

Philosophy and Aim of Yoga

What is Yoga?

Yoga is the union of the individual consciousness with the universal consciousness. The word “yoga” comes from the Sanskrit “yug” meaning “to join.” Yogic philosophy states that the absolute Reality (also known as the Absolute or Pure Consciousness, or “Brahman”) is unchanging, whereas our reality is defined by time, space and causality – all constantly changing, all relative rather than absolute. These three dimensions are collectively known as “Maya,” illusions created by our mind. It is our acceptance of time, space and causality as reality that prevents us from realizing our true nature.

So... Where do Asanas come in?

The practice of asanas (steady postures) and pranayama (control of the vital energy through breath) allow our bodies to become healthy and energized, and gradually improves our mental capacity – for concentration and, eventually, meditation. Once a practitioner has reached a meditative state, it means (s)he has transcended the three illusions of Maya and reached a state of tranquility, and then progresses to a single uninterrupted point of awareness. So asanas are one of the building blocks of this personal evolution.

Then if I want to practice Yoga, does it mean I have to meditate?

Before we can truly meditate, we must cultivate excellent concentration. Try doing six Sun Salutations with complete awareness of your body and breath and no random thoughts entering your mind. Quite a challenge for most of us. So to practice asanas with a real interest in improving concentration and awareness of body and breath is an important step towards meditation.

It should be added that sitting still and quietly – in typical “meditation” style – is very beneficial. Sitting and calming your breath reduces heart rate and oxygen consumption, greatly reducing stress levels. This leads to a slowing of the “decaying” or aging process. In a normal middle aged adult, about 100,000 brain cells are permanently lost each day. Meditation can reduce this decay and help the body’s cell production. Mental benefits include a reduction or loss of negativity, a steady mind, greater mental energy, and even (it is said) cheerfulness and dynamic personalities.

Having said all that...

Practicing asanas should be enjoyable, even **fun!** Yoga does not seek to carve out statuesque athletes or twist us all into impossible pretzels. It is gentle exercise performed with awareness. It is a steady, personal process of expanding our limitations, both physical and mental. It is not competitive – always listen to your body. Nor is it a miracle cure – heed your health professionals. It is described as an art, by B.K.S. Iyengar in *The Tree of Yoga*:

*The six basic arts of Indian tradition are yoga, wrestling, archery, drama (including dance), music and economics. Arts can be of many kinds, including useful arts, healing arts, fine arts, performing arts and so on. The art of yoga embraces all these levels and is thus **the fundamental art**. Through yoga, the human being comes into contact with the soul; thus yoga is a spiritual art. Each asana has an exact geometrical and architectural shape; thus it is also a fine art. Yoga brings health and happiness to the practitioner; thus it is both a healing and a useful art. When the beauty and harmony of the asanas are appreciated by onlookers, yoga also becomes a performing art.*