

What is Yoga?

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Yoga is the current of spirituality that has developed on the Indian peninsula over a period of some five thousand years. Its three major cultural branches are Hindu Yoga, Buddhist Yoga, and Jaina Yoga. Within each of these great spiritual cultures, Yoga has assumed various forms.

Hindu Yoga is the most diversified branch of the yogic tree, and its most important forms are Râja-Yoga ("Royal Yoga") - also known as Pâtanjala-Yoga and Classical Yoga, Hatha-Yoga ("Forceful Yoga"), Karma-Yoga ("Yoga of Action"), Jnâna-Yoga ("Yoga of Wisdom"), Bhakti-Yoga ("Yoga of Devotion"), Mantra-Yoga ("Yoga of Power-Sounds"), Tantra-Yoga (Tantric Yoga), Kundalinî-Yoga ("Yoga of the Serpent-Power"), and Laya Yoga ("Yoga of Absorption"). For explanations of these and other forms of Yoga, please see the article [Forty Types of Yoga](#).

Underlying all forms of Yoga is the understanding that the human being is more than the physical body and that, through a course of discipline, it is possible to discover what this "more" is. Hindu Yoga speaks of a transcendental Self (*âtman, purusha*), which is eternal and inherently blissful, as our true identity. Buddhism and Jainism have their own distinct ways of describing the goal of the transformative path of Yoga. For various scriptural definitions of Yoga, click [here](#).

Yoga entered the West mainly through the missionary work of Swami Vivekananda, who spoke at the Parliament of Religions in 1893. Since then Yoga has undergone a unique metamorphosis. In the hands of numerous Western Yoga teachers, most of whom have learned (Hatha-)Yoga from other Westerner teachers rather than native Indian gurus, Yoga has been tailored to suit the specific needs of their countrymen and -women. Thus, by and large, Yoga has been secularized and turned from a rigorous spiritual discipline into an "instant" fitness system. However, there also has been a continuous influx of Indian gurus, who, with varying degrees of success, have tried to communicate the traditional teachings of Yoga.

Among the best known Indian gurus spreading Hindu Yoga in the Americas and Europe are Swami Rama Tirtha (no organization), Paramahansa Yogananda (Self-Realization Fellowship), Swami Muktananda (Siddha Yoga Dham), Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Transcendental Meditation), Swami Satyananda Saraswati (Bihar School of Yoga), Swami Rama (Himalayan International Institute), Swami Venkatesananda (Divine Life Society), Shri Prabhupada (Hare Krishna movement), Bhagwan Rajneesh (later "Osho," Osho International Foundation), Swami Vishnudevananda (Sivananda Yoga Centers), Swami Jyotirmayananda (Yoga Research Foundation), Sri Chinmoy (Chinmoy Mission), B. K. S. Iyengar (Iyengar Yoga Association), and the anti-guru guru Jiddu Krishnamurti (Brockwood Park).

A century after Swami Vivekananda's successful mission in the United States and Europe, the Western Yoga movement can claim perhaps 20 million members. Most of them are practitioners of one or the other system of [Westernized Hatha-Yoga](#), with those

who are spiritually motivated in their Yoga practice forming a small minority. Whatever the inherent problems of the Western Yoga movement may be, it has grown steadily over the past hundred years, and more rapidly since the late 1960s. This is undoubtedly due to a combination of factors, not least the Baby Boomers' interest in alternative healthcare and their spiritual and moral confusion. Whether or not the Western Yoga movement will continue to hold appeal for Westerners depends on its degree of integrity and authenticity. Not only must it be informed by the knowledge of modern science, but it must also secure its traditional roots in the psychospiritual teachings of India.

For further reflection on this matter, I recommend that you read my book *The Shambhala Guide to Yoga* or, at a more detailed level, [*The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*](#), both published by Shambhala Publications.

See also the article [What is Green Yoga?](#)

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