

Ten Fundamental Principles of Yoga

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Yoga is a complex tradition, which has a history of 5,000 or more years. Beginners are easily overwhelmed by the vastness and richness of Yoga's practice, philosophy, and literature. But there are a few underlying principles that, once grasped, provide easier access to all the numerous aspects of Yoga. Here are ten such fundamental principles.

1. Yoga is what is traditionally called a liberation teaching (*moksha-shâstra*). It seeks to liberate us from our limited notion of who we are. We habitually identify with our particular body, mind, possessions, and relationships (which we often treat like possessions). But this mental-emotional habit, according to Yoga, is really a profound and fateful *misidentification*. It keeps us stuck in our behavioral grooves, causing us to experience suffering (*duhkha*) over and over again.

Who we are in truth is *something* or *someone* beyond our particular body, mind, possessions, and relationships. From a yogic perspective, we are immortal, superconscious Being. As that Being, we are unlimited and free. All of Yoga's teachings aim at helping us to realize this fundamental truth.

2. Because human beings have different strengths and weaknesses, the masters of Yoga have designed various approaches, so that Yoga can be helpful to everyone. Thus there are different *branches*, which correspond to specific emotional and mental capacities or preferences. Generally seven such *branches* are distinguished:

(i) *Râja-Yoga* is the "Royal Yoga" aiming at liberation through meditation, which is for practitioners who are capable of intense concentration—the eightfold path of Patanjali's *ashta-anga-yoga*, also called "Classical Yoga"

(ii) *Hatha-Yoga* is the "Forceful Yoga" aiming at liberation through physical transformation

(iii) *Jnâna-Yoga* is the "Wisdom of Yoga" aiming at liberation through the steady application of higher wisdom that clearly discerns between the real and the unreal

(iv) *Karma-Yoga* is the "Action Yoga" aiming at liberation through self-transcending service

(v) *Bhakti-Yoga* is the "Devotional Yoga" aiming at liberation through self-surrender in the face of the Divine

(vi) *Tantra-Yoga* is the "Continuity Yoga" aiming at liberation through ritual, visualization, subtle energy work, and the perception of the identity (or continuity) of the ordinary world and the transcendental Reality

(vii) *Mantra-Yoga* is the "Yoga of Potent Sound" aiming at liberation through the recitation (aloud or mental) of empowered sounds (such as *om*, *hûm*, *ram*, *hare krishna*, etc.)—often considered an aspect of Tantra-Yoga

These seven branches are alternative portals into the mysteries of Yoga and thus our own consciousness.

3. All branches and forms of Yoga have as their foundation a sound moral life. Such a life is guided by the principle of *dharma*, which means “morality,” “law,” “order,” and “virtue.” It stands for moral virtues like nonharming (*ahimsâ*), truthfulness (*satya*), abstention from theft (*asteya*), chastity (*brahmacarya*), compassion (*karunâ*), and kindness (*maitri*). Without a firm grounding in these moral principles, Yoga cannot lead us to its ultimate goal of liberation. For so long as we pursue a lifestyle that falls short of these moral virtues, our energies are scattered and we continue to harvest the negative repercussions of our actions. A morally sound life, however, allows us to stop the creation of negative effects and to focus our energies like a laser beam, so that we can fully discover or realize our true nature.

4. Yoga is a continuum of theory and practice. That is to say, Yoga is not mere arm chair philosophy, nor is it merely a battery of practices. In order to engage Yoga properly and successfully, one must pay due attention to the ideas behind its practical disciplines and, vice versa, to the exercises and techniques embodying its theories. This calls for *thoughtful* and *mindful* practice. For instance, regular and correct practice of the yogic postures will undoubtedly help us maintain good physical health. Yet, to tap into their deeper potential, we must understand them as being merely one small aspect of Yoga’s integrated approach toward spiritual liberation. Similarly, meditation definitely balances the nervous system and calms the mind. However, only when we understand the nature of the mind—thanks to the yogic theories—can we hope to overcome the inherent limitations of our mental make-up and discover transcendental Consciousness. For this reason, study (*svâdhyâya*) has been held in high esteem by most schools of Yoga; it complements steady application to the practical disciplines.

5. However simple a particular yogic approach may be, all approaches require a profound commitment to self-transformation. If we fear change and tend to cling to our established ways, we cannot succeed in Yoga. The practice of Yoga calls for considerable personal effort (*vyâyama*), which involves self-discipline (*âtma-nigraha*). As we endeavor to replace undesirable habit patterns with positive ones, we inevitably experience a measure of frustration. However, this frustration is creative rather than self-destructive. The Sanskrit word for this process is *tapas* meaning “glow” or “heat.” The term also stands for “asceticism,” which is based on self-restraint.

6. Yoga comprises numerous practices—both physical and mental. These can be reduced to two major categories: *abhyâsa* and *vairâgya*. *Abhyâsa* is the repeated performance of exercises or techniques that are intended to produce a positive state of mind in us. *Vairâgya* is the complementary practice of letting go of old behavior patterns or attachment. *Abhyâsa* gradually reveals to us the deeper, hidden aspects of the mind, while *vairâgya* moves us step by step beyond appearances and toward Reality.

7. The closer we are to Self-realization, the more ordinary we become. Only seekers striving for liberation as if it were a trophy glamorize the yogic process and themselves. They want to be extraordinary, whereas liberated beings are perfectly ordinary. They are as happy washing dishes as they are sitting quietly in meditation or teaching their disciples. For this reason, Yoga has from the beginning celebrated not only the path of the world-renouncing ascetic (*samnyâsin*) but also that of the world-engaging householder (*grihastha*) who uses the opportunities of daily life to practice the virtues of a yogic lifestyle.

8. In all Yoga practice, there is an element of grace (*prasâda*), which is unpredictable. In the theistic schools of Yoga, this is explained as the grace of the Divine Being; in nontheistic schools, such as Jaina Yoga or certain schools of Buddhist Yoga, it is said to flow from liberated beings (called *arhats*, *buddhas*, or *mahâ-siddhas*). Also, *gurus* are channels of benevolent energies, or blessings, intended to ripen their disciples. The process by which a *guru* blesses a disciple is called “transmission” (*samcâra*). In some schools, it is known as *shakti-pâta* meaning “descent of the power.” The power in question is the Energy of Consciousness itself.

9. All Yoga is initiatory. That is, initiation (*dîkshâ*) by a qualified teacher (*guru*) is essential for ultimate success in Yoga. It is possible to benefit from a good many yogic practices even without initiation. Thus, most exercises of Hatha-Yoga—from postures to breath control to meditation—can be successfully practiced on one’s own, providing the correct format has been learned. But for the higher stages of Yoga, empowerment through initiation is definitely necessary. The habit patterns of the mind are too engrained for us to make deep-level changes without the benign intervention of a Yoga master. All yogic practices can usefully be viewed as preparation for this moment.

10. Yoga is a gradual process of replacing our unconscious patterns of thought and behavior with new, more benign patterns that are expressive of the higher powers and virtues of Self-realization. It takes time to accomplish this far-reaching work of self-transformation, and therefore practitioners of Yoga must first and foremost practice patience. Enlightenment, or liberation, is not realized in a matter of days, weeks, or months. We must be willing to commit to an entire lifetime of yogic practice. There must be a basic impulse to grow, regardless of whether or not we will achieve liberation in this lifetime. It is one of Yoga’s fundamental tenets that no effort is ever wasted; even the slightest attempt at transforming ourselves makes a difference. It is our patient cumulative effort that flowers into Self-realization sooner or later.

For a simple introduction to Yoga, see my book *The Shambhala Guide to Yoga*, published by Shambhala Publications. For a more comprehensive coverage, see my book [The Yoga Tradition](#), published by Hohm Press (2d ed.)

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