



# Molehill to Mountain – The Yoga Way

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## Abstract:

*Giving a brief overview of the science of Yoga, this article sets the context and gives a deeper purpose for the practice of Yoga. Though Yoga is widely popular the world over today, its practice is largely limited only to achieving physical and mental health benefits. That is great in itself. The fact is that Yoga is, however, underutilized, much like employing Einstein to prepare a cup of tea. Understanding the context and power of Yoga in its entirety will unleash its full potential to push humanity to its next evolutionary level. This paper gives a snapshot overview of the necessary background information required to understand Ashtanga Yoga in its entirety.*

## Introduction

Yoga is one of the soft powers of India. We celebrated the ninth International Yoga Day this year on the 21st of June. The theme of this year's International Yoga Day celebrations at the UN Headquarters was "Yoga for Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" - Yoga for making 'The World One Family'. The Art and Science of Yoga is, no doubt, one of the greatest gifts of ancient India to mankind. Bhartṛhari was a great Indian poet and a Sanskrit grammarian who lived in the fifth century AD. He described Yoga beautifully in a Sanskrit sloka, the English translation of which reads as:

*"Like a courageous father, forgiving mother,  
eternally peaceful friend,*

*Through the regular practice of Yoga, Truth  
becomes our child,*

*Kindness becomes our sister, self-control  
becomes our brother,*

*The earth becomes our mattress, and,  
knowledge satiates our hunger"*

Such is the magnitude and grandeur of Yoga as a complete system for total human transformation. Notwithstanding such great potential, Yoga is still largely practised in a very limited way. It is mostly practised

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today for physical and mental well-being. Of course, there is absolutely nothing wrong with practising Yoga for such benefits. In fact, commencing the practice of Yoga for any reason whatsoever is highly desirable for it is the beginning of the greater journey, no matter how little the practitioner recognises it. Understanding the context and power of Yoga in its entirety will, however, unleash its full potential to push humanity to its next evolutionary level. With this objective in mind, let us review the context of Yoga and its intended trajectory.

### **Yoga Sutra**

Yoga Sutra of Sage Patanjali is the foundational text for the Asana and Pranayama that is being widely taught and practised today. The very first aphorism of Yoga Sutra starts like this: “Atha yoganushasanam”, literally meaning, “Now begins the instruction on the practice of Yoga”. An opening sentence like “let us NOW begin the instruction on the practice of Yoga” clearly indicates that a great deal is already discussed prior to the beginning of the instructions on the practice of Yoga.

The pre-setting for the teachings contained in Yoga Sutra is the long-held view of ancient Indian sages that each human being is an island of excellence in itself. To be born as a human being is considered a great achievement according to ancient Indian teachings. It is a great loss if we die without realizing this indwelling excellence in us. No other creature on planet Earth has so much evolved a mind and a nervous system as that of ours. The assimilating power of the human mind is truly unmatched. Our mind can cognize fine concepts like time, space, and the relationship

between cause and effect. We can store our experiences in our minds either sequentially or non-sequentially and recall them at will, again either sequentially or non-sequentially. This unique capacity of our mind puts human beings above the rest of the creatures on earth. In other words, our capacity to comprehend, and our ability to increase our knowledge and awareness is distinguishing us from other forms of existence here.

After observing their own inner nature as well as by observing the life around them, the ancient sages realized the unique capacity of the human mind to “cognize” and “retain” that cognition that holds the key to human evolution. We can see that our body stops growing after the first twenty to twenty-four years of life. Thereafter, it is only our “mind” that expands and grows, if at all anything grows in us. Our minds can expand and increase our knowledge and awareness till the last moment of our life. Ancient Indian sages, therefore, subjected their own minds to intense study. They found a way to accelerate this very process of the expansion of our awareness ad infinitum. Sage Patanjali collected those methods and codified them as Ashtanga Yoga in Yoga Sutra.

### **The Yoga Way**

The “Yoga” that is popularly practised today is “Asana” which is one of the eight steps or limbs of Ashtanga Yoga as given in the Yoga Sutra. These eight steps or limbs are Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Prathyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi. Yama and Niyama are the moral and ethical codes of living, that the practitioners have to establish in their daily life. Yama and Niyama are, in

fact, the entry-level primary requirements before one embarks on the Yoga Way. Then one advances on the path of Yoga through the next six steps from Asana to Samadhi to

reach the pinnacle of human existence that is possible with our given grade of human body and mind. Each of these eight steps is summarised in the tables below:

Steps	Brief Description & Notes
I Yama	The Five Ethical Codes to observe in our relationship with the external world: (1) Non-violence ( <i>Ahimsa</i> ), (2) Non-lying ( <i>Sathyam</i> ), (3) Non-stealing ( <i>Astheya</i> ), (4) Non-sensuality ( <i>Brahmacharya</i> ), (5) Non-attachments ( <i>Aparigraha</i> )
II <i>Niyama</i>	The Five Ethical Codes to observe in our relationship with ourselves: (1) Cleanliness ( <i>Saucham</i> ), (2) Contentment ( <i>Santhosham</i> ), (3) Austerity ( <i>Tapas</i> ) is consciously and purposefully building and fostering an attitude of perfect inner contentment in all our actions. (4) Self Study & Introspection ( <i>Swadhyayam</i> ) to understand who really we are, where we came from, where we are going to etcetera, (5) Devotion to the Supreme ( <i>Iswara Pranidhanam</i> ).
III <i>*Asana</i>	Postures. (Practicing to develop the ability to hold the body still, without any muscular tension in the body as a preparation for stages 7 and 8. When the body does not have internal tension, the flow of pranic energy through its pathways becomes unhindered in the body, restoring well-being.)  *This state is the popular understanding of “Yoga” today. The physical and mental benefits derived are the direct result of the reduction of physical tension and the consequential removal of blockages in the pranic pathways.
IV <i>Pranayama</i>	Regulated Breathing Techniques to regulate and guide the flow of Pranic energy through its pathways from the lower distribution points to the higher ones and to finally reach the highest point located in the middle of the two eyebrows in the brain.
V <i>Prathyahara</i>	Directing and interiorizing our conscious attention of mind by shifting it from the external world to our internal pranic energy world.
VI <i>Dharana</i>	Developing a fixed inner awareness and remaining consciously without the mind wandering out to the matters of the external world.
VIII <i>Dhyana</i>	One pointed concentration to the upward pranic energy flow and getting absorbed in it.
VIII <i>Samadhi</i>	When stage 7 is maintained sufficiently long, the subject (we) and the object (internal reality) become one. There is no time and space in this state. With daily practice of this stage, we become harmonious without the world inside and outside and we (the ‘consciousness’ that we are) will be able to leave the body at the time of death of the physical body, without having to return to another body later. Such a state at the time of the death of the body is true liberation and the resultant moving to the next higher evolutionary state of existence.

## Understanding the Yoga Way

In order to appreciate the Yoga Way in its entirety, we need to develop a reasonable foundational understanding of the following four subjects from a yogic perspective. Our mainstream education system does not give an opportunity to study these important topics so far. That is the reason why Yoga is still used for certain limited purposes.

1. Yogic Perspective of Mind and Role of Memory
2. Yogic Physiology
3. Energy and Energy Pathways
4. Consciousness

There is a reason why Ashtanga Yoga is prescribed in eight consecutive stages. According to the highest understanding of the ancient Indian sages and yogis, we are not this body, we are not this mind. We are Consciousness, period. We merely hold a body and a mind as our two tools. Unfortunately, we always mistake our body or our mind or both as the “I” factor in us. There are extensive discussions and proofs in Upanishads and in the six Indian philosophies establishing the truth about our existence - that we are indeed “consciousness”. A discussion on them is outside the scope of this paper. We (read, ‘consciousness’) move Pranic Energy in us (read, in ‘consciousness’) to generate, feelings, thoughts, emotions and realities. Likewise, we create and experience our own created realities. We are responsible for what we are today because we unknowingly created it. We can create higher realities if we expand ourselves (meaning, expand our current state of consciousness). We continue to create and experience lower realities if continue without expanding our current level of consciousness

or letting our consciousness fall further down. It all depends on where our current level of consciousness is positioned, and how aware we are to expand and develop it to upgrade our experiences to higher levels. The choice is ours. We can either consciously live and steadily expand our awareness and move to higher states of harmony, joy and awareness or continue to live unconsciously and fall further below our present level. If you chose the former, Yoga Way is the way forward.

We can now look at the snapshot views of those four foundational topics so that we can truly appreciate the bigger picture of the Yoga Way and use it to realise our highest evolutionary potential.

### Yogic Perspective of Mind and Role of Memory

Unveiling the mystery of the human mind is the essence of Yoga. The second aphorism of Yoga Sutra is a definition of Yoga. It is “Yoga chittha vruthi nirodhah”, meaning, the “complete mastery over the roaming tendencies of the mind is Yoga”. When steadily practised involving all the eight steps, “Yoga” refines our mind and takes it to the next evolutionary level. Mind is the tool that we use in the Yoga Way. A sound understanding of the mind and its ways is, therefore, extremely important in the Yoga Way.

The mind is the archive of all our thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, likes, and dislikes. We view the world through the eyes of our minds. If our mind is convoluted, our worldview, our thoughts, our words, and our actions will also be equally convoluted. In effect, the quality of our mind governs the quality of our thoughts, emotions, words and actions. It is, therefore, correct to say that our

today's actions depend on the quality of our minds. It is our today's actions that create our tomorrow's experience. Consequently, our mind, in fact, creates our future. Putting it in plain language, we create our future. We created our present in a similar manner in the past. We are responsible for what we are now. It is not our fault, because we were unaware when we created our present. But it is our responsibility to become aware and create a future of harmony, joyfulness, and knowledge. Yoga Way is a tool to expand our awareness/consciousness. It is how important the Yoga Way is.

It is worth pointing out that in Abrahamic religions too, there is a parable of Adam and Eve falling from the heavenly abode of Eden Garden. This is a highly symbolic narration of a fall in consciousness after 'enjoying' the forbidden fruit. In this parable, everything is highly symbolic. The emotional responses of eating the fruit (meaning, the emotional responses to the results of any actions) generate memories/data which retards the expansion of consciousness. The more we understand a religion in its rightful depth better harmony will emerge amongst all religions.

#### Four Parts of the Mind

It is important to understand the way the mind functions to gain mastery over it. Mind is called "antah karana" in ancient Indian texts. Translated verbatim it is an "internal instrument". According to the yogic understanding, our antah karana has four aspects, namely "buddhi", "manas", "ahankara" and "chittha". In the English language, there is only one word to imply all of these collectively - The Mind. In yogic understanding, there are four key aspects to

mind, understanding of which is important to gain mastery of our mind.

- (i) The discerning dimension of our antah karana is '*buddhi*' or intellect. It is buddhi that analyses the data and nudges us to take certain decisions and act upon them.
- (ii) The accumulative aspect of our antah karana is 'manas' or memory. We all know today that no computer system can work without software either at the application level or at the hardware level. Software is nothing but a collection of data stored in a storage device in an easily accessible manner. Likewise, "Manas" is the memory bank where vital data about our existence is stored. Contrary to the common belief, 'manas' is not limited to the brain, according to the yogic understanding. Manas is spread all across the body. It is the "manomaya kosha" that we will be briefing further below under "Yogic Physiology". Every cell in our body is holding phenomenal memory, not only from this life but also from millions of years, right from the very beginning of its existence. In a way, it is correct to say that each of us is a part of Nature's Quantum Computing system.
- (iii) The identity aspect of antah karana is '*ahankara*' or separate identity. It is this part of our antah karana that gives rise to our wrong identification that "I" am this or that.
- (iv) The awareness aspect of antah karana is '*chittha*', which is beyond both buddhi and manas. Chittha is mind without data. It is NOT buddhi or intellect. It is pure intelligence. It is because of chittha that everything happens. It is on its own and functions on its own. Chittha is

the last point of the mind. It connects to the basis of creation within us - the 'consciousness' that we are. Chittha is always switched ON both in wakefulness and in sleep states. Our buddhi (intellect) may fail many times, but the chittha or the intelligence is always ON and that is why we are 'alive' and life happens to us. Chittha is the connecting link between consciousness and mind.

### **Role of Memory/Data**

We need to understand Buddhi in a little more detail since Memory or data is connected to this. Buddhi, when translated into English, is "intellect". Buddhi cannot function without data or memory. Depending on the sharpness of the Buddhi, and the amount of data/memory available, we generate thoughts and take actions on it. As an example to understand the role of Buddhi, let us take the example of two different people with the same measure of data/memory, but with different levels of sharpness of Buddhi. The person with the higher sharpness of Buddhi will produce a large amount of thoughts and possible courses of action, compared to the fewer amount of thoughts and possibilities a person with a blunt buddhi would take. "Buddhi" is intellect or the ability of the mind to use memories. Memories are data. Buddhi is the efficiency of antah karana to make use of the data. It is all about the capacity of the mind to apply past memories in a given context.

### **Yogic Physiology**

Modern medical science is only recognising the physical body and the mind as a predominant function of the brain. However, the ancient Indian Yogic science recognizes five bodies in human physiology. They are called five sheaths

or five coverings. They can be imagined as five layers of overlapping consecutive overcoats that one wears. The outermost one is the visible physical body, which alone the medical science recognizes along with components of the mind. In yogic terminology, the physical body is called "Annamaya Kosha". Underneath and overlapping this physical body, there are four other consecutive bodies, namely, "Manonmaya kosha" (Mental Body), Pranamaya Kosha (Energy body), Vigyanamaya Kosha (Knowledge body) and Anandamaya Kosha (blissful body). The real "I" - consciousness - is inside these five sheaths. Budhi and Chittha are both all over the "Manonmaya kosha" (Mental Body), Pranamaya Kosha (Energy body) in the physiology of our yogic body. Out of these, only the outer Annamaya Kosha is visible and the rest are all increasingly subtle and invisible. However, its presence is clearly present as electromagnetic radiation in Kirlian photography, which is widely used in Russia for medical diagnosis.

### **Energy and Energy Pathways**

The entire collection of these five bodies is traversed by a huge network of 72,000 energy pathways called Nadis, with pranic energy moving through them. Prana is the life force energy. There is an indirect connection between the movement of Prana and the breathing system of the physical body. It is for this reason that physical breathing can be used as a sort of handle for regulating pranic movement. The Yoga Way smartly makes use of this handle for our benefit. Likewise, the yoga asanas or practice of postures aid in keeping the body supple and free of blockages for *prana* to move through *pranic* pathways.

When we live under tension every day, no matter whether it is physical or mental tension, it will constrict our physical body and create blockages for the free flow of pranic energy. Physical stress, strain and tension as well as emotional stress, strain and tension will restrict the passage of these energy pathways which will result in ill health and diseases. Health and well-being is the result of the free flow of pranic energy through these pathways. Ayurveda also uses this aspect in its massaging technique for healing. There is a clearly defined distribution system with the seven most important master distribution centres called chakras. There are altogether 114 such chakras points in the body – 112 are within the physical body and two are outside the body.

### Consciousness

The highest understanding is that the “I” factor in us is the presence of ‘consciousness’. Body and mind are the two tools that the consciousness possesses much like an out-growth of itself. “I” is aware and “live” because I is ‘consciousness’. It is the faculty of cognition or awareness or knowing that the “I” experiences. Consciousness can be defined as “aware of being aware”. Our ability to know anything at all is directly proportional to the expansion of our consciousness. Consciousness is not a ‘thing’. Consciousness is a quality. We are aware that we are alive. That awareness is thanks to our innate ‘consciousness’. A rock too is alive, but the expansion of a rock’s consciousness is not intense enough to demonstrate its liveliness with movements.

### Conclusion

The Yoga Way is a way of leading our daily life practising all the eight steps of Ashtanga Yoga which will be helpful to expand the consciousness in us to the highest possible extent. As a result, it will be possible for us to be totally liberated from the bondage to a body and mind, and free us permanently from pain and suffering. The primary key to this eternal liberation is to discover that the “I” factor in each of us is consciousness only and nothing else. The secondary keys are to understand our yogic physiology and to uplift pranic energy flow to higher chakras through the practice of all the eight limbs of Ashtanga Yoga. Practising just one of the eight steps is indeed a welcome measure, but NOT significant enough to justify our birth as human beings.

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