

Definition: **Yoga** from *Black's Medical Dictionary, 43rd Edition*

A system of Hindu philosophy and physical discipline involving special breathing techniques and a series of prescribed physical poses. These are intended to relax the body and teach the individual mental and physical control.

Summary Article: **Yoga**

from *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*

## Origins

The concept and practices of yoga come out of India (→ Indian Subcontinent). The Sanskrit word *yoga* is related to the English 'yoke.' In the ancient text of the Veda, accordingly, it meant first, the hitching (therefore, the 'yoking') of draught animals to a cart or plow.

Then, in the time of the Upanishads (from c. 900 BCE), as a systematic examination of human nature began in India, the concept was broadened to include a mental and religious dimension. A basic premise of the mystics of the days in question was that religious seekers must 'yoke' their senses and drives (constantly subjected, as they are, to transformation), that is, dominate them, in order to be able to venture an advance to their essential basis and ground—as eternally and changelessly apostrophized. Only thus, according to the teaching of the Upanishads, was 'liberation' (Skt., *moksha*) from the cycle of → 'rebirths' (samsara) to be attained. From such an allegorical comparison of human meaning with draught animals, the concept *yoga* in India gradually advanced to the status of an umbrella concept for the type of the praxis-oriented way of salvation.

Around the first centuries CE, the *yoga sutras* (i.e. yoga verse) of *Patañjali* appeared, considered to be a basic text even today. In these maxims, a scant two hundred, yoga is defined as the "coming-to-rest of the activities of the human heart and soul," in the sense of a 'hitching up,' a yoking, of the mind and spirit. Here Patañjali teaches an eight-limbed "way of yogic practice," as follows.

- *yama*: general ethical commandments, such as nonviolence, truthfulness, not stealing, moderation, and not hoarding;
- *niyama*: specific ethical commandments, such as cleanliness, health, attention, self-study, and orientation to the immortal;
- *asana*: seating, and body position(s);
- *pranayama*: breathing exercises (→ Breathing);
- *pratyahara*: withdrawal of the senses inward;
- *dharana*: meditation;
- *samadhi*: immersion, being one. Yoga scholar Mircea → Eliade denotes the highest condition of yoga, *samadhi*, as 'ecstasy'—in the sense of a complete 'being at,' or 'being within' oneself, as distinguished from the frequently encountered religious → ecstasy, in the sense of a total 'being outside of oneself' (Eliade 1969).

## Hatha Yoga

Besides the other kinds of yoga, beginning in the twelfth century CE, in India developed, on the spiritual foundation of tantrism (→ Tantra), *hatha yoga* (yoga of the 'power thrusts'), which valued the corporeal aspects of the 'way of the practice,' a differentiated physiology of its own. Here belongs, for example, the concept of *chakras*—thought of as delicate matter—a concept that today enjoys a growing popularity, especially in Western countries (→ New Age).

## Yoga in the West

In the West, toward the end of the nineteenth century, yoga in its practical application was transmitted especially by the appearance of Indian Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) at the World Congress of Religions (1893) in Chicago, and by the activities of the → Theosophical Society under Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Annie Besant (1847–1933). This first generation of Western adepts limited itself to yoga's concentrative and meditative practices. But, at the end of the 1930s, with the founding of the yoga schools of Boris Sacharov (1899–1959) in Berlin, and Selvarajan Yesudian (1916–1998) and Elisabeth Haich (1897–1994) in Budapest, the era of a Western yoga of a newer stamp began. This second phase in the development of yoga is characterized by the opening of instruction to a wider circle—unlike the exclusive guidance of a closed circle in the earlier phase of Theosophically marked yoga—as well as by a stronger orientation, during the exercises, toward psycho-physical events. Simultaneously, Western research offered its first verifications of the manners of operation of individual yoga exercises, as examined through medical and psychological studies.

## Secularization

Today, many of the courses in Yoga offered in the West are extensively dis severed from the original, unambiguously religious relation of Indian yoga, and especially pursue corporeal purposes of regeneration and therapeutic prophylaxis. Accordingly, in Western countries, on the occasion of investigations into the motives of a participation in yoga or yoga courses, it is 'relaxation' and 'physical fitness' that are cited as first on the list (Fuchs 1990, 239f.). Along with content and direction, the current Western forms of the transmission of yoga are specified. Thus, practitioners of yoga in Europe and North America are rather rarely—as in traditional India—instructed by → gurus, who expect a high degree of personal dedication, but by yoga teachers, who are usually active in a second occupation, and direct their instruction to the didactic principles of adult education. This Western development can therefore be designated, as a whole, *secularization of yoga*. In this connection, it is likewise interesting that eighty percent of those three million people practicing and teaching yoga in Germany are women (Fuchs 1990, 198 and 201), while, in India, yoga is still a clear domain of men.

→ *Body, Breathing, Guru, Hinduism, Indian Subcontinent, Meditation, Mysticism, New Age, Occultism, Theosophical/Anthroposophical Society*

### Literature Sources:

- Malhotra, Ashok Kumar, *An Introduction to Yoga Philosophy: An Annotated Translation of the Yoga Sutras*, Aldershot 2001.
- Prasada, Rama, *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, with the Commentary of Vyasa and the Gloss of Vachaspati Mishra*, New Delhi 1978.

### Secondary Literature:

- De Michelis, Elizabeth, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*, London 2004.

- Eliade, Mircea, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, New York 2 1969 (Fr. 1 1954).
- Feuerstein, Georg, *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga*, Manchester 1980.
- Fuchs, Christian, *Yoga in Deutschland. Rezeption, Organisation, Typologie*, Stuttgart 1990.
- Jarrell, Howard R., *International Yoga Bibliography, 1950 to 1980*, Metuchen 1981.
- Worthington, Vivian, *A History of Yoga*, London/Boston 1982.

Christian Fuchs

**APA**

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

---

Fuchs, C. (2005). Yoga. In K. Von Stuckrad (Ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (2nd ed.). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/yoga>

---

**BRILL** © 2006 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands

**BRILL** © 2006 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands

## APA

Fuchs, C. (2005). Yoga. In K. Von Stuckrad (Ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (2nd ed.). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/yoga>

## Chicago

Fuchs, Christian. "Yoga." In *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, edited by Kocku Von Stuckrad. 2nd ed. Brill, 2005. <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/yoga>

## Harvard

Fuchs, C. (2005). Yoga. In K. Von Stuckrad (Ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*. (2nd ed.). [Online]. Leiden: Brill. Available from: <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/yoga> [Accessed 27 May 2019].

## MLA

Fuchs, Christian. "Yoga." *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, edited by Kocku Von Stuckrad, Brill, 2nd edition, 2005. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/yoga>. Accessed 27 May 2019.