

# Yoga: Its Origin, History and Development

April 23, 2015

*\*By Dr. Ishwar V. Basavaraddi*

**Introduction:** Yoga is essentially a spiritual discipline based on an extremely subtle science, which focuses on bringing harmony between mind and body. It is an art and science of healthy living. The word 'Yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'Yuj', meaning 'to join' or 'to yoke' or 'to unite'. As per Yogic scriptures the practice of Yoga leads to the union of individual consciousness with that of the Universal Consciousness, indicating a perfect harmony between the mind and body, Man & Nature. According to modern scientists, everything in the universe is just a manifestation of the same quantum firmament. One who experiences this oneness of existence is said to be in yoga, and is termed as a yogi, having attained to a state of freedom referred to as mukti, nirvana or moksha. Thus the aim of Yoga is Self-realization, to overcome all kinds of sufferings leading to 'the state of liberation' (Moksha) or 'freedom' (Kaivalya). Living with freedom in all walks of life, health and harmony shall be the main objectives of Yoga practice. "Yoga" also refers to an inner science comprising of a variety of methods through which human beings can realize this union and achieve mastery over their destiny. Yoga, being widely considered as an 'immortal cultural outcome' of Indus Saraswati Valley civilization – dating back to 2700 B.C., has proved itself catering to both material and spiritual upliftment of humanity. Basic humane values are the very identity of Yoga Sadhana.

## A Brief History and Development of Yoga:

The practice of Yoga is believed to have started with the very dawn of civilization. The science of yoga has its origin thousands of years ago, long before the first religions or belief systems were born. In the yogic lore, Shiva is seen as the first yogi or Adiyogi, and the first Guru or Adi Guru.

Several Thousand years ago, on the banks of the lake Kantisarovar in the Himalayas, Adiyogi poured his profound knowledge into the legendary Saptarishis or "seven sages". The sages carried this powerful yogic science to different parts of the world, including Asia, the Middle East, Northern Africa and South America. Interestingly, modern scholars have noted and marvelled at the close parallels found between ancient cultures across the globe. However, it was in India that the yogic system found its fullest expression. Agastya, the Saptarishi who travelled across the Indian subcontinent, crafted this culture around a core yogic way of life.



The Number of seals and fossil remains of Indus Saraswati valley civilization with Yogic motives and figures performing Yoga Sadhana suggest the presence of Yoga in ancient India. The phallic symbols, seals of idols of mother Goddess are suggestive of Tantra Yoga. Presence of Yoga is available in folk traditions, Indus valley civilization, Vedic and Upanishadic heritage, Buddhist and Jain traditions, Darshanas, epics of Mahabharat and Ramayana, theistic traditions of Shaivas, Vaishnavas, and Tantric traditions. In addition, there was a primordial or pure Yoga which has been manifested in mystical traditions of South Asia. This was the time when Yoga was being practised under the direct guidance of Guru and its spritual value was given special importance. It was a part of Upasana and yoga sadhana was inbuilt in their rituals. Sun was given highest importance during the vedic period. The practice of 'Surya namaskara' may have been invented later due to this influence. Pranayama was a part of daily ritual and to offer the oblation. Though Yoga was being practiced in the pre-Vedic period, the great Sage Maharshi Patanjali systematized and codified the then existing practices of Yoga, its meaning and its related knowledge through his Yoga Sutras. After Patanjali, many Sages and Yoga Masters contributed greatly for the preservation and development of the field through their well documented practices and literature.

Historical evidences of the existence of Yoga were seen in the pre-Vedic period (2700 B.C.), and thereafter till Patanjali's period. The main sources, from which we get the information about Yoga practices and the related literature during this period, are available in Vedas (4), Upanishads(108), Smritis, teachings of Buddhism, Jainism, Panini, Epics (2), Puranas (18) etc.

Tentatively, the period between 500 BC - 800 A.D. is considered as the Classical period which is also considered as the most fertile and prominent period in the history and development of Yoga. During this period, commentaries of Vyasa on Yoga Sutras and Bhagawadgita etc. came into existence. This period can be mainly dedicated to two great religious teachers of India –Mahavir and Buddha. The concept of Five great vows – Pancha mahavrata- by Mahavir and Ashta Magga or eightfold path by Buddha - can be well considered as early nature of Yoga sadhana. We find its more explicit explanation in Bhagawadgita which has elaborately presented the concept of Gyan yoga, Bhakti yoga and Karma Yoga. These three types of yoga are still the highest example of human wisdom and and even to day people find peace by following the methods as shown in Gita. Patanjali's yoga sutra besides containing various aspects of yoga, is mainly identified with eight fold path of Yoga. The very important commentary on Yoga sutra by Vyasa was also written. During this very period the aspect of mind was given importance and it was clearly brought out through Yoga sadhana, Mind and body both can be brought under control to experience equanimity. The period between 800 A.D. - 1700 A.D. has been recognized as the Post Classical period wherein the teachings of great Acharyatrayas-Adi Shankracharya, Ramanujacharya, Madhavacharya-were prominent during this period. The teachings of Suradasa, Tulasidasa, Purandardasa, Mirabai were the great contributors during this period. The Natha Yogis of Hathayoga Tradition like Matsyendaranatha, Gorkshanatha, Cauranginatha, Swatmaram Suri, Gheranda, Shrinivasa Bhatt are some of the great personalities who popularized the Hatha Yoga practices during this period.

The period between 1700 - 1900 A.D. is considered as Modern period in which the great Yogacharyas- Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Paramhansa Yogananda, Vivekananda etc. have contributed for the development of Raja Yoga. This was the period when Vedanta, Bhakti yoga, Nathayoga or Hatha-yoga flourished. The Shadanga-yoga of Gorakshashatakam, Chaturanga-yoga of Hathayogapradipika, Saptanga-yoga of Gheranda Samhita, were the main tenants of Hatha-yoga.

Now in the contemporary times, everybody has conviction about yoga practices towards the preservation, maintenance and promotion of health. Yoga has spread all over the world by the teachings of great personalities like Swami Shivananda, Shri T.Krishnamacharya, Swami Kuvalayananda, Shri Yogendara, Swami Rama, Sri Aurobindo, Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, Acharya Rajanish, Pattabhijois, BKS. Iyengar, Swami Satyananda Sarasvati and the like.

*B.K.S. Iyengar was the founder of the style of yoga known as "Iyengar Yoga" and was considered one of the foremost yoga teachers in the world*

## **Clearing Misconceptions:**

For many, the practice of yoga is restricted to Hatha Yoga and Asanas (postures). However, among the Yoga Sutras, just three sutras are dedicated to asanas. fundamentally, hatha yoga is a preparatory process so that the body can sustain higher levels of energy. The process begins with the body, then the breath, the mind, and the inner self.

Yoga is also commonly understood as a therapy or exercise system for health and fitness. While physical and mental health are natural consequences of yoga, the goal of yoga is more far-reaching. "Yoga is about harmonizing oneself with the universe. It is the technology of aligning individual geometry with the cosmic, to achieve the highest level of perception and harmony."

Yoga does not adhere to any particular religion, belief system or community; it has always been approached as a technology for inner wellbeing. Anyone who practices yoga with involvement can reap its benefits, irrespective of one's faith, ethnicity or culture. Traditional Schools of Yoga :These different Philosophies, Traditions, lineages and Guru-shishya paramparas of Yoga lead to the emergence of different Traditional Schools of Yoga e.g. Jnana-yoga, Bhakti-yoga, Karma-yoga, Dhyana-yoga, Patanjala-yoga, Kundalini-yoga, Hatha-yoga, Mantra-yoga, Laya-yoga, Raja-yoga, Jain-yoga, Bouddha-yoga etc. Each school has its own principles and practices leading to ultimate aim and objectives of Yoga.

Yogic Practices for Health and Wellness: The widely practiced Yoga Sadhanas (Practices) are: Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana (Meditation), Samadhi / Samyama, Bandhas & Mudras, Shat-karmas, Yukta-ahara, Yukta karma, Mantra japa, etc. Yama's are restraints and Niyama's are observances. These are considered to be pre-requisites for the

Yoga Sadhanas (Practices). Asanas, capable of bringing about stability of body and mind ‘kuryat-tad-asanam-sthairyam...’, consists in adopting various body (psycho-physical) patterns, giving ability to maintain a body position (a stable awareness of one’s structural existence) for a considerable length and period of time as well.

### *Different postures of Pranayam*

Pranayama consists in developing awareness of one’s breathing followed by willful regulation of respiration as the functional or vital basis of one’s existence. It helps in developing awareness of one’s mind and helps to establish control over the mind. In the initial stages, this is done by developing awareness of the ‘flow of in-breath and out-breath’ (svasa-prasvasa) through nostrils, mouth and other body openings, its internal and external pathways and destinations. Later, this phenomenon is modified, through regulated, controlled and monitored inhalation (svasa) leading to the awareness of the body space/s getting filled (puraka), the space/s remaining in a filled state (kumbhaka) and it’s getting emptied (rechaka) during regulated, controlled and monitored exhalation (prasvasa).

Pratyahara indicates dissociation of one’s consciousness (withdrawal) from the sense organs which helps one to remain connected with the external objects. Dharana indicates broad based field of attention (inside the body and mind) which is usually understood as concentration. Dhyana (Meditation) is contemplation (focussed attention inside the body and mind) and Samadhi – integration.

Bandhas and Mudras are practices associated with pranayama. They are viewed as (the) higher Yogic practices mainly consisting on adopting certain body (psycho-physical) patterns along with (s well as) control over respiration. This further facilitates control over mind and paves way for higher yogic attainment. Shat-karmas are de-toxification procedures, help to remove the toxins accumulated in the body and are clinical in nature.

Yuktahara (Right Food and other inputs) advocates appropriate food and food habits for healthy living. However practice of Dhyana (Meditation) helping in self-realization leading to transcendence is considered as the essence of Yoga Sadhana (The Practice of Yoga).

## **The Fundamentals of Yoga Sadhana:**

Yoga works on the level of one’s body, mind, emotion and energy. This has given rise to four broad classifications of Yoga: karma yoga, where we utilize the body; bhakti yoga, where we utilize the emotions; gyana yoga, where we utilize the mind and intellect; and kriya yoga, where we utilize the energy.

Each system of Yoga we practice would fall within the gamut of one or more of these categories. Every individual is a unique combination of these four factors. "All the ancient commentaries on

Yoga have stressed that it is essential to work under the direction of a Guru.” The reason being that only a Guru can mix the appropriate combination of the four fundamental paths, as is necessary for each seeker. Yoga Education: Traditionally, Yoga Education was imparted by knowledgeable, experienced, and wise persons in the families (comparable with the education imparted in convents in the west) and then by the Seers (Rishis/Munis/Acharyas) in Ashramas (compared with monasteries). Yoga Education, on the other hand, aims at taking care of the individual, the 'Being'. It is presumed that a good, balanced, integrated, truthful, clean, transparent person will be more useful to oneself, family, society, nation, nature and humanity at large. Yoga education is 'Being oriented'. Details of working with 'being oriented' aspect have been outlined in various living traditions and texts and the method contributing to this important field is known as 'Yoga'.

Present days, Yoga Education is being imparted by many eminent Yoga Institutions, Yoga Colleges, Yoga Universities, Yoga Departments in the Universities, Naturopathy colleges and Private trusts & societies. Many Yoga Clinics, Yoga Therapy and Training Centers, Preventive Health Care Units of Yoga, Yoga Research Centers etc. have been established in Hospitals, Dispensaries, Medical Institutions and Therapeutical setups.

Different social customs and rituals in India, the land of Yoga, reflect a love for ecological balance, tolerance towards other systems of thought and a compassionate outlook towards all creations. Yoga Sadhana of all hues and colours is considered panacea for a meaningful life and living. Its orientation to a comprehensive health, both individual and social, makes it a worthy practice for the people of all religions, races and nationalities.

**Conclusion:** Now-a-days, millions and millions of people across the globe have benefitted by the practice of Yoga which has been preserved and promoted by the great eminent Yoga Masters from ancient time to this date. The practice of Yoga is blossoming, and growing more vibrant every day.

*\* Dr. Ishwar V. Basavaraddi is the Director of Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga*

