


# A Beginner's Guide To YOGA

Inhale love, exhale  
gratitude with this all-  
encompassing guide to  
yoga **by Mira Khreino.**





"By directing the mind's eye to the breath, one becomes less distracted by the inner turbulence of thought and the mind becomes more quiet and peaceful"

## Yoga:

### An Overview

With a surge in popularity over the past few decades, agreeing on a unified definition for the diverse set of practices that constitute yoga is becoming increasingly difficult. This ancient term has evolved to mean a variety of things to millions of people around the globe. Essentially a set of techniques to find spirituality and inner peace, yoga is practiced by people of all faiths without exemption. The word itself comes from the Sanskrit term "yuj," meaning to yoke, join, and unite. Hence, the term "yoga" is often interpreted as meaning union. More specifically, it is a set of techniques that enable the practitioner to unify the mind, body, and spirit. This integration creates inner balance, which leads to a calmer, happier, and more fulfilled journey through life.

The 5,000 year old, Indian body of knowledge is still practiced today to purify and harmonize the body and mind through various breathing exercises, physical postures, self-reflection, mind discipline, and meditation.

The body in yoga is treated with the

greatest respect, as it is the primary vehicle for our self-expression and personal growth. The practice develops the physical body as a means to strengthen the mind and spirit. A weak and frail body is a hindrance to physical, mental, and spiritual health. Through yoga one becomes more aware of one's body. Exercises not only strengthen, tone, stretch, and release muscles, but also stimulate abdominal organs, improve circulation, and better body function through their effect on the body's various systems such as endocrine, nervous, lymphatic, etc. The breath is of paramount importance in the yoga practice as it carries with it our vital "life force," also known as "prana" or "chi." Controlling the breath in specific ways helps to detoxify the body and mind, leading to betterment of both. Furthermore, tuning into the breath in the practice by feeling it enter and exit the body, listening to the sound it makes and concentrating on it, channels the mind's energies to a single point of focus. By directing the mind's eye to the breath, one becomes less distracted by the inner turbulence of thought and the mind becomes more quiet and peaceful.

### The Specifics

There are actually four branches of yoga, all of which are practiced to achieve personal liberation and union. Karma Yoga is the path of selfless service; Bhakti Yoga is the path of love and devotion; Jnana Yoga is the path of wisdom and intelligence; and Raja Yoga is the path of self-discipline and self-mastery.

Raja Yoga is the most well-known and followed path in non-Indian societies. It is known as Raja or the "royal" road as it combines the essence of all other paths. It is based on the systemized teachings of the Eight Limbs of Yoga found in the Patanjali Yoga sutras written in 250CE. The sutras are a series of aphorisms concerning mental and spiritual wellbeing. Raja Yoga is a holistic way of life that integrates the eight elements of the ancient knowledge of yoga; a discipline to unite body, mind, and soul. Patanjali's eightfold path is shortly described below:

1. Yama (moral conduct): non-injury to others, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence, non-covetousness
2. Niyama (personal observances): purity/cleanliness of body and mind, contentment in all circumstances, self-discipline, contemplation/self-study, surrender to god
3. Asana: the practice of right postures to purify body and mind and prepare both for meditation
4. Pranayama: conscious control of prana through means of specific breathing techniques
5. Pratyahara: the withdrawal of the senses (seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching) from the distraction of the external world
6. Dharana: single focused concentration. Intently focusing the mind on one sound, thought and object
7. Dhyana: absorption in meditation
8. Samadhi: union with the supreme, personal freedom, liberation

Yoga, as it is practiced in the West, is therefore a combination of a few of the above mentioned limbs whose higher purpose is to purify the body and mind, giving one awareness and control over one's internal states and preparing oneself for meditation.

### Is It For Me?

Yoga is for everyone. From people stuck behind a desk all day to active homemakers and from professional Olympians to people looking to lose weight. There are many different types of yoga to suit all tempereents, physical ability, and age. One need not be flexible, nor physically fit to participate and it requires no special talent. It requires the will to learn something new, an investment in one's own wellbeing, and a desire to lead a healthier life. While some people are attracted to yoga for its ability to strengthen the body, improve flexibility, and tone muscle, others find that the physical practice of yoga is a mere gateway into spiritual exploration.

### Health Conditions

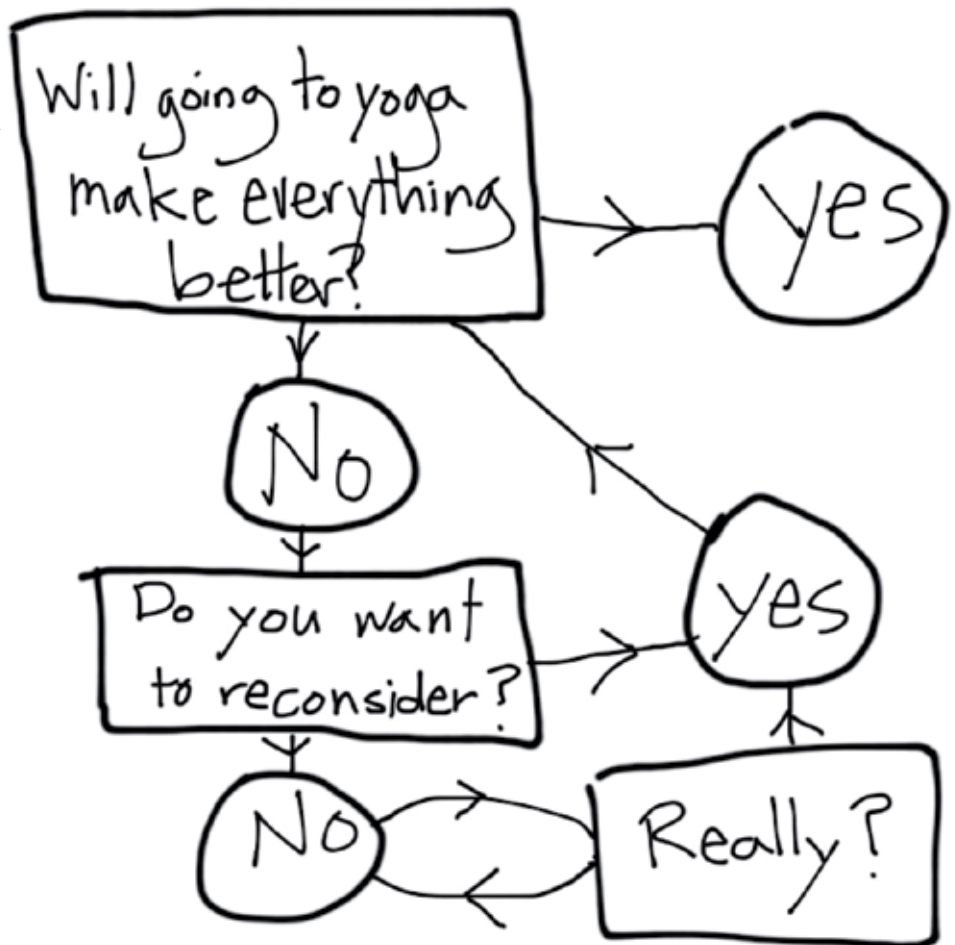
People with a range of health conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, and spinal problems have benefited from introducing yoga to their lives (note: if you suffer from a medical condition please ask your doctor for advice before starting any physical program).

### Age Related Concerns

Yoga is wonderful to start at any age; it's never too late. For the more mature practitioner, yoga improves balance and strengthens the lower body, knees, and ankles, reducing the chance of falling. For those suffering from arthritis, it can be a gentle way to promote joint mobility and reduce pain. There are yoga classes for every age group and ability; it is a form of exercise which can be enjoyed from childhood to maturity.




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### What To Expect From A Class?

There are different types of yoga, some are more physically demanding while others are more restorative and meditative. Some classes will cater to a particular age group or physical mobility. As a reference point, "mixed level" classes cater to students of all ability; one may find a few seasoned practitioners and one or two beginners in such a class. Most open classes (or mixed level classes) assume a degree of physical mobility- enough to get up and down from the floor, and to move limbs without much hindrance. Beginners in a mixed level class should inform the teacher at the start. Alternatively, beginners may prefer

to attend a "beginners" or "hatha" class in order to learn the fundamentals and to have time to explore poses. Classes typically last between 50 to 90 minutes. Practitioners may be given instruction on breathing techniques, physical poses, and meditative practices. Some classes may include philosophical teachings or reading from scripture, and/or chanting. Nearly all yoga classes finish with a long relaxation known as *savasana*. Note: Before commencing the class, notify the teacher of any injuries or health condition you may have. A teacher will then be able to cater to your individual needs, informing you of what poses to avoid, and your alternatives and modifications.



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### Styles Of Yoga

There are so many different styles of yoga nowadays. It is unfair to say that any style is more authentic or better than another. Rather it is a matter of taste; finding a teacher and a style which suits you best. Ashtanga, Vinyasa, and Dynamic Yoga are quite fast paced and can flow vigorously from one pose to the other in quick succession. A practitioner can produce quite a lot of heat in the body and often sweats. These forms are quite physical and athletic in nature.

The umbrella term Hatha Yoga (including more classical styles such as Sivananda)

describes styles which are a little slower and more mindful. Iyengar Yoga is more alignment-based, where one holds poses for longer durations of time with emphasis on body positioning. Kundalini Yoga focuses on awakening latent energies (*kundalini* is the dormant female energy) by cleansing the body through breathing techniques, physical poses, and meditation. Even though the styles are different, there is much overlap with poses, breathing, and meditation techniques. All practices are understood as yoga and the difference in approach depends greatly on the tradition of the teacher.

### Your Practice

A teacher will often refer to the act of you doing yoga as a "practice" rather than a workout. "Your practice" refers to your individual experience of yoga as it develops over time. Your personal practice is always evolving and changing, so even though the poses don't necessarily change, the relationship you have to the poses does. A practitioner's experience in the practice on any given day is unique.

The practice is non-competitive, non-aggressive, and non-violent. It is lead with a sense of self-nurturing and compassion. It promotes physical and mental wellbeing and involves staying present in the moment and connected to the experience – keeping ruminations about the past and anxieties about the future at bay. Moreover, in such a cutthroat world, the non-competitive attitude of yoga is very liberating as it allows one to let go of the harsh judgements of ego, permitting the practitioner to accept themselves flaws and all.

### Yoga:

### Beyond The Physical

Very often we look to the outside world to fill our inner voids. We look for outer attainments, such as gaining material wealth and buying things, to satiate the deep longing within. Yoga encourages us to look inside ourselves for the answers to the questions we have. Instead of accumulating more and more goods to pacify our inner insecurities and fears, yoga helps change our relationship with our inner struggles. It allows us to better understand ourselves. It moves us into a state of contentment that is not so dependent on external circumstance. With better self-understanding and inner stability, we become more resilient, better equipped to deal with adversity, and calmer in the face of challenge. With an increase in mental clarity, we see difficult situations as learning opportunities rather than problems. Life becomes a journey of discovery; one without the huge fluctuations of the mind we once experienced. We travel through life with greater inner balance, tolerance, mindfulness, serenity, and happiness. **Namaste. ■**

