

## **A Brief Overview of Yoga Philosophy and Psychology for Westerners**

**Although there is a complex web of Hindu myths, stories, tales, icons, gods, and divinities, the underlying philosophy behind yoga is remarkably simple. It is interesting, however, that although hatha yoga has become a billion dollar industry in America, to most Americans this philosophy remains at best esoteric and inapplicable and at worst utterly inconceivable. Some Americans still think that yoga is a Buddhist practice but it is not; it is originally a Hindu practice and Buddha is to Hinduism what Jesus Christ is to Judaism. The purpose of this article is to clarify what traditional yoga is, clear up some of the inaccuracies surrounding modern yoga, and show how yoga can effect all aspects of our hectic lives.**

**Here are the basic terms needed to understand the philosophy behind yoga:**

**Brahman: the literal translation of Brahman from Sanskrit is “that without attributes.” For us Westerners the best way to conceive of Brahman is as ultimate or transcendent reality, cosmic consciousness, world soul, the unmoved mover, or the supreme and absolute god-term or divinity of Hinduism. It is infinite, unchanging, and eternal as well as omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. And although Brahman is without attributes or characteristics, theoretically it is blissful.**

**Atman: Atman is the individual true Self or what is sometimes conceived of in the West as “soul.”**

**Karma: karma is the law of action or the law of cause and effect. On the micro level in the West we think of karma as “what goes around comes around;” on the macro level it could be summed up by the metaphor “a butterfly in Osaka flaps its wings and there’s a earthquake in Peru,” which implies that everything is essentially interrelated, that there is an unperceivable underlying matrix (Brahman), and that all thoughts, words, and actions have effects or consequences.**

**Maya: maya is best translated by the word “illusory,” which many Americans confuse with “delusional.” Maya simply means that what we perceive through our five senses – seeing as all those phenomena are ephemeral, impermanent, and not**

eternal – is not Real. Only Brahman is Real; hence, all else is illusory or “maya.” This does not imply that you should not trust your senses; it merely tells you that there exists a higher level of reality to which your senses do not have immediate access.

**Samsara/reincarnation: individual souls reincarnate over and over on the wheel of samsara until they are able to burn off all of the bad karma they have accumulated, become enlightened, and are thus liberated from the wheel of samsara and cease to return or incarnate. Hindus use that fact that karma cannot explain or cannot be explained using the events of a single lifetime; thus, we must reincarnate. Although most Americans believe in an afterlife such as heaven and hell, only about 20% believe in the transmigration of souls, ie., reincarnation. However, if you have any doubts just check out Ian Stevenson’s work; Stevenson documented thousands of cases of children who remembered their past lives. Also, read Sogyal Rimpoche’s “The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying” for an interpretation of reincarnation and why most people do not remember their past lives.**

Using the above basic definitions we will now gain a greater understanding of what yoga is, how it developed in India, and how it became the codified ritual and billion dollar industry that it has evolved into in America.

‘Yoga’ means union or yoking. Primarily yoga was developed to unite the mind, body, and spirit, which is primarily accomplished through the concentration on and purification of the essential life force, the breath, prana.

There are different types of yoga. For example, there is bhakti yoga which is devotional yoga; the Hare Krishna movement practices bhakti yoga. There is also jnana yoga which is the yoga of knowledge – not merely an intellectual endeavor but using the mind and intellect to attain higher consciousness.

And then there is hatha yoga, the type of yoga that most Westerners practice. ‘Ha’ means sun and ‘tha’ means moon. Yoga means union. Thus a good definition of hatha yoga is the union or yoking of mind, body, and spirit through the breath; heat (tapas) is generated by moving the body in opposing directions – reaching up

while grounding down, for instance – and this engages the breath to heat up the gross body, cleanse the subtle body, and purify the Self.

The main written texts of Hinduism are the Brahma Sutras, the Bhagavadgita, and the Upanishads. All three of these were predated by the Vedas which were passed on orally and were not written down until thousands of years later. During the Vedic period – around 4000 to 5000 years ago – yoga primarily consisted of groups of men generating tapas by standing around a fire and invoking primordial sounds. There were not many – if any - poses or asanas as we know them.

The time following the Vedic period is known as ‘Vedanta’ which simply means ‘the end of the Vedas.’ During this time commentaries on the Vedas were written – these commentaries became known as “The Upanishads.” Although there are thousands and thousands of Upanishads and even the principal Upanishads are both quite dense and recondite, the Upanishads are often distilled into a simple equation: Atman = Brahman.

Atman equals Brahman simply means that your essential Self, Atman, is really at one – united – with ultimate or transcendent reality, cosmic consciousness, world soul, the unmoved mover. However, human beings are limited by our five senses; all that we are able to perceive through them is illusory, maya. Thankfully, there is a tool that can take us beyond our five senses, beyond consciousness, to the other side of language... and that tool is yoga.

There are other Hindu darshanas – viewpoints – that place the primacy on god or gods rather than Brahman, but because the notion of god has become so obfuscated and confused for most of us by our Judeo-Christian upbringings, it is best to think of Brahman when practicing yoga.

Continuing with the development of yoga in India, after the period of the Upanishads came the Bhagavadgita; written between 500 and 50 BCE, it is supposedly a divine text that provides an excellent discourse on dharma and elucidates why we practice yoga. And around 200 BCE Patanjali wrote his Yoga

**Sutras which delineates the eight limbs of Raja Yoga, of which the asana practice is one limb.**

**It is not until the 1300s in India that we really start seeing an asana practice developing and that occurs in the “Hatha Yoga Pradipika.”**

**Let us shift now to a timeline or overview of the development of hatha yoga and its various incarnations and brands in America:**

**1893 Swami Vivekananda, student of Ramakrishna, speaks at the Parliament of Religions**

**1920s Paramahansa Yogananda begins Self-Realization Fellowship in Boston**

**1930s Sri Aurobindo founds Integral Yoga**

**1920s-1930s in India: Krishnamacharya standardizes the pose sequences into three series: primary, intermediate and advanced. His four most famous disciples become the founders of yoga schools in America: K. Pattabhi Jois, Iyengar, Indra Devi (a Soviet woman), and Krishnamacharya’s son, Desikachar**

**1943 Paramahansa Yogananda publishes “Autobiography of a Yogi”**

**1950s Sivananda Yoga, series of 12 postures, is created by Swami Vishnudevananda, a disciple of Swami Sivananda**

**1953 Indra Devi publishes the first best-selling book on yoga “Forever Young, Forever Healthy”**

**1960s B.K.S. Iyengar. Iyengar adds precision to asanas and therapeutic descriptions, abandons Krishnamacharya’s viniyasa style**

**1960s Pattabhi Jois founds Astanga yoga**

**1969 Swami Satchitananda speaks at Woodstock**

**1970s Swami Muktananda founds Siddha Yoga Dama in the West**

**1970 Yogi Bhajan founds Kundalini Yoga in the West**

**1970s Desikachar furthers Viniyoga which is developed by Krishnamacharya towards end of his life**

**1970s Bikram Choudhury founds Bikram Yoga which consists of 26 poses performed in a heated room**

**1980s David Life and Sharon Gannon found Jivamukti Yoga in the East Village in New York**

**1997 John Friend founds Anusara Yoga**

**As you can see, the lineage and various brands of yoga are quite complicated. Irrespective of the brand of yoga that you choose, if you are performing a series of asana poses it is mostly like some form of hatha yoga. Now we must ask why this often strenuous practice is so appealing to Westerners in general and Americans in particular?**

**If you look deeply, the ethos behind our intense form of American capitalism is a competitiveness and covetousness rarely seen in humanity. We are warriors, are possessors, conquerors – in our careers, in our homes, and in our relationships – and in terms of material possessions and status symbols enough never seems to be enough.**

**When was the last time someone said to you, “I love you unconditionally. I don’t care what you ‘do.’ I don’t care if you’re poor or don’t have money for food. I love your being. I love your essence. I just want to facilitate your blissfulness.” And yet, no large bank account, no large home or homes, no large muscles, no Prada handbag, no Ferrari, no diplomas, no vacation in Antigua or the Swiss Alps can fulfill our essential emotional and spiritual needs. The great emphases in America that are placed on self-reliance, productivity, independence, and competitiveness have left many people feeling unconnected, alienated, unloved, unlovable, and depressed.**

**Yoga is an excellent tool for going to the other side of our “Western” desires, our “maya,” and gaining a greater understanding of what is really important in life. At worst, even if we get just one pure breath – just one – during our practice, it is a respite from the stress of our hectic lives.**

**Theoretically, with extensive practice, it is possible through yoga “to realize Brahman,” to become “one” or united with blissful cosmic consciousness. But such an extreme transformation should not be our goal. Rather, on our paths to**

**enlightenment, we should seek and appreciate calm, we should seek and appreciate peace, we should practice ahimsa – non-violence to all things including ourselves – we should embody commitment, respect, and personal integrity, we should be as compassionate, patient, and loving as possible, and we must try to replace any resentments we may harbor with gratitude.**

**A deeper problem for many Americans is that we have not been taught how to truly love ourselves. In fact, many Americans don't even know who they are – they truly believe that they are their resumes, they are a list of accomplishments, they are a list of things that they own or possess or wear or are attached to. But do any of those things comprise the essence of what being human is?**

**Again, if only for a glimpse, if only for a millisecond, yoga is a wonderful tool – with no side effects if practiced correctly with ahimsa (non-violence) – to gaining a greater understanding about and insights into our essential Selves, our Atmans, about the things that we think are important to us, about the commitments we must make in order to lead fulfilling, fruitful, and meaningful lives.**

**So as we can see, yoga as we practice it here in the West did not spontaneously incarnate 5000 years ago as a 75 or 90 minute workout on bleached oak hardwood floors. The practice - which we often equate with various series of asanas - has evolved over time: the idea of generating “tapas” – heat, austerity – that developed during the Vedic period was internalized during the period of the Upanishads. This heat is created by moving in opposite directions at the same time – for instance, reaching up while grounding down – and is the primary means used to enable us to transcend maya and realize our true natures and Brahman. This is the philosophy behind the poses of the asana series... not better abs. 😊**

**Ira Israel  
M.A. Religious Studies  
M.A. Clinical Psychology  
M.A. Philosophy**