

1. What is yoga?

The word yoga, from the Sanskrit word *yuj* means to yoke or bind and is often interpreted as "union" or a method of discipline. A male who practices yoga is called a yogi, a female practitioner, a yogini.

The Indian sage Patanjali is believed to have collated the practice of yoga into the *Yoga Sutra* an estimated 2,000 years ago. The Sutra is a collection of 195 statements that serves as a philosophical guidebook for most of the yoga that is practiced today. It also outlines eight limbs of yoga: the *yamas* (restraints), *niyamas* (observances), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing), *pratyahara* (withdrawal of senses), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyani* (meditation), and *samadhi* (absorption). As we explore these eight limbs, we begin by refining our behavior in the outer world, and then we focus inwardly until we reach samadhi (liberation, enlightenment).

Today most people practicing yoga are engaged in the third limb, asana, which is a program of physical postures designed to purify the body and provide the physical strength and stamina required for long periods of meditation.

2. What does Hatha mean?

The word hatha means willful or forceful. Hatha yoga refers to a set of physical exercises (known as asanas or postures), and sequences of asanas, designed to align your skin, muscles, and bones. The postures are also designed to open the many channels of the body—especially the main channel, the spine—so that energy can flow freely.

Hatha is also translated as *ha* meaning "sun" and *tha* meaning "moon." This refers to the balance of masculine aspects—active, hot, sun—and feminine aspects—receptive, cool, moon—within all of us. Hatha yoga is a path toward creating balance and uniting opposites. In our physical bodies we develop a balance of strength and flexibility. We also learn to balance our effort and surrender in each pose.

Hatha yoga is a powerful tool for self-transformation. It asks us to bring our attention to our breath, which helps us to still the fluctuations of the mind and be more present in the unfolding of each moment.

3. What does Om mean?

Om is a mantra, or vibration, that is traditionally chanted at the beginning and end of yoga sessions. It is said to be the sound of the universe. What does that mean?

Somehow the ancient yogis knew what scientists today are telling us—that the entire universe is moving. Nothing is ever solid or still. Everything that exists pulsates, creating a rhythmic vibration that the ancient yogis acknowledged with the sound of Om. We may not always be aware of this sound in our daily lives, but we can hear it in the rustling of the autumn leaves, the waves on the shore, the inside of a seashell.

Chanting Om allows us to recognize our experience as a reflection of how the whole universe moves—the setting sun, the rising moon, the ebb and flow of the tides, the beating of our hearts. As we chant Om, it takes us for a ride on this universal movement, through our breath, our awareness, and our physical energy, and we begin to sense a bigger connection that is both uplifting and soothing.

4. Is yoga a religion?

Yoga is not a religion. It is a philosophy that began in India an estimated 5,000 years ago. The original scriptures provide a framework for spiritual growth and mastery over the physical and mental body. Yoga sometimes interweaves other philosophies such as Hinduism or Buddhism, but it is not necessary to study those paths in order to practice or study yoga. It is also not necessary to surrender your own religious beliefs to practice yoga.

5. Do I have to be vegetarian to practice yoga?

The first principle of yoga philosophy is *ahimsa*, which means nonharming to self and others. Some people interpret this to include not eating animal products. There is debate about this in the yoga community—I believe that it is a personal decision that everyone has to make for themselves. If you are considering becoming a vegetarian, be sure to take into account your personal health issues as well how your choices will affect those with whom you live. Being a vegetarian should not be something that you impose on others—that kind of aggressive action in itself is not an expression of *ahimsa*.

6. How many times per week should I practice?

Yoga is amazing—even if you only practice for one hour a week, you will experience the benefits of the practice. If you can do more than that, you will certainly experience more benefits. I suggest starting with two or three times a week, for at least an hour each time. If you can only do 20 minutes per session, that's fine too. Don't let time constraints or unrealistic goals be an obstacle—do what you can and don't worry about it. You will likely find that after a while your desire to practice expands naturally and you will find yourself doing more and more.

7. How is yoga different from stretching or other kinds of fitness?

Unlike stretching or fitness, yoga is more than just physical postures. Even within the physical practice, yoga is unique because we connect the movement of the body and the fluctuations of the mind to the rhythm of our breath. Connecting the mind, body, and breath helps us to direct our attention inward. Through this process of inward attention, we learn to recognize our habitual thought patterns without labeling them, judging them, or trying to change them. We become more aware of our experiences from moment to moment. The awareness that we cultivate is what makes yoga a practice, rather than a task or a goal to be completed. Your body will likely become much more flexible by doing yoga, and so will your mind.

8. I'm not flexible—can I do yoga?

Yes! You are a perfect candidate for yoga. Many people think that they need to be flexible to begin yoga, but that's a little bit like thinking that you need to be able to play tennis in order to take tennis lessons. Come as you are and you will find that yoga practice will help you become more flexible.

This newfound agility will be balanced by strength, coordination, and enhanced cardiovascular health, as well as a sense of physical confidence and overall well-being.

9. What do I need to begin?

All you really need to begin practicing yoga is your body, your mind, and a bit of curiosity. But it is also helpful to have a pair of sweat pants, leggings, or shorts, and a t-shirt that's not too baggy. No special footwear is required because you will be barefoot. It's nice to bring a towel to class with you. As your practice develops you might want to buy your own yoga mat, but most studios will have mats and other props available for you.

10. Why are you supposed to refrain from eating two to three hours before class?

In yoga practice we twist from side to side, turn upside down, and bend forward and backward. If you have not fully digested your last meal, it will make itself known to you in ways that are not comfortable. If you are a person with a fast-acting digestive system and are afraid you might get hungry or feel weak during yoga class, experiment with a light snack such as yogurt, a few nuts, or juice about 30 minutes to an hour before class.