

Frequently Asked Questions About Yoga

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

1. What is Yoga?

Yoga is the unitive (spiritual) tradition within the great cultures of **Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism** native to India. Today Westerners are often practicing Yoga techniques (especially postures) divorced from their traditional (sacred) background. Although the Yoga postures are very effective for maintaining and even restoring one's physical health, the true power of Yoga lies in its capacity as a path to lasting happiness and inner freedom.

2. What does the term *yoga* mean?

Yoga, a word from the ancient Sanskrit language, has many meanings. Of these, two meanings are particularly relevant in regard to the yogic tradition: *union* and *discipline*. Hence Yoga has been called *unitive discipline*. (Sanskrit, which belongs to the Indo-European language group, is the language in which most traditional Yoga texts are written.)

3. What is a *yogi*?

A *yogī* (grammatical stem: *yogin*) is a male practitioner of Yoga. A female practitioner is called *yoginī*. Both terms are from the Sanskrit language (see under #2).

4. What is a *guru*?

The Sanskrit word *guru* means literally "heavy" or "weighty." A *guru* is someone whose council is weighty or highly significant, that is, who is a teacher. According to an esoteric explanation, the syllable *gu* represents darkness and the syllable *ru* stands for (but does not mean) removal. Thus a *guru* is a dispeller of spiritual darkness.

5. Do I need a *guru* to practice Yoga?

It depends on what you wish to accomplish. If you are primarily or exclusively interested in learning postures or breathing techniques, it is sufficient to have the guidance of a qualified Yoga instructor, at least until you have learned how to perform them correctly. But if you intend to pursue Yoga as a spiritual path, you need to be initiated and guided, which calls for a *guru*.

6. How do I find a *guru*?

There is an old adage that states “When the disciple is ready, the teacher will come.” Essentially, this appears to hold true. We find a *guru*—or rather the *guru* finds us—when we duly prepare ourselves. We can practice Yoga’s moral disciplines and many other practices without initiation. It is better to come to a Yoga master with a healthy moral outlook and no major psychological problems.

7. What is the goal of Yoga?

Yoga’s highest purpose is to help practitioners in realizing true happiness, freedom, or enlightenment. However, Yoga has a number of secondary goals, such as physical health, mental harmony, and emotional balance. In its most integrated form, Yoga seeks to unlock our full human potential.

8. What is meant by freedom or liberation?

According to Yoga, at the deepest (or highest) level of our being, we are perfectly free. But this is not our everyday experience. In our ordinary state of consciousness, we are subject to all kinds of limitations and, most significantly, experience suffering (*duhkha*). Yoga is the means by which we can discover our innate freedom, and this is accomplished through an extensive process of self-purification; the cleansing of the mirror of the mind. So long as the mind is clouded, we believe ourselves to be limited individuals with a unique personal center (the ego or “I”). All our suffering arises from this false egoic identity. When the ego is transcended, we simply abide in and as our true nature, which is superconscious, unconditional, and free from suffering. This condition is variously called *moksha*, *mukti*, *apavarga*, *kaivalya*—all meaning essentially “freedom” or “liberation.” Some authorities speak of this as “enlightenment” (*bodhi*). It should be clearly understood, however, that this is not merely a temporary experience. Liberation is a once-and-for-all state of complete ego-transcendence. It also is known as Self-realization or God-realization, though some schools of Yoga make a distinction between these two, arguing that Self-realization is a lower type of spiritual attainment whereas upon God-realization, we find our true identity (the Spirit) as being a part of the omnipresent, omnitemporal Being that we call God or the Divine.

9. What is meant by the Self?

This question is relevant only to Hindu Yoga, as Buddhist Yoga does not subscribe to an eternal Self. Within a Hindu context, then, the Self (*âtman* or *purusha*) is our true nature, or Spirit, which is recovered when we shun all our misconceptions about ourselves and the world around us. The Self, or transcendental Self, is our true identity as opposed to the ego, which is a false center. The ego is our misidentification with a particular body-mind and its belongings. The Self is pure Being-Consciousness free from all delusion, in fact, abiding beyond the body and the mind. In Patanjali’s Râja-Yoga, or Classical Yoga, which is dualistic, the Self is called *purusha* (“man”) and is deemed completely separate from Nature (*prakriti*) and all its manifestations or products. In nondualistic (Vedântic) schools of Yoga, the term *âtman* is commonly used to refer to the ultimate or

transcendental Self. This Sanskrit term literally means “self” or “oneself.” The *âtman* is conceived as being singular (*eka*), whereas—at least according to Patanjali’s Yoga—there are countless *purushas*. In other words, the viewpoint of nondualistic Yoga is that our own true identity also is the true identity of all other beings and things. The *âtman* is superconscious, unlimited, eternally free, and possesses all the characteristics that we usually associate with the Divine.

10. If I don’t aspire to liberation, can I still benefit from Yoga?

Absolutely. Yoga can help at all levels—physical, emotional, mental, moral, and spiritual. It begins to liberate us from the moment we begin to practice it. At the most ordinary level, it frees us from ill health and the undesirable emotional and mental states connected with an unhealthy body. It calms our mind and thus gradually enables us to see things more clearly—thereby liberating us from wrong or unproductive thoughts or attitudes. For most people, the traditional yogic ideal of ultimate liberation is too daunting. Others make a fetish out of it. Really, the soundest approach is to commit to whatever form of yogic practice and be diligent about it. Then Yoga will unfold naturally, as will a person’s inner life. It is good to know what our highest human potential is, and also what the traditional goal of Yoga is, but we should never become obsessive about this or anything else.

11. Is it ever too late to start practicing Yoga?

The straightforward answer is: No. Yoga has no upper age limit, and people taking up yogic practice in their eighties have had very positive results in terms of improved health (through Hatha-Yoga postures and breathing) and mental equanimity (through meditation). Even bedridden individuals with chronic diseases can still benefit from Yoga, though the practices must be carefully tailored to their particular needs. Since Yoga is primarily a spiritual tradition, which seeks to bring about an inner transformation, in principle all that is required is a positive intent and the capacity to practice mindfulness (that is, conscious awareness). If someone isn’t able to do bodily exercises, it is still possible to engage the mind through Yoga. Of course, in such a case one has to adjust one’s expectations and goals accordingly. At the lower end of the age scale, Yoga has been found to be beneficial for young children, though their involvement with yogic practice is necessarily different from that of adults. So long as they are able to pay attention and execute simple exercises, children can benefit greatly from Yoga.

12. What are the most important Yoga scriptures that I should study?

(1) The **Yoga-Sûtra of Patanjali**, of which there are numerous translations. We recommend the translation by James Houghton Woods, which includes two major Sanskrit commentaries (Vyâsa’s *Bhâshya* and Vâcaspati Mishra’s *Tattva-Vaishârâdî*). For a translation containing the transliterated Sanskrit text and equipped with a short commentary, see Georg Feuerstein’s *The Yoga-Sûtra of Patanjali* and *The Yoga-Sûtra: A Nondualist Interpretation*, as well as Brenda Feuerstein’s *The Yoga-Sûtra: From a Woman Perspective* <http://www.traditionalyogastudies.com/store/e-books/>. Also useful is *The Essence of Yoga* by Bernard Bouanchou, which includes many stimulating

questions for self-study. See also TYS's [250-hour distance-learning course](#) on Patanjali's Classical Yoga.

(2) The ***Bhagavad-Gîtâ***, the “New Testament” of Hinduism and the oldest full-fledged textbook on Yoga, expounding an integral teaching of Karma-Yoga, Jnâna-Yoga, and Bhakti-Yoga. For a reliable translation see Georg Feuerstein's *The Bhagavad-Gîtâ: A New Translation*, published by Shambhala Publications in 2011.

(3) The ***Hatha-[Yoga-]Pradîpikâ of Svâtmârâma Yogendra***, a classical manual on Hatha-Yoga, which also gives out the philosophy behind this branch of Yoga. A complete translation (with all **10** chapters) was done by the late Dr. M. L. Gharote and published by the Lonavla Yoga Institute, India. This and other rare publications are now available through a U.K. Branch via the Internet [here](#).

(4) The ***Tiru-Mantiram of Tirumûlar***, a Tamil text that expounds Tantra-Yoga in poetic form. For a complete translation (in Indian English), see *Thirumandiram: A Classic of Yoga and Tantra by Thirumoolar*, edited by Marshall Govindan and published in 3 volumes by Kriya Yoga and Publications in 1993. For an excellent introduction to this work, see T. N. Ganapathy and K. R. Arumugam, *The Yoga of Siddha Tirumular: Essays on the Tirumandiram*. St. Etienne de Bolton, Canada: Babaji's Kriya Yoga and Publications, 2006.

13. What are the two top reference works on Yoga in English?

(1) [The Yoga Tradition](#) by Georg Feuerstein, published by Hohm Press, which—with its over 500 large-size pages—is the most up-to-date and comprehensive reference work on the history, literature, philosophy, and practice of all traditions and branches of Yoga. It can open the door to a deeper study of Yoga, which is possible through TYS's [800-hour distance-learning course](#) on the history, literature and philosophy of Yoga.

(2) [The Shambhala Encyclopedia of Yoga and Tantra](#) by Georg Feuerstein (rev. and enl. edition 2011), which is a unique compilation that provides a systematic overview of the complex Yoga tradition and all its key concepts. This reference work complements [The Yoga Tradition](#) (3d edition 2008) and should be on the shelves of all Yoga practitioners.

14. Which four books on Yoga theory should an intelligent beginner study?

(1) [The Path of Yoga: An Essential Guide to Its Principles of Practices](#) by Georg Feuerstein, published by Shambhala Publications (2011). Alternatively, *The Tree of Yoga* by B. K. S. Iyengar, which is an inspiring introduction utilizing the metaphor of the tree to explain the limbs of the yogic path, is recommended.

(2) [Yoga Morality](#) by Georg Feuerstein, published by Hohm Press, which examines the moral principles and practices of Yoga in the context of our contemporary world and as they should be applied in everyday life.

(3) [The Deeper Dimension of Yoga](#) by Georg Feuerstein, which comprises 78 essays on a wide range of topics.

(4) *Bhagavad Gita* by Paramahansa Yogananda (2 vols.), which is a marvelous yogic commentary on this key scripture accessible to everyone.

14. Which ten books on Yoga theory/practice should an intelligent beginner study?

(1) [*The Path of Yoga: An Essential Guide to Its Principles of Practices*](#) by Georg Feuerstein (rev. ed. 2011). Alternatively, *The Tree of Yoga* by B. K. S. Iyengar, which is an inspiring introduction utilizing the metaphor of the tree to explain the limbs of the yogic path, is recommended.

(2) [*Yoga Morality*](#) by Georg Feuerstein, published by Hohm Press, which examines the moral principles and practices of Yoga in the context of our contemporary world and as they should be applied in everyday life.

(3) *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving Into Stillness* by Erich Schiffmann, which shows how the yogic postures can be done in the spirit of Yoga.

(4) [*The Yoga of Breath*](#) by Richard Rosen, which introduces the art of *pranayama* according to the precise and graduated approach of B. K. S. Iyengar. Alternatively, Donna Farhi's [*The Breathing Book*](#), which also is a clear instructional guide on yogic breathing, is recommended.

(5) [*The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*](#) by Georg Feuerstein, which comprises 78 essays on a wide range of topics.

(6) [*The Bhagavad-Gîtâ: A New Translation*](#) by Georg Feuerstein, published by Shambhala Publications in 2011 (with the Sanskrit on verso pages).

(7) [*Talks with Ramana Maharshi*](#), which is a volume consisting of the incredibly inspiring conversations that Sri Ramana Maharshi had with visitors to his *ashrama*, all from the point of view of Jnana-Yoga and spoken from the vantage point of one of the truly great masters of the twentieth century.

(8) [*Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy*](#) by Georg Feuerstein, which is a systematic overview of the teachings of the important but widely misunderstood branch of Yoga called Tantrism or Tantra-Yoga.

(9) [*Secret of the Vajra World*](#) by Reginald Ray, which is a deep introduction to the world of Buddhist Tantra-Yoga (Vajrayana).

(10) [*Meditation for Dummies*](#) by Stephan Bodian, which, despite the off-putting title, is a very useful practical introduction to Yoga's central art of meditation.

15. How important is it to study the theory behind the various yogic practices?

Very important. Would you set about building or repairing your computer without studying the functions of its various components first? Since ancient Vedic times, study

(*svādhyāya*) has been recognized as a principal tool of Yoga. We must learn to control the mind, not merely abandon our God-given gift of rational thinking. Some of the greatest realized adepts of Yoga have had extremely capable minds. Yoga is a continuum of theory and practice. TYS offers an [800-hour distance-learning course](#) on the history, literature and philosophy of Yoga based on Georg Feuerstein's *The Yoga Tradition*, and also a [250-hour distance-learning course](#) on Classical Yoga.

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