



---

## **The Yoga in India: Ancient Roots to Modern Practices**

Dhani Ram

Department of Commerce

Ramjas College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India.

E-mail: [ghaniram@ramjas.du.ac.in](mailto:ghaniram@ramjas.du.ac.in)

### **Abstract**

*Yoga is a practice with roots in ancient India that has evolved, with different schools and styles emerging. The earliest known mention of yoga is in the Rig Veda, a sacred text between 1500-1200 BCE. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, written around 400 CE, is one of the most influential texts on yoga philosophy and practice. Hatha yoga, a popular style that emphasises physical postures, breathing, and meditation, emerged in the 11th century CE. In the 19th and 20th centuries, yoga began to spread beyond India with the establishment of yoga schools and the integration of yoga into Western culture. Today, yoga is practised by millions of people around the world for its physical, mental, and spiritual benefits. This paper provides an overview of yoga's origin, history, and development in India, highlighting key historical events, influential texts, and notable figures in the evolution of this ancient practice.*

*Introduction Yoga is a practice that has gained immense popularity in recent years, with millions of people around the world practising it for its physical, mental, and spiritual benefits. However, the roots of yoga can be traced back to ancient India, where it emerged as a way to attain spiritual enlightenment and liberation from suffering. The practice of yoga has evolved, with different schools and styles developing to suit the needs and beliefs of different practitioners. In this paper, we will explore yoga's origin, history, and development in India, highlighting key historical events, influential texts, and notable figures in the evolution of this ancient practice. By understanding yoga's rich history and cultural significance in India, we can better appreciate the practice and its many benefits.*

**Keywords:** Yoga, Ancient India, Rig Veda, Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Hatha Yoga, Physical Postures, Meditation, Western Culture, Spiritual Benefits.

### **History of Development of Yoga**

Yoga has a long and rich history, dating back thousands of years in India. Its development is closely tied to the spiritual and philosophical beliefs of the ancient Indian people, who saw yoga as a path to enlightenment and liberation from suffering.

The earliest known mention of yoga is in the Rig Veda, a sacred text between 1500-1200 BCE. The Rig Veda describes the practice of yoga as a way to connect with the divine and attain spiritual insight. The word "yoga" is derived from the Sanskrit word "yuj," which means to yoke or unite, suggesting a connection between the practitioner and the divine.

Over time, the practice of yoga evolved, with different schools and styles developing to suit the needs and beliefs of different practitioners. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, written around 400 CE, is one of the most influential texts on yoga philosophy and practice. It outlines the eight limbs of yoga, including ethical principles, physical postures, breathing exercises, meditation, and concentration. The Yoga Sutras emphasise the importance of self-discipline, mindfulness, and detachment from worldly desires to attain spiritual liberation.



Hatha yoga, a popular style that emphasises physical postures, breathing, and meditation, emerged in the 11th century CE. Hatha yoga is often seen as a preparation for the deeper spiritual practices of yoga, helping to purify the body and calm the mind in preparation for meditation. Hatha yoga includes various physical postures, from gentle stretches to more challenging poses, as well as breathing exercises and meditation.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, yoga began to spread beyond India with the establishment of yoga schools and the integration of yoga into Western culture. One of the key figures in this development was Swami Vivekananda, an Indian philosopher and yogi who introduced yoga to the Western world at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Vivekananda emphasised the practical benefits of yoga for physical and mental health and its potential as a spiritual path.

Another influential figure in the development of modern yoga was Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, an Indian yoga teacher often referred to as the "father of modern yoga." Krishnamacharya taught a holistic approach to yoga that incorporated physical postures, breathing exercises, meditation, and philosophy. His students included many of the most influential yoga teachers of the 20th century, including B.K.S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, and T.K.V. Desikachar.

Today, yoga is practised by millions of people worldwide, with a wide variety of styles and approaches to suit different needs and preferences. Some people practice yoga primarily for its physical benefits, such as increased flexibility and strength, while others see it as a means to reduce stress and promote overall well-being. Still, others are drawn to yoga as a spiritual path, seeking to deepen their connection to the divine and explore the mysteries of the universe.

In recent years, there has been some controversy surrounding the commercialisation and cultural appropriation of yoga in the Western world. Some argue that the popularization of yoga has led to a loss of its spiritual and philosophical roots, reducing it to a mere fitness trend or lifestyle choice. Others argue that yoga is a living tradition that continues to evolve and adapt to new contexts and that its popularity in the West has helped to spread its benefits and make it more accessible to people around the world.

Regardless of these debates, the history of yoga is a fascinating and complex story that reflects the diverse beliefs and practices of the people who have practised it over the centuries. By exploring the history and development of yoga, we can gain a deeper appreciation of its many

#### ⇒ **Vedic period Yoga**

The Vedic period lasted from roughly 1500-500 BCE and is considered the earliest stage of Indian civilisation and culture. During this period, the earliest known references to yoga appear in the sacred texts known as the Vedas.

The Vedas were composed in the Sanskrit language and are considered the oldest surviving texts of the Hindu tradition. They consist of four main collections: the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda. The Rigveda, in particular, contains numerous references to yoga as a spiritual practice.

In the Vedas, yoga is described as connecting with the divine and attaining spiritual enlightenment. It is often associated with the god Indra, who is said to have practised yoga to gain strength and



overcome his enemies. The Rigveda also references various physical postures and breathing exercises, thought to be early forms of what would later become known as hatha yoga.

The concept of karma, the idea that our actions have consequences and determine our destiny, is also prominent in the Vedas. This idea is closely tied to yoga, emphasising cultivating a pure heart and mind to attain spiritual liberation.

One of the key themes of the Vedas is the pursuit of truth and knowledge. This pursuit is often described as a journey, with the seeker moving from darkness to light, from ignorance to enlightenment. This metaphorical journey is a central part of the spiritual path, and yoga is often described as a means to facilitate this journey.

It is worth noting that the yoga of the Vedic period was quite different from the yoga practised today. The physical postures and breathing exercises that are now synonymous with yoga still need to exist, and the practice was primarily focused on meditation, visualisation, and the chanting of mantras. However, the seeds of the later developments in yoga were already present in the Vedic period, and the spiritual and philosophical principles that underlie yoga were already well-established.

Overall, the Vedic period represents an essential stage in the development of yoga, laying the foundation for later practices and beliefs. The early references to yoga in the Vedas suggest that it was already an established spiritual practice and was closely tied to the pursuit of spiritual knowledge and enlightenment. While the physical postures and breathing exercises now associated with yoga did not yet exist, the principles of self-discipline, mindfulness, and detachment from worldly desires central to yoga were already well-established in the Vedic period.

#### ⇒ **Pre-classical period**

The pre-classical period of yoga in India is believed to have lasted from around 500 BCE to 200 BCE. During this time, significant developments were made in the practice and philosophy of yoga, paving the way for the classical period of yoga that would follow.

One of the most important figures of this period was the sage Patanjali, who is credited with writing the Yoga Sutras. This text is considered one of the foundational works of yoga philosophy and is still studied and revered by yogis today.

The Yoga Sutras are divided into four chapters, or padas, which outline the principles and practices of yoga. The first chapter, called Samadhi Pada, discusses the nature of yoga and its ultimate goal, which is to attain a state of samadhi, or spiritual enlightenment. The second chapter, Sadhana Pada, outlines the various practices necessary to achieve this goal, including ethical principles, physical postures, and breathing exercises. The third chapter, Vibhuti Pada, discusses the various supernatural powers that yoga can attain. The fourth and final chapter, Kaivalya Pada, describes the ultimate state of liberation that yoga can achieve.

One of the critical contributions of Patanjali to the development of yoga was his systematisation of the various practices and principles that had been developed up to that point. By organising these practices into a coherent system, he made it easier for students to learn and practice yoga. He also helped establish a common language and set of concepts still used in the study of yoga today.



Another significant development during the pre-classical period was the concept of karma yoga, or the yoga of action. This idea emphasises the importance of performing one's duties in a selfless and detached manner without being attached to the results of one's actions. This concept is closely tied to karma, which suggests that our actions have consequences that determine our future experiences.

During this period, various yoga schools emerged, each with unique practices and philosophies. One of the most influential of these schools was the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu scripture that explores the nature of yoga and its relationship to other aspects of life, such as duty, love, and knowledge.

The Bhagavad Gita describes three main paths of yoga: karma yoga, which emphasises action and duty; bhakti yoga, which emphasises devotion and love; and jnana yoga, which emphasises knowledge and wisdom. These three paths are seen as complementary and interdependent and often practised together as a holistic approach to spiritual growth and enlightenment.

Overall, the pre-classical yoga period in India was a time of significant development and innovation. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and the Bhagavad Gita are two of the most important works of this period, laying the foundation for the classical period of yoga that would follow. The emergence of karma yoga and the three paths of yoga described in the Bhagavad Gita also demonstrate the diversity and richness of the yogic tradition, which has continued to evolve and adapt over thousands of years.

#### ⇒ **Classical period Yoga**

The classical yoga period in India is believed to have lasted from around 200 BCE to 500 CE. During this time, yoga became more widely practised and took on a more formalised structure, with specific schools and lineages emerging.

One of the most important figures of this period was the sage Patanjali, who is credited with writing the Yoga Sutras. This text, discussed in the pre-classical period, continued to be studied and developed during the classical period, with commentators and practitioners adding their insights and interpretations.

One of the critical contributions of the classical period of yoga was the development of Hatha Yoga, a branch of yoga that emphasises physical postures, breathing exercises, and other practices aimed at purifying the body and preparing it for spiritual practices. Hatha Yoga is often credited to the sage Goraksha, believed to have lived in the 10th or 11th century CE.

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika, a text attributed to the sage Swami Svamarama, is one of the most important works of Hatha Yoga. This text describes the various practices of Hatha Yoga, including asanas (physical postures), pranayama (breathing exercises), and bandhas (energy locks).

During the classical period, various yoga schools also emerged, each with unique practices and philosophies. One of the most influential of these schools was the Advaita Vedanta, which emphasised the non-dual nature of reality and the ultimate goal of realising one's true nature as the infinite and eternal Self.

Another significant development during the classical period was the emergence of Tantra Yoga, a branch of yoga that emphasises using physical and mental techniques to transform the individual and achieve spiritual realisation. Tantra Yoga includes visualisation, mantra repetition, and ritual worship of deities.



Overall, the classical yoga period in India was a time of significant innovation and development. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika are two of the most important works of this period, laying the foundation for the modern practice of yoga. The emergence of Hatha Yoga and Tantra Yoga also demonstrate the diversity and richness of the yogic tradition, which has continued to evolve and adapt over thousands of years.

During the classical period, yoga also began to spread beyond India, with the first translations of yoga texts into Chinese and other languages appearing. This helped spread the knowledge and practice of yoga to other parts of the world and contributed to the development of new forms of yoga that incorporate elements of other cultures and traditions.

Today, yoga continues to be practised by millions of people worldwide, with various styles and traditions to choose from. While the classical period of yoga in India was a pivotal time in developing this ancient practice, it is clear that yoga has continued to evolve and adapt over the centuries. It will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future.

### ⇒ **Yoga in Medieval Times**

The medieval period in India, roughly from the 6th to the 16th century, was a time of significant development for yoga. During this period, yoga continued to evolve, with new techniques and teachings emerging and existing practices refined and expanded.

One of the most important developments during the medieval period was the emergence of Bhakti Yoga, a branch of yoga that emphasises devotion and love for a personal deity as the path to spiritual realisation. Bhakti Yoga was popularised by the Bhakti movement, a religious movement that swept across India during the medieval period and emphasised the worship of divine love and devotion.

The practice of yoga during the medieval period was also strongly influenced by the teachings of the Natha Yogis, a sect of yogis who emphasised physical practices such as Hatha Yoga and the use of mantra and meditation. The Natha Yogis were known for their ability to perform physical feats and their use of esoteric practices to achieve spiritual realisation.

Another significant development during the medieval period was the emergence of the Tantric Yoga tradition, which emphasised using sexual energy to achieve spiritual realisation. Tantric Yoga also emphasised the use of ritual and visualisation practices, and it was closely associated with the worship of the goddess Kali and other Tantric deities.

During the medieval period, yoga practice was also influenced by the teachings of the various Indian philosophical schools, including Advaita Vedanta, which emphasised the non-dual nature of reality, and the Sankhya school, which emphasised the analysis of the components of reality.

One of the most important texts of the medieval period was the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, a text attributed to the sage Swami Svatmarama. This text provided a detailed description of the various practices of Hatha Yoga, including asanas, pranayama, and bandhas. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika also



emphasised the importance of purification of the body and mind as a necessary step in practising yoga.

The medieval period also saw the emergence of various yoga schools and lineages, each with unique practices and teachings. One of the most influential of these schools was the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres, founded by Swami Sivananda in the early 20th century. The Sivananda Yoga tradition emphasises a holistic approach to yoga, incorporating physical postures, breathing exercises, meditation, and spiritual study.

Overall, the medieval period was a time of significant development for yoga, with new techniques, teachings, and existing practices being refined and expanded upon. The emergence of Bhakti Yoga, Tantric Yoga, and the teachings of the Natha Yogis contributed to the richness and diversity of the yogic tradition, which has continued to evolve and adapt over the centuries.

Today, yoga continues to be practised by millions of people worldwide, with various styles and traditions to choose from. While the medieval period in India was a pivotal time in the development of yoga, it is clear that yoga has continued to evolve and adapt over the centuries. It will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future.

### ⇒ **Yoga in Modern Times**

The practice of yoga has undergone significant changes and evolution in the modern era. While yoga was traditionally associated with spiritual and religious practices, it has become increasingly popular as a form of physical exercise and stress management in the modern era.

One of the most significant changes in the modern era has been the emergence of modern postural yoga, which has become popular worldwide. Modern postural yoga emphasises physical postures, asanas, and breathing techniques, or pranayama, to achieve physical and mental well-being. This form of yoga has been adapted to suit modern lifestyles and is often taught in group classes, with many different styles and variations available.

Another significant development in the modern era has been the scientific validation of the benefits of yoga. Modern research has shown that yoga can positively impact various health conditions, including anxiety, depression, back pain, and high blood pressure. This scientific validation has helped to increase the popularity and acceptance of yoga and has led to its incorporation into mainstream healthcare and wellness programs.

The modern era has also seen the emergence of new styles and variations of yoga. For example, hot yoga, which involves practising yoga in a heated room, has become increasingly popular in recent years. Other variations include aerial yoga, which involves performing yoga poses while suspended in the air, and laughter yoga, which involves using laughter to achieve physical and mental well-being.

In addition to the physical benefits of yoga, the modern era has also seen a growing interest in yoga's spiritual and philosophical aspects. Many yoga teachers and practitioners now emphasise the



importance of incorporating meditation, mindfulness, and spiritual practices into their yoga practice to achieve a more holistic approach to well-being.

The popularity of yoga in the modern era has also led to the commercialisation of the practice, with many companies and organisations offering yoga-related products and services. This includes everything from yoga mats and clothing to yoga retreats and teacher training programs. While the commercialisation of yoga has increased the accessibility and visibility of the practice, it has also raised concerns about cultural appropriation and the commodification of a traditional practice.

Another significant development in the modern era has been the globalisation of yoga. While yoga has its roots in India, it is now practised and taught worldwide, with many different styles and variations. This globalisation has led to a cross-fertilisation of ideas and techniques, with many different traditions and lineages merging and evolving.

However, the globalisation of yoga has also raised concerns about the authenticity and integrity of the practice. Some critics argue that the commercialisation and commodification of yoga have diluted traditional teachings and practices and that the true essence of yoga has been lost.

Overall, the modern era has seen significant changes and evolution in yoga practice. While the traditional spiritual and philosophical aspects of yoga continue to be important to many practitioners, the popularity of modern postural yoga has brought the practice to a broader audience, focusing on physical health and well-being. While the commercialisation and globalisation of yoga have raised concerns about the integrity and authenticity of the practice, it is clear that yoga will continue to evolve and adapt over time, as it has done throughout its long and rich history.

#### **Reference:**

Nagendra, H.R. (2004). *Yoga for Promotion of Positive Health*. Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana, India.

Nagendra, H.R. (2011). *Prāṇāyāma, the Art and Science*. Bangalore: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana, India.

Nagendra, H.R. (2011). *Yoga: The Path of Will-Power*. Rāja Yoga, Vol. 4. Bangalore: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana, India.

Nagendra, H.R. (2014). *Yoga for Physical Stamina Development: Yoga in Education for Total Personality Development*. Bangalore: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana, India.

Nagendra, H.R. and Nagaratna, R (2008). *Yoga Practices*. Bangalore: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana.

Nagendra, H.R. and Nagaratna, R. (1998). *Yoga for Asthma*. Bangalore: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana: India.

Nagendra, H.R. and Nagaratna, R. (1998). *Yoga for Promotion of Positive Health*. Bangalore: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana, India.



Nagendra, H.R. and Nagaratna, R. (2008). Yoga Practices. Bangalore: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana, Bangalore, India.

Nagendra, H.R. and Nagaratna, R. (2009). Yoga for IQ development: Yoga in education for total personality development series-4. Bengaluru: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana.

Nagendra, H.R. and Nagaratna, R. (2011). New Perspectives in Stress Management. Bangalore: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana.

Nagendra, H.R. and Nagaratna, R. (2011). Yoga for Creativity development: Yoga in education for total personality development series-8. Bengaluru: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana.

Nagendra, H.R. and Nagaratna, R. (2012). Yoga for Creativity development: Yoga in education for total personality development series-7. Bengaluru: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana.

Nagendra, H.R. and SherleyTelles (2008). Yoga and Memory: Yoga in Education for Total Personality Development. Bangalore: Swami Vivekananda Yoga Prakashana.

Pandey, V.C. (2005). Intelligence and Motivation. Delhi, Isha Books.