YOGA: LOOKING BEYOND “THE MAT”

WHAT IS YOGA?

Yoga is an ancient system of contemplative practice that has become very influential in contemporary culture. Originating in India where it has been practiced for millennia, yoga was once considered a classical school of Indian philosophy and a multifaceted “psychospiritual technology.”[1] Today, the term “yoga” usually refers to a diverse system of exercise based on traditional practices that involve the body, breath, and mind.

Interest in yoga among Americans has substantially grown in recent years. While a 1998 survey found that only 3.8% of Americans used yoga in the previous 12 months,[2] this number was 9.5% by 2012.[3] The most recent survey, conducted in 2016, showed that 28% of Americans have practiced yoga.[4] Impressively, a survey showed that 9 out of 10 Americans have heard of yoga and 75% of Americans agree that “yoga is good for you.”

WHAT IS A TYPICAL YOGA CLASS LIKE?

A typical yoga class in the United States will focus on physical postures (or asanas) of yoga, with additional time devoted to breathing, relaxation, and/or meditation. Depending on the type, style, or school of yoga, exercises may have different emphases. Examples include holding a single posture for an extended period of time to develop alignment of musculoskeletal structures, flowing freely through a variety of poses, or rhythmically repeating movements that are synchronized with breathing. Deep rhythmic breathing and mindfulness instructions are often integrated into developing asanas; alternatively, exercises from the system of yogic breathing (pranayama) may be conducted during classes as well.

Asanas are often given evocative names derived from nature (e.g. the tree pose) or virtuous qualities (e.g. the hero’s pose) in order to engage the mind. Technical Sanskrit terms and names may or may not be used. In addition to poses (asanas) and breathing practices (pranayama), yoga includes a well-developed theory and practice of meditation (dhyana); American yoga classes sometimes include an extended period of meditation, contemplation, or guided imagery from eclectic sources.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF YOGA?

There is tremendous diversity among yoga styles, paths, and practices. This was historically true with yoga in India [1] and remains true today. In addition, many hybrids of yoga and other movement systems have been recently created, such as yoga with acrobatics (“acroyoga”) and yoga with Pilates (“yogalates”). While the diversity of yoga can be confusing, it may also allow yoga to modernize and affect more people from diverse backgrounds. The following discussion explores different yoga styles, paths, and practices in greater detail.
YOGA STYLES

The “styles” of yoga generally refer to different modes of physical, asana-based practices that often correspond to different yoga lineages or contemporary schools of thought. Proprietary yoga programs are also included. Some popular yoga styles in the United States include the following:

- **Hatha yoga**—this generally describes a more traditional approach to yoga asanas and pranayama that emphasizes slow, mindful exercises. This is the traditional yogic path that forms the basis for the most popular styles of yoga today.

- **Iyengar yoga**—a famous system developed by B.K.S Iyengar that involves precise musculoskeletal alignment and holding poses for prolonged periods. This system has been very influential in the therapeutic application of yoga exercises.

- **Kundalini yoga**—a traditional system of yoga designed to awaken creativity and personal power. The practices often involve repetitive movements coordinated with breathing, chanting, and meditation.

- **Bikram yoga**—an influential and now proprietary sequence of yoga asanas developed by Bikram Choudhury. This style is perhaps the prototype of “hot yoga,” featuring an athletic, even competitive, approach to yoga asanas performed in a 105°F room. At least one study has shown that core body temperatures can rise above 103°F during Bikram yoga. [5]

- **Ashtanga vinyasa yoga**—a rather regimented, vigorous, and physically challenging practice that involves arm balances and jumping transitions. It was spread by the late Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009). Although often shortened to the moniker “Ashtanga yoga,” this style should not be confused with the philosopher Patanjali’s classical ashtanga yoga (a.k.a. *raja* or classical yoga), which is a more broadly applicable term (refer below). “Vinyasa yoga” is a closely related style through which the teacher takes more liberty to “flow” in and out of planned sequences and poses.

For a lengthy guide to popular yoga styles in the United States, refer to [Yoga Journal](#).

TRADITIONAL PATHS OF YOGA

In India, many traditional approaches to spiritual practice (also referred to as *yogas*) have gained a popular following. As indicated by their names, these “paths” of yoga are associated with distinct practices, ancient texts, and lineages that have survived until modern times. The following section lists examples of commonly recognized traditional paths of yoga.
TABLE 1. EXAMPLES OF TRADITIONAL YOGA PATHS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yogic Path</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Modern Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karma yoga</td>
<td>Yoga of action</td>
<td><a href="https://yogaservicecouncil.org/">https://yogaservicecouncil.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jnana yoga</td>
<td>Yoga of knowledge</td>
<td>Work of Swami Vivekananda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhakti yoga</td>
<td>Yoga of devotion</td>
<td>Kirtan singing (e.g., Krishna Das’ music)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mantra yoga</td>
<td>Yoga of sacred words</td>
<td>Practice of chanting “OM.” This practice has been studied extensively in Veteran populations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashtanga/Raja yoga</td>
<td>Patanjali’s eight-limbed path of classical yoga</td>
<td>Integral yoga, Sivananda yoga, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hatha yoga</td>
<td>Yoga of polarity</td>
<td>Work of B.K.S. Iyengar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As previously mentioned, it is the traditional path of hatha yoga that influenced the physical posture and breathing practices that are so popular today.[1]

YOGA PRACTICES

Yoga “practices” are roughly synonymous with yoga “exercises.” However, unlike strictly physical exercises, yoga practices also include activities such as systemic relaxation that do not involve any movement of the musculoskeletal system. There are innumerable individual practices and variations in yoga, but some are commonly employed across different schools (e.g. the sun salutation series.)

Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* is an ancient text that offers an authoritative classification scheme for yoga practices that is still applied today.[6] This text codified the vast array of yoga practices of the time into eight core aspects of yoga (or *ashtanga yoga*), which range from ethical restraints (*yama*) to advanced meditative absorption (*samadhi*). These eight limbs describe a rather robust continuum of yoga that is at least partially reflected in contemporary yoga practice.

The following section shows common examples that demonstrate the range of yoga practices along with their correspondence to Patanjali’s eight aspects of yoga (*ashtanga yoga*):
TABLE 2. PRACTICES THAT REFLECT PATANJALI’S EIGHT ASPECTS OF YOGA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yoga Practice</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Aspect of Patanjali’s Yoga</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonviolence (<em>ahimsa</em>)</td>
<td>May include behaviors such as vegetarianism and non-harming of others</td>
<td>Yama (ethical restraints)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neti wash (<em>jala neti kriya</em>)</td>
<td>Cleansing the sinuses with warm saline solution</td>
<td>Niyama (ethical observances)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun salutation (<em>surya namaskar</em>)</td>
<td>A series of usually 12 yoga poses</td>
<td><em>Asana</em> (postures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kapalabhati</td>
<td>A practice involving breathing with rapid, forced exhalation and passive inhalation</td>
<td><em>Pranayama</em> (breathing exercises)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Shanmukhi mudra</em> (<em>yoni mudra</em>)</td>
<td>Manually closing the ears, eyes, nose, and mouth with breath retention</td>
<td>Pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mantra repetition (<em>japa</em>)</td>
<td>Repetition of a mantra (special word or phrase)</td>
<td><em>Dharana</em> (concentration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breath awareness meditation</td>
<td>Single-pointed mindfulness of the flow of breath</td>
<td><em>Dhyana</em> (meditation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced meditation</td>
<td>Refer to Patanjali’s <em>Yoga Sutras</em> (first chapter)[6]</td>
<td><em>Samadhi</em> (meditative absorption)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WHAT AGE GROUP IS YOGA THERAPY BEST SUITED FOR?

Yoga can be utilized by patients of all ages. Many of the studies emphasized in this module focus on the benefits of yoga in adult and elderly populations, but yoga can also impact our veterans’ children as well. For example, studies have shown that children practicing yoga react better to stressful situations, show improved self-esteem, have reduced symptoms of ADHD, and demonstrate improved memory scores when compared to controls.[7-9] Moreover, aspects of athletic performance such as endurance and aerobic capacity may also improve with yoga.[10] For these reasons, consider prescribing yoga therapy as a family practice.

HOW MIGHT YOGA HELP WITH MY WHOLE HEALTH?

A regular yoga practice can address many aspects of the Circle of Health. The following recommendations can help both clinicians and patients approach Whole Health through yoga. When considering the array of yoga practices, remember it is perfectly acceptable to select only what is helpful and leave behind what is not.

YOGA FOR MOVING THE BODY

A vast and growing body of research suggests that yoga exercise has many health benefits, and these benefits may overlap with more conventional forms of exercise. These are outlined in the Whole Health Library overview, “Moving the Body.”

YOGA AND SURROUNDINGS

Though popular depictions of yogis often include an ascetic practicing in a pure, pastoral environment, yoga can positively impact our surroundings in our everyday lives. For instance, yoga has been demonstrated to decrease stress levels, [11-13] including in the workplace.[12,13] A yoga practice is also consistently associated with an increase in physiologic markers for relaxation.[14] Thus, even if you can’t run away to the mountains, yoga might help you to create the same peacefulness wherever you may be.

YOGA AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The classical yoga tradition provides a philosophical approach to the broad continuum of human experience... from the rarefied and transcendental, to the afflicted and mundane.[6,15] As such, many commentators have drawn parallels between yoga and Western psychology.[16] The chakra system is one traditional set of yoga teachings that describes a sophisticated developmental scheme, with very practical implications.[17] Studying with a qualified and experienced yoga teacher is a good way to learn about these more traditional aspects of yoga.

YOGA, FOOD, AND DRINK

Diet is frequently a huge topic of discussion in yoga communities. Vegetarianism is often considered a foundational practice of yoga in connection to the core yoga tenet of ahimsa
Given the potential benefits of more plant-based diets, eating a yogic diet may be a step in the right direction. Yoga has also been associated with mindful eating, which may reduce calorie intake[18]. Additionally, intoxicating substances are usually banned from yoga schools and studios. There has been little research in this area, but some scientists have theorized that yoga can be beneficial for addiction.[19]

### YOGA AND RECHARGE

Preliminary data suggest yoga practice may improve sleep.[20-23] This is not surprising given that many yoga programs incorporate systematic relaxation techniques into classes. A particular subset of yoga relaxation exercise based on the traditional practice of *yoga nidra* (literally *yogic sleep*) has also produced some very promising results[24,25] that have the potential to dramatically change the way we think about sleep.[25]

### YOGA AND FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND CO-WORKERS

One of the least recognized benefits of a typical exercise program is the sense of community that develops among participants. This certainly applies to yoga exercise classes.

Discussions of relationships and communication often occur in the context of the foundational ethical tenets (*yamas* and *niyamas*) of yoga.[6] There are also some preliminary data suggesting yoga may help with sexual function and intimacy.[26]

### YOGA, SPIRIT, AND SOUL

Yoga is often referred to as a *spiritual science* and as such may provide a wellspring of experimentation, inspiration, and insight for practitioners. Elements of yogic philosophy are shared by many of the spiritual traditions of South Asia, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. There are also schools of Christian yoga and Jewish yoga. Secular presentations of yoga are fairly popular in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Many yogis assume a stance of radical nonsectarianism, and the majority of yoga in the United States is practiced in a secular context.

### YOGA AND THE POWER OF THE MIND

Yoga is often classified as a mind-body practice.[27] Appropriately, yoga provides significant insight into the interaction between the body and the mind.

Early investigations of the power of yoga were focused on yogic feats through which advanced practitioners demonstrated amazing voluntary mental control over normal involuntary physiological processes.[28-30] These activities helped form the theoretical basis for biofeedback, a therapeutic practice that is applied to numerous health conditions.[31] Unusual yogic abilities continue to invite scientific investigation into mind-body issues.[25] Not surprisingly, yoga therapy has also been associated with improvements in symptoms of anxiety and depression in a variety of populations in some research, though more study is needed.[32-36]
Yoga—Looking Beyond "The Mat"

YOGA, PREVENTION, AND TREATMENT

Historically, the therapeutic aspects of yoga have been formalized by and integrated into yoga's sister system of medicine, Ayurveda.[37] Ayurveda is a well-developed system of traditional medicine with its own approach to prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of medical conditions. (Refer to Chapter 18 of the Passport to Whole Health and www.ayurveda.com.) Many practitioners of yoga find that Ayurvedic medicine complements their yoga practice.

Yoga therapy (also called therapeutic yoga) is yoga with the intention of healing. Although yoga has probably been used for physical health for centuries, the discipline of yoga therapy has recently been formulated to integrate the Western biomedical perspective into yoga practices. Yoga therapy now has an international professional organization (refer to www.iayt.org), a peer-reviewed research journal ( referenced on PubMed), and numerous training programs. A growing number of yoga teachers, yoga therapists, and more conventionally credentialed health practitioners are contributing to this movement. Research on the health effects of yoga usually does not differentiate between yoga and yoga therapy, but most of the clinical trials using yoga do employ an explicit therapeutic intent as well as modification of normal yogic exercises.

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR IN A YOGA CLASS OR TEACHER?

THE TYPE OF YOGA

Yoga classes are very diverse, ranging from physically demanding to gentle and restful. Most types of yoga are safe for healthy people, but one size does not fit all.

THE QUALIFICATIONS OF A TEACHER

Credentialing and licensing of yoga instructors vary. Consider teachers trained and certified through a Yoga Alliance teacher-training program (bearing “RYT” after their name) or with the International Association of Yoga Therapists. Word of mouth still matters.

A FACE-TO-FACE TEACHER AND CLASS

Yoga texts and manuals often contain a strong warning to only learn yoga under the guidance of a qualified teacher. Exclusively learning yoga from books and recordings should be discouraged.

A THERAPEUTIC CLASS AND/OR INTENT

Most research evaluating the health effects of yoga refers to therapeutic programs. A good teacher can modify and recommend poses based on your health condition(s).
A TEACHER WHO LISTENS

Alert your teacher to any major health or structural issues before the class. A qualified yoga teacher or instructor should know major contraindications and should attend to your special needs.

RESOURCES

- **iRest in the Military**
  - A branch of the Integrative Restoration Institute’s presentation of yoga-based practices in support of active-duty military and Veterans.
- **The International Association of Yoga Therapists**
  - A variety of articles and blog posts discussing yoga’s emerging role in the U.S. military
- **Warriors at Ease**
  - Offers training, certification, and resources that bring “the healing power of yoga and meditation to military communities around the world.”
- **Yoga For Vets**
  - A nonprofit organization dedicated to helping war Veterans “cope with the stress of combat through yoga instruction.”
- **Yoga Warriors International**
  - A large, multifaceted program offering evidence-based yoga and mindfulness practices “to alleviate symptoms of combat stress or post-traumatic stress disorder and increase the resilience of critical task performers.”

AUTHORS

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REFERENCES


