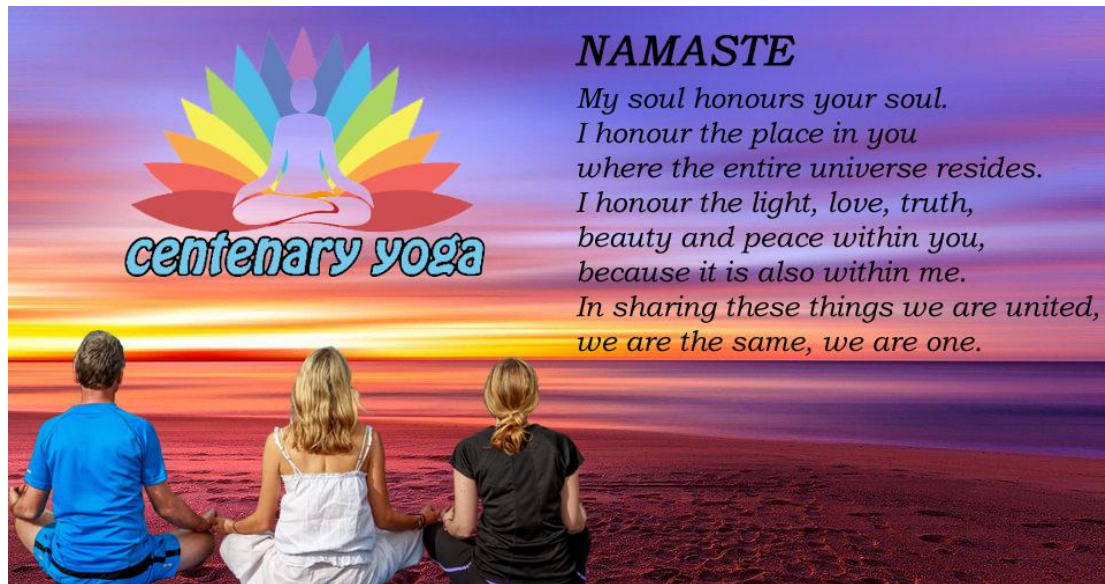


What is Yoga?



Amazing suppleness and flexibility, along with glowing health and impressive calmness. These are outward characteristics of people who practice yoga. But what the uninitiated sees is merely the tip of the iceberg. Yoga is rich in tradition and history, the journey through which is deeply rewarding.

The word “yoga” means “union”. But what does this really mean?

Yoga has its historical roots in Hindu philosophy. As such union has traditionally meant becoming one with God. In the Vedantic tradition, recognition was given to the dualistic nature of our existence and yoga provided a pathway to become closer to God.

The evolution of yoga was heavily influenced by the development of Tantra, which held that God is within all of us and we are all a part of God. Tantra encouraged awakening our own divinity. Common ground can be found in both traditions in the following definition of yoga that applies to all people, regardless of their religious beliefs or even a need to believe in God.

Yoga means union of the inner self or soul (Atman) with the oneness of all life (Brahman)

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (one of yoga's two most important ancient texts) prescribed a pathway for the practice of yoga. Patanjali described the importance of controlling the mind to achieve union. In Sutra 1.2, Patanjali has given us one of the most important definitions of yoga still in use today:

Yoga is the restraint of the fluctuations of the mind



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Patanjali's yoga has been described as '...the first definitive, unified and comprehensive system of yoga'.¹ It is the ancient form of yoga known as Raja Yoga that is commonly associated with meditation. However, this is very different to modern yoga, most notably because there are no descriptions of asanas (modern yoga poses) in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

Modern yoga is based upon Hatha Yoga, which came into being during the medieval period. Hatha Yoga recognised the importance of developing a healthy body and controlling its energy flows before control of the mind could be achieved. From Hatha Yoga, a new understanding of yoga emerged:

Yoga means union of body, mind and soul

In traditional Hatha Yoga the mind played centre stage, being the link between body and soul. Patanjali's emphasis on quietening the fluctuations of the mind was still all important, as was the ultimate goal of becoming one with the divine.

Yoga has continued to evolve over the centuries. Modern yoga has a strong focus on the stretching and twisting of asana, along with the breathing techniques of pranayama. Some see this as a diversion from the true essence of yoga. However, any serious student of yoga inevitably encounters yogic philosophy and begins an amazing journey.

An important aspect of yogic philosophy is learning to accept ourselves for who we are. It is a discovery of self that promotes understanding, acceptance and a deep love for life.

Yoga for many begins as a journey on a physical plane, but whether we realise it or not, yoga is also a journey on mental and spiritual planes. It leads to a deeper understanding of yourself, to becoming one with yourself – to union.

One of the most eloquent contemporary descriptions of yoga is based upon text found in Sutra 6.20 in the Bhagavad Gita (the other of yoga's two most important ancient texts):²

Yoga is the journey of the self, through the self, to the self

¹ Swami Satyananda Saraswati (2013) *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*, Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar, India, pg3.

² This phrase is an adaptation of the second part of Sutra 6.20. The full sutra explains that the journey through the self occurs when the mind is quietened by the practice of yoga.



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