

# Ashtanga Yoga

## Patanjali Yoga Sutras

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Yoga, as we know it today, originates from the Yoga Sutras, a component of the Shastras. The Shastras are a compilation of six schools of Hindu teachings which were collected and organized to clarify and conjoin Indian philosophy and psychology into a cohesive collection of knowledge, sometime prior to the Christian era. The great yogi and spiritual master, Patanjali, is recognized as the author of the Yoga Sutras.



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Patanjali gave his system of yoga the name, 'Ashtanga', which means 'eight limbs'. Ashtanga Yoga has eight distinct components or branches. Within these eight elements, Patanjali created a framework for the practice of yoga, not only for his own era, but for all time. All of the distinct forms of yoga we find in the world today are rooted in Ashtanga Yoga.

The eight branches of Ashtanga Yoga are:

1. Yamas - restraints
2. Niyamas – ethical observances
3. Asana - posture
4. Pranayama – use of breath and breathing
5. Pratyahara – withdrawal of sensory currents
6. Dharana – focused concentration
7. Dhyana - meditation
8. Samadhi - transcendence

While there are some who would like to credit Patanjali as being the original progenitor of yoga, this is not the case. The practice of yoga, and references to yoga are found in numerous places in Hindu literature. For example, yoga is referenced in both the Vedas and Upanishads, both of which predate the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

Also, in the Mahabharata we find:

*“Hiranyagarbha is the original knower of Yoga. There is no one else more ancient.”*

Hiranyagarbha is the sun god, also referred to as Vivasvan. In another passage, Krishna states,

*“I instructed this imperishable science of yoga to the sun-god, Vivasvan, and Vivasvan instructed it to Manu, the father of mankind, and Manu in turn instructed it to Ikshvaku.”*

Patanjali never suggests that he is the progenitor of yoga. By contrast, in the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna does make this claim when he states:

*“I taught the original Yoga to Vivasvan”.*

What Patanjali did was to present yoga in a literary format as a coherent, organized formula for its practice. Prior to Patanjali, this had never been done.

## Ashtanga Yoga, Hinduism, and History

Ashtanga Yoga derives from Hindu culture. Any investigation of Hindu culture or its literature must take into account the difficulty – even impossibility of making any definitive statements regarding historical accounts and historic dates. While Indians have done an excellent job of conserving their historic writings, they have done an unsatisfactory job of maintaining accurate historical records.

Confounding this reality is the fact that Hindu literature is a combination of historic events and lore, and it's usually impossible to distinguish between the two. Was the story of the Mahabharata based on historic events? Was Krishna an historic figure or a purely literary, mythological figure? We don't know for sure. When was the Gita written? Who wrote it? We just don't know the answers to these, and many other questions regarding Indian history.

There are some Indian scholars who date the Gita as early as 3300 BCE. There are others who date it as late as 200 BCE. If correct, it would date the writing of the Gita after the appearance of Patanjali and his composition of the Yoga Sutras. Fortunately, we do have some basis upon which to date Patanjali and some of his fellow yogic masters.

# Ashtanga Yoga and the Axial Period

The term, 'Axial Period', or 'Axial Era', is a term, originally devised by religious scholars, which refers to a six-century period from 800 BCE to 200 BCE. Scholars view this six-hundred-year window of time as the period in which the modern human being emerges. This is the period when our cultural and philosophic standards evolved into existence. There are extraordinary events and historic figures who appear during this time, especially around the middle of this period; 600-500 BCE.

In China, Lao Tzu and Confucius appear, establishing the foundation of Chinese thought and cultural norms. In India, it was the time of the appearances of Gautama Buddha and Mahavira, along with many similar, lesser-known Hindu reformers. In Persia, Zoroaster appeared, laying groundwork for many of the principles of Judaism and Christianity. In Palestine, we find the appearance of the great prophets Jeremiah, Elijah, and Isaiah. In Greece, we have the seeds of democracy sown and a long tradition of great thinkers and spiritual adepts, including Plutarch, Pythagoras, and Socrates, to name a few. All of these great teachers appear simultaneously, in various locales, all establishing the groundwork for future civilization.

Right near the end of this period, around the third or second century, BCE, we also have the appearance of a lineage of great Himalayan spiritual masters. Patanjali is one of those great masters.

## Nandinath - Patanjali's Guru

Long ago, centuries before the Christian era, in the rugged highlands of the Himalayas, there lived a great spiritual master known as Maharishi Nandinath. Nandinath was one of those rare souls whose inner eye was open to the mysteries of the cosmos. Nandinath was just one in a long succession of great Sat Gurus whose names and stories have been forever lost to the winds of time.

Nandinath was one of the earliest seeds of light which would ultimately become known as the Nath Tradition, or Nath Sampradaya. Everything Patanjali knew and wrote about Ashtanga Yoga, he learned from his spiritual master, Nandinath.

Nandinath was a grandfather guru, a teacher of teachers. He spawned eight disciples who would all become great teachers of humanity in their own right. Each of these eight would ultimately become a founder or co-founder of one of the original Agamic schools of Hindu Saivite philosophy.

Many of the ancient yogis from the Himalayan region had high levels of spiritual attainment. They lived a simple, austere life amongst their fellow yogis, close to the land and close to one another.

Their dwellings and ashrams were usually built close to a river, with fresh water required for survival. Those who grew food had to terrace the sloping hillsides. They grew a variety of crops including orchards for fruit. They kept bees for honey, cows for milk, and goats for hauling. The mountains were networked with trails which the people used to travel to distant settlements and marketplaces. In some places, the pathways were so narrow that only one man, or one animal could pass at a time.

Their simple lifestyle offered many opportunities for gatherings, especially in the ashrams. Disciples would sit on the ground and memorize the words of their guru. Knowledge and spiritual instructions were transferred orally, since there were no books.

Their life was arduous, but the pure environment of the Himalayan region was conducive to spiritual pursuits. It was, and still is today, a sacred region where many great yogis and masters have found realization and enlightenment.

Most of Nandinath's disciples traveled far and wide teaching yoga throughout the subcontinent and as far away as China. One of Patanjali's fellow disciples, Sundernath, traveled to Southern India, where he took on the name 'Tirumoolar'. Tirumoolar authored over 3000 hymns, known as the Tirumantiram, which have become an important component of the literary canon of Shaivite Hinduism. Ashtanga Yoga is referenced by Tirumoolar in a number of places within these 3000 hymns.

## Patanjali and His Ashtanga Yoga

Patanjali remained in the Himalayan region and authored the Yoga Sutras, along with numerous other spiritual writings under the guidance of Nandinath. Patanjali was the rare combination of being a great scholar, along with being a mystic adept.

He was also a consummate musician and singer. His favorite instrument was the vina. One day, he and his fellow disciple, Vyaghrapada, got into a friendly debate over musical composition. Vyaghrapada contended that under certain restrictions, it would be impossible to compose a cohesive, tonal piece of music. Patanjali agreed that the imposed restrictions would make composition very difficult. However, in spite of the restrictions, Patanjali was able to compose a beautiful raga anyway. Such was his great intellect and artistic prowess.

The word 'sutra' means thread, a thread that is connected to something, and that leads us to that something. It also means 'formula', or a solution to a question or problem. The Yoga Sutras are a formula for self-realization. They are brilliantly conceived, one of the most literary writings to be found anywhere in Hindu literature. They are a solution to life, a formula for awakening to the inner spiritual realms to reveal our true nature and our higher selves.

Patanjali begins his landmark work with a chapter containing only three words:

*"And now yoga."*

He is saying, "Alright, you have established yourself and your family, your worldly affairs are in order; now it is time for you to pursue yoga, the highest purpose of human birth."

Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga is more a framework, or a practical set of tools, than it is a set of guidelines on how to practice yoga. He is deliberately opaque on specifics. He allows for future yogis, and future teachers of yoga to formulate their own unique approach. This is just one of his masterful contributions to future generations of yoga practitioners.

What he does is establish a set of benchmarks, a foundational base upon which the practice of yoga can be built. He calls his benchmarks Ashtanga, or eight limbs, the eight universal components that make up yoga; all yoga.

Patanjali defines yoga as 'chit vritta nirodha', which means the removal of the ongoing vibratory disturbances within the mind, which ultimately leads to ascension over the mind and unification with the Over-self, or God. Stilling the mind is, therefore, the golden pathway to self-realization and God-realization.

The word yoga derives from the Sanskrit root, 'yug', which literally means yoking two things together. It refers to the union of the soul with its divine source. The ultimate goal of yoga is Samadhi, a state of mental equipoise, where the consciousness of the contemplator is merged with the object of contemplation.

Yoga utilizes certain spiritual disciplines, or sadhanas, to attain a state of consciousness, free of the onslaught of thoughts, where one's consciousness becomes detached from all objects of thought, and is aware only of its own pure essence.

## The Ashtanga Yoga Sutras

The Yoga Sutras are comprised of four chapters or books. They contain 196 sutras (aphorisms) pertaining to the theory and practice of yoga.

1. Samadhi Pada (51 sutras) – The first book addresses the ultimate goal of yoga, Samadhi. He describes various forms of Samadhi and the nature of the experience.
2. Sadhana Pada (55 sutras) – He defines sadhana as spiritual practice or discipline. He goes on to outline two primary forms of yoga practice; Kriya and Ashtanga.
3. Vibhuti Pada (56 sutras) – Vibhuti means power or manifestation. In this book, he describes the transcendental powers, or 'siddhis', which can be acquired as an outcome of the practice of yoga.
4. Kaivalya Pada (34 sutras) – This book describes the process of spiritual liberation and the nature of the realized self.

## The Eight Limbs of Ashtanga Yoga

In book number two, Sadhana Pada, he outlines the eight limbs, or components of Ashtanga Yoga.

1. Yamas – The yamas are moral imperatives involving the eradication of harmful tendencies and the subsequent replacement with virtuous habits. The five yamas mentioned by Patanjali are:
  - Ahimsa, or non-violence
  - Satya, or truthfulness
  - Asteya, or non-stealing
  - Brahmacharya, or sexual restraint and marital fidelity
  - Aparigraha, or non-greediness and non-possessiveness
2. Niyamas – This section focuses on the cultivation of positive habits:
  - Shaucha, including purity, clearness of mind, speech, and body
  - Santosha, including contentment, acceptance of others and of one's circumstances
  - Tapas, including persistence, perseverance, and austerity
  - Svadhyaya, including study of scriptures and self-introspection of one's thoughts, words, and actions
  - Ishvarapranidhana, the contemplation of God
3. Asana – Patanjali describes the yogi's posture as a posture that one can hold for a period of time, while staying relaxed, steady, comfortable, and motionless. He does not recommend one posture over another in the Yoga Sutras. However, in a later writing, he outlines twelve possible asanas. All of the twelve asanas are variations of the lotus posture, sitting cross-legged on the floor or on some type of platform.

4. Pranayama – Pranayama consists of two Sanskrit words, prana (breath), and ayama (restraining, extending, stretching). Pranayama addresses various ways the breath can be used in the practice of yoga.
5. Pratyahara - This is the process of withdrawing the sensory currents from the outside world and all external distractions. It is closing the 'mind' to the sensory world outside. Pratyahara marks the transition point in Ashtanga from the outer to the inner.
6. Dharana – In Sanskrit, dharana means concentration, introspective focus, and single-mindedness. It consists of holding the mind's attention at a particular point.
7. Dhyana – Once Dharana has been established, Dhyana is the ensuing, ongoing stream of experience with the attention fixed, moving forward in time. It is contemplation. It is meditation.
8. Samadhi – In Sanskrit, samadhi means joining, combining with, union, and a harmonious whole. Samadhi is the achievement of union with the object of Dhyana. When the attention is fully absorbed, there is no distinction between the contemplator and the contemplated. In Samadhi, the consciousness of the yogi loses its individual identity. The yogi and his object of contemplation become amalgamated.

## The Evolution of Yoga from Ashtanga Yoga

Today, thousands of different schools of yoga have evolved out of Ashtanga Yoga. This evolutionary phenomenon has resulted in each of the eight primary elements of Ashtanga becoming a distinct school of yoga, with emphasis on the specific, individual branch.

Emphasis on yamas and niyamas, for example, has evolved into Karma Yoga. Numerous modern schools, such as Hatha Yoga, emphasize the posture, or asana.

The practice of pranayama, with emphasis on breathing techniques, has become widespread, with literally thousands of different schools worldwide.

There is also a yogic school known as Dharana Yoga, which places emphasis on focused concentration of the attention. There are thousands of schools of yoga and spirituality that emphasize meditation, or Dhyana.

Yoga is a healthy component to modern life, benefitting thousands of people worldwide physically, mentally, and spiritually. With Ashtanga Yoga, India has made a constructive contribution to all members of her diverse human family.