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## Ashtanga yoga: Modern day practice and its physiological & psychological impact

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#### Abstract

Yoga is one of the most sought after practices in the modern world as faith, as healing factor, as medicinal practice, as a fitness routine and as a practice to attain happiness and peace. It has its origin in the old vedic civilization and the region of Indian sub-continent. It has gained momentum in the past 5-6 decades in the west and all across the world.

A 2008 poll commissioned by Yoga Journal reported that 6.9 percent of U.S. adults (15.8 million people), currently practice yoga, with fifty percent of the practitioners indicating that they began practicing yoga to improve overall health (YogaJournal.com, 2008). Yoga has seemingly found a place within the fitness industry as evidenced by a survey of North American health clubs (Club Programs: IHRSA member census and 1208 North American clubs, 2003) that found 86% of member clubs offered yoga classes, and the increasing number of DVDs on the market promoting yoga as means for total body strengthening and weight loss. However this increasing trend has not been due to any research evidence which has disabled the practicing professionals, teachers and yoga club attendants from making an informed and empirical decision.

The word 'Yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'Yuj', meaning 'to Join' or 'to Yoke' or 'to unite'. Hence yoga is sought to unite the individual consciousness with the world consciousness. As per the scientist the universe is the manifestation of the same quantum firmament. Here in this paper we will seek to establish the facts about the philosophy, theory, practice, parts and methodology of a school of yoga system called 'Ashtanga Yoga'. We will also be emphasizing on the positive impact yielded by the yogic intervention and the criticisms faced by the people. The approach will be to bring out an informed inquiry into the system of Ashtanga Yoga by understanding its various parts and parcels.

**Keywords:** Ashtanga yoga, practice, physiological, psychological

#### Introduction

In Sanskrit "Ashta + anga" is ashtanga. "Ashta" means Eight and "Anga" is limbs so it means Eight Limb path, Ashtanga yoga is based on Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali. The Asanas, Pranayamas, Dhyana are the aspects which were discovered, compiled and based on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, who was an ancient saint sought to have compiled the various sutras of Yoga from the scriptures of Vedic and Vedantic Philosophy. Hence, we will acquaint ourselves with the fundamentals as stated by Patanjali first. Ashtanga Yoga is the eight-limbed path of conscious living and spiritual practice that guides one towards Self-Knowledge, liberation and cessation of personal suffering. It is also understood that the practice is sought to bring both physical and mental improvement in us. It is presented in the Yoga Sutras which was compiled around 200 BCE by the great sage Patanjali.

#### Theory

Ashtanga Yoga has 8 parts as the meaning of the word itself suggests.

#### The Eight Limbs are as follows

1. Yama – Restraints
2. Niyama – Observances
3. Asana – Postures
4. Pratyahara – Control of breath and prana
5. Pranayama – Directing the senses inwards
6. Dhyana – Concentration

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7. Dharana – Meditation
8. Samadhi – Unified consciousness Yoga

These practices can be practiced individually but are suggested and more meaningful when done as a bundle. The sequence in which the above parts are mentioned are also the one in which they should be practiced. However besides the original context these are practiced in many modified forms today and a few of them being practiced in the modern world is a rare feat to address.

### Origins

Originally it was created by T Krishnamacharya for his student K Pattabhi Jois in the 20th century. It was simultaneously practiced by the wrestlers and the gymnasts for bodily strength and elasticity. Later its practiced was refined by the K Pattabhi, he promoted the styles and also began to teach others. These began to be known to purify the body and calm the mind. It also led to the rise of different Yoga practices and styles.

The Ashtanga Yoga research institute was established and is located in Mysore, India. It is headed and directed and headed by son of Mr. Jois R Saranath Jois. Through the institute and various others decentralized and unorganized institutes it is propagated and promoted across India throughout the world.

### Key Principles

1. **Ujjayi Pranayama:** It is a slow meditative breathing technique instructed to build up the focus and as a warm up exercise & is sought to energize the body and refocus the mind.
2. **Drishti:** It translates as sight and means the focal point of each of the Asanas performed. It helps generate focus and channelize the energy flow.
3. **Vinyasa:** There are various postures that are performed in the asanas hence the breath is also needed to be synchronized with each of the movements as per this principle. These are further classified as 'Purak' 'Rechak' and 'Kumbhak' which stands for inhalation, exhalation and holding of the breath. The breathing has to be synchronized with the various movements of the body.
4. **Bandhas:** The bandhas are classified as the various hold point or the locking of body postures which is sought to seal the the prana energy and strengthen the core stability.
5. **Daily practice:** Daily practice of the yoga is encouraged, a six days a week routine is often recommended by the teachers to practitioners and one day rest is given to re-energise the body. Full moon days and new moon days are also the rest days. Women who are pregnant and in menstruation are prohibited. A strict precaution is suggested to injured and ill people.

### Purpose

It has both the immediate and long term purpose; the short term benefit is that it gives mental poise and physical strength & firmness to the body. It helps maintain inner peace and emotional balance. Its primary result is overall wellness and health.

The higher motive or the long term objective as understood by the yogis or the advanced practitioners is to raise the consciousness to the level that one can conceive the

supersoul and see all the living beings with equanimity. It is the stage of 'samadhi' or situated in the state of highest consciousness.

### Types

There are fundamentally eight types as is discussed above:

#### 1. Yamas

These are the basic moral imperatives that need to be followed as is defined in the Hindi scriptures. These are the commandment or right living which could drive us towards the higher purpose of life. These rules are discussed in the Vedas and upanishads in detail.

These are -

1. Ahimsa - Non-violence
2. Satya - non-lying
3. Astreya - Non-stealing
4. Bramhacharya - Sexual restraint, celibacy and marital fidelity
5. Aparigraha - non-possessiveness
6. Kshama- Patience or forgiveness
7. Dhriti- Fortitude or perseverance with the aim to reach the goal
8. Daya - Compassion
9. Arjava- Non-hypocrisy or sincerity
10. Mitahara- Controlled diet

In the present day Yamas or right living has become the core of yoga practitioners, however it is not done in entirety. These principles are adopted in general by the Hindus, Jains and Buddhists in their religion as moral codes of conduct. Controlled diet is one of the most widespread among the Yoga doers all across the world, as only a health conscious diet is sought to bring the outcome of Yoga practice. For example Veganism has taken turns in the past decade and a lot of people across the world are adopting it as a rightful and healthy diet which is also eco-friendly and involves the moral aspect of non-violence.

#### Niyamas

These are the do's or the habits or observances needed to be developed in order to strengthen one's abilities of self restraint and channelize the energy. There are also tools of self development and growth thus leads to contentment, inner peace and happiness from the inside. These help to control the urges of sensual pleasures from the outside.

These are:

1. **Saucha:** Purity of speech, mind and body
2. **Tapas:** Self discipline and asceticism
3. **Swadhyay:** Study of Vedas or the holy scriptures & self introspection
4. **Santosha:** Contentment or acceptance of oneself and others as they are
5. **Ishvarapranidhana:** Contemplation on the supreme soul or the unchanging reality.

The purity and serenity of the environment is highly encouraged by yoga practitioners and a regular practice ensures that the people build discipline across their life. However as far as the spiritual aspect is concerned the votes differs across people but they as adopted by a few religious group of people who practice yoga.

### Asanas

The verse 46 of the second book of the Patanjali Yoga Sutra begins with word 'Sthirsukhasanam' which means the posture of the mediation should be steady and comfortable.

The primary purpose of the asanas is the state of position that one can hold for a period of time to make us stay calm, motionless and steady. The postures that cause pain and restlessness are called not to be a yogic postures. A part of the text also discuss that the postures while meditation should be in such a way that the head, chest and the neck are erect. There are various asanas mentioned in the bhasya sutras few of them are Padmasana, Virasana, Bhadrasana, Sthirsukhasana, Swastikasana, Dandasana, Hasthanishadasna and Sthirsukhasana.

The modern form of yoga has taken turn unlike the previous original styles, here the prominence of the asanas has increased and the count has also increased. These practices are the major reason why the Yoga is known all across the world. There are many studies which have evaluated that the Asanas help in building the physical and psychological health and that yogic intervention can bring improvement in the various illnesses and diseases.

### Pranayama

These originally refer to the practice of the control of breath, prana or breath and ayama refers to restraint. It has basically four phases of inhalation, full pause then exhalation and an empty pause. These are sought to increase the prana vayu or the vitality of a human being and increase the vitality.

In modern yoga system these are either practiced separately or after performing the asanas. These were also encouraged during the Covid 19 pandemic as it was believed and suggested by medical professionals to bring out positive outcomes and improvement of immunity among the both infected and non-infected people. Few studies have shown that Pranayama are helpful in curing few diseases concerned with breathing, lungs and others. However there are not enough evidences to back these claims on a solid ground.

### Pratyahara

These means drawing one's awareness or the attention from the sensory objects of the world and focusing one's attention to oneself. The focus is to withdraw the ability of the urges from the external world to control us and thus seeking the knowledge about the self and the freedom of the inner world. The purpose is not to close one's eyes to the external world but to close the reactions of the mental processes to external world. This has a spiritual angle and becomes a subjective debate of spiritualism and materialism, however it is widely understood that seeking inner peace involves detachment from excessive material luxuries and unnecessary accessories.

### Dharana

This refers to keeping an unwavering focus on an object, a part of the body, a subject, mantra. This is the prior limb before the Pratyahara that is in order to withdraw one's attention from the external world one has to *ekagra* or focus one's attention monomaniacally to the supreme soul or within one self, as these are the only ways of renunciation asked in Pratyahara. The Dharana and the Dhyana are different in the sense that the former is the object of the meditation itself and later is the more advanced form when

one's mind and consciousness slowly begins to dissolve and unite.

### Dhyana

In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (dated ca. 400 CE) a key text of the Yoga school of Hindu philosophy, Dhyana is the seventh limb of this path, following Dharana and preceding Samadhi. Dhyana is basically related to Dharana and one leads to the other. Dharana is a state of mind, Dhyana the process of mind. Patanjali defines contemplation (Dhyana) as the mind process, where the mind is fixed on something, and then there is "a course of uniform modification of knowledge".

In the modern Yoga system the dhyana is practiced as meditation techniques, these have positive impacts on the mind and the psyche of the practitioner. These lead to a sense of peace and calm from the withing and in higher sense affirms one's connection with the supreme consciousness.

This is also one of the most famous practices across the West and other countries. This has been branded as a tool which can help us focus and lose anxiety and stress. There are very few empirical studies proving this. However it is also addressed that a long term practice is bound to yield such benefits.

### Samadhi

It is an ultimate form of mediation which literally translates as putting together, joining, combining with, union, harmonious whole, trance. The awareness that one is meditating only remains, the consciousness and ego seems to dissolve in this state. It is the highest forms of yoga that is done by great sages and yogis. As per Britannica it is a state of profound and utterly absorptive contemplation of the Absolute that is undisturbed by desire, anger, or any other ego-generated thought or emotion. It is a state of joyful calm, or even of rapture and beatitude, in which one maintains one's full mental alertness and acuity.

### Conclusion

The Ashtanga Yoga system was discovered by the ancient sages of India and reaffirmed and re-established by the Patanjali In his Yoga Sutras, these have references ranging from the Rig Vedic era to the latest century authors. The practices are modified to suit the current world needs but in few places in India these are practiced in its original form in various yoga centers. The Asanas, Pranayama and the Dhyana are popularized all over the world by programs like the International Yoga Day initiated by the Government of India.

This study seeks to present the Ashtanga Yoga system in an organized form so as this can be referred by the practitioner and the scholars while studying the and thinking of the original context of Ashtanga Yoga system which is the basis of all the forms of the current yoga systems.

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