

THE
YOGA
SUTRAS
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A Comprehensive Guide to the Core Concepts of Yoga

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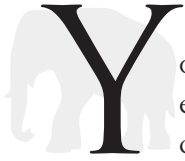
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What Is Yoga?



Yoga is an unassuming word with deep and broad interpretations. Many equate yoga with physical postures or stretching exercises, which captures only a tiny fraction of its true identity. According to the text at hand, the *Yoga Sūtra-s*, “yoga is the stilling of fluctuations in the heart-mind field of consciousness” (1.2). Yoga is a set of tools for refining and stabilizing our body, breath, heart, and mind, which allows our attention to turn inward to discover our own true nature, our quiet inner light of awareness. The term yoga is also used to describe the state of mind in which our thoughts and emotions do not distract our attention, again enabling our innate radiance to shine forth.

The dictionary lists a variety of meanings for yoga, including joining, uniting; union, junction, combination; contact, touch, connection; employment, application, use; mode, manner, course, means; a yoke; and a conveyance, vehicle. Various texts define yoga in a similar way, yet all are slightly different. According to the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*,

They consider holding the senses steady as the state of yoga.
Then one becomes vigilant. Yoga is indeed subject to growth
and decay. (2.3.11)

The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* states

By practicing the yoga of meditation, they saw
the power of the divine self hidden by its own effects. (1.3)

The *Bhagavad-Gītā*, one of the most important texts on yoga, defines yoga as

equanimity (2.48)
skill/welfare/well-being in actions (2.50)
not eating too much, not absolutely not eating, not the habit of
sleeping too much, and not staying awake either (6.16)
separating from the bondage of suffering (6.23)

According to the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, a text on Āyurveda (East Indian Medicine),

Happiness and suffering proceed from contact with the self, sensory organs, mind, and sense objects. When the mind is steadily resting in the self, both happiness and suffering cease due to not engaging the sensory organs, and complete control (of the heart-mind) arises in the person. This state is known as “yoga” by the expert sages. (Śarīrasthānam 1.138-139)

Yoga can take on several different yet overlapping forms. The list below is not necessarily all-inclusive.

<i>rāja</i>	“king”	Yoga according to the <i>Yoga Sūtra-s</i>
<i>bhakti</i>	“devotion”	Connecting through pure devotion, complete surrender to the divine
<i>jñāna</i>	“knowledge”	Study and contemplation
<i>karma</i>	“action”	Service to others, self-practice
<i>mantra</i>	“sacred chanting”	Chanting a mantra repeatedly
<i>nāḍa</i>	“resounding”	Hearing the inner sounds, inaudible to our outer sense of hearing
<i>bat̥ha</i>	“force, will”	Purification, awakening the kuṇḍalinī-śakti

A BRIEF HISTORY OF YOGA

The source texts for yoga philosophy are the four *Veda-s*: *Ṛg*, *Sāma*, *Yajur*, and *Atharva*. Both *Sāma-Veda* and *Yajur-Veda* derive heavily from the original *Ṛg-Veda*. “Veda” means “knowledge,” from the root “vid,” meaning “to see, find,” the origin of the English words “vision” and “video.” It is said that all four *Veda-s* were channeled from a divine source through ṛṣi-s (sages/poets) into Sanskrit sounds. The Sanskrit language itself is considered to be of divine origin. The *Upaniṣad-s*, written much later, are considered “Vedānta,” which literally means “end of the *Veda-s*.” They are extrapolations of the *Veda-s*, often couched in story format and more accessible and easier to understand than the *Veda-s*. Both the *Veda-s* and *Upaniṣad-s* are classified as “śruti,” meaning “heard,” a class of knowledge accorded to divine origin. All other texts are classified as “smṛti,” meaning “remembered,” and are considered to be of human origin. The *Yoga Sūtra-s* is considered “smṛti” because it was written by a man (Patañjali) and does not reference the *Veda-s* directly.

All the *Veda-s* have been preserved orally by means of Vedic chanting. In fact, they are still memorized by families in India, and the oral rendition is usually considered the most accurate. At some point in history they were written down on palm or banana leaves. When the leaves dried up, they were rewritten based on the chanting, not copied from the old leaves. Thus, the earliest written text does not date the true origin of the *Veda-s*. The *Ṛg-Veda* is the oldest of all the *Veda-s*, its written form dating back to at least 1500 BCE, with some traditions placing it at 3000 BCE or earlier.

Yoga philosophy existed long before the *Yoga Sūtra-s* was written. The *Yoga Sūtra-s* were compiled between 500 and 200 BCE, much later than the *Veda-s* in which yoga is mentioned. There are six classical darśana-s, “views” that are rooted in the *Veda-s*. (See below.) The *Yoga Sūtra-s* is considered to be the primary text of what is called yoga-darśana. Sāṅkhya-darśana is its pair, providing a foundational theory of creation for yoga-darśana.

SIX VIEWS

(*Ṣaḍ-Darśana-s*)

There are six “views” of Vedic thought, called ṣaḍ-darśana-s, that are like branches of the same tree. These are six different perspectives on the same underlying Vedic principles. The Sāṅkhya perspective delineates the components of existence (the twenty-five tattva-s) and how they emerge to form the manifest world. This view provides a foundational structure for Patañjali’s yoga, which describes in detail how the human psyche works. Patañjali mentions several tools for living a kind, civil life; refining the body, mind, and sense organs; and turning attention inward to understand the true nature of one’s inner Self.

NAME OF VIEW	SĀṆKHYA	YOGA	PŪRVA-MĪMĀMSĀ	UTTARA-MĪMĀMSĀ, OR VEDANTA	NYĀYA	VAIŚEŚIKA
MEANING OF NAME	Enumeration	Application/ union	Early investigation	Later investigation	“That by which the mind is led to a conclusion”	Particularization
PRIMARY TEXT	<i>Sāṅkhya Kārikā</i>	<i>Yoga Sūtra-s</i>	<i>Mīmāṃsā Sūtra-s</i>	<i>Vedānta/ Brahma/ Śārīraka Sūtra-s</i>	<i>Nyāya Sūtra-s</i>	<i>Vaiśeṣika Sūtra-s</i>
FOUNDER	Kapila	Hiranyagarbha	Jaimini		Gotama	
AUTHOR(S)	Īśvarakṛṣṇa	Patañjali	Jaimini	Bādarāyaṇa	Gotama	Kaṇāda/ Kāśyapa
APPROX DATES	700–600 BCE, 200–300 AD	500–200 BCE	400 BCE	500–200 BCE	300–200 BCE	300–200 BCE
COMMENTATORS	Vācaspati Miśra	Vyāsa	Śabara	Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva	Vātsyāyaṇa	Śaṅkara Miśra
DESCRIPTION	Seer and seeable meet and manifest into the twenty-five tattva-s, guṇa-s	Psychological map of consciousness with tools and practices to reach samādhi	Ritual, worship, ethical conduct, sound, mantra	Nondual—all is Brahman; anything that appears to exist is only a projection of Brahman	Logic, the basis for scientific inquiry and philosophical debate	Everything is made up of individual atomic particles; physics, chemistry

SĀṆKHYA-DARŚANA

The Philosophy Behind the Yoga Sūtra-s

Underlying the experiential practice of yoga is a philosophy that provides a blueprint for the manifest world. Sāṅkhya means “enumeration” and refers to a theory of creation and dissolution that consists of twenty-five “tattva-s,” components of the manifest world. Some say that only twenty-four of them are actually tattva-s and the twenty-fifth (Puruṣa) is not really a tattva since it is not part of the manifest world per se.

According to the *Sāṅkhya-Kārikā*, the primary text of this philosophy, objects come into existence from subtle to gross. Puruṣa is the unmanifest, conscious witness that pervades Prakṛti, the manifest universe. (See draṣṭṛ and dṛśya.) If Puruṣa is a magnet, Prakṛti is the iron filings. When in close proximity, Puruṣa causes Prakṛti to stir. Prakṛti, the manifest world, has three qualities, called guṇa-s: sattva (intelligence, purity, balance), rajas (activity, stimulation), and tamas (inertia, stagnation). (See below.) Sāṅkhya theory describes how matter is formed into specific products, including the five elements (solids, liquids, fire, gases, and space). (See appendix F, figure 1.)

THE GUṆA-S

Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas

Guṇa means attribute, quality, property, or characteristic. In Sāṅkhya philosophy, there are three guṇa-s: sattva, rajas, and tamas. Each represents a set of qualities that, taken together, comprise all qualities present in the natural, manifest world, called Prakṛti. Guṇa also means rope, string, or cord, so the guṇa-s can be likened to three strands of a rope that bind the individual's spirit (Puruṣa) within his or her body (part of Prakṛti). There are two ways to view the guṇa-s: cosmic or psychological.

The Sāṅkhya philosophy provides the cosmic view, where every substance in the manifest world contains all three guṇa-s in various proportions. Tamas, the grossest and densest guṇa, represents inanimate matter, which does not require an embodied being. The five gross elements (space, air, fire, water, and earth) and corresponding subtle elements (sound, touch, form, taste, and smell) arise from tamas. Rajas, the energy of activity, is responsible for change and movement. Sattva, a balance of the positive aspects of tamas and rajas, is present in animate matter, which requires an embodied being. The outer mind (manas), buddhi, five sense organs, and five motor organs arise from sattva. From this point of view, tamas and rajas have positive and negative attributes. Tamas is matter; rajas is the heat and energy necessary to transform; and sattva is the purity, intelligence, and light of knowledge.

The *Yoga Sūtra-s* and Āyurveda both refer to the guṇa-s in the psychological sense, as qualities of the individual heart-mind. Ideally, sattva leads and rajas and tamas follow. Relative to the field of sattva in the heart-mind (citta), rajas and tamas appear unhealthy and negative. The physical body is inherently tamasic; the prāṇa is rajasic; and the spirit is sattvic. Chapters 14 and 17 of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* describe the triguṇa in detail, with sattva regarded as positive and helpful while rajas and tamas are negative and harmful. Yoga and Āyurveda advocate a heart-mind that moves toward sattva and away from rajas and tamas, which are considered detrimental to one's spiritual progress.

Sūtra 2.18 refers to these guṇa-s not by name but by adjectives describing the main property of each: brightness (sattva), activity (rajas), and inertia (tamas). One stage leading up to kaivalya is a realization of the difference between a sattvic heart-mind and the seer (4.25). A sattvic heart-mind is indeed an advanced stage, but not the end. Sattva is like a golden chain. Although its qualities are all positive and helpful, it is nevertheless a guṇa, binding our spirit to impermanent manifest existence. The last sūtra in chapter 4 (4.34) equates

kaivalya with going inward to the point at which one returns to the source of the guṇa-s and can distinguish between the changing guṇa-s of Prakṛti and the unchanging inner light of Puruṣa.

Generally we want the qualities of our heart-mind to progress from tamas and rajas toward sattva. Tamas and rajas can counteract each other for the eventual good of the individual. For example, if we are stuck in tamas, rajas can act as motivation to loosen up the inertia and start practicing. On the other hand, if we are too nervous or agitated or cannot slow down (too much rajas), tamas can help ground and stabilize our heart-mind. Sattva can be viewed as a balance of the positive qualities of tamas and rajas. For example:

Water

Ice = tamas—immobile, rigid crystals; slow to melt

Steam = rajas—fast moving particles; hot and energetic

Liquid = sattva—flowing gently

Direction

Veering to right = rajas

Veering to left = tamas

Centering = sattva

According to Āyurveda, our physical constitution (called Prakṛti) is governed by three doṣa-s (vāta, pitta, and kapha), and our mental constitution (manas-prakṛti) by the three guṇa-s. The individual heart-mind field of consciousness (citta, specifically the buddhi) is innately transparent, a characteristic of sattva. When the dark veil of ignorance is lifted, the citta becomes clear, which allows the inner light of knowledge to shine through for us to experience.

OVERVIEW AND FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

SATTVA	RAJAS	TAMAS
Love, compassion, wisdom, intelligence, truthfulness, radiance, purity, clarity, peace, harmony, equilibrium/balance, nonviolence. Know when and how to act for the greater good, how stable to be, etc. Blend best of both sides = balance	Dynamic movement, desire, motivation, direction, competition, aggressiveness, kinetic energy, turbulence, agitation, change	Inertia, solidity, dullness, darkness, veiling, coarseness, resistance to change, laziness, destructive nature, violence, dizziness, sleepiness
Virtue, appropriateness	Activity, stimulation	Inertia, stagnancy
Light	Color	Darkness
Light	Energy	Matter
Knowledge, wisdom	Too intellectual	No interest in knowledge
Adaptable, appropriate change	Quick to change	Slow to change, resists change
Positivity, optimism		Negativity, pessimism
Truthfulness	Deceit	Untruthfulness, lying
Pure, clean, neat	Disorderly	Impure, dirty, sloppy
Nonviolence	Angry violence	Perverse violence
Vegetarian, fresh foods, easy to digest, promote a clear mind, nutritious	Stimulating foods like coffee (caffeine), cayenne, peppers	Stale, leftover, fried, or canned foods
Not attached to actions. Don't talk about them, just do	Intent to harm, unclear speech and action, easily affected by pairs of opposites	Postpones action, ineffective, indirect, cannot find best way to handle situations
Steady, does not give up if fails unless there is no hope	Ever seeking happiness: What can I get?	Lack of belief in higher force, depressed, gives up easily

YOGA-DARŚANA

As Sāṅkhya shows evolution happening from the subtlest and innermost to the grossest, outermost level, yoga provides the means for involution, going in reverse from the grossest external to the subtlest internal state. Spiritual development involves conscious change and refinement, replacing one's unconscious, negative habitual patterns with conscious, positive, helpful practices that dissolve attachments and lead to a healthier, happier being.

The purpose of yoga is purification of the heart-mind (*citta-prasādana*). Yoga, working from outer to inner, focuses on how to connect to the inner light of awareness, our inner self, called *Puruṣa* or *Ātman*. Yoga is a preparation for *Vedānta*, which works from inner to outer and focuses on the question “What is *Ātman*?”

YOGA AND YOGA-DARŚANA

There is a distinction to be made between yoga in a broad sense and yoga-darśana. Patañjali did not create yoga. He brilliantly compiled its essence, entitled *Pātañjala-Yoga-Darśanam*, meaning “view of yoga according to patañjali” and known in the West as the *Yoga Sūtra-s*. Yoga existed long before Patañjali. In the initial sūtra, the term “*anuśāsana*” indicates this teaching follows (*anu*) a long tradition of teachings (*śāsana*). The Patañjali yoga tradition is a later expression of older, vedic teachings originally founded by *Hiraṇyagarbha*, and as such occurs in the context of a broader yoga-darśana. As mentioned previously, the term “yoga” is defined in the *Kaṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad-s*. The *Mahābhārata*, the huge Indian epic that includes the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, refers to yoga numerous times. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* itself, each chapter of which is called a “yoga,” is considered one of the primary ancient yoga śāstra-s.

Many texts exist on yoga-darśana, listed below in chronological order.

NAME	DATE	AUTHOR	NOTES
<i>Bhagavad-Gītā</i>	600–200 BCE	Veda Vyāsa	18 chapters, 700 verses, part of the <i>Mahābhārata</i>
<i>Pātañjala-Yoga-Darśana</i>	500–200 BCE	Patañjali	4 chapters, 195 sūtra-s
<i>Yoga-Yajñavalkya</i>	200–400 CE	Yajñavalkya	12 chapters, 462 verses, teaching to Gargi, a woman
<i>Yoga-Vasiṣṭha</i>	800–900 CE	Vasiṣṭha	29,000 verses, taught by Vasiṣṭha to Rāma

NAME	DATE	AUTHOR	NOTES
<i>Haṭha-Yoga-Pradīpikā</i>	1300–1400 CE	Swātmarāma	4 chapters, 389 verses, primary āsana text
<i>Śiva-Saṃhitā</i>	1650–1750 CE	Unknown	5 chapters, 517 verses
<i>Gheraṇḍa-Saṃhitā</i>	1650–1750 CE	Gheraṇḍa	7 chapters, 346 verses, primary āsana text
<i>Yoga-Upaniṣad-s</i>	Broad range	Many	Not well known

OVERVIEW OF THE *YOGA SŪTRA-S* (PĀTAÑJALA-YOGA-DARŚANAM)

The *Pātañjala-Yogadarśanam* is an exercise in philosophy, “love of wisdom”; ontology, “study of existence”; and psychology, “study of the psyche.” It describes human consciousness in detail and provides tools and practices for self-development and refinement. Even if the ultimate goal of emancipation (kaivalya) is not attained, the process of studying and learning the *Yoga Sūtra-s* serves to make one a better, happier, kinder person.

The *Yoga Sūtra-s* has four chapters with approximately 195 sūtra-s (some versions have one more or less). Keep in mind the circularity of Indian thought when viewing the organization of this text. In the West, we typically read a book from the beginning to the end. This particular book does not necessarily work that way. Pāda means “part,” which here translates to “chapter.”

CHAPTER	# SŪTRA-S	MEANING
1 Samādhi Pāda	51	Absorption
2 Sādhana Pāda	55	Practice
3 Vibhūti Pāda	55	Extraordinary Power
4 Kaivalya Pāda	34	Freedom

Chapter 1, entitled Samādhi Pāda, is meant for students already steeped in yoga practice. It jumps right into the various fluctuations present in the heart-mind, then provides ways to quell those distracting thoughts. Samādhi, an advanced stage of yoga practice, is discussed in detail.

Chapter 2, called Sādhana Pāda, is the most practical. It describes numerous tools and practices for purifying the body, breath, and heart-mind in preparation for the journey inward. It is said that a beginner should start in the middle of this

chapter, with the mention of the eight limbs of yoga and description of the first five outer limbs. The practices in chapter 2, needed for one who is still involved in worldly matters, are preparations for chapter 1.

Chapter 3, Vibhūti Pāda, describes the last three inner limbs (collectively called saṃyama, focusing inward) and their side effects. The powers accrued during deep meditation are extraordinary and not to be shown off or abused; they are merely to be noticed and then ignored, since they can sidetrack one's focus away from the final goal of yoga, described in chapter 4.

Chapter 4, Kaivalya Pāda, describes the heart-mind (citta) and the changes that occur during the journey inward culminating in absolute freedom (kaivalya).

Patañjali consistently lists concepts in deliberate order, most often from outer/external/superficial to inner/internal/deep, and also in sequence, one leading to the next. It is interesting to note that the first real word of the text is yoga (the word “atha” is equivalent to “the Beginning”), and the last real word is śakti (the final word “iti” is equivalent to “the End”). Given the circular nature of Indian thought, it is fair to say that yoga is directly related to śakti (power or ability). This relationship is discussed further in “The Power of Attention,” below.

SŪTRA WRITING FORMAT

The *Pātañjala-Yoga-Darśanam* is written in sūtra format, one of several possible formats for recording information. Sūtra format, described in the verse below, is the most concise way of presenting information, and is meant to be used as a mnemonic device. Since sūtra-s are so terse, a written or live commentary is necessary to understand them. Traditionally one memorizes them via chanting, then a teacher expounds on their meaning. Because the sound of the sūtra is associated in memory with its expanded commentary, it becomes easy to recall vast amounts of information by mnemonic association.