a form of exercise. And it certainly didn't help yoga's standing in the public eye when several women later accused Satchidananda of sexual abuse.

The yoga train, however, had left the station, and despite some lingering negative associations, it also had many devotees who kept the wheels turning. In 1970, a woman named **Lilias Folan**, who had begun practicing a few years before at a local YWCA in Connecticut, began teaching on PBS television. Between her cheerful personality, her gentle approach and her encouraging instruction, the show became extremely popular, especially among women, many of whom practiced along with Lilias from their living rooms while their husbands were at work. This contributed significantly to yoga developing a reputation in the west as being a mild and feminine form of exercise.

At the same time, for those who wanted more intensity in their workouts, a teacher named **Bikram Choudury**, who had recently arrived from India, opened his first studio in Los Angeles, where practitioners were led through his signature series of twenty-six

postures in a room heated to 104 °F (40 °C), which he claimed was meant to mimic the heat of Calcutta. Bikram, as he became known, also claimed to have been a national yoga champion in India, which was later proven to be false. Despite his flamboyant and aggressive personality—or perhaps because of it—his style of yoga became extremely popular, gaining a celebrity following and eventually opening over 1,600 studios in forty countries by 2006.

Meanwhile, back in the early '70's, a few of the more hard-core American yogis began traveling to India to study with a teacher named **Pattabhi Jois**, who had been another of Krishnamacharya's standout students. Jois had developed an intensely athletic style of yoga called Ashtanga, and his name had begun spreading in the west after a Belgian yogi named André van Lysebeth came to study with him in the mid-60's and subsequently wrote a book about his experience. So impressed were the Americans with Jois and his yoga method that in 1975 they invited him to come to California to teach a workshop.

As it happened, the introduction of Ashtanga yoga to the United States coincided with the fitness boom of the late 70's and early 80's, which led to many new exercise trends, including aerobics, jazzercise, and martial arts, as well as the advent of recorded workouts that people could do at home with a VCR.

With more and more people seeking healthier lifestyles, yoga's popularity continued to grow. But the options were somewhat limited. There was either the gentle style of Lilias Folan, the sweltering heat and bombast of Bikram, the white-clad 'cult' of Yogi Bhajan, the strict, alignment-focused method of Iyengar, or the intense and ultra-athletic style of Ashtanga—all of which were traditionally practiced in silence. There was also restorative yoga, and the various *mantra* and seated meditation-based practices, but they were hardly thought of as exercise.

Then in 1984, a musician and dancer named **Sharon Gannon** and her artist and cafe-owner partner, **David Life**, founded **Jivamukti Yoga** in New York City. Their style, which drew from the different lineages they had each studied, and which consisted of vigorous, free-flowing sequences of postures set to upbeat music, became very popular. Students flocked from all over the city to sweat, breathe and move together. The Jivamukti practice also incorporated chanting, however, and the study of sacred texts, and strongly encouraged veganism, all of which appealed to devotees, but was a tougher sell in the mainstream.

There were many people, though, who still liked the idea of yoga as a form of exercise, and who were looking for a style of practice that would give them a good workout without requiring them to perform advanced contortions or learn how to chant in Sanskrit. The answer came in the late 1980's, when **Beryl Bender Birch** and **Bryan Kest**, who had both been students of Pattabhi Jois, developed **Power Yoga**, a vigorous style of practice that involved a mix of flowing, creative sequences, as well as long, static-holds, and that could be set to music or done in silence, depending on the preference of the teacher.

The loose structure of Power Yoga also gave individual instructors free rein to sprinkle in as much or as little yogic philosophy as they saw fit. This enabled many teachers to create their own 'flavor' of practice, and the more flavors emerged the wider Power Yoga's audience grew—and grew and grew and grew, not only throughout the United States, but also Europe, Asia, Australia, even parts of South America and Africa—until within just a few years it had become one of the most—if not *the* most—widely practiced style of yoga in the world.

The emergence of Power Yoga is significant for several reasons, not the least of which is that it marked the beginning of a transition away from a lineage-based system, where every teacher typically learned from a single master of a given style, to what is increasingly referred to as the **'post-lineage' era**, in which teachers commonly study multiple styles of yoga with a variety of different teachers, and often go on to create hybrid styles of their own that incorporate elements from different lineages and/or schools. Many teachers even began incorporating elements from different movement modalities altogether, such as Pilates, interval training, gymnastics, aerobics, even Martial Arts. This has made it common for yoga studios and gyms to offer hybrid 'yoga-lates' and 'cardio-sculpt' classes, among others.

By the same token, Power Yoga made it much easier for people to become yoga teachers. With studios beginning to pop up in cities all over the world, and teacher training programs often factoring heavily into their bottom line, students no longer had to travel all the way to India to study for years with an established guru. They could simply sign up for a teacher training at their local studio, study with whichever instructor or instructors happened to be leading it, and become certified to teach yoga in as little as ten to twelve weeks. Many reasonably argue that this is nowhere near enough time for most students to learn how to teach yoga safely and effectively. And indeed, between 2001 and 2014, the National Institute of Health in the United States reported almost 30,000 yoga-related injuries seen in hospital emergency rooms, with the number of injuries increasing each year in that span. Of course, given that there were an estimated 21 million people practicing yoga in the U.S. by 2010, 30,000 could seem like a relatively small number (it's less than one per-cent). But given that yoga injuries were so rare that official records of them weren't even kept before the year 2000, it seems fair to say that one of the consequences of Power Yoga was a rise in people hurting themselves while practicing yoga.

At the same time, due largely to its rapidly expanding popularity, many scientists, doctors and researchers at various leading universities, medical schools and health institutes began conducting a variety of studies to try to understand what effect—other than occasional injury—yoga had on the mind and body. And while there is always room for further investigation, the studies that were done then and that have been done since all seem to show almost unequivocally that certain forms of Modern Postural Yoga, when practiced regularly and with proper effort, attention and guidance, provide a wide range of health benefits, including:

- Stress reduction
- Reduced risk of heart disease

- Increased cognitive function
- Reduced blood pressure
- Reduced risk of hypertension
- Relief of chronic pain
- Improved bone density and muscle longevity
- Improved immune system functionality
- Improved sleep
- Improved sexual function
- Effective management of depression and anxiety
- Effective management of ADD and ADHD
- Improved overall health, sense of well-being and quality of life

Essentially, the more information that came out about yoga, the more popular it continued to become. Everyone from doctors and physical therapists to sports psychologists, health journals and international newspapers were all encouraging people to practice yoga.

And practice they did—in droves. Most estimates indicate that between 2010-2019, the number of people practicing yoga in the United States alone increased by roughly one million per year. Meanwhile, populations in Europe, Asia, Australia, and parts of The Middle East, Africa and South America all saw similar increases.

Among the many consequences of this dramatic rise in popularity was that it helped facilitate the emergence of even more new schools and styles of Modern Postural Yoga, including Vinyasa Flow, Rocket, Primal, Anusara, and Hot Yoga, to name just a few. And while most of the new schools were *hatha*-based derivations of Power Yoga, other styles and branches of yoga, such as Kundalini, Bhakti and *nada,* the yoga of sound healing, all began to grow in popularity, as well, as did various meditation techniques, almost all of which are a form of *raja* yoga.

On the one hand, this growth and exposure had the effect of helping more people find a style of practice and/or a teacher that resonated with them, and that helped them to experience at least some of the benefits yoga had been shown to provide. On the other hand, with so many teachers teaching so many different styles from so many different perspectives and lineages, it became not at all uncommon for the yoga that was being taught in one studio to be completely different from—and sometimes even at odds with—the yoga that was being taught in another. And with yoga becoming so popular, it wasn't long before people began coupling it with a variety of activities and events that traditionally had no association with yoga whatsoever—everything from goat yoga and stand-up paddle board yoga to beer yoga, wine yoga, even cannabis yoga. This lack of cohesion and mixed messaging led to a fair amount of confusion among many people as to what it actually means to practice yoga.

At the same time, a new and extremely powerful force that was also exploding in popularity all around the world began to have a significant influence on how yoga was practiced, taught and perceived—namely, social media. By allowing virtually anyone

anywhere to post pictures and videos of themselves performing yoga postures, social media had the dual effect of helping yoga to flourish even more than it already had, while at the same time causing it in many ways to become even more deeply misunderstood than it already was.

For many, social media provided a new and exciting way of connecting with and learning from a global community of kindred spirits, and for some people it offered a form of inspiration that motivated them to begin a practice. At the same time, the visual emphasis on the physical aspects of the practice caused many others to think (or continue thinking) of yoga as 'just another form of exercise' or 'contortion'. The seemingly endless barrage of often-highly-polished images featuring young, strong, thin, hyper-flexible and predominantly Caucasian bodies demonstrating postures that most other bodies are not capable of left many people with the impression that yoga was simply not for them—an impression that was reinforced by the many marketing campaigns from various 'yoga apparel' companies that were becoming increasingly ubiquitous, and that featured similar bodies in similar expressions of extreme strength and flexibility.

Furthermore, because of the relatively low bar to becoming a teacher, many students continued to be taught in ways that were either unsafe or ineffective, or both, and at least partly because of this yoga injuries continued to rise while various health maladies that yoga was in theory supposed to help with continued to persist. On top of that, due to a rise in questionable health claims and unverified teachings promoted by social media influencers, as well as an inordinate number of sexual and financial scandals involving some of modern yoga's most prominent teachers, by 2019, even though it was at a peak of popularity, many people had begun to grow weary of yoga culture, and wary of the movement that surrounded it.

But if yoga had proven itself to be anything over the last 2,500-plus years, it had proven itself to be resilient, and perhaps one of the greatest testaments to this came in 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite causing virtually every yoga studio in the world to close down, in many cases permanently, people did not stop practicing. Quite the opposite, in fact. With economies struggling, global tensions rising and good health—mental, physical, emotional and spiritual—in ever-greater demand, more and more people turned to yoga. According to most estimates, in the years 2020 and 2021, an average of two million more people per year either began or re-initiated a yoga practice in the United States alone, with similar increases in many other countries.

For the vast majority of these people, their only option during the pandemic was to practice online, either with live-streaming or pre-recorded classes. And though many who might be considered 'traditionalists' expressed (and continue to express) disapproval of this way of teaching, claiming that the only true way to teach yoga is in person, many others have found great potential in modern technology, which unlike TV allows teachers to see the people they're instructing, and which as a consequence has enabled teachers and students all over the world to connect with and learn from each other about the ever-evolving tradition that is yoga.

Likewise, while many people lament what they consider the over-commercialization, Westernization and 'watering-down' of yoga, many others see great value in some of the advances that have come as a result of all the changes that have taken place in the modern era. And perhaps both sides have a case. It is true, for example, that the general lack of attention typically paid in Modern Postural Yoga to classical yogic philosophy deprives students of something essential to the practice—almost like teaching people to play basketball without letting them know about dribbling. It is also true, however, that were it not for the increased popularity brought on by the 'watered-down' styles, we would likely not understand as much as we do about how yogic postures and breathing techniques work on a scientific level, nor would we be as clear about how and why yoga provides the benefits it provides—or at least has the potential to provide when taught and practiced properly.

As the dust continues to settle on decades of explosive growth, evolution and controversy, the yoga world finds itself at a crossroads, struggling to balance reverence for its roots with the realities of a rapidly changing, digitized and globalized world.

All of which begs the question: Where will yoga go from here? Of course, only time will tell. But if history is any indicator, there will likely be many more ups and downs and changes to come as yoga continues to evolve and adapt to meet the needs of the people who practice it, and the societies in which it's practiced.

Indeed, in the wake of the Covid pandemic, there has already been a slight shift away from some of the more aggressive forms of Power Yoga to the more relaxing practices such as Restorative and **yin yoga**, a very slow, gentle style that first emerged in the late 1980's as a hybrid form of yoga and martial arts, and which has grown tremendously in popularity in the last few years.

Also, as more research is done and more information becomes available, more and more teachers are becoming better educated, not only about the history and philosophy of yoga, but also about how and why yoga works on a scientific level. This, in turn, has led to more emphasis being placed on these topics in yoga teacher trainings, and more awareness in general among the global yoga community of the importance of understanding these subjects.

On top of that, some teachers of Modern Postural Yoga have even begun incorporating techniques from more recent mindful-movement-based modalities like **Functional Range Conditioning** (FRC) and **Kinstretch.** These practices focus on joint health and mobility and were developed at least in part to help yogis recover from injuries and/or imbalances caused by their own practice. Perhaps one day the techniques of these and other modalities may come to be thought of as their own forms of yoga—or rather, as essential components of a well-rounded and effective yoga practice. Again, only time will tell.

Last but far from least, as a result of the many scandals and stories that have emerged in recent years about various *gurus* who were once put on pedestals, but who have

since been revealed to be flawed humans who in many cases acted less than ethically, and who in some cases harmed some of their students, there has been a greater awareness among many teachers and students alike of the importance of ethics among yoga professionals. Of course, no one is perfect, but with greater awareness of the potential damage, both to individual students and communities, as well as to the reputation of yoga as a whole, many teachers have begun making efforts to avoid making the same mistakes as their predecessors.

All of that said, as the world continues transitioning to life in the post-Covid era, there has been a slight decline reported in the number of people practicing yoga, even as many studios have reopened, or opened for the first time. But yoga still remains a powerful force in the world. No doubt this is due at least in part to the fact that it's become a multi-billion dollar business, which has given many people a vested interest in its continued growth and success. But more than likely, yoga remains widely practiced because it has helped millions upon millions of people over many generations to feel better in their minds and bodies, and to live happier, healthier, more satisfying lives.

Just as no one knows where yoga ultimately came from, no one knows what will come of it, either. One thing is certain, though: The fate of yoga, for better and worse, has always been in the hands of those who practice and teach it.

As the tradition continues to evolve through new trends, scientific research and shifting cultural landscapes, it is important for teachers and practitioners alike to understand and remember that beneath yoga's myriad styles, beneath its commerce and controversies, lies an enduring essence—a practice that has always been rooted in cultivating awareness within one's self through interaction with the material world. Whether practiced as dynamic movement, quiet meditation, selfless service or spiritual study, yoga invites people to look beyond surface appearances to discover a deeper path toward greater clarity, peace and freedom.

No matter what forms yoga takes in the future, so long as teachers and practitioners continually recommit themselves to these core values—and honor its rich lineage with humility and sincerity—yoga will remain what it always has been at its heart: a profound and transformative practice for all who embrace it.

A Note on Yoga and Religion

"Yoga itself is not a religion, but when practiced in the right spirit,
it may gradually align the practitioner with those eternal principles
on which all true religion rests."

—Alistair Shearer, "The Story of Yoga"

Many people often wonder whether yoga is a religion. Given that many yogic practices touch on themes of personal transformation and spiritual insight, this is a reasonable question. However, the general consensus is that yoga is not a religion.

Though it does share certain similarities with many religions—such as moral guidelines, ritualized practices, as well as an emphasis on inner development and faith—yoga does not require belief in, or involve the worship of any God or gods. And though it does recognize and honor the contributions of a variety of revered sages, yoga does not call for their worship either.

It is true that yoga emerged within a primarily Hindu cultural setting, and as mentioned in the previous section, its early development was influenced by Buddhist and Jain philosophies, as well. But yoga is not a part of those or any other religions.

Historically, yoga has been practiced by people of all faiths, as well as by people who do not subscribe to any particular faith at all. It is generally considered as a mind-body practice with spiritual roots that supports all faiths without requiring allegiance to any.

It is important to note, however, that while many forms of modern yoga highlight this universal, secular accessibility, classical yogic philosophy was very much based on and does indeed call for the belief in God—or at least something that might be called God—as we will discuss in the next section.

The Cornerstones of Yogic Philosophy

"Yoga is a continuum of theory and practice."

—Georg Feuerstein

Given how far yoga has grown from its roots, people often wonder if the classical teachings are even relevant to the modern practice anymore—and if so, how. The answer, as with many question about yoga, is… it depends.

In many ways, the concepts that form the philosophical foundations of classical yoga are like tools. They're meant to help solve problems. Depending on the kind of problem a person has, certain tools are likely to be more helpful than others. Other tools may have very limited applications, or be difficult to use, or both. But the more tools a person has in their toolkit, and the more they know how to use them—in both traditional and creative ways—the more problems they are likely to be able to solve.

For teachers of yoga, cultivating an understanding of the philosophical concepts that yoga is built on, and learning to put those concepts into practice, can be of enormous benefit, both to the teachers themselves, as well as to their students.

That said, the study of yoga philosophy presents a variety of challenges. For one, the texts that contain its foundational tenets are ancient, and many of the concepts the tenets are based on are foreign to the majority of people in the modern world. On top of that, most of the texts are written in Sanskrit, which, due to complex grammar, a large number of words with no direct equivalent in other languages and many nuanced meanings that depend on context, is a notoriously difficult language to translate.

To make matters even more complicated, very little is known about the authors of any of the classical yoga texts. This not only adds to the difficulty in translating and understanding their exact meaning, it also makes it all but impossible to know exactly when or why the texts were written in the first place.

Considering all this, and considering the tendency of different people to see from different perspectives and draw different conclusions based on the same evidence, it is hardly surprising that the subject of yoga philosophy is one about which there remains a certain amount of debate. In some cases, a considerable amount.

Among yoga scholars and historians, however, there is a general consensus about what might be called "the cornerstones of yogic philosophy" — the concepts and principles that form the foundation upon which modern yoga was built.

It is worth noting that one need not believe in any of the cornerstones in order to practice yoga effectively. They are ultimately only ideas and philosophical constructs that

seem to have arisen out of a desire to experience the highest state a human can experience, and to help others do the same.

As the renowned yoga scholar and teacher, Georg Feuerstein, says: "The only belief required to practice yoga is the belief that we can grow beyond our present circumstances." Depending on the practitioner, this may involve getting stronger and/or more flexible, becoming more self-aware, healing a wound of some sort—whether physical, mental, emotional or psychological—becoming more at peace within one's self, or growing in any number of other ways a person might grow physically, mentally, emotionally and/or spiritually.

In other words, even though classical yoga seems to have been based on a set of ancient ideas and principles aimed at helping people achieve a somewhat mysterious state often referred to as 'enlightenment' or 'oneness', the practice has long since evolved to become something that's meant to help support a person's growth and development on every level, and the ways it can work vary widely depending on the needs, circumstances and character of each individual practitioner.

All of that said, the first cornerstone of yoga is that it was conceived as a liberation teaching—that is, a teaching that seeks to liberate people from internal suffering by helping them understand and connect with their true nature. In many ways, the very notion of yoga was based on two foundational principles:

1. That most people live with an unconscious habit of perceiving themselves as a limited body-mind; and,

2. That this limited understanding of the Self is the root cause of all human suffering—everything from anxiety and depression to insecurity, frustration, confusion, anger and a variety of other mental and emotional afflictions.

As a liberation teaching, the practice of yoga is meant to help people not only perceive, but *experience* themselves as pure consciousness. Whether through meditation, ethical living, acts of service, philosophical inquiry and/or physical movement, it is the promise of yoga that through skillful practice we can learn to realize ourselves as inherently and inwardly free, and that as a result we can live more peacefully, with a greater sense of meaning, fulfillment and well-being.

From this primary cornerstone, the foundation of yogic philosophy expands in essentially two different directions. On one side is the path as laid out by the *Bhagavad Gita***,** on the other is the path as laid out in the *Yoga Sutras.* Both texts contain deep, multifaceted teachings that have inspired centuries of practice. And while certain concepts are common to both texts, they are presented in very different ways.

Rather than a comprehensive analysis, which is beyond the scope of this study guide, the following section is meant to offer an overview of the key concepts of each text, and highlight their relevance to the modern practice.

The Bhagavad Gita

On one hand, the *Bhagavad* Gita is widely considered a classic of world literature. Underneath its narrative structure and poetic language, however, it is essentially a manual for navigating the human experience. The aim of the text is nothing less than to help people free themselves from whatever fears, doubts, habits, attachments, aversions, insecurities and/or misapprehensions that cause them to suffer in one way or another.

At the core of the *Gita* is the notion that the human soul is both immortal and divine, that though our bodies may live and die, our true Self remains, as Krishna tells Arjuna: "Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial." (verse II.20)

Central to the *Gita*'s teaching is the concept of ***maya***, the force of nature that causes us to perceive what is ultimately one reality as a world of innumerable separate things. Often misinterpreted as "the world of illusion," as if to suggest that material reality itself is an illusion, *maya* is more accurately understood as "the power of illusion" that causes us to misperceive reality—that is, to see and experience ourselves as separate from everyone and everything rather than as interconnected parts of a larger whole.

The premise of the *Gita* is that freedom from suffering lies in learning to overcome the power of *maya* and align both our thoughts and actions with the reality of our divine, interconnected nature.

The way to do this, it says, is through yoga, which the *Gita* describes as a practice for achieving awareness of the unity of life.

As mentioned previously, the *Gita* discusses four paths of yoga:

- ***Jñana yoga*** - The contemplative path of spiritual wisdom, meant to help people realize the true nature of the Self through study and knowledge;

- ***Karma yoga*** - The active path of selfless service, meant to help people free themselves from suffering by being of service to others;

- ***Raja yoga*** - The path of meditation, meant to help people realize their true nature by disciplining the mind in order to free it from delusion; and,

- ***Bhakti yoga*** - The path of devotion, meant to help people live an exalted life by surrendering the ego and cultivating a sense of loving devotion to the divine.

Though each path is distinct, and though Krishna tells Arjuna at different points that one path is better than another, he is ultimately clear that they are all interconnected and lead to the same goal of Self-realization:

"Still your mind in me, still your intellect in me, and without doubt you will be united with me forever. If you cannot still your mind in me, learn to do so through the regular practice of meditation. If you lack the will for such self-discipline, engage yourself in my work, for selfless

service can lead you at last to complete fulfillment. If you are unable to do even this, surrender yourself to me, disciplining yourself and renouncing the results of all your actions."

—Bhagavad Gita (12.8-11)

This comment from Krishna touches on one of the most important concepts in the *Gita*, that of ***nishkama karma***, or performing actions without selfish desire and without attachment to the outcome.

The word ***karma*** itself means "action" or "deed." Though commonly misunderstood by many people, especially in the west, as a belief in punishment for 'bad' deeds or reward for 'good' ones, it simply refers to the law of cause and effect.

The *Gita* teaches that our circumstances are created by the actions we take, and that the actions we take are determined—whether consciously or not—by the thoughts we have. It also teaches that selfish desires are the primary cause of actions that lead to suffering. For this reason, it encourages us to renounce our attachment to selfish desires and perform *nishkama karma*, i.e., action that does not lead to suffering and that aids in spiritual growth.

Dharma

Another concept central to the *Gita* is ***dharma***, which is commonly translated simply as "duty." But while this is not wrong, it only scratches the surface of the full meaning of the word.

Derived from the Sanskrit root *'dhr'*, meaning 'to hold' or 'to support', *dharma* refers both to the laws of nature that create the cosmic order, as well as to the moral responsibilities each individual bears to uphold that order.

A person's *dharma* is said to depend on their role in society, inherent nature and circumstances. For example, the *dharma* of a soldier is to protect, whereas the *dharma* of a farmer is to provide nourishment. Each role has its benefits, as well as its challenges.

Though some people may wish for the benefits of a given role, or try to turn away from the challenges of another, the theory of *dharma* holds that to deny one's duty will inevitably lead to suffering, both for the individual, as well as for society in general. For this reason, the *Gita* encourages people to act in accordance with their own personal *dharma* regardless of its challenges.

The *Gunas*

One more concept that is important to understanding, as well as implementing the teachings of the *Gita* is that of the ***gunas***. Often described as a "field of forces" or the "essential qualities of nature," the concept of the *gunas* is difficult to translate, as it is

unique to Sankhya philosophy and has no equivalent in English, or any other language for that matter.

The word *guna* means "strand", as in a thread or fiber that's woven with others to hold together some larger tapestry or net. Just as all colors are made up of some combination of the primary colors, Sankhya considers all physical phenomena—including our thoughts and emotions, even our personality—to be made up of some combination of the three *gunas,* which, loosely defined, are:

- ***Rajas*** - The quality of energy, passion or activity;
- ***Tamas*** - The quality of darkness, solidity, heaviness or inertia;
- ***Sattva*** - The quality of lightness, purity or harmony.

At any given moment, for any given phenomena, one of the *gunas* is always considered to be more predominant than the others, but that can always change. For example, a piece of steel is comprised predominately of *tamasic* energy—heavy, solid—whereas a rushing river is comprised mostly of *rajasic* energy—wild, chaotic—but if you add enough heat to the steel it will eventually start to liquefy and become more *rajasic*; and if you add enough cold to the river it will eventually freeze and become more *tamasic*. Or if you add enough heat to the river it will eventually vaporize and become more *sattvic.*

Similar with personality and behavior, someone under the influence of too much *rajas* may become greedy and reckless, whereas someone under the influence of too much *tamas* may become indifferent and careless. With proper guidance and effort, however, either person can become more *sattvic*, i.e., more calm, conscious and thoughtful.

It is often taught that the goal of yoga is to help us balance the *gunas* in our minds and bodies in order to become more *sattvic* in our attitudes and behavior. But while a *sattvic* state generally leads to more peace of mind and selfless action than a *tamasic* or *rajasic* one, the *Gita* teaches that the cause of selfish desire lies in our attachment to the influence of the *gunas*—even *sattva*—and that the path to liberation lies in learning to realize the Self as the unchanging observer of their ever-shifting fluctuations.

Shraddha

One final concept that is essential to understand and live the teachings of the *Gita:* ***shraddha.*** Commonly translated as "faith", its literal meaning is "that which is placed in the heart."

In essence, *shraddha* is the fuel that powers our existence. It is what causes us either to be kind, loving, generous and to fight for what we believe in no matter the consequences, or to be careless, arrogant, greedy and resigned in the face of adversity. As Eknath Easwaran writes in the introduction to his translation of the *Gita:*

"'Right shraddha'... is faith in spiritual laws, in the unity of life, the presence of divinity in every person, the essentially spiritual nature of the human being. 'Wrong shraddha' is not necessarily morally wrong, merely ignorant. It means believing that there is no more to life than physical existence, that the human being is only a biochemical entity, that happiness can be got by pursuing private interests and ignoring the rest of life."

Given the considerable power of *maya* to mask our true nature, as well as the equally formidable influence of the *gunas* to scatter and confuse our minds, 'right' *shraddha* is an indispensable ingredient to success in any practice of yoga, according to the *Gita.*

As for people who possess 'wrong' *shraddha,* the *Gita* is clear that *shraddha* is not fixed. It can change, and so long as people grow tired of suffering and remain open to letting their ways of thinking, believing and being evolve, it will.

Summary

The *Bhagavad Gita* is the first known text to present yoga as a way of life. By encouraging us to learn to see the divine in every living creature and to pay attention to the consequences of both our thoughts as well as our actions, it empowers us to live a purposeful life, to fulfill our duties selflessly, and to have faith in our practice.

The Yoga Sutras

Despite being roughly one-fifth the length of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Yoga Sutras* are in many ways a much denser text. They discuss a wide range of ideas and present a vast amount of information in relatively few words. This can make them difficult to comprehend when read from beginning to end. Taken in segments, however, they tend to become much more accessible.

At the core of the Sutras are the concepts of ***purusha****,* that which perceives, and ***prakriti****,* that which can be perceived. As mentioned previously, *purusha* refers to our consciousness, which is equated in yogic philosophy with our soul, while *prakriti* refers to all perceivable reality, including our mind, thoughts and feelings.

The *Yoga Sutras* are divided into four *padas*, which literally means "feet," but is commonly translated in relation to the Sutras as "chapters."

In the first *pada*, Patañjali discusses the concept of ***samadhi****,* a state of focused attention, or meditative absorption, in which the mind becomes so still and clear that the practitioner experiences *purusha* free from the influence of *prakriti*, and consequently experiences unity with what is often referred to as the divine or ultimate reality. *Samadhi* is a means of achieving this state, which is often referred to as enlightenment or oneness.

What *samadhi* looks like—or feels like—in practice is difficult to say. Some have suggested that it's the equivalent of the state some athletes describe as being "in the zone,"

or what a musician might experience when he or she becomes “one with their instrument.” Others have suggested that *samadhi* is ultimately a state of undistracted awareness that anyone can achieve simply by distinguishing *purusha* from *prakriti.*

Whatever the case, there can be no question that *samadhi* is an important concept in classical yoga philosophy. But while the exact meaning of the word is hard to know, the *Yoga Sutras* are more clear about how to achieve it.

After defining yoga in sutra I.2 as *citta vritti nirodhah,* i.e., “the ability to calm the fluctuations of the mind”, and listing the fluctuations as “cognition”, “misapprehension", “imagination”, "deep sleep” and “memory,” Patañjali then goes on to say in sutra I.12 that we can arrive at a state of yoga through ***abhyasa*** and ***vairagya.***

Abhyasa is commonly defined simply as “practice”, however this definition, while not wrong, is incomplete. *Abhaysa* refers to the *correct* practice for a given individual on a given day. This implies that there are multiple ways to practice yoga, and that different ways will be appropriate for different people on different days.

Likewise, the common definition of v*airagya* as “non-attachment” is also not wrong, but it is incomplete. Similar to the concept of *nishkama karma* in the *Bhagavad Gita*, *vairagya* refers to non-attachment from selfish desires.

It is important to understand that *vairagya* is not about suppression of feelings or unhealthy desires, nor is it about renunciation of the material world. Rather, it is about cultivating an attitude of impartiality toward the transient nature of all physical phenomena, including our thoughts and feelings. It is an inner quality meant to help people live a life of peace and contentment as a result of focusing on spiritual growth rather than getting caught up in the distractions of the material world and the ups and downs of everyday life.

Notably, the sutras assert that success in yoga requires both *abhyasa* and *vairagya.* This would seem to imply that neither practice without detachment, nor detachment without practice will suffice. And while it could be said that *vairagya* is a practice in and of itself, Patañjali goes on to list a variety of other practices in the first chapter that are meant to help the practitioner experience *samadhi.*

Ishvarapranidana

Sutra I.23 introduces the concept of ***Ishvarapranidana****,* which is commonly translated as “surrender to the divine” or “devotion to God.” Similar to the commonly accepted definitions of *abhyasa* and *vairagya,* however, while not wrong, per se, these definitions of *Ishvarapranidana* are incomplete. What does it mean in practice, after all, to surrender to the divine or to devote one’s self to God?

Considering that Patañjali devotes a full seven sutras to discussing *Ishvarapranidana* —far more than any other concept in the text—it is the consensus among virtually all yoga

scholars that this is one of the most important concepts in the *Yoga Sutras*. Given that, it seems reasonable to try to understand its meaning in a more practical sense.

As Alistair Shearer writes in *The Story of Yoga*: "*Ishvara* implies, above all, mastery. The other half of the compound, *pranidhana,* connotes devotion in the sense of 'application; endeavour; commitment to, or focusing the attention on, something', rather than the more usual emotional meaning of the word. In other words, the surrender brought about by the practice of *ishvarapranidhana* is not so much the cultivation of religious sentiment, but the progressive letting go of grosser levels of mental experience and a corresponding absorption into the depths of *samadhi,* the causal levels of the mind."

What this means, then, is that each practitioner must come to his or her own understanding of how to practice *Ishvarapranidana.* Depending on one's cultural and/or religious background, different people may find it useful to conceptualize *Ishvara* as a higher power, one's highest Self, the ultimate cause of creation, the power of nature, or something personal to them.

Given the many possibilities, different people may practice *Ishvarapranidana* either by praying, by chanting the sound of *om*, by practicing gratitude, by honoring the values in their moment-to-moment decision making that they believe support their highest potential, or simply by accepting reality as it is, among other possibilities.

Ultimately, what matters most is not how a person practices *Ishvarapranidana*, but whether or not that practice helps them advance toward a state of yoga. For most practitioners, the guidance of a skilled teacher in this domain is all but essential.

The *Antaraya*

Before listing any other practices, Patañjali seems to acknowledge that achieving *samadhi* through the practice of *Ishvarapranidana* alone is, at least for most people, easier said than done. In sutra I.30 he lists the ***antaraya***, the nine inner obstacles or disturbances that are likely to impede one's progress, or even derail it altogether. Depending on the translation, the obstacles are:

1. Illness
2. Apathy or mental dullness
3. Doubt
4. Carelessness or lack of foresight
5. Laziness
6. Lack of detachment or overindulgence
7. Misapprehension or delusion
8. Lack of perseverance
9. Inability to maintain focus

At the same time, Patañjali also seems to acknowledge that because of the often distracted and unreliable nature of our own minds, we may not always be aware of the

obstacles when they're acting on us. Accordingly, in Sutra I.31 he lists the four symptoms that indicate one or more of the obstacles are present. They are:

1. Pain, suffering or mental discomfort
2. Negative thinking or despair
3. Restlessness or the inability to be at ease in different body postures
4. Difficulty controlling one's breath

Essentially, with these two sutras (I.30-31), Patañjali seems to be saying that if we are experiencing any of the symptoms, we can be sure that our efforts to achieve a state of yoga are being hindered by one or more of the obstacles. And though he does not say it explicitly, he also seems to imply that as long as we have enough presence of mind to recognize the symptoms when they are present, we should then select an appropriate practice to help overcome their influence. Likewise, he seems to imply that practicing yoga helps to cultivate self-awareness, thus the more we practice the more attuned we inevitably become to both the symptoms, as well as the obstacles that cause them.

It is worth noting that sutra 1.31 is where Patañjali first mentions the concept of ***dukha***, or "suffering." Literally, "a bad axle hole," and thus conjuring the sense of a cart or a vehicle that's sort of hobbling along, *dukha* refers to any feelings of mental or emotional anguish that prevent us from being content and/or at peace within ourselves.

The opposite of *dukha* is ***sukha***, or "sweetness," though it is also translated as "ease", "bliss", "comfort", "joy" or "inner peace." It is generally considered that the purpose of yoga practice is to help us decrease *dukha* and increase *sukha.*

Ekagrata

After discussing the *antaraya* and their symptoms, Patañjali then goes on to list several other practices that may prove more effective for some people in achieving *samadhi* than *Ishvarapranidana.* The first is ***ekagrata,*** or single-pointed focus.

Though the *Yoga Sutras* do not use the actual term *ekagrata*, Patañjali refers to the concept in sutra I.32, which encourages the practice of fixing the mind on a single object in order to overcome the *antaraya.*

The notion of *ekagrata* is considered central not only to the *Yoga Sutras*, but to the practice of yoga in general. The idea of calming the mind by focusing it on an object—whether it be the breath, a mantra, an exercise, or quite literally anything else—is at the heart of virtually all schools and styles of yoga.

The *Brahmavihara*

Though he does not state it explicitly, Patañjali again seems to acknowledge that like *Ishvarapranidana, ekagrata* may also not work for everyone. For those who struggle to

surrender to the divine or focus their mind on a single object, he then offers third practice in sutra I.33, a set of four virtues known in Buddhism as the ***Brahmavihara.*** They are:

1. ***Maitri*** - Friendliness or loving-kindness
2. ***Karuna*** - Compassion
3. ***Mudita*** - Encouragement or appreciative joy
4. ***Upeksha*** - Impartiality

While some scholars do not consider the *Brahmavihara* to be a practice in the strictest sense of the word, they are without a doubt virtues that can be put into practice in every day life.

By making efforts to be friendly, to have compassion for those who are suffering, to encourage and delight in the success of others without envy or desire for personal gain, and to be non-judgmental toward the faults and imperfections of others, the *Brahmavihara* are meant to help the practitioner cultivate a sense of mental and emotional peace within through the cultivation of love and goodwill toward all.

Other Practices

In addition to *Ishvarapranidana, ekagrata* and the *Brahmavihara*, Patañjali lists several other practices in the first *pada* meant to help practitioners achieve *samadhi*. They include:

1. Breathing exercises with an emphasis on extended exhalations (sutra I.34)
2. Inquiry into the role of the senses (sutra I.35)
3. Focusing on the absence of pain and/or the nature of one's own soul (sutra I.36)
4. Focusing on having no desires at all and/or no objects of the senses, or depending on the translation, contemplating and/or seeking out the council of wise people who have overcome obstacles similar to our own (sutra I.37)
5. Inquiry into our dreams (sutra I.38)
6. Focusing the mind on any object of interest (sutra I.39)

The variety of ways in which different people might engage with these practices is virtually infinite. Most significant, though, is that they all emphasize mental over physical activity. Even the first one—breathing exercises with an emphasis on extended exhalations —is ultimately an exercise in concentration.

Whether it be *Ishvarapranidana, ekagrata,* the *Brahmavihara* or any of the other methods he mentions, Patañjali is clear that the ultimate goal of all yogic practices is to help the practitioner focus and calm the mind in order to distinguish *purusha* from *prakriti.*

According to most yoga scholars and historians, Patañjali's main premise, then, in the first *pada* of the Yoga Sutras can be summarized as:

- The more we practice in a way that aligns with the principles of *abhyasa* and *vairagya*, the more calm our minds will become;
- The calmer our minds become, the more clearly we are likely to perceive reality;
- The more clearly we perceive reality the more likely we are to experience *samadhi*, and thus realize our Self, our true nature, as pure consciousness.

Note that Patañjali does not guarantee that correct practice will lead to *samadhi,* only that it will make it more likely.

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The second *pada* of the *Yoga Sutras* focuses on the concept of ***sadhana.*** Literally, "a means of accomplishing something" or "a method for attaining a goal", *sadhana* refers to an individual's personal spiritual practice.

In this chapter, Patañjali presents the components of an effective yoga practice. Some scholars hold that he actually presents two different methods, or paths of practice, while others hold that he presents a variety of philosophical concepts as components of a single path. It is not clear which point of view is accurate.

Either way, the first concept Patañjali presents in sutra 2.1 is ***kriya yoga***, commonly translated as "the yoga of action" or "the path of action." It has three components:

1. ***Tapas*** - from the root 'tap' meaning 'to heat' or 'to burn', tapas refers to the idea of burning away impurities through the cultivation of discipline and focused effort. Sometimes referred to as "the fire of alchemical transformation", tapas conveys the idea of a burning desire to purify the mind, body and spirit in order to achieve Self-realization.

2. ***Svadhyaha*** - literally 'self-study', svadhaya consists of self-reflection through meditation, study of sacred texts—i.e., texts that are meant to help us see ourselves more clearly—or consultation with a qualified teacher.

3. ***Ishvarapranidana*** - "surrender to the divine" or "devotion to God", as previously noted.

Essentially, *kriya yoga* aims to help the practitioner reach *samadhi* through the cultivation of a healthy body and mind, the development of our capacity for self-examination, as well as the encouragement of both uplifted action and graceful acceptance of things that are beyond our control.

In sutra 2.2, Patañjali tells us that the practice of *kriya yoga* is meant to help weaken the ***kleshas****,* the obstacles to clear perception, also commonly referred to as the afflictions that plague the mind.

Then in sutra 2.3, he lists the five *kleshas.* Depending on the translation, they are:

1. ***Avidya*** - Ignorance or misapprehension
2. ***Asmita*** - Ego consciousness or confused values
3. ***Raga*** - Unhealthy or excessive attachment to pleasure
4. ***Dvesha*** - Unreasonable or unhealthy aversion to pain or discomfort
5. ***Abhinivesha*** - Insecurity, anxiety or fear of death

The next several sutras (2.4-10) go into more detail about each of the *kleshas*.

Avidya refers to the tendency most people have to identify themselves with their body, name, nationality, religion, political party, job title, etc. According to yogic philosophy, these things are all external to who and what we truly are, i.e. our true nature. This misidentification or lack of spiritual knowledge is *avidya.* It is considered the root cause of the other *kleshas.*

Asmita refers to the identification of the self with the activity of the mind, which tends to function ego-centrically. This can lead to various forms of suffering—from feelings of stress and/or emotional distress as a result of overthinking and/or believing ourselves to be correct about something when in fact we're wrong, to feelings of either inadequacy or superiority as a result of comparing ourselves with others, either physically, mentally or otherwise. According to yogic philosophy, whether we see ourselves as better or worse than someone else, ultimately we are seeing ourselves as separate from them, which fosters a sense of alienation that can often lead to feelings of loneliness, cynicism and despair.

Raga refers to the tendency to crave experiences that we believe will bring us happiness and/or pleasure. This can manifest in many forms—wanting to eat a certain food or consume a certain substance, wanting to possess a certain object or go on a certain trip, wanting to achieve a certain goal or have relations with a certain person or group of people, etc. According to yogic philosophy, it is not the desire for the experience that causes suffering. It is the belief that our happiness depends on it.

Dvesha is generally considered to be the opposite of *raga*. It refers to the tendency to want to avoid experiences that we believe will cause us suffering when in fact they are either benign or may even be good for us.

Abhinivesha has several meanings. In simplest terms, it is the fear of death. On a more subtle level, it refers to the fear of having our life upended, either by illness, the end of a relationship, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job or the disruption caused by a natural disaster, etc. In each case, *abhinivesha* is the feeling of anxiety that accompanies these fears. It is said to afflict even the wisest of people and is generally considered the hardest obstacle to overcome.

The *kleshas* are considered to be the root cause of all human suffering (*dukha*). According to yogic philosophy then, anytime a person is suffering it is ultimately because they are under the influence of one or more of the *kleshas.*

In sutra 2.11, Patañjali says that the way to overcome the influence of the *kleshas* is through ***dhyana***, or meditation. He goes into more detail about this later in the same chapter.

Sutras 2.12-15 have been interpreted in various ways by different translators, but the general consensus is that they discuss the concepts of *karma* and ***samskara***.

Karma has the same meaning in the *Yoga Sutras* as it does in the *Bhagavad Gita*, i.e. "action." Where the *Sutras* differ is in their suggestion that whether we experience the consequences of our own or someone else's actions as 'good' or 'bad' depends on our *samskaras,* or mental conditioning.

The word *samskara* means "impression." It refers to the imprints that various experiences leave in our minds. Unlike memories, *samskaras* are not the record of the events themselves, but rather the beliefs and subsequent behavior patterns that form as a result of different events.

For example, if someone has a series of bad relationships, they may come to the conclusion that love is painful and/or not worth pursuing, and as a result they may choose to remain single. For some people, this may lead to a sense of liberation and happiness, for others it may lead to feelings of loneliness and disappointment.

Samskaras can be positive or negative, meaning they can help us to grow and move toward our goals, or they can limit us and cause us to suffer. They can also be conscious or unconscious. Generally speaking, it is the negative, unconscious *samskaras* that tend to cause the most suffering. Because of this, it is often said that one of the primary goals of all authentic yoga practices is to help us become more aware of our *samskaras* and, if it's in our best interest, to replace negative ones with positive or benign ones.

Given this, one might loosely summarize sutras 2.12-15 as, "Our actions (*karma*) create impressions (*samskaras*). These impressions in turn influence our decisions—often unconsciously—which can either help us grow or lead us into patterns of suffering. Therefore, if we find ourselves suffering in any way, it is likely we've been conditioned to make choices that have lead to this outcome."

Patañjali then goes on in sutra 2.16 to say that pain which is likely to occur should be anticipated and avoided. This may seem like common sense, but for many, if not most people, it is easier said than done.

Every day all over the world, people of all ages and backgrounds make choices that lead to their own suffering. Whether it be consuming food or other substances that make them sick, engaging in toxic relationships, fretting about money or politics or any number of other possibilities, Patañjali seems to indicate here that it can, and perhaps should be a part of our yoga practice to pay close attention to the choices we have to make and the outcomes that are likely to occur, and to choose actions that have the highest probability of leading to the least amount of suffering.

In sutra 2.17, Patañjali asserts that the cause of actions that cause painful effects is ultimately the inability to distinguish what perceives (*purusha*) from what is perceived (*prakriti*).

He then goes on in sutras 2.18-20 to discuss the *gunas*. In a discourse that would seem to be influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita,* he talks about the difference between material reality, which he says is temporary and ever-changing, and consciousness, which he says is eternal and unchanging.

Then in sutras 2.21-23, he states that everything that can be perceived serves but one ultimate purpose: to help us clarify the distinction between *purusha* and *prakriti.*

This concept is central to the premise of the Yoga Sutras, the notion that everything —absolutely everything we can perceive, from the ground we walk on to the sky above us, from the words other people speak and the things that happen in the world to our bodies, thoughts, feelings and everything in between—all serves to remind us that what we are is the consciousness, the *purusha*, that perceives it all.

If we can do this, Patañjali tells us we will have achieved true freedom, or *samadhi.*

As for why it can be so difficult to succeed on this path, Patañjali states in sutra 2.24 that it is because of the accumulation of *avidya,* the ignorance of our true nature that clouds or minds and causes us to make choices and repeat actions that reinforce a limited sense of self and that lead to suffering of one form or another.

Sutra 2.25 specifically states that when *avidya* is eliminated, the link between the sea and the seen is severed.

Sutras 2.26--28 then go on to assert that the primary objective of our *sadhana* should be to seek clarity in terms of recognizing what perceives from what is being perceived. Patañjali states that the attainment of such clarity is a gradual process, but that it can be achieved through regular, correct practice and the use of ***viveka***, our capacity for discriminative discernment.

The Eight-Limbs of Yoga

The second half of *pada* two (sutras 2.29-55) focuses on the concept of ***ashtanga yoga***, the eight-limbs of yoga, also sometimes referred to as "the eight-limbed path." It is important to understand that the *ashtanga* of the Yoga Sutras is different than the physical practice of *Ashtanga yoga* that was established by Patthabi Jois in the late 1940's.

Though the physical practice of *Ashtanga Yoga* encourages the study of the eight limbs, the emphasis in that system is on the postures, whereas the eight-limbed path as listed in the *Yoga Sutras* places much more emphasis on ethical behavior and meditation.

Patañjali lists the eight limbs as:

1. ***Yama*** - Ethical disciplines or restraints
2. ***Niyama*** - Personal disciplines or restraints
3. ***Asana*** - Posture
4. ***Pranayama*** - Regulation of breath or expansion of consciousness
5. ***Pratyahara*** - Withdrawal of the senses
6. ***Dharana*** - Concentration
7. ***Dhyana*** - Meditation
8. ***Samadhi*** - Absorption or oneness

The next several sutras (2.30-45) go into further detail about the first two limbs.

Yama, often called "The Great Vow", is comprised of five principles, often referred to as "the yamas", which are meant to harmonize our relationships with other people. They are:

1. ***Ahimsa*** - Non-violence, often interpreted not only as "doing no harm" but also "wishing no harm", it is meant to help us overcome the tendency toward violence inherent in human nature.

2. ***Satya*** - Truthfulness, not only in our words, but also in our actions, it is meant to help us overcome the tendencies toward deception and self-delusion inherent in human nature.

3. ***Asteya*** - Non-stealing, also sometimes referred to as non-covetousness, it is meant to help us overcome the tendency toward greed.

4. ***Brahmacharya*** - Moderation, also sometimes translated as continence, it is meant to help us overcome the tendency to squander our creative potential.

5. ***Aparigraha*** - Abstention from unnecessary possessions, also sometimes referred to simply as non-attachment, it is meant to help us overcome the tendency to clutter our lives.

There is much debate about the exact meaning and appropriate application of the principles of *yama*. For example, many people believe that *ahimsa* means that in order to practice yoga, one must be vegetarian, since being a carnivore necessarily implies violence toward animals. Meanwhile, others believe that eating animals is not only healthy and part of the circle of life, but that for some people *not* eating animals amounts to self-harm, and that *ahimsa* therefore is meant to apply only to our interactions with other people.

Likewise, many people interpret *brahmacharya* to mean celibacy, while others accept a more literal translation. '*Brahma'* refers to the creative principle of the universe, and '*charya'* conveys a sense of "moving within." Taken together, then, *brahmacharya* means

"to move in accordance with the creative principle of the universe", which does not imply total celibacy, but rather proper use of our creative energies, of which sexuality is one.

As Desikachar says, "How we exhibit these qualities and how we strive for them depends inevitably on our social and cultural background, our religious beliefs, and our individual character and potential. But their representation in an individual is a reflection of the extent to which the obstacles (*kleshas*) in the mind are at work. How we behave toward others and our environment reveals our state of mind and our personalities."

Thus, how we interpret the principles of *yama* is up to each individual practitioner. Ultimately, the measure of whether or not we are applying them successfully can be determined by the quality of our relationships with other people. If we are on good terms with a wide variety of people, chances our we are interpreting and applying the principles in a useful way. If not, there's a good chance are we have room for improvement in our practice.

Similar to *yama, niyama* is also comprised of five principles, often referred to as "the *niyamas."* Rather than other people, though, *niyama* is meant to help us harmonize our relationship with ourselves. The principles are:

1. ***Saucha*** - Cleanliness or purity.

2. ***Santosha*** - Contentment.

3. ***Tapas*** - Discipline, as previously noted.

4. ***Svadhyaya*** - Self-study, as previously noted.

5. ***Isvarapranidana*** - Surrender or devotion to God, as previously noted.

The first principle, *saucha*, is meant to encourage cleanliness not only of our body and personal environment, but also purity of our mind. This means that cleaning out a cluttered closet, or simply taking a bath when we're in need of one, can be considered just as much a practice of yoga as performing postures or doing a seated meditation.

The second principle, *santosha*, is meant to encourage the cultivation of the ability to be at peace with what we have, as well as what we don't have. It does not, however, encourage complacency. Central to the practice of yoga is the notion of working diligently toward Self-realization while at the same time not attaching to the results. In other words, finding satisfaction in the process rather than the outcome.

As for why the last three principles of *niyama* are the same as the three elements of *kriya yoga,* and whether there is any difference in their meaning in the two cases, are questions that do not seem to have clear answers. The general consensus is that they are thought to have the same meaning, and that they are repeated to emphasize their importance to all practices and paths of yoga.

Pratipaksha Bhavananam

Sutra 2.33 introduces the concept of ***pratipaksha bhavanam***, which is commonly translated either as "cultivating the opposite" or "contemplating the consequences." In this sutra Patañjali seems to be saying not *if* but *when* negative thoughts arise—in the form of violence, anger, greed, lust or anything that might otherwise lead to suffering of one form or another—we should use our faculties of awareness and discernment either to consciously cultivate more benign or positive mental states, or reflect on the possible outcomes of actions inspired by the tendencies *yama* and *niyama* are meant to help us overcome.

Though it is not one of the eight limbs, *pratipaksha bhavanam* is a practice meant to help support our efforts to uphold *yama* and *niyama* in our daily lives, and thus advance toward a state of yoga.

Asana

Sutras 2.46-48 discuss the third limb of yoga, ***asana***, which is commonly translated as "posture" or "yoga pose". But there is much debate as to what exactly Patañjali was referring to with this limb.

Though we can be reasonably assured that the vast array of yoga postures practiced today did not exist at the time the *Yoga Sutras* were written, we cannot be sure that none of them existed. Some scholars hold that a small number of postures probably did exist, but because the *Yoga Sutras* focus on *raja yoga*, the yoga of meditation, as opposed to *hatha yoga*, the yoga of physical practices, that Patañjali chose not to go into much detail about the practice of *asana.* Meanwhile, other scholars hold that the only postures that existed in Patañjali's time were basic seated postures for meditation, and therefore that this is what he was referring to.

The literal meaning of *asana* is "seat" or "sitting down". It is thought to have been derived from the Sanskrit root *'as'*, meaning "to be". Because of this, many scholars believe that the word originally referred to a seated posture in which a practitioner focuses on being, as opposed to doing.

Whether he was referring only to basic seated postures for meditation, or other postures, Patañjali devoted only three sutras to the subject of *asana.* Depending on the translation, he says:

- That *asana* should strikes a balance between effort and ease, or with a quality of both both steadiness and sweetness (sutra 2.46);

- That perfection in *asana* is achieved when there is a relaxation of effort and the mind becomes absorbed in the infinite (sutra 2.47); and,

- That through the successful practice of *asana*, the practitioner will no longer be afflicted by the dualities of life, or will be free from the disturbance of external influences (sutra 2.48).

Pranayama

The next five sutras (2.49-53) discuss the fourth limb of yoga, ***pranayama.*** Like many other words in the *Yoga Sutras*, there is some debate as to the exact meaning of *pranayama.* Some scholars hold that it is a combination of ***prana****,* which refers to the universal life-force, the energy that pervades all things and that makes them what they are, and ***yama***, which means "restraint" or "discipline". Others hold that it is a combination of *prana* and ***ayama***, which means "expansion".

Depending on one's perspective then, *pranayama* can mean either "discipline or restraint of *prana*" or "expansion of *prana*". And because *prana* is considered to be contained in the breath, the word is commonly translated as "regulation of the breath" or "breathing exercises."

Whatever the exact meaning of the word, Patañjali is clear about several aspects of *pranayama*. He says:

- That *pranayama* consists of regulating the flow of breath, and that it can only be practiced once the practitioner is successfully established in *asana* (sutra 2.49);

- That breath is comprised of three components—inhalation, exhalation and retention—and that *pranayama* involves directing the mind into the regulation of these components (sutra 2.50);

- That a fourth type of *pranayama* occurs when the movements of the mind and consciousness cease and *prana* begins to move of its own volition (sutra 2.51);

- That mastery of *pranayama* removes the veil to clear perception and leads to illumination (sutra 2.52); and,

- That mastery of *pranayama* makes the mind fit for concentration.

Pratyahara

The last two sutras of the second *pada* (2.54-55) discuss the fifth limb of yoga, ***pratyahara***, or "withdrawal of the senses." This refers to the act of turning the attention inward toward the *purusha.* The result of this, says Patañjali, is mastery of the senses.

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The third *pada* of the *Yoga Sutras* focuses on the concept of ***siddhis.*** Sometimes referred to as "supernatural or mystic powers" or "special accomplishments", *siddhis* are

unusual abilities that a person may acquire as a result of a skillful practice. Patañjali is very clear, however, that *siddhis* are not the goal of yoga. In fact, as he explains toward the end of the chapter, there is a danger that practitioners can be seduced by them and consequently become distracted from the true goal of yoga, which is Self-realization, or freedom from the influence of the afflictions that disturb the mind. In this way, the third chapter serves as a warning, of sorts, about some of the perils and pitfalls on the path of yoga.

Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi

Before discussing the *siddhis*, however, the third chapter picks up where the second chapter left off. Sutras 3.1-3 go into a bit more detail about the last three limbs of the eight-limbed path. Depending on the translation, they say that:

- *Dharana*, or concentration, which is only possible after the senses have been mastered, is the fixing of the mind, or the binding of consciousness to a single point of focus (3.1);

- *Dhyana*, or meditation, is the steady flow of uninterrupted attention toward the single point of focus (3.2);

- *Samadhi*, union or absorption, occurs when the meditator becomes so immersed in the object of meditation that no separation is perceived between them (3.3).

Samyama

In sutra 3.4, Patañjali introduces the concept of ***samyama***, when the processes of *dharana, dhyana* and *samadhi* are applied to different objects of meditation. It's important to understand that *samyama* is not a separate state of consciousness, but rather a method: the disciplined application of concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*) and absorption (*samadhi*) on a single object, idea or activity.

According to the *Yoga Sutras*, it is through this process of *samyama* that we develop insight, awareness, and also *siddhis.*

Patañjali's explanation for how exactly this process works is somewhat esoteric, but essentially he says that by cultivating our capacity for *ekagrata*, or single-pointed focus, we gradually begin to understand the changing nature of the mind, and through this understanding, we begin to grasp the changing-yet-constant nature of all material reality.

An example that is sometimes given is that of a clay pot. At one point, the pot was soft clay. Then through a process of shaping and baking, it became hardened. And at some point it will crumble and turn to dust. But through it all, certain essential properties of the raw material never change.

A central premise of the *Yoga Sutras* is that the more we understand the relationship between that which changes and that which remains unchanged, the more we develop the

ability to overwrite the negative mental imprints (*samskaras*) that cause us to perpetuate our own suffering. Consequently, the more control we learn to cultivate of our minds, the more clearly we allow our consciousness (*purusha*) to perceive, and the more clearly we perceive, the more unusual abilities (*siddhis*) we develop.

Though it is beyond the scope of this study guide to list all of the *siddhis* Patañjali mentions, a few examples are:

- *Samyama* on the process of change leads to knowledge of the past and future (sutra 3.16)
- *Samyama* on the distinction between word, meaning and idea leads to the ability to understand foreign languages (sutra 3.17)
- *Samyama* on karma leads to knowledge of one's own death (sutra 3.22)
- *Samyama* on the sun leads to knowledge of the planetary system and cosmic regions (sutra 3.26)
- *Samyama* on the navel leads to knowledge of the internal organs and their dispositions (sutra 3.29)

Many of the *siddhis* can seem far-fetched or confusing from a modern perspective, but when considered in the context of the time they were written, they often make more sense. For example, the idea that concentrating on one's navel can lead to knowledge of the internal organs might seem hard to fathom. But given what modern science has since come to understand about the link between the breath and the nervous system—a term that didn't exist in Patañjali's day—as well as the link between the nervous system and the internal organs, it is entirely possible that this sutra was Patañjali's way of explaining a phenomenon that modern science has since confirmed.

Also, certain *siddhis* may not seem all that impressive to modern ways of thinking, but when considered in the context of the time they were written, they tend to invite deeper reflection. For example, "knowledge of the planetary system and cosmic regions" may seem somewhat mundane given the easy access most people have to modern science. But considering the sutras were written more than 1,000 years before Copernicus or Galileo ever walked the Earth, it is not hard to understand why they continue to intrigue scholars to this day.

Whether or not the *siddhis* make sense to us today, as far as Modern Postural Yoga is concerned, the important thing to understand is that the practice of postures is a form of *samyama* in and of itself. By focusing the attention on the act of linking breath with movement and feeling deeply into the body, we are engaging in a process of single-pointed focus that holds the potential for a variety of abilities that are becoming increasingly unusual in the modern world: Good physical and mental health, low stress, a positive outlook, emotional stability and peace of mind, to name a few.

But as Patañjali reminds us in the final sutras of this chapter, the attainment of such abilities can breed arrogance and thus become a distraction from the actual goal of Self-realization. On that note, he closes the third *pada* with an encouragement to remain non-attached to the *siddhis* and focused on the ultimate goal of yoga, i.e. inner freedom.

••••••••

The fourth and final chapter of the *Yoga Sutras* focuses on the concept of ***kaivalya***, or absolute freedom. It is generally considered the most complex of the four *padas,* and is consequently the most difficult to understand. There are a variety of interpretations, both as to the specifics of many of the individual sutras, as well as to the overall message of the chapter as a whole.

That said, it is widely agreed that the *Sutras* consider *kaivalya* to be the ultimate goal of yoga. Often translated as "isolation", *kaivalya* refers not to solitude in the social sense, but rather to a profound state of inner freedom—freedom from the fluctuations of the mind, the misidentification with the ego or body, as well as the influence of the senses. It is an abiding state of pure awareness in which the *purusha* recognizes itself as distinct from *prakriti.*

Unlike the previous chapters, which honed in on the tools and obstacles to practice, the fourth *pada* zooms out to describe what happens when those tools have been implemented properly and the obstacles removed. The emphasis shifts from effort to divine revelation. As sutra 4.3 says:

"The cause of creation does not cause nature's potential to manifest, but rather only helps to remove the obstacles to its evolution, just as a farmer pierces the barriers between his fields in order to allow water to flow where it is needed."

Essentially what this sutra is saying is that there is an ultimate cause of creation, and though scholars debate what exactly Patañjali considers that cause to be, they generally agree that he's saying that cause is not responsible for the way events unfold. It merely sets things in motion, and leaves the rest to us.

As far as the practice of yoga is concerned, this means that we all have a potential, individually and collectively, and though we cannot force our highest potential to manifest, we can remove any obstacles to its realization, and thus create the conditions for it to express itself fully, just as a farmer cannot make his or her crops grow, but can remove any impediments that might prevent them from receiving the proper water and light in order to give them the best chance to flourish.

In many ways, this one sutra seems to contain the essence of what the fourth *pada* is all about—how *kaivalya* ultimately emerges not by force, but by removing whatever stands in the way of our spiritual growth. Because of the complexity of many of the sutras, however, as well as the difficulty in translating certain words and concepts, interpretations

vary. Some commentators hold that the fourth *pada* is ultimately about the things that become possible for yogis who have learned to control their minds, while others interpret it as guidance for how yogis, having realized the Self, might be of service in the world.

Whatever Patañjali's true intention, there is no doubt that the fourth *pada* presents further discussion of many of the concepts from the previous three chapters. For example, where the first *pada* discusses the mind (*citta*) and its fluctuations (*vrittis*), the fourth *pada* clarifies that the mind is neither the true self nor the source of consciousness, but rather a tool meant to help reflect *purusha*'s light. When purified, the mind serves as a mirror for *purusha,* but when clouded by *samskaras* it distorts reality.

Patañjali even suggests in sutra IV.4 that a single consciousness may produce multiple minds, each with their own ego, *karma* and *samskaras*. This points toward the philosophical notion that individuality itself is an illusion sustained by memory and perception, not essence.

Furthermore, where the second *pada* introduces the concepts of *karma* and *samskara*, the fourth *pada* offers a more in depth discussion of how *karma* creates conditioned tendencies stored in the unconscious, and how *kaivalya* happens when we cease to identify with these patterns.

Finally, where the third *pada* explained *siddhis* as byproducts of *samyama*, the fourth *pada* offers further clarification that some *siddhis* are innate or karmically inherited while others arise through the use of herbs or *mantras*, but none should be confused with *kaivalya*. In fact, they can be an obstacle to it.

In the end, the fourth *pada* offers a kind of spiritual epilogue. It reminds us that yoga is not about adding powers or distinguishing ourselves as different than others, but rather uncovering our true essence. Even as we approach *kaivalya*, the fourth *pada* encourages continued practice, not to gain more, but to let go of subtle clinging. It affirms that true freedom is not something we acquire, but something we recognize once the veils have been lifted; something we experience not by escaping reality, but in finally seeing it clearly.

Human Anatomy & Physiology in the Practice of Modern Postural Yoga

"The human body is the most complex system ever created.
The more we learn about it, the more appreciation
we have about what a rich system it is."

—Bill Gates

The practice of Modern Postural Yoga aims to help practitioners achieve an abiding state of both physical and mental well-being through a process of mindful movement and intentional exploration of the human mind-body connection. Though the classical aims of inner freedom, Self-realization, *samadhi* and/or *kaivalya* are generally not considered to be the primary goals of Modern Postural Yoga, they are possible outcomes, depending on the way the practice is taught.

When practiced properly, Modern Postural Yoga has been shown to provide a wide variety of benefits, including:

- Mental calm/reduced stress
- Improved functional movement
- Increased strength and flexibility
- Reduced risk of cardiovascular disease
- Reduced cholesterol
- Reduced risk of heart disease
- Reduced inflammation
- Easing of chronic pain
- Effective management of anxiety and depression
- Effective management of PTSD
- Effective management of asthma
- Improved cognitive function
- Improved immune function
- Improved digestion
- Improved quality of sleep
- Improved bone density
- Improved sexual function
- Higher reported overall quality of life

When practiced improperly, however, Modern Postural Yoga can lead to physical injury and/or mental distress. But while at least some, if not most of the responsibility for this lies with the individual practitioner, generally speaking the more knowledgeable and experienced an instructor, the less likely students are to injure themselves or experience adverse consequences, and the more likely they are to experience benefits.

Given the emphasis of Modern Postural Yoga on physical movement, it only stands to reason that the more teachers understand about how the human body functions on a musculoskeletal level, the more competently and effectively they will be able to guide their students in their practice.

Human Anatomy 101

The underlying structure of the human body is the **skeleton**, which is made of **bones**. The bones of the skeleton are held together by **ligaments**, as well as **muscles** and **tendons**. In general, ligaments connect bones to other bones, and tendons connect muscles to bones. In many parts of the body, the muscles, tendons, ligaments and bones are all encased in an additional layer of connective tissue called **fascia.**

{Diagrams of skeleton showing major bones and muscles, front and back, as well as inserts of key terms}

Joints and Ranges of Motion

The place where two or more bones come together is called a **joint**. lf not for joints, human beings would barely be able to move. In fact, without joints it would be difficult to live at all, as breathing itself would not be possible without the various joints that allow the ribcage to expand and contract.

There are three types of joints in the human body:

1. **Fixed:** Also known as fibrous or synarthroses joints. These are joints that do not move. An example is the joints between the plates of the skull.

{diagram}

2. **Slightly Moveable:** Also known as cartilaginous or amphiarthroses joints. These are joints that offer limited movement, for example the joints between the vertebrae of the spine.

{diagram}

3. **Freely Moveable:** Also known as synovial or diarthroses joints. These joints contain synovial fluid, which enables the bones and ligaments that make up the joint to move smoothly. They are the most prevalent joints in the human body. Examples are the shoulders, hips, knees and elbows.

{diagram}

While there is only one type of both fixed and slightly moveable joints, there are six types of freely moveable joints:

1. **Ball and Socket:** This type of joint allows for movement in all directions. It consists of a rounded head of one bone that sits in the cup of another bone or set of bones. Examples are the hip and shoulder joints.

{diagram}

2. **Hinge:** This type of joint works similar to hinge on a door, allowing for movement in one primary plane. Examples include the knee and elbow joints, however it should be noted that the knee is also capable of a small degree of rotation when it is flexed.

{diagram}

3. **Condyloid:** Also called an ellipsoidal joint, this type of joint allows angular movement in two axes. An example is the wrist joint.

{diagram}

4. **Pivot:** Also called a rotary or trochoid joint, this type of joint allows one bone to swivel around another. An example is the joint between the radius and ulna that allow the forearm to rotate.

{diagram}

5. **Gliding:** Also called a plane joint, this type of joint is formed by two bones with flat or nearly flat surfaces. It allows for limited gliding movement in the same plane. An example is the facet joints of the spine.

{diagram}

6. **Saddle:** This type of joint allows movement back and forth and side to side. An example is the joint at the base of the thumb.

{diagram}

All moveable joints are capable of expressing what is considered a typical or normal range of motion. Some joints in some people are also capable of **hyperextension**, a condition that allows the joint to move beyond what is considered typical. In some cases, the ability to hyperextend can enable a practitioner to achieve certain postures more easily than for those whose joints exhibit typical ranges of motion, but it can also make it easier for the person to injure themselves if they are not careful.

Understanding the typical ranges of motion of the spine, shoulders, hips and wrists is of particular importance in the practice of Modern Postural Yoga. They are as follows:

Spine (Cervical)
Flexion: 80-90 degrees
Extension: ~70 degrees
Rotation: ~80 degrees
Lateral flexion (side bending): ~45 degrees

{Diagrams}

Spine (Thoracic)
Flexion: 20-50 degrees
Extension: 20-50 degrees
Rotation: 35-50 degrees
Lateral flexion (side bending): ~20-45 degrees

{Diagrams}

Spine (Lumbar)
Flexion: 35-55 degrees
Extension: 20-35 degrees
Rotation: 35-45 degrees
Lateral flexion (side bending): ~30 degrees

{diagrams)

Shoulders
Flexion (lifting the arm forward and up): 180 degrees
Abduction or Lateral Flexion (lifting the arm to the side): 150-180 degrees
Adduction (pulling the arm across the midline): 30-50 degrees
Extension (reaching the arm backwards): 45-60 degrees
Internal Rotation: 70-90 degrees
External Rotation: 70-90 degrees

{diagrams}

Hips
Flexion (lifting the leg forward): 80-120 degrees
Extension (pulling the leg backward): 30-40 degrees
Abduction (lifting the leg away from the midline): 20-40 degrees
Adduction (pulling the leg across the midline): ~20 degrees
Internal Rotation: 30-40 degrees
External Rotation: 50-90 degrees

{diagrams}

Wrists
Flexion (pulling the hand toward the underside of the forearm): ~60
Extension (pulling the hand toward the upper side of the forearm): ~60
Radial deviation (turning the hand inward): ~20 degrees
Ulnar deviation (turning the hand outward): 20-30 degrees

{diagrams}

It is important to understand that some yoga postures may require a greater range of motion than certain joints in a given person's body are capable of achieving safely. In other words, not all postures are for all bodies. With time and skillful practice, some people may be able to expand the range of motion that a given joint is capable of, however other people may have structural limitations that prevent certain joints from being able to move beyond a given range. Becoming familiar with different students' ranges of motion and helping them understand how to work with them is all but essential when it comes to teaching Modern Postural Yoga safely and effectively.

In addition, all moveable joints have both an active and a passive range of motion. The **active range** is the degree to which a given joint can move without assistance, and the **passive range** is the degree to which a given joint can move with assistance.

For example, when lifting one leg forward (hip flexion), the active range is how high the leg can lift using only the muscles responsible for hip flexion, in this case the *iliopsoas*. The passive range is how far the leg can be moved when assisted, such as by lifting it with a hand or a strap, or by putting the foot on an elevated surface to lift the leg higher than it could otherwise go.

{diagrams}

In general, it is considered safe to work with active ranges, and while many movements that involve passive ranges of motion are also generally safe, if a practitioner applies too much force, it can move the joint to a degree it is not capable of achieving safely, often resulting in injury. Teachers of Modern Postural Yoga should be able to help their students understand how to listen to their bodies and honor their limitations in order to work safely with passive ranges of motion.

Muscular Contractions

Virtually all movement in the human body is created by the contraction of muscles. There are four different types of muscular contractions:

1. **Concentric:** A contraction that causes tension in the muscle as it shortens, as in doing a sit up. In this case, your *rectus abdominus* muscle would shorten to pull your rib cage toward your hips, causing your upper body to lift off the ground.

{Diagram}

2. **Eccentric:** A contraction that causes tension in the muscle as it lengthens, as in lowering back down from a sit up. In this case, your *rectus abdominus* would lengthen to allow your upper body to lower back down to the ground.

{Diagram}

3. **Isometric:** A contraction that causes tension in the muscle when the length remains more or less the same, as in contracting your abdominal muscles to protect yourself from the impact of a punch. In this case the muscles engage, but no movement is generated.

{Diagram}

4. **Spasmodic:** Commonly known as a spasm or a cramp, this is when a muscle contracts uncontrollably and can't relax. They are considered common, can range in intensity from mildly uncomfortable to deeply painful and can last from a few seconds to a few minutes or longer. Other than sometimes being an indication that we've pushed a bit too hard, however, or that we're dehydrated or need to adjust ourselves somehow, spasmodic contractions are involuntary and, while they may sometimes occur during practice, they are not intentionally cultivated in yoga.

In general, concentric and eccentric contractions cause a bone or set of bones to move in relation to another bone or set of bones, resulting in motion, whereas isometric contractions hold bones in place, resulting in stabilization.

Origins and Insertions

All muscles have at least one point of origin and at least one point of insertion**.** The **origin** is the attachment site that generally stays more stable during contraction, whereas the **insertion** is the attachment site that generally moves during contraction. For example, the pectoralis major originates at the sternum and inserts along the upper inside edge of the humerus. Thus, when it contracts, it pulls the arm in toward the midline.

{Diagram}

Many muscles have multiple points of origin and/or insertion. An example is the biceps, which has two points of origin at the shoulder and an insertion at the forearm. Thus, when the biceps contract, the shoulder tends to remain stable while the forearm moves.

{Diagram}

Prime Movers, Synergists and Antagonists

The muscle or group of muscles that does most, if not all of the work to create a given movement is known as the **prime mover**. For example, when pulling the shoulder blades together—i.e., performing scapular retraction—the prime mover is the middle part of the trapezius, a relatively large muscle that originates along the upper spine and inserts along the top ridge and upper part of the medial border of the shoulder blades. Thus, when the mid traps, as they're commonly called, contract concentrically, they pull the shoulder blades in toward the upper spine.

{Diagram}

Many movements also involve **synergists**, which are muscles that help the prime mover. For example, in the case of scapular retraction, the movement is assisted by the rhomboids, a pair of smaller muscles that lie "deep" to, or underneath the mid traps, and that also originate along the upper spine and insert along the medial border of the shoulder blades. When they contract concentrically, they help to pull the shoulder blades in toward the spine.

{Diagram}

Additionally, in most movements there is also an **antagonist**, which is the muscle or group of muscles that opposes the action of the prime mover. For example, in the case of straightening one's leg—i.e., performing knee extension—the prime mover is the quadriceps, which, generally speaking, originate along the upper part of the femur bone and insert at the patella (knee cap), which is connected by a ligament to the tibia. Thus, when the quadriceps contract concentrically, they pull the knee cap up toward the hip, which in turn pulls the tibia forward, straightening the leg.

{Diagram}

At the same time, the antagonists to knee extension are the hamstrings, which are the prime movers of knee flexion—i.e., bending the knee. Generally speaking, the hamstrings originate along the lower back part of the pelvis and insert along the upper back part of the tibia and fibula. Thus, when they contract concentrically, they pull the lower leg up toward the back of the thigh.

{Diagram}

This means that in order to straighten your leg, your hamstrings have to relax as your quadriceps contract, and vice versa—in order to bend your knee your quadriceps have to relax as your hamstrings contract. This way of muscles working in pairs happens throughout the body to create a wide variety of movements.

Functional Movement

Human beings are designed to move in a wide variety of ways, which in turn allows us to perform an astonishing array of activities and tasks—everything from walking and crawling to running, climbing, dancing, skipping, jumping, lifting, pulling, swimming and standing on our heads to using tools, playing instruments, typing on keyboards and driving cars, to name just a few. Being able to do both the things we need to do in order to function in our daily lives, as well as the things we love to do for the pure joy that comes from doing them—with relative ease and without pain—is known as **functional movement,** and it is one of the primary benefits of practicing Modern Postural Yoga.

Many people come to Modern Postural Yoga seeking to increase their flexibility and/or build strength. Though neither of these things are necessarily required in order for a practitioner to experience many of the other benefits the practice has to offer, they are indeed worthy goals where functional movement is concerned, and can often lead to the realization of additional benefits. Not only does increased flexibility and greater strength give people the ability to do things they previously couldn't, which tends to cultivate a sense of both greater confidence and enjoyment of life, it also tends to give practitioners a sense of accomplishment that often leads to further exploration of other possibilities that may exist for them through continued practice.

In order to help students increase flexibility and build strength safely and effectively, teachers must not only understand how the different parts of the human body work together to create movement, they must be able to put that understanding into practice and inspire their students to do the same.

Increasing Flexibility

There is essentially one way to increase flexibility, and that is through stretching. There is, however, more than one way to stretch.

Static Stretching involves holding a position that causes a muscle or group of muscles to stretch to or near the limit of their current level of flexibility. An example would be lying on your back, holding one leg up in the air with your hands and pulling it toward your chest (or face) until it becomes uncomfortable to go any further. This would result in a stretch of the hamstrings.

{Diagram}

Dynamic Stretching involves moving your body in a way that causes a muscle or group of muscles to stretch to or near the limit of their current level of flexibility. An example would be kicking one leg up into the air as high as possible before bringing it back down. This would also result in a stretch of the hamstrings.

{Diagram}

Active Stretching involves actively engaging the muscles that are being stretched. For example, if you were trying to do the splits, you would be stretching the hamstrings of the front leg and the hip flexors of the back leg. If you were to engage these muscles by creating the action of trying to pull your feet toward each other while simultaneously letting gravity push your hips toward the ground, that would be an active stretch.

{Diagram}

Passive Stretching involves relaxing the muscles that are being stretched. For example, if you were trying to do the splits, relaxing the hamstrings of the front leg and the hip flexors of the back leg and letting gravity push your hips toward the ground would be a passive stretch of both muscles.

{Diagram}

As far as which kind of stretching yields the best results, the current scientific data does not point to one clear answer. Given the complexities of the human body, as well as the many different factors at play in different individuals, there is likely no one-size-fits-all prescription. Furthermore, though the old adage "repetition is the key to mastery" holds true when it comes to both increasing flexibility and building strength, it is also true that the human body tends to respond well to variety, so it is likely that a mixture of techniques will likely yield the best results for most people.

That said, in general, for most people, *consistent* passive stretching at high intensity for 30 seconds per stretch tends to be the most efficient way to increase flexibility for most people. As for what is meant by "consistent", again, there is no data that points to a clear answer, but in general, a minimum of 5 minutes total time spent stretching per muscle per week is what is needed for muscles to experience a sustained increase in flexibility. At 30 seconds per stretch, this equals ten stretches per muscle per week.

For example, if a person wanted to gain more flexibility in their hamstrings, a good way to do it would be to stretch those muscles at high intensity ten times throughout a given week and hold each stretch for 30 seconds. Given that most forms of Modern Postural Yoga do not involve ten high intensity hamstring stretches for 30 seconds each in a given class, this means that the person would most likely need to practice more than once per week in order to see results.

One exception to this general rule is yin yoga, which frequently involves holding a single stretch for 3-5 five minutes. However, yin yoga does not involve high intensity stretching. Instead it encourages gentle stretching that aims to target the connective tissue (ligaments, tendons and fascia) rather than the muscles themselves. This style of practice can be a good complement to a higher intensity practice, as it tends to help create greater flexibility and mobility in the joints more so than the muscles, which can help with overall flexibility.

All of that said, though it is true that repetition is an essential ingredient in building flexibility, there is a point of diminishing returns. In general, the more a person stretches the more flexibility they will tend to gain—until they've reached their limit. After that, more repetitions will likely lead to injury. As for how a person can know they've reached their limit, typically the body will send a pain signal.

Where it can get challenging is that an increase in flexibility will generally only happen if a given muscle is stretched to the point of discomfort. Some people have a difficult time distinguishing between discomfort—especially extreme discomfort—and pain. If a practitioner doesn't push far enough into discomfort, they will likely not see much, if any, increase in flexibility. If they push too far, however, they are likely to injure themselves. For most people, the best way to learn to distinguish between a safe amount of discomfort and a dangerous level of pain is by paying attention to the breath. In general, if a person is able to breathe smoothly, slowly and deeply, they are most likely not experiencing pain. Conversely, if a person *isn't* able to breathe smoothly, slowly and deeply, they have likely pushed too far.

In addition to the four kinds stretching listed above, there are also two specific techniques that can help to increase flexibility—Reciprocal Inhibition and PNF.

Reciprocal Inhibition is a naturally occurring neuromuscular phenomenon where the contraction of one muscle or group of muscles on one side of a joint causes the simultaneous relaxation of the opposing muscle or group of muscles on the other side of the joint.

For example, a mentioned earlier, when a person contracts their quadriceps to straighten their leg, the hamstrings have to relax in order to allow the knee to extend. In the vast majority of cases, this relaxation happens automatically, i.e. unconsciously, as the nervous system signals the hamstrings to relax at the appropriate time. However, we can access it consciously—in a deep stretch, for example—by intentionally strengthening our quads in order to encourage our hamstrings to relax.

{Diagram}

Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation, or **PNF**, is a technique based on the principle that a muscle contracted maximally will relax maximally. Essentially, the idea is to exhaust the muscle you are intending to stretch so that it will have less resistance to offer when you stretch it. Traditionally, PNF is meant to be done with the assistance of a physiotherapist or other qualified facilitator, but there is no reason it can't be done without assistance.

{Diagram}

Building Strength

There is essentially only one way to make muscles stronger, and that is through resistance training—that is, engaging in activities that challenge the muscles. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Lifting weights
- Performing bodyweight exercises (push-ups, pull-ups, etc.)
- Using resistance bands
- Doing heavy manual labor (digging, chopping wood, etc.)
- Climbing stairs, hills and/or mountains
- Cycling
- Certain forms of dance
- High intensity stretching

Depending on a given person's level of fitness, certain yoga postures may or may not help to build strength. For example, for someone who is relative active and in good shape, doing five sun salutations will most likely not provide any meaningful benefits in the way of strength building. They may provide other benefits, such as mental calm and/or stress release, but not strength building.

For someone who is relatively inactive and not in good shape, however, depending on how they are performed, doing five sun salutations may indeed help to provide strengthening benefits for several muscles, including the abdominals, anterior deltoids, triceps and serratus anterior.

In other words, if someone wants to know if doing a certain posture or set of postures will help them build strength, the answer, as with so many things in yoga is, "It depends."

Furthermore, in order to see continued growth, muscles need to experience **progressive overload**, meaning that if a person want to continue getting stronger, they need to gradually increase the resistance and/or intensity of the challenge over time.

For example, in the case of the person who was relatively inactive and not in good shape, if they were to practice five sun salutations a day for 2-3 weeks, they would likely experience an increase in strength. In order to continue building strength, however, at some point they would either need to increase the number of sun salutations they do and/or hold certain postures for a longer period of time.

Another key factor in building and maintaining strength is consistency. **Muscular atrophy**, or the loss of muscle mass, can begin as soon as within 1-2 weeks of inactivity. The rate of atrophy can vary depending on various factors such as age, fitness level and cause of inactivity (illness, injury, not having/making time, etc.), but regardless of such factors, most people's muscles will decrease in strength after a relatively short time of inactivity.

Other key factors in building and maintaining strength are rest and nutrition. Resistance training causes microscopic damage to the muscles that the body then repairs

and rebuilds, which leads to increased mass and strength. Without adequate rest, the muscles will not have time to repair. This can lead to injury in the form of muscle strains, or even tears. Similarly, without adequate nutrition, the body will not have the necessary fuel to repair the microscopic damage caused by resistance training. Protein, in particular, is the nutrient needed for muscle growth. A general rule of thumb is to consume one gram of protein per pound of bodyweight. Thus, a person who weighs 150 lbs. should aim to consume 150 grams of protein in a given day. For people who use their muscles more regularly and/or intensely, more protein may be required in order to maintain good muscular health.

When it comes to Modern Postural Yoga, the vast majority of strength building happens as a result of performing bodyweight exercises, although in some cases practitioners may experience an increase in strength as a result of doing certain high intensity stretches.

Regardless of the means, it is important to understand that even though Modern Postural Yoga offers a wide range of possibilities for movement and strength building, it also has certain limitations. For example, there are many postures and transitions that can help to build strength in the abdominals, pectorals, anterior deltoids, triceps, quadriceps and gluteus medius, but very few standard postures directly or sufficiently load many muscles enough to meaningfully build strength in them, especially for already-active individuals. Those muscles include but are not limited to the gluteus maximus, mid-trapezius, rhomboids, posterior deltoids, triceps, hamstrings or adductors.

Because of this, most practitioners of Modern Postural Yoga will likely benefit by using resistance bands, doing heavy manual labor and/or performing other forms of exercise or physical movement, including bodyweight movements that are not typically associated with traditional yogic postures, such as pull-ups, push-ups, lunges and others. In fact, for many people, incorporating other forms of physical activity is essential not only to establish and maintain joint health, but also to avoid muscular imbalances and overuse injuries. When done with the proper intention and awareness, there is no reason that these activities cannot be considered part of a well-rounded yoga practice.

Likewise, most forms of Modern Postural Yoga have not been shown to provide significant cardiovascular benefits. Accordingly, most practitioners will most likely benefit by incorporating some form of regular cardiovascular exercise into their regimen. This can include, but is not limited to running, jumping rope, using a rowing machine and/or elliptical trainer, etc.

All of that said, it is important for teachers of Modern Postural Yoga to understand the scope of their practice and to know the limitations of their expertise. If students have questions that go beyond a given teacher's knowledge, it is considered best practice to refer the student to someone with more expertise in that area and/or encourage them to do their own research.

Anatomy and the Teaching of Modern Postural Yoga

Most people tend to have a very limited awareness of how their body works. As a result, not only do most people only ever experience a fraction of their physical potential, but in most cases if/when they get injured their only recourse is either to seek medical attention, which is often costly and time consuming, or simply to suffer.

One of the primary ways Modern Postural Yoga works to create better health and a better quality of life is by helping practitioners to become more aware of their bodies and how they function. The more teachers understand about human anatomy—including which muscles connect to which bones and where, how those muscles work to create movement and how to work with the limitations of the body to increase flexibility and build strength safely and effectively—the better able they will be to help students become more aware of their own bodies and all that they are capable of.

In this way, anatomy is not just academic knowledge. It's a tool for helping to awaken embodied intelligence in others, and for helping people move through life with more ease, awareness and freedom.

The Human Mind in the Practice of Modern Postural Yoga

"I admit that thoughts influence the body."

—Albert Einstein

Yoga is often referred to as "the science of the mind." Though often seen as a purely physical practice, Modern Postural Yoga has the potential to work just as deeply—if not more so—on a mental level. Consequently, the same way teachers of Modern Postural Yoga need to be knowledgable about the human body, it behooves them to understand about the human mind, as well—namely, how it works and how the practice of yoga affects it.

This, however, can be easier said than done.

One of the main challenges when it comes to understanding the human mind is that there is very little consensus as to what exactly it is. One theory holds that the mind is the part of us that thinks, feels, perceives, imagines, remembers and wills. Another holds that the mind is a complex of faculties involved in perceiving, remembering, considering, evaluating and deciding. Some theories consider the mind to be the seat of human consciousness and intelligence, whereas others hold that consciousness is separate from the mind. Most western theories hold that the mind enables a system of cognitive processes that happen in the brain, whereas many eastern theories consider the mind to be a function of the body just as much as the brain.

To make matters more complicated, we also have the term "psyche", which refers to the aspect of our being that encompasses both our conscious as well as our unconscious mental processes, including deep feelings, beliefs and attitudes. Some theories consider "mind" and "psyche" to be the same thing, whereas others consider the mind to be responsible only for the conscious, intellectual aspects of mental functioning, such as thinking, coordination and memory.

But while modern theories differ widely, classical yogic philosophy offers a much more unified perspective. The Sanskrit word most commonly used to refer to the mind is ***citta.*** Unlike most Western conceptions, however, which consider the mind to be a single entity, *citta* has three components:

1. ***Manas*** - The part of our mental functioning that is responsible for thinking, processing information, imagining and remembering. Often equated with the intellect, it is considered to be the aspect of mind that receives sensory information before presenting it to consciousness.

2. ***Ahamkara*** - Literally "I-maker", this is the part of our mental functioning that causes us to identify with our minds, bodies and the world around us. Often equated with the ego, it is thought to be the thing that causes us to have a sense of individuality.

3. ***Buddhi*** - Derived from the root 'budh', meaning "to know" or "to be awake", it is considered to be our innermost wisdom. Sometimes equated with our intuition, it is the power of the mind to comprehend, analyze, discern and decide.

Together, these three components comprise the *citta*, which yogic philosophy considers to be the lens through which consciousness perceives. The implication of this is that without the *citta* our consciousness would have no means of interfacing with the material world.

But just as the lenses of a pair of glasses can become smudged and/or scratched, causing our perception to be altered, the *citta* can also become occluded and/or warped by impressions left over from the things we experience. Among the potential consequences to this are the following:

1. Our perception can become skewed. For example, if a person of a certain race, gender or community does something we deem dishonest, it may lead us to believe that *all* people of that race, gender and/or community are dishonest.

2. We can form unhealthy attachments. For example, if we're taught that the only measure of success is how much money we earn, we may become obsessed with making money to the point of sacrificing our physical and/or mental health, or possibly behaving in unethical ways in order to earn more money. Or if we meet a person whose company we enjoy, we may come to believe that we can't be happy without them.

3. We can become excessively reactive. For example, if someone criticizes our weight, it might hurt our feelings. As a result, we may develop an eating disorder. Or we may assume some kind of insult when someone else offers us a piece of cake, even though they mean no harm.

4. We can become distracted to an unhelpful degree. For example, if we made a decision that led to an unfavorable outcome, we may become preoccupied with our "mistake" to the point that we either miss out on other opportunities or become so afraid of making another mistake that we avoid making important decisions altogether.

5. We can develop what is often referred to as a "monkey mind", that is a mind that is constantly jumping from one thought to another, never settling or focusing long enough to think things through or be cognizant of certain aspects of our self and/or our environment, and eventually exhausting itself to the point of possibly breaking down. For example, if we work in a high

stress environment that requires dividing our attention constantly between multiple tasks, we may forget to breathe in a way that brings adequate oxygen into our bodies, resulting in burnout, illness and other dysfunction.

6. We can form self-destructive habit patterns. For example, if a person experiences abandonment, they may develop a belief that they are not worthy of attention. This can lead to all sorts of self-destructive behaviors, including eating disorders, substance abuse, isolating one's self and engaging in toxic relationships, to name a few.

The common thread of all these consequences is suffering of one form or another. Whether it be fear, doubt, loneliness, anxiety or any number of other possibilities, the basic premise of classical yogic philosophy is that suffering is rooted in the mind. The corollary to this is that if we find ourselves suffering internally, it is an indication that our *citta* has been disturbed in some way.

It is because of this that the original goal of all yogic practices was to help practitioners calm and cleanse their minds. In theory, if a person could do this successfully, they would:

- Learn to perceive reality objectively, i.e. without emotional attachment
- Free themselves of any unhealthy attachments
- Develop a greater capacity for responsiveness over reactivity
- Increase their capacity for focus and equanimity
- Become more aware of their mental conditioning, and if the resulting behavior patterns were causing them to suffer, to change them.

And ultimately, according to the theory of classical yoga philosophy, if a person could purify and calm their mind fully, they would eventually come to realize themselves as pure consciousness, undisturbed by the activity of the mind.

Whether this is true or not, or has ever happened, is open to debate. Given that there are currently no tests or ways of proving that our consciousness is distinct from our mind, or that a given person has Self-realized or not, we have no way of knowing if the claims of classical yoga have any validity.

Thanks to modern science, however, we do know that practicing yoga benefits the brain in measurable ways. Studies suggest that people who practice yoga regularly tend to show higher-than-average thickness of their cerebral cortex and hippocampus, which typically shrink with age. These are the areas of the brain responsible for high-level cognitive processes, sensory perception and motor control (cerebral cortex), as well as emotional processing, learning and memory (hippocampus). As a result, people who practice yoga regularly tend to exhibit:

- Better than average cognitive function (learning and memory)
- Better than average executive function (reasoning and decision making)

- Better than average motor skills (reaction time and accuracy)
- Lower than average anxiety and depression
- Higher than average gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) levels, resulting in better mood and decreased anxiety
- Increased capacity for emotional regulation

All of that said, it is important to note that many people may suffer from mental afflictions that may be most effectively treated by a licensed psychologist or psychiatrist. For many others, however, yoga has the potential to provide tremendous mental benefits. The more teachers understand about how specific postures and breathing techniques affect mental states, the more skillfully they will be able to guide students toward practices that support their unique needs.

The Human Nervous System in the Practice of Modern Postural Yoga

"The purpose of yoga is to help us calm our minds and balance our nervous systems."

—Georg Feuerstein

The human nervous system is a complex network of nerve fibers and specialized cells that facilitates communication and coordination throughout the body, controlling both voluntary and involuntary actions. It has four primary functions:

1. **Sensory Input and Integration:** The nervous system receives information from the environment, as well as from various internal organs, through sensory receptors that register things like touch, taste, sight, sound and smell. It then integrates and processes this information to determine an appropriate response.

2. **Motor Output:** Upon processing sensory information, the nervous system sends signals to muscles, causing them to contract, which in turn creates movement. It also sends signals to various glands, causing them to release hormones or other secretions.

3. **Coordination of Bodily Functions:** The nervous system works to maintain a stable internal environment by regulating various bodily functions such as heart rate, breathing, body temperature, blood sugar, hydration and more. The body's ability to maintain a stable internal environment despite changes in the external environment is called **homeostasis.** It is crucial for survival and proper functioning of the body's many systems—immune, circulatory, digestive, lymphatic, endocrine, etc.

4. **Cognitive and Emotional Processes:** The nervous system is integral not only to cognitive functions such as thinking, learning and memory, but also to the experiencing and processing of emotions.

In addition, the nervous system also plays a role in the development and growth of the brain, the body's ability to heal, the way we respond to stress, as well as the regulation of reproductive health and fertility.

Given the essential role the nervous system plays in virtually every function of the body and mind, it stands to reason that the more teachers of Modern Postural Yoga understand about how the nervous system works, as well as how various practices of yoga affect it, the better equipped they'll be to serve their students' individual needs.

Divisions of the Nervous System

The human nervous system is divided into two main parts—the **Central Nervous System** (CNS) and the **Peripheral Nervous System** (PNS). The CNS is comprised of the brain and spinal cord and serves as the body's control center. The PNS is made up of the many nerves that branch off from the CNS and extend throughout the body. These nerves relay information between the CNS and the many muscles, organs and other body parts it regulates.

Within the PNS are two branches—the **Somatic Nervous System**, which controls voluntary movements, such as walking and talking, and the **Autonomic Nervous System**, which regulates involuntary bodily functions such as heart rate, sweating, blinking and digestion.

The Autonomic Nervous System is further divided into two more parts—the **Sympathetic Nervous System**, which governs the body's "fight-or-flight" response to perceived danger or stress, and the **Parasympathetic Nervous System**, which governs the body's "rest-and-digest" function. When these two branches of the nervous system are balanced—i.e., when homeostasis occurs—the mind and body tend to function well. Conversely, when they are out of balance, it can and often does lead to a wide variety of mental and physical disorders.

While Modern Postural Yoga has been shown to help improve physical attributes such as strength, balance, flexibility and coordination—all of which rely on nervous system function—when it comes to overall well-being, one of the primary benefits yoga provides is its ability to help people balance the sympathetic and parasympathetic divisions of the autonomic nervous system.

How Yoga Affects the Nervous System

The nervous system uses specialized cells called **neurons** to send electrical and chemical signals throughout the entire body via **nerve fibers** (commonly referred to simply as nerves). These signals not only help us to move our limbs and feel sensations, they are the carriers of the information we gather and process constantly to make decisions about what action to take on a moment-to-moment basis.

There are three types of neurons:

1. **Sensory Neurons:** Take information from the sensory organs (nose, eyes, tongue, ears, skin) to the brain.

2. **Motor Neurons:** Take signals from the brain and spinal cord to various muscles.

3. **Interneurons:** Facilitate communication between the motor and sensory neurons, regulating movement in response to sensory information (shivering when we're cold, moving away upon touching a hot surface, etc.) and also playing a role in how we think, learn and remember.

All three types of neurons activate in response to stimuli, both internal as well as external.

For example, if a person were to go out walking in the woods and come upon a bear, unless for some reason that person had no fear of bears, their nervous system would register a threat and the sympathetic branch of their nervous system would immediately send them into a "fight or flight" response. Based on the information received from their sensory neurons, the person's brain would then send out motor neurons and activate interneurons that would prepare their body for action by:

- Releasing cortisol and adrenaline from the adrenal glands
- Causing their heart and breathing rates to go up
- Increasing blood flow to major muscles
- Causing their pupils to dilate
- Possibly stimulating sweat production
- Possibly also temporarily suppressing certain non-essential functions such as digestion, immune response and/or bladder control

Depending on the person, their nervous system would also send out signals that might cause them either to freeze, to run away, to fall on the ground and curl up into a ball, to wave their arms and make loud sounds in an effort to scare the bear off, or possibly even to attack the bear.

As long as the bear continued to present a threat, the person would likely remain in a heightened state of awareness and anxiety. Provided the bear moved on and left them alone, however, and provided the person's nervous system was able to balance itself, they would gradually shift out of "fight or flight" mode and return to "normal" functioning as the perceived threat diminished.

The challenge for many people is that their nervous systems rarely, if ever, are given a chance to reset.

Even though most people in the modern world don't have to worry about encountering bears on a daily basis, they have to navigate all kinds of other stressors—work, money, family, health, politics, etc.—and though the nervous system's response to them is rarely as intense as a run in with a deadly animal, the effects are often compounding, which can make them even more overwhelming in the long run.

If a person is constantly dealing with pressure at work and/or pressure at home, if they are frequently concerned about finances and/or health matters, if they are disturbed by politics and/or other current events, or if their mind becomes fixated on memories of a

traumatic experience from the past, that person's nervous system may keep them in a more-or-less constant state of heightened anxiety, sometimes referred to as **chronic stress**. This can lead to a variety of issues, including:

- Restlessness/difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping
- Digestive problems/loss of appetite
- High blood pressure
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Irritability
- Sexual dysfunction
- Weakened immune system
- Memory issues
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Delusion

These are all symptoms of a nervous system that is out of balance, or dysregulated. For many people, though, many of these symptoms have become so common as to seem normal. In such cases, conscious efforts must be made to regulate the nervous system and reestablish homeostasis.

Certain yoga practices can be extremely helpful with this. Restorative and yin yoga, in particular, tend to be very effective at stimulating parasympathetic function. The long holds, supported postures, emphasis on slow, steady deep breath and progressive muscle relaxation have all been shown to help activate the body's "rest and digest" response.

This typically results in:

- Decreased cortisol and adrenaline levels
- Decreased heart and breathing rates
- Reduced blood flow to non-essential areas/muscle relaxation
- Reduced blood pressure
- Stimulation of digestion and other metabolic activity
- Increased feelings of safety and calm

It can be helpful to think of the sympathetic nervous system like an accelerator, and the parasympathetic nervous system like a brake. Both are necessary for driving, but they have to be engaged at the right time and in the right measure in order to navigate safely and effectively.

A well-regulated nervous system is one that activates the sympathetic and parasympathetic responses at the appropriate times and in the appropriate measure, resulting in:

- Improved digestive function
- Improved cognitive function and memory
- Improved sleep quality
- Improved immune function
- Improved heart rate variability (HRV), an indicator of the body's ability to manage stress
- Improved overall health and well-being

All of that said, it is important to understand that not *all* yoga practices will necessarily result in a balanced nervous system. If someone is suffering from chronic stress, it will most likely not benefit them to engage with a practice that involves high-intensity stretching and/or strength training. For this reason, it is essential that teachers of Modern Postural Yoga are not only capable of assessing the state of their students' nervous systems, but also discerning which practices are likely to support regulation versus exacerbate imbalance.

A Note on the Vagus Nerve

The vagal nerves—commonly referred to as the vagus nerve, even though there is one on each side of the body—are the primary nerves of the parasympathetic nervous system. They are responsible for sending signals between the brain and the heart, lungs, liver, spleen, stomach, intestines and kidneys. They contain 75% of the neurons of the parasympathetic nervous system and play a central role in regulating everything from heart rate, blood pressure, respiration and digestion to immune response, mood, stress response, cognitive function and mental health.

The functioning of the vagal nerves is measured in tone. A high vagal tone is associated with:

- A healthy resting heart rate
- Healthy blood pressure
- Increased Heart Rate Variability
- Strong digestion
- Reduced inflammation
- Greater ability to manage/recover from stress
- Strong cognitive function (self-regulation, decision making and memory)

Conversely, a low vagal tone is associated with:

- High blood pressure
- Low Heart Rate Variability
- Gastrointestinal dysfunction (acid reflux, irritable bowel syndrome)
- Chronic inflammation
- Increased risk of anxiety and depression
- Poor cognitive function

Studies have shown that certain activities can help to promote a higher vagal tone, including:

- Deep breathing, specifically with extended exhalations
- Chanting, or even simply humming gently
- Meditation and mindfulness practices that encourage present moment awareness
- Regular physical activity, especially aerobic exercise
- Brief exposure to cold
- Social connection, including acts of kindness and expressing gratitude

It is often said that practicing inversions (postures in which the heart is above the head) can also help to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system. Currently, however, there is not enough evidence to support this claim, but there is evidence to indicate that practicing inversions can help to increase Heart Rate Variability significantly. This suggests an increased vagal tone, but more research is needed to understand the effects of inversions specifically on the vagus nerve and parasympathetic nervous system.

The Subtle Body

"The subtle body in yoga is not only the secret
to the optimal functioning and alignment of the body;
it is the key to delight, love, understanding
and good relationships."

—Richard Freeman

The term "subtle body" refers to a non-physical, energetic system that is thought to influence the workings of the mind, physical body and emotions. It is typically described as a network of energy centers and channels, as well as layers of being that all work in conjunction with the physical body to influence health, harmonious living and spiritual growth.

If there is scientific research proving the existence of a subtle body, it has yet to be made widely known. This does not mean, however, that the subtle body is purely imaginary, or that there is no value in learning about and understanding it.

There are essentially four elements to the subtle body:

1. ***Prana*:** Commonly translated as "life force", it is considered to be the vital energy that flows through our bodies and animates our existence. Similar to the concept of *chi* (often spelled *qi*) from traditional Chinese medicine and various martial arts traditions, it is thought to be the source of life and all movement in the body. As such, it is considered essential not only for maintaining physical, mental and emotional well-being, but also for making us who and what we are.

2. ***Nadis*:** The channels or energetic pathways through which *prana* flows in the body. Virtually all illnesses, imbalances and/or disorders—physical, mental and emotional—are thought to be the result of blockages in certain nadis, causing *prana* to be unable to flow freely.

3. ***Chakras*:** Energy centers within the subtle body that are believed to be responsible for receiving, processing and expressing energy that influences our physical, emotional and spiritual well being.

4. ***Koshas*:** Commonly described as the five "sheaths" of human existence, they are thought to be the layers of awareness that make up our being.

More on *Prana*

The practice of yoga is closely associated with Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine that seeks to promote good health by achieving and maintaining balance within

the body, mind and spirit. Literally translated as "the science of life", Ayurveda has its roots in the *Vedas* and is considered a "sister science" to yoga.

According to Ayurveda, there are five distinct forms of *prana*, or ***vayus****,* each with a specific function in the body.

1. ***Prana vayu*** - Located in the lungs and heart, it governs respiration;

2. ***Apana vayu*** - Located in the pelvis and sometimes called the "down breath", it governs elimination, or the downward and outward movement of energy;

3. ***Samana vayu*** - Centered in the navel, it governs digestion, absorption and assimilation of nutrients and also helps to balance *prana* and *apana;*

4. ***Udana vayu*** - Located in the throat and sometimes called the "up breath", it governs verbal expression and the upward, outward movement of energy;

5. ***Vyana vayu*** - Located throughout the body, it governs circulation and the general distribution of energy.

In many ways, the practice of yoga is meant to help facilitate the efficient and unrestricted flow of energy through the *nadis*. Certain postures are thought to help stimulate the flow of different energies in different ways. Understanding which postures can effect which *pranas* and in which way can help teachers be of greater service to their students.

For example, if a teacher encounters a student who is having difficult expressing themselves clearly and confidently, postures that bring attention and blood flow to the throat area—such as plow pose and/or shoulder stand—are thought to be more helpful in most cases than other postures that might emphasize flexibility of the hamstrings or strength in the abdomen.

As always, the postures that will prove most beneficial will vary from student to student and sometimes from day to day even with the same student. However, developing an understanding of the ways that different postures and/or breathing techniques may effect energy flow through different parts of the body can provide a helpful framework for constructing an effective practice.

More on the *Nadis*

The Sanskrit word "*nadi*" translates as "tube", "channel" or "flow." While there is no way to know exactly how many *nadis* there are in the subtle body, some texts claim there are as many as 72,000.

Though the *nadis* are thought to comprise a vast network of energetic pathways, it is generally taught that there are three primary *nadis*:

1. ***Shushumna nadi*:** The central energetic channel in the human body, thought to run along the spinal column.

2. ***Ida nadi*:** Often referred to as the "lunar" or the "feminine" channel, it is associated with calming, receptive energies.

3. ***Pingala nadi*:** Often referred to as the "solar" or the "masculine" channel, it is associated with activating, outgoing energies.

Both the *ida* and *pingala nadis* are thought to originate at the base of the spine and circulate upwards in a criss-crisscrossing pattern around the *shushumna nadi*, terminating in the nostrils.

[Diagram of Shushumna, Ida & Pingala]

The *ida nadi* is thought to connect to the left nostril, whereas the *pingala nadi* is thought to connect to the right nostril.

At the same time, the *ida nadi* is thought to link to the right side of the brain and the left side of the body, while the *pingala nadi* is thought to link to the left side of the brain and the right side of the body.

Because of their end points in the nostrils and their connection to opposite sides of the brain, different breathing techniques are believed to stimulate different functions.

For example, breathing only through the left nostril is believed to stimulate both the parasympathetic nervous system, as well as creativity, imagination and diplomacy, whereas breathing only through the right nostril is believed to stimulate both the sympathetic nervous system, as well as logic, critical thinking and assertiveness.

Though more research is needed to verify all of these claims, recent studies have shown that breathing only through the left nostril is indeed associated with a decrease in cardiovascular parameters, including heart rate, blood pressure and cardiac output, as well as an increase in Vital Capacity and Peak Expiratory Flow Rate, two important indicators of lung health.

Likewise, studies have also demonstrated that right nostril breathing is associated with enhanced blood flow in the left frontal cortex, as well as enhanced verbal cognition.

Perhaps further studies will help to confirm more of what the ancient yogic teachings have asserted, but for now the evidence has proven convincing enough that modern scientific and medical communities are beginning to explore the possibility of different breathing techniques as potential remedies for various brain and mood disorders.

More on the *Chakras*

As far as we know, the concept of the *chakras* has its roots in *tantra*. While not formally a part of any traditional schools of yoga, they have become adopted by many modern day yogis as a tool to help achieve and maintain balance and harmony internally, as well as externally.

The *chakras* are thought to govern the primary aspects of a person's life, including relationships, creativity, professional success, sexuality, communication, intuition and connection to a higher power. They are said to be located along the spinal axis, where the *ida* and *pingala nadis* intersect with the *shushumna nadi* (except for the "crown" *chakra*, which is located above the crown of the head).

Each *chakra* is thought to identify a core human need. In theory, when a given *chakra* is open, energy flows and the need of that energy center is able to be met more readily. When the *chakra* is blocked or closed, energy is stagnant and intentions become harder to actualize.

In addition, each *chakra* is said to have a corresponding color, element and sense function associated with it, as well as different postures that are thought to help open and/or balance the energy center.

Though *chakras* are not verifiable through modern anatomical study, they offer a symbolic map for understanding how energy, emotion and intention manifest in the human experience. Developing a working knowledge of the concept of the *chakras* and how they function can help inform a person's yoga practice.

Likewise, the more teachers are able to understand about where their students are stuck, the more the *chakra* system can help them understand where to focus their attention, as well as which postures and/or breathing techniques to practice in order to help create and maintain balanced health.

[Diagram of the chakras]

The seven primary *chakras* are:

1. ***Muladhara Chakra*** – Also known as the "root chakra"

   Location: Base of the spine/pelvic floor
   Color: Red
   Element: Earth
   Sense: Smell
   Function: Governs basic survival needs such as stability, finances and relationships
   Overview: When this chakra is open we have confidence that our needs will be

met. When it's blocked we feel a sense of anxiety or worry.
To open/balance this chakra: Practice one-legged standing balance postures.
Notes: According to the theory behind the *chakras,* the body evaluates decisions based on the likelihood of having our needs met. *Muladhara* gives us information about the likelihood of a decision or action to nourish us or to bring toxicity into our lives.

2. ***Svadistana Chakra*** – Also known as the "creativity chakra"

Location: Genitals/Lower abdomen
Color: Orange
Element: Water
Sense: Taste
Function: Fuels the creative force behind reproduction, art, business, building a life of love and abundance.
Overview: When this *chakra* is open we are able to co-create our life with the universal force of creativity. When it is blocked we struggle to relate to others.
To open/balance this chakra: Practice hip opening postures.
Notes: Creativity is a process of taking raw material and forming different contexts and relationships between components. *Svadisthana* takes the raw material of the root *chakra* to remake the world anew each day.

3. ***Manipura Chakra*** – Also known as the "energy" or"power chakra"

Location: Solar plexus
Color: Yellow
Element: Fire
Sense: Sight
Function: This chakra is the seat of one's individual power. It governs our sense of individuality, our ego and how we conduct ourselves.
Overview: When this chakra is open we are capable of manifesting our intentions and desires. When it's blocked we experience frustration and/or a feeling of being ineffective.
To open/balance this chakra: Practice twisting and/or core strengthening postures.
Notes: The seeds of intention & desire reside in our souls. In order to harvest these seeds, we must first bring them into our consciousness. Whether we mean to or not, we are always manifesting something. This chakra reminds us to be careful and pay attention to what we're cultivating.

4. ***Anahata Chakra*** – Also known as the "heart chakra"

Location: Center of the chest
Color: Green
Element: Air
Sense: Touch

Function: Represents the unifying energy of love and compassion, dedicated to overcoming separation and recognizing oneness.
Overview: When this chakra is open we feel nourished by a deep connection to all beings. When it's blocked we feel a sense of alienation & envy.
To open/balance this chakra: Practice heart openers (i.e. backbends).
Notes: It is the job of the heart both to give and receive. In order to receive love, we must also give it. In addition to governing our breathing and cardiovascular system, the *Anahata* is also responsible for our ability to forgive and give compassion.

5. ***Vishudda Chakra*** – Also known as the "throat chakra"

Location: Center of the neck
Color: Blue
Element: Ether
Sense: Hearing
Function: The center of expression, this chakra governs our communication
Overview: When the Throat Chakra is open we have confidence that we can express our needs clearly and that we'll have our needs met. When it's blocked we experience feelings of not being heard (which can manifest as neck pain and/or thyroid problems)
To open/balance this chakra: Practice shoulderstand, plow and fish pose.
Notes: This chakra enables us to express our truth in life-affirming ways without concern for censors and/or critics. In theory, when we have a clear intention and an open heart, we experience spontaneous right speech. The idea is that we choose our words and actions and put our trust in the universe to handle the rest.

6. ***Ajna Chakra*** – Also known as the "third eye"

Location: Center of the forehead
Color: Indigo
Element: Extrasensory perception
Sense: Sound
Function: The center of insight and intuition, this *chakra* represents our ability to look upon the world with equanimity and also to see ourselves in others and others in us.
Overview: When this chakra is open we feel a deep sense of connection to our inner voice, and we feel guided in our choices. When it's blocked we feel a sense of self-doubt and distrust.
To open/balance this chakra: Practice child's pose and Kapalabati (skull-shining breath).
Notes: This chakra governs our relationship to a higher power. According to yogic philosophy, our souls carry a spark of divinity. When we are in touch with this reality, we feel a clear sense of connection to our individual dharma.

7. ***Sahasrara Chakra*** – Also known as the "crown chakra"

Location: Just above the crown of the head
Color: Violet
Element: Unity (the ability to recognize our self in others and vice versa)
Sense: Awareness of the inner light from the eternal flame of sacred wisdom
Function: Reminds us that we are an unbounded spirit in a human body.
Overview: When this chakra is open we experience the full expression of yoga, i.e., the unification of being with action, of universality with individuality. When this chakra is blocked we forget our divine nature and become stuck in the material world.
To balance this chakra: Practice headstand and meditation; also open and balance the other *chakras.*
Notes: This chakra is represented by the lotus flower. When it blossoms, it is a symbol of the memory of our wholeness being restored. Likewise, when *sahaswara* opens, our identity shifts from constricted to expanded. Fear and anxiety give way to trust and faith.

More on the *Koshas*

The concept of the *koshas* was first described in writing in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*. Though typically associated with the subtle body, the *koshas* also include the 'gross', or physical body, as well as the 'causal' body, which is considered in yogic philosophy to be the foundation of both the subtle and gross bodies, and the source of all experiences. It is believed to be an energetic seed, of sorts, carrying thoughts, impressions and accumulated karma from past lives.

Central to the notion of the *koshas* is the concept of *atman,* the individual soul. In order to realize one's self as the soul, which is the ultimate goal of classical and pre-classical yogic practices, one must ultimately remove the five *koshas*, or "sheaths", that cover it.

The five *koshas* are:

1. ***Annamaya kosha* -** Literally, the "food body". This is the gross, or physical body that most people typically think of as their self. It can be a source of both great pleasure, as well as great pain and suffering.

2. ***Pranamaya kosha* -** The energetic body. This is the outermost layer of the subtle body. It contains our life force energy that animates our being and governs our vitality.

3. ***Manomaya kosha* -** The mental body. This is the middle layer of the subtle body. It contains our sense of individuality, as well as our cognitive functioning, and governs our ability to think and perceive clearly.

4. ***Vijñjanamaya kosha* -** The wisdom body. This is the innermost layer of the subtle body. It contains our intuition and governs our instincts, as well as our ability to heed them.

5. ***Anandamaya kosha* -** The bliss body. This is the so-called causal body. It is the closest sheath to the *atman.* It contains the capacity for causeless bliss that is considered by yoga to be our birthright, and governs our ability to experience peace and contentment.

The *koshas* are often described as working like layered veils or blinds covering a lantern. In order for the light within to shine out clearly, the blinds must open fully. Similarly, in order to experience one's self as the soul, a practitioner must remove any blockages within the five sheaths that may prevent them from establishing a clear connection with their own soul.

While many modern day practitioners are not necessarily striving to experience themselves as the soul, it can nonetheless be helpful for teachers of yoga to understand the concept of the *koshas.* Depending on the nature of a given student's struggles, being able to identify whether the root cause is physical, mental or energetic can give a teacher insight as to which practice techniques might be most appropriate and effective in terms of helping the student find relief from whatever is ailing them.

The Practice of Yogasana

Coming soon…

The Practice of Pranayama

Coming soon…

Yoga Teaching Methodology

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Yoga Ethics & Lifestyle

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