

# The Ancient and Classic Texts of Yoga

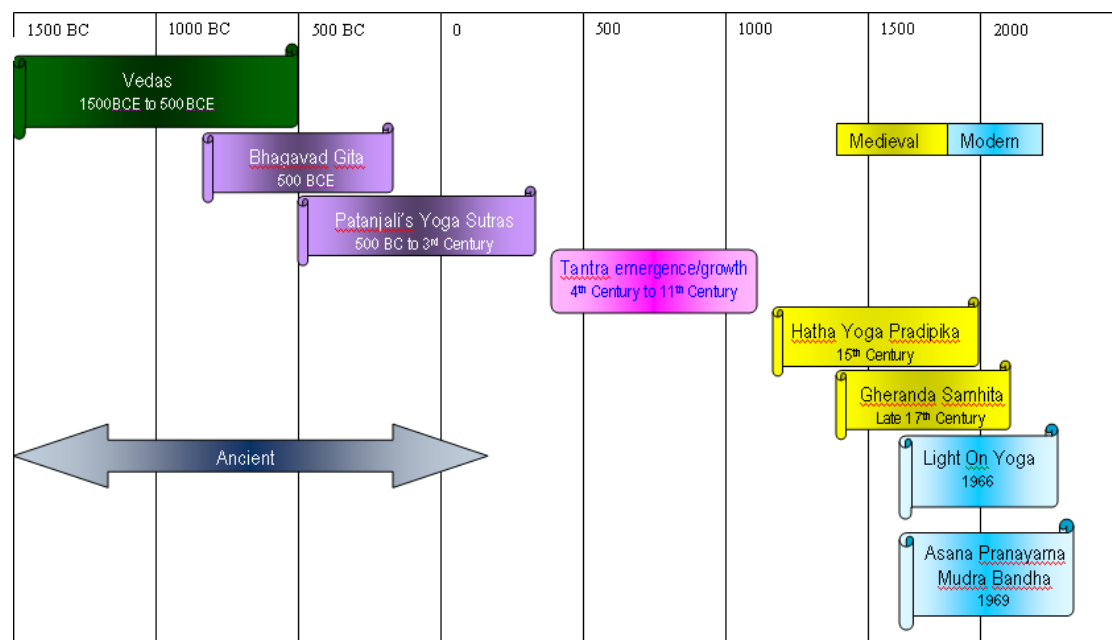
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Yoga has a rich history that spans the millennia. How yoga is practiced, however, has changed so much over time that ancient and modern yoga appear to be worlds apart. Here we examine six of the most important ancient and classic yoga texts to reveal how yoga has evolved. These texts represent three important time-periods in the development of yoga:

Ancient	Medieval	Modern
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Bhagavad Gita</li> <li>○ Patanjali's Yoga Sutras</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Hatha Yoga Pradipika</li> <li>○ Gheranda Samhita</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Light On Yoga</li> <li>○ Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha</li> </ul>

It is difficult to establish accurately when the older texts were written. A general indication is provided in the diagram below. Also shown in the diagram are general timeframes for the Vedas (which influenced the ancient texts) and the emergence of Tantra (which influenced the medieval texts).



## Why these texts and time-periods?

### Ancient

Although the use of the word “yoga” dates back to the Vedas, which are amongst the world’s oldest scriptures, they do not describe what the practices of yoga were. Texts that come later provide more detail, and while discussion of yoga occurs in the various Upanishads (of which there are 14 main and over 200 minor), and Puranas (18 major and 18 minor), it is the Bhagavad-Gita and Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras that have come to prominence as the most important ancient texts for yoga.



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The Bhagavad-Gita, a chapter taken from India's greatest epic (the Mahabharata), has been described as the most famous and beloved of all yoga texts. B.K.S. Iyengar suggests the Bhagavad-Gita is '...the most important authority on yoga philosophy'.<sup>1</sup>

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras organised the knowledge of ancient yoga in a manner that has endeared it in modern times such that it is considered the most important foundation text of Classical Yoga. Swami Satyananda Saraswati describes it as '...the first definitive, unified and comprehensive system of yoga'.<sup>2</sup>

### Medieval

Tantric philosophy revolutionised spiritual thought in India. It emerged sometime around the 4<sup>th</sup> Century and rose to prominence by the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. The subsequent development of Hatha Yoga, which was heavily influenced by Tantra, represented a radical change from the Classical Yoga of ancient times.

The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (written around the 15<sup>th</sup> century) and the *Gheranda Samhita* (written in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century) are two of the three most important foundational texts of Hatha Yoga.<sup>3</sup>

### Modern

The most influential yoga teachers of the modern era come from two lineages:<sup>4</sup> Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989) and Sivananda Saraswati (1887–1963). Krishnamacharya has been called the father of modern yoga.<sup>5</sup> His students included some of the greatest names in modern yoga: B.K.S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, T.K.V. Desikachar and Indra Devi. Sivananda was a prolific author, writing over 200 books on yoga. He has established nine ashrams and numerous yoga centres around the world. He also taught several famous modern yoga masters, including Swami Vishnudevananda, Swami Satchitananda, Swami Satyananda, and Swami Chidananda.

*Light on Yoga* (first published 1966) was written by Krishnamacharya's student, B.K.S. Iyengar. Time magazine in 2004 named Iyengar as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. *Light on Yoga* has become the seminal book on yoga postures.

*Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha* (first published 1969) was derived from the direct teachings of Swami Satyananda Saraswati, which are based on Swami Sivananda Saraswati's teachings. It is published by the famous Bihar Yoga School and has become a standard reference text for many yoga schools.

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<sup>1</sup> B.K.S. Iyengar (2001) *Light on Yoga*. HarperCollins, London, pg1.

<sup>2</sup> Swami Satyananda Saraswati (2013) *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*, Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar, India, pg3.

<sup>3</sup> The third text is the *Shiva Samhita*, also written in the late 17th century. It is less commonly used in yoga teaching. James Mallinson (2007) explains 'Firstly, in some places the readings found in all the manuscripts are very corrupt and it is difficult to make sense of them. Secondly, the text is an eclectic collection of Yogic teachings and some of these teachings contradict each other.' (*The Shiva Samhita: A Critical Edition and an English Translation*, YogaVidya.com, pg xii).

<sup>4</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga>.

<sup>5</sup> *The History of Yoga in India*. <http://www.turiyayoga.com/blog/history-yoga-india/>.



## What do they say about Yoga?

### Ancient – The Bhagavad-Gita

The Bhagavad-Gita presents a conversation between Arjuna (whose questions represent the doubts we experience on our spiritual journey) and Krishna (whose responses are guidance from the divine).

Krishna talks about acting selflessly (Karma Yoga), devotion (Bhakti Yoga) and wisdom (Jnana Yoga). The aim of these three paths of yoga is to achieve self-realization, which is union of the individual soul (Jivatman, or simply Atman) with the supreme soul/the divine (Paramatman/Brahman).

Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Jnana Yoga are interlinked. In the practice of devotion (Bhakti Yoga), selfless action is needed (Karma Yoga) and vice-versa. The spiritual growth (self-study, self-reflection, gaining of spiritual knowledge) that is required for Jnana Yoga inevitably accompanies, or is accompanied by, devotion and selfless action.

The Bhagavad-Gita says: ‘Constantly mastering his mind, the man of yoga grows peaceful, attains supreme liberation, and vanishes into my bliss’.<sup>6</sup> This mastering of the mind is known as Raja Yoga (the King or Highest Yoga).

While the Bhagavad-Gita provides guidance on how to think and act, there is no discussion of key elements of modern yoga such as postures (Asana) and breathing exercises (Pranayama).

### Ancient – Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras

Patanjali defines yoga as “Yogas citta vrtti nirodah” (Sutra 1.2), which translates as “Yoga is the restraint of the fluctuations of the mind”. Detailed guidance is given on calming the mind – the problems encountered and what needs to be done – to achieve union of the soul with the divine.

An eight-limbed path (Ashtanga Yoga) is presented, starting with moral guidance (Yama and Niyama), then posture (Asana), breath (Pranayama) and the steps of meditation (Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana) to achieve union (Samadhi).

Discussion of asana in the Yoga Sutras is limited. In Sutra 2.46, Patanjali says: ‘Sthira Sukham Asanam’ – posture (Asanam) should be steady (Sthira) and comfortable (Sukham).

Discussion of pranayama is also limited. In Sutra 2.49, Patanjali says: ‘That [firm posture] being acquired, the movements of the inhalation and exhalation should be controlled. That is pranayama.’<sup>7</sup>

### What the ancient texts say about Yoga

Both the Bhagavad-Gita and the Yoga Sutras provide guidance on how to think and act to achieve union of the self with the divine. They provide advice on overcoming the ego, which stands as a barrier to self-realization. They both provide moral guidance and they both emphasise understanding the body is a temporary container for the immortal spirit. They are recognised as important foundation manuals for Raja Yoga.

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<sup>6</sup> Verse 6.15 as shown in Stephen Mitchell’s (1988) translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

<sup>7</sup> Sutra translations are from Sri Swami Satchidananda’s (2014) *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*.



### Medieval – The Hatha Yoga Pradipika

The Hatha Yoga Pradapika begins by stating that Hatha Yoga is the pathway to Raja Yoga (HYP 1.1).<sup>8</sup>

The first chapter, Asana, states ‘Asanas are described first because they are the first step of Hatha. They give steadiness, health and lightness of body’ (HYP 1.17). It then goes on to describe 15 asanas. These are mostly seated poses that help prepare for meditation. There are no standing poses.

The second chapter, Pranayama, begins by stating: ‘After mastering asanas, the yogi – possessing self-control and eating a suitable, moderate diet – should practice pranayama as taught by his guru’ (HYP 2.1). This chapter then talks about energy channels (Nadis), energy centres (Chakras) and vital energy (Prana). It says: ‘When all the nadis and chakras which are full of impurities are purified, then the yogi is able to retain prana’ (HYP2.5). The second chapter goes on to describe six cleansing techniques (Shatkarma), and eight breathing techniques (Pranayama).

The third chapter, Mudras, further refines the control of energy that was developed in the second chapter. Ten are mudras described – none of which involve the hand gestures we normally think of as mudras. The ten mudras include four energy locks (Bandhas taught in more advanced modern Yoga classes) along with a number of actions, such as curling the tongue to the roof of the mouth, or sitting with the perinium on one heel (not taught in modern Yoga classes), that largely relate to control of semen.

The final chapter, Samadhi, discusses control of the mind to achieve union of the individual soul (Jivatman) with the supreme soul (Paramatman). It explains that samadhi is a synonym for Raja Yoga (HYP 4.4).

### Medieval – The Gheranda Samhita

The Gheranda Samhita describes Yoga as a means of achieving self-realization (GS 1.5).<sup>9</sup> It has seven sections: Shatkarma; Asana; Mudra and Bandha; Pratyahara; Pranayama; Dhyana; and Samadhi. The purpose of each is summarised in Verses 1.10 and 1.11:

Through shatkarmas, purification of the body is achieved; through asanas, firmness; through mudras, steadiness; and through pratyahara, patience is achieved. Through pranayama, agility or lightness is achieved, through meditation, self-realization; and through samadhi, non-involvement or detachment and, undoubtedly, liberation, are achieved.

The Gheranda Samhita differs from the Hatha Yoga Pradipika in: 1) the sequence of practices e.g. cleansing the body (Shatkarma) precedes posture (Asana); and 2) more practices are described e.g. 32 poses instead of the 15 poses in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. However, it also has much in common with the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, most notably being its focus on preparing the body first, before practicing meditation with the aim of calming the mind to achieve union of soul with the divine (Raja Yoga).

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<sup>8</sup> Hatha Yoga Pradapika translations are from Brian Dana Akers (2002) *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika: The Original Sanskrit Svātmanāma: An English Translation*. YogaVidya.com.

<sup>9</sup> Gheranda Samhita translations are from Swami Niranjananda Saraswati (2012) *Gheranda Samhita: Commentary on the Yoga Teachings of Maharshi Gheranda*. Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar.



### What the medieval texts say about Yoga

The medieval texts pay homage to the Raja Yoga of Classical Yoga, stating that Hatha Yoga is the pathway that leads to Raja Yoga. The medieval view was that control of the mind (Raja Yoga) was too difficult to achieve without first developing control of the body and its energy flows (Hatha Yoga).

The later texts, as represented by the Gheranda Samhita, show increasing detail in the number of, and instruction for, asana and other physical/energetic Yoga practices.

### Modern – Light on Yoga

Iyengar defines Yoga as ‘...the means by which the jivatma can be united to, or be in communion with the paramatma, and so secure liberation’.<sup>10</sup> In the chapter titled ‘What is Yoga’, Iyengar draws extensively from the Bhagavad-Gita, Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, the Hatha Yoga Pradapika, the Gheranda Samhita, the Siva Samhita and the Kathopanishad. Of the 31 pages allocated to discussion of “What is Yoga”, 20 pages are dedicated to Patanjali’s eight limbs.

The majority of the book (320 pages), however, is allocated to describing asanas. Pranayama forms a small section (27 pages) and there are brief mentions of bandha (1 page) and shatkarma (1 page).

Each asana includes photos and text describing how to it is performed, as well as discussion of its health effects. Appendices suggest courses of asanas for aspiring Yoga students, and selections of asanas to cure diseases.

### Modern – Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha

Yoga ‘...is described in spiritual terms as the union of the individual consciousness with the universal consciousness. On a more practical level, yoga is a means of balancing and harmonizing the body, mind and emotions. This is done through the practice of asana, pranayama, mudra, bandha, shatkarma and meditation, and must be achieved before union can take place with the higher reality’.<sup>11</sup>

This captures both the ancient definition of yoga (union of the individual consciousness with the universal consciousness) and the medieval concept of working on the body and its energy flows (Hatha Yoga) before moving on to the practice of meditation (Raja Yoga) for this union can occur.

As with Light on Yoga, the largest portion of the book is dedicated to asana (360 pages). Asanas are divided into a Beginners Group, Intermediate Group and Advanced Group. The benefits of each asana are described, along with instructions and diagrams.

Sections on pranayama (52 pages), mudra (50 pages), bandha (13 pages) and shatkarma (38 pages) are more extensive than in *Light on Yoga*, but still a minority of the book. There is also discussion of chakras and nadis (11 pages).

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<sup>10</sup> B.K.S. Iyengar (2001) *Light on Yoga*. HarperCollins, London, pg1.

<sup>11</sup> Swami Satyananda Saraswati (2013) *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*, Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar, India, pg1.



## How has yoga changed?

Yoga began as instruction in how to think and act so as to achieve union of the individual soul (Atman) with the divine consciousness (Paramatman). Moral guidance was given, along with advice on overcoming barriers such as the ego. The body was considered to be a temporary container for the immortal spirit. Little or no mention was made of postures, breathing techniques or other modern Yoga practices. This yoga has come to be called Classical Yoga or Raja Yoga.

Yoga evolved in the medieval period with the realization that control of the body was needed first, before control of the mind. The medieval texts pay homage to the Raja Yoga of the classical texts, stating that Hatha Yoga is the pathway that leads to Raja Yoga. The body was prepared through postures to strengthen it and techniques to clean out impurities and control energy flows. Only then could the steps of meditation be taken on the path to samadhi. Thus, Hatha Yoga was created as the stairway to Raja Yoga. This led to redefining yoga as being the union of body, mind and soul.

Yoga today has become a billion dollar worldwide industry.<sup>12</sup> The majority of people who start practicing yoga, do so to improve their flexibility.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the postures (asana) of yoga are the defining characteristic of modern yoga. This is evident in modern yoga texts, which focus so much on asana that a new yoga student could be forgiven for thinking anything else was ancillary.

However, flexibility is only a contributing factor to yoga's health benefits. The full extent of yoga's success in delivering a healthy body and mind is unmatched by any other form of exercise.<sup>14</sup> This, in no small way, can be attributed to yoga's breathing techniques (pranayama), its focus on calming the mind, and the resultant activation of the parasympathetic nervous system.

Serious yoga students inevitably move beyond the initial attraction of asana, discovering the richness of Hatha Yoga and the beauty of Raja Yoga. Thus, while modern yoga on the surface appears to focus on postures (asana), flexibility and health, the foundations of Hatha and Raja Yoga remain to guide those who delve deeper and tread the spiritual journey to union of body, mind and soul.

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<sup>12</sup> According to yoga statistics provided by *The Good Body*, \$80 billion (US) is spent worldwide on yoga each year (<https://www.thegoodbody.com/yoga-statistics/>).

<sup>13</sup> "Improve flexibility" was the top reason cited for starting yoga in a recent US study (<https://www.thegoodbody.com/yoga-statistics/>) and this was also the top reason provided by students at Centenary Yoga.

<sup>14</sup> For further information on the health benefits of yoga, see *The Science of Yoga* (2018) [Centenaryyoga.com.au/resources](http://Centenaryyoga.com.au/resources).

