

## Chapter 1

# Yoga 101: What You Need to Know

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Debunking Yoga myths
  - ▶ Deciphering the word *Yoga*
  - ▶ Exploring the primary branches, styles, and approaches to Yoga
  - ▶ Understanding the yogic principles of being
  - ▶ Taking control of your mind, body, health, and life with Yoga
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**T**hree or four decades ago, some people still occasionally confused *Yoga* with *yogurt*. Today, *Yoga* is a household word. The fact that just about everyone has heard the word *Yoga*, however, doesn't mean they know exactly what it means. Many misconceptions still exist, even among those who practice *Yoga*, so in this chapter, we clear up the confusion and explain what *Yoga* really is and how it relates to your health and happiness. We also help you see that *Yoga*, with its many different branches and approaches, really does offer something for everyone.

Whatever your age, weight, flexibility, or beliefs may be, you can practice and benefit from some version of *Yoga*. Although *Yoga* originated in India, it's for all of humanity.

## *Understanding the True Character of Yoga*

Whenever you hear that *Yoga* is *just* this or *just* that, your nonsense alert should kick into action. *Yoga* is too comprehensive to reduce to any one thing — it's like a skyscraper with many floors and numerous rooms at each

level. Yoga isn't just gymnastics, fitness training, huffing and puffing, or a way to control your weight. It's not just stress reduction, meditation, or some spiritual tradition from India.

Yoga is all these things and a great deal more. (You'd expect as much from a tradition that's been around for 5,000 years.) Yoga includes physical exercises that look like gymnastics and have even been incorporated into Western gymnastics. These postural exercises help you become or stay fit and trim, control your weight, and reduce your stress level. Yoga also offers a whole range of meditation practices, including breathing techniques that exercise your lungs and calm your nervous system or charge your brain and the rest of your body with delicious energy.

You can also use Yoga as an efficient system of health care that has proven its usefulness in both restoring and maintaining health. Yoga continues to gain acceptance within the medical establishment; more and more physicians are recommending Yoga to their patients not only for stress reduction but also as a safe and sane method of exercise and physical therapy (notably, for the back and knees).

But Yoga is more than even a system of preventative or restorative health care. Yoga looks at health from a broad, holistic perspective that's only now being rediscovered by avant-garde medicine. This perspective appreciates the enormous influence of the mind — your psychological attitudes — on physical health.

## *Finding unity*

The word *Yoga* comes from the ancient Sanskrit language spoken by the traditional religious elite of India, the *Brahmins*. Yoga means “union” or “integration” and also “discipline,” so the system of Yoga is called a *unitive* or *integrating discipline*. Yoga seeks unity at various levels. First, it seeks to unite body and mind, which people all too often separate. Some people are chronically “out of the body.” They can't feel their feet or the ground beneath them, as if they hover like ghosts just above their bodies. They're unable to cope with the ordinary pressures of daily life and collapse under stress, and they're often confused and don't understand their own emotions. They're afraid of life and easily emotionally hurt.

Yoga also seeks to unite the rational mind and the emotions. People frequently bottle up their emotions and don't express their real feelings, choosing instead to rationalize these feelings away. Chronic avoidance can become a serious health hazard; if people aren't aware that they're suppressing feelings such as anger, the anger consumes them from the inside out.



Here's how Yoga can help you with your personal growth:

- ✓ **It can put you in touch with your real feelings and balance your emotional life.**
- ✓ **It can help you understand and accept yourself and feel comfortable with who you are.** You don't have to "fake it" or reduce your life to constant role-playing.
- ✓ **It helps you become more able to empathize and communicate with others.**

Yoga is a powerful means of psychological integration. It makes you aware that you're part of a larger whole, not merely an island unto yourself. Humans can't thrive in isolation. Even the most independent individual is greatly indebted to others. After your mind and body are happily reunited, this union with others comes about naturally. The moral principles of Yoga are all-embracing, encouraging you to seek kinship with everyone and everything. We say more about this topic in Chapter 20.

## ***Finding yourself: Are you a yogi (or yogini)?***

Someone who's practicing the discipline of balancing mind and body through Yoga is traditionally called a *yogi* (if male) or a *yogini* (if female). In this book, we use both terms at random. Alternatively, we also use the English term *Yoga practitioner*. In our book, practicing Yoga postures is a step in the right direction but doesn't make a person a *yogi* or *yogini*. For that, you'd have to embrace Yoga as a self-transforming spiritual discipline. A yogi or yogini who has really mastered Yoga is called an *adept*. If such an adept also teaches (and not all of them do), he or she is traditionally called a *guru*. The Sanskrit word *guru* means literally "weighty one." According to traditional esoteric sources, the syllable *gu* signifies spiritual darkness and *ru* signifies the act of removing. Thus a guru is a teacher who leads the student from darkness to light.

Very few Westerners have achieved complete mastery of Yoga, mainly because Yoga is still a relatively young movement in the West. So please be careful about those who claim to be enlightened or to have been given the title of guru! However, at the level at which Yoga is generally taught outside its Indian homeland, many competent Yoga teachers or instructors can lend a helping hand to beginners. In this book, we hope to do just that for you.

## Considering Your Options: The Eight Main Branches of Yoga

When you take a bird's-eye view of the Yoga tradition, you see a dozen major strands of development, each with its own subdivisions. Picture Yoga as a giant tree with eight branches; each branch has its own unique character, but each is also part of the same tree. With so many different paths, you're sure to find one that's right for your personality, lifestyle, and goals. In this book we focus on Hatha Yoga, the most popular branch of Yoga, but we avoid the common mistake of reducing it to mere physical fitness training. Thus, we also talk about meditation and the spiritual aspects of Yoga.

Here are the seven principal branches of Yoga, arranged alphabetically:

- ✓ **Bhakti** (*bhuk-tee*) **Yoga:** The Yoga of devotion
- ✓ **Hatha** (*haht-ha*) **Yoga:** The Yoga of physical discipline
- ✓ **Jnana** (*gyah-nah*) **Yoga:** The Yoga of wisdom
- ✓ **Karma** (*kahr-mah*) **Yoga:** The Yoga of self-transcending action
- ✓ **Mantra** (*mahn-trah*) **Yoga:** The Yoga of potent sound
- ✓ **Raja** (*rah-jah*) **Yoga:** The Royal Yoga
- ✓ **Tantra** (*tahn-trah*) **Yoga (including Laya Yoga and Kundalini Yoga):** The Yoga of continuity

To this list we must add as a branch of its own *Guru* (*goo-roo*) *Yoga*, the Yoga of dedication to a Yoga master.

The seven branches and Guru Yoga are described in the following sections.

### Feeling enlightened

To get a sense of the nature of enlightenment, sit in a warm room as still as possible, with your hands in your lap. Now sense your skin all over; it's your body's boundary separating you from the air surrounding you. As you become more aware of your body's sensations, pay special attention to the connection between your skin and the air. After a while, you realize that no

sharp boundary really exists between your skin and the outside air. In your imagination, you can extend yourself further and further beyond your skin into the surrounding space. Where do you end, and where does the space begin? This experience can give you a sense of the all-comprising expansiveness of enlightenment, which knows no boundaries.

## ***Bhakti Yoga: The Yoga of devotion***

Bhakti Yoga practitioners believe that a supreme being (the Divine) transcends their lives, and they feel moved to connect or even completely merge with that supreme being through acts of devotion. Bhakti Yoga includes such practices as making flower offerings, singing hymns of praise, and thinking about the Divine.

## ***Hatha Yoga: The Yoga of physical discipline***

All branches of Yoga seek to achieve the same final goal, enlightenment (see Chapter 21), but Hatha Yoga approaches this goal through the body rather than through the mind or the emotions. Hatha Yoga practitioners believe that unless they properly purify and prepare their bodies, the higher stages of meditation and beyond are virtually impossible to achieve — such an attempt would be like trying to climb Mt. Everest without the necessary gear. We focus on this particular branch of Yoga in this book.



Hatha Yoga is very much more than posture practice, which is so popular today. Like every form of authentic Yoga, it's a *spiritual* path.

## ***Jnana Yoga: The Yoga of wisdom***

Jnana Yoga teaches the ideal of *nondualism* — that reality is singular, and your perception of countless distinct phenomena is a basic misconception. What about the chair or sofa that you're sitting on? Isn't that real? What about the light that strikes your retina? Isn't that real? Jnana Yoga masters answer these questions by saying that all these things are real at your present level of consciousness, but they aren't ultimately real as separate or distinct things. Upon enlightenment, everything melts into one, and you become one with the immortal spirit.

## ***Karma Yoga: The Yoga of self-transcending action***

Karma Yoga's most important principle is to act unselfishly, without attachment, and with integrity. Karma Yoga practitioners believe that all actions, whether bodily, vocal, or mental, have far-reaching consequences for which they must assume full responsibility.

## Good karma, bad karma, no karma

The Sanskrit term *karma* literally means “action.” It stands for activity in general but also for the “invisible action” of destiny. According to Yoga, every action of body, speech, and mind produces visible and also hidden consequences. Sometimes the hidden consequences — destiny — are far more significant than the obvious repercussions. Don’t

think of karma as blind destiny. You’re always free to make choices. The purpose of Karma Yoga is to regulate how you act in the world so that you cease to be bound by karma. The practitioners of all types of Yoga seek to not only prevent bad (black) karma but also go beyond good (white) karma to no karma at all.

## Mantra Yoga: The Yoga of potent sound

Mantra Yoga makes use of sound to harmonize the body and focus the mind. It works with *mantras*, which can be a syllable, word, or phrase. Traditionally, practitioners receive a mantra from their teacher in the context of a formal initiation. They’re asked to repeat it as often as possible and to keep it secret. Many Western teachers feel that initiation isn’t necessary and that any sound works. You can even pick a word from the dictionary, such as *love*, *peace*, or *happiness*, but from a traditional perspective, such words are, strictly speaking, *not mantras*.

## Raja Yoga: The Royal Yoga

Raja Yoga means literally “Royal Yoga” and is also known as *Classical Yoga*. When you mingle with Yoga students long enough, you can expect to hear them refer to the eightfold path laid down in the *Yoga-Sutra* of Patanjali, the standard work of Raja Yoga. Another name for this yogic tradition is *Ashtanga Yoga* (pronounced *ahsh-tahng-gah*), the “eight-limbed Yoga” — from *ashta* (“eight”) and *anga* (“limb”). (Don’t confuse this tradition with the Yoga style known as Ashtanga Yoga, which we discuss in “Getting The Scoop on the Prominent Styles of Hatha Yoga” later in this chapter.) The eight limbs of the prominent traditional approach, designed to lead to enlightenment or liberation, are as follows:

- ✓ **Yama (yah-mah):** Moral discipline, consisting of the practices of non-harming, truthfulness, nonstealing, chastity, and greedlessness (for an explanation of these five virtues, head to Chapter 20).
- ✓ **Niyama (nee-yah-mah):** Self-restraint, consisting of the five practices of purity, contentment, austerity, self-study, and devotion to a higher principle.

- ✓ **Asana (ah-sah-nah):** Posture, which serves two basic purposes: meditation and health.
- ✓ **Pranayama (prah-nah-yah-mah):** Breath control, which raises and balances your mental energy, thus boosting your health and mental concentration.
- ✓ **Pratyahara (prah-tyah-hah-rah):** Sensory inhibition, which internalizes your consciousness to prepare your mind for the various stages of meditation.
- ✓ **Dharana (dhah-rah-nah):** Concentration, or extended mental focusing, which is fundamental to yogic meditation.
- ✓ **Dhyana (dhee-yah-nah):** Meditation, the principal practice of higher Yoga (this practice and the next are explained in Chapter 21).
- ✓ **Samadhi (sah-mah-dhee):** Ecstasy, or the experience in which you become inwardly one with the object of your contemplation. This state is surpassed by actual enlightenment, or spiritual liberation.

## The sacred syllable *om*

The best known traditional mantra, used by Hindus and Buddhists alike, is the sacred syllable *om* (pronounced *ommm*, with a long *o* sound). It's the symbol of the absolute reality — the Self or spirit. It's composed of the letters *a*, *u*, and *m* and the nasal humming of the letter *m*. A

corresponds to the waking state, *u* to the dream state, and *m* to the state of deep sleep; the nasal humming sound represents the ultimate reality. We introduce several other traditional mantras in Chapter 21 in our coverage of meditation.



## *Tantra Yoga: The Yoga of continuity*

Tantra Yoga is the most complex and most widely misunderstood branch of Yoga. In the West and in India, Tantra Yoga is often confused with “spiritualized” sex; although sexual rituals are used in some (so-called left-hand) schools of Tantra Yoga, they aren’t a regular practice in the majority of (so-called right-hand) schools. Tantra Yoga is actually a strict spiritual discipline involving fairly complex rituals and detailed visualizations of deities. These deities are either visions of the divine or the equivalent of Christianity’s angels and are invoked to aid the yogic process of contemplation.

Another common name for Tantra Yoga is Kundalini Yoga (pronounced *koon-dah-lee-nee*). The latter name, which means “she who is coiled,” hints at the secret “serpent power” that Tantra Yoga seeks to activate: the latent spiritual energy stored in the human body. If you’re curious about this aspect of Yoga, you may want to read the autobiographical account by Gopi Krishna (see the appendix) or my (Georg’s) *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy* (Shambhala). **Note:** Kundalini Yoga is also the name of a Hatha Yoga style; we discuss it in “Getting The Scoop on the Prominent Styles of Hatha Yoga” later in the chapter.

## *Guru Yoga: The Yoga of dedication to a master*

In Guru Yoga, your teacher is the main focus of spiritual practice. Such a teacher is expected to be enlightened or at least close to being enlightened (see Chapter 21 for more about enlightenment). In Guru Yoga, you honor and meditate on your guru until you merge with him or her. Because the guru is thought to already be one with the ultimate reality, this merger duplicates his or her spiritual realization in you.



But, please, don’t merge too readily! This Yoga is relatively rare in the West, so approach it with great caution to avoid possible exploitation.

## *Getting The Scoop on the Prominent Styles of Hatha Yoga*

In its voyage to modernity, Yoga has undergone many transformations. One of them was Hatha Yoga, which emerged around 1100 AD. The most significant



adaptations, however, were made during the past several decades, particularly to serve the needs or wants of Western students. Of the many styles of Hatha Yoga available today, the following are the best known:

- ✓ **Iyengar Yoga**, which is the most widely recognized approach to Hatha Yoga, was created by B. K. S. Iyengar, the brother-in-law of the famous T.S. Krishnamacharya (1888–1989) and uncle of T.K.V. Desikachar. This style is characterized by precision performance and the aid of numerous props. Iyengar has trained thousands of teachers, many of whom are in the United States. His Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute, founded in 1974 and dedicated to his late wife Ramamani, is located in Pune, India.
- ✓ **Viniyoga** (pronounced *vee-nee yoh-gah*) is the approach first developed by Shri Krishnamacharya and continued with his son T.K.V. Desikachar. The emphasis is on the breath and practicing Yoga according to your individual needs and capacities. In the United States, Viniyoga is now associated with Gary Kraftsow and the American Viniyoga Institute (AVI); Desikachar has expanded his approach in conjunction with his son Kausthub under the new umbrella of The Krishnamacharya Healing and Yoga Foundation (KHYF), headquartered in Chennai (formerly Madras), India. As the teacher of well-known Yoga masters B.K.S. Iyengar, K. Pattabhi Jois, and Indra Devi, Professor T.S. Krishnamacharya can be said to have launched a veritable Hatha Yoga renaissance in modern times that is still sweeping the world.
- ✓ **Ashtanga Yoga** originated with Shri Krishnamacharya and was taught by K. Pattabhi Jois, who was born in 1915 but who had a suitably modern outlook to draw eager Western students to his Mysore, India, Ashtanga Yoga Institute until his death in 2009. He was a principal disciple of T.S. Krishnamacharya, who apparently instructed him to teach the sequences known as Ashtanga Yoga or Power Yoga. This style is by far the most athletic of the three versions of Hatha Yoga, going back to T.S. Krishnamacharya, and it combines postures with breathing. Ashtanga Yoga differs from Patanjali's eightfold path (also called Ashtanga Yoga), though it's theoretically grounded in it. (We discuss the Ashtanga Yoga tradition in "Considering Your Options: The Eight Main Branches of Yoga" earlier in this chapter.)



*Power Yoga* is a generic term for any style that follows closely Ashtanga Yoga but doesn't have a set series of postures. It emphasizes flexibility and strength and was mainly responsible for introducing Yoga postures into gyms. Beryl Bender Birch, Bryan Kest, Baron Baptiste, and Sherri Baptiste Freeman are all closely associated with Power Yoga. In a similar manner, *Vinyasa Yoga* and *Flow Yoga*, developed by Ganga White and Tracey Rich, are also variations of Ashtanga Yoga.

- ✔ **Anusara Yoga**, with strong roots in Iyengar Yoga, has attained great popularity within a short span of time. Created in 1997 by the American Yoga teacher John Friend, its appeal is in its heart-centered approach. Based on the three As — attitude, alignment, and action — Anusara Yoga seeks to bring “grace” (*anusara*) into a posture and thus give Hatha Yoga a spiritual thrust.
- ✔ **Kripalu Yoga**, inspired by Swami Kripalvananda (1913–1981) and developed by his disciple Yogi Amrit Desai, is a three-stage Yoga tailored for the needs of Western students. The first stage emphasizes postural alignment and coordination of breath and movement; you hold the postures for a short time only. The second stage adds meditation and prolongs the postures. In the final stage, practicing the postures becomes a spontaneous meditation in motion. See Chapter 24 for more information about the Kripalu Yoga Center in Massachusetts.
- ✔ **Integral Yoga** was developed by Swami Satchidananda (1914–2002), a student of the famous Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, India. Swami Satchidananda made his debut at the Woodstock festival in 1969, where he taught the baby boomers to chant *om*, and over the years has attracted thousands of students. As the name suggests, this style aims to integrate the various aspects of the body-mind through a combination of postures, breathing techniques, deep relaxation, and meditation. Chapter 24 gives you more information about the Satchidananda Ashram in Virginia.
- ✔ **Sivananda Yoga** is the creation of the late Swami Vishnudevananda (1927–1993), also a disciple of Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, India, who established his Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center in Montreal in 1959. He trained over 6,000 teachers, and you can find numerous Sivananda centers around the world. This style includes a series of 12 postures, the Sun Salutation sequence, breathing exercises, relaxation, and *mantra* chanting.
- ✔ **Ananda Yoga** is anchored in the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) and was developed by Swami Kriyananda (Donald Walters), one of his disciples. This gentle style prepares the student for meditation, and its distinguishing features are the silent affirmations associated with holding the postures. This Yoga style includes Yogananda’s unique energization exercises, first developed in 1917, which involve consciously directing the body’s energy (life force) to different organs and limbs. You can find more information about the Ananda Institute of Alternative Living in Nevada City, California, in Chapter 24.
- ✔ **Kundalini Yoga** isn’t only an independent approach of Yoga but also the name of a style of Hatha Yoga, originated by the Sikh master Yogi Bhajan (1929–2004). Its purpose is to awaken the serpent power (*kundalini*) by means of postures, breath control, chanting, and meditation. Yogi

Bhajan, who came to the United States in 1969, is the founder and spiritual head of the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO), which has headquarters in Los Angeles and numerous branches around the world. (We cover the Kundalini Yoga approach in the earlier section “Considering Your Options: The Eight Main Branches of Yoga.”)

- ✓ **Hidden Language Yoga** was developed by the late Swami Sivananda Radha (1911–1995), a German-born female student of Swami Sivananda. This style seeks to promote not only physical well-being but also self-understanding by exploring the symbolism inherent in the postures. Hidden Language Yoga is taught by the teachers of Yasodhara Ashram in British Columbia (see Chapter 24).
- ✓ **Somatic Yoga** is the creation of Eleanor Criswell, EdD, a professor of psychology at Sonoma State University in California who has taught Yoga since the early 1960s. Somatic Yoga is an integrated approach to the harmonious development of body and mind, based both on traditional yogic principles and modern psychophysiological research. This gentle approach emphasizes visualization, very slow movement into and out of postures, conscious breathing, mindfulness, and frequent relaxation between postures.
- ✓ **Moksha Yoga**, which was originally based on the style of Bikram Yoga (in the following bullet) and is popular in Canada, uses traditional postures in a heated room and includes relaxation periods. It champions a green philosophy.
- ✓ **Bikram Yoga** is the style taught by Bikram Choudhury. Bikram Choudhury, who achieved fame as the teacher of Hollywood stars, teaches at the Yoga College of India in Bombay and other locations around the world, including San Francisco and Tokyo. This style, which has a set routine of 26 postures, is fairly vigorous and requires a certain fitness level for participation, especially because it calls for a high room temperature.

You also may hear or see a mention of other Yoga styles, including Tri Yoga (developed by Kali Ray), White Lotus Yoga (developed by Ganga White and Tracey Rich), Jivamukti (developed by Sharon Gannon and David Life), Ishta Yoga (an acronym for the Integrated Science of Hatha, Tantra, and Ayurveda, developed by Mani Finger), Forrest Yoga (a mixture of Hatha Yoga and Native American ideas created by Ana Forrest), and Prime of Life Yoga (developed by me [Larry]) for midlife and beyond.



*Hot Yoga* isn't really a style itself; it just means that the practice occurs in a high-temperature room (90 to 100 degrees Fahrenheit). It usually refers to either Ashtanga Yoga or Bikram Yoga.

## *Finding Your Niche: Five Basic Approaches to Yoga*

Since Yoga came to the Western hemisphere from its Indian homeland in the late 19th century, it has undergone various adaptations. Today, Yoga is practiced in five major ways:

- ✓ As a method for physical fitness and health maintenance
- ✓ As a sport
- ✓ As body-oriented therapy
- ✓ As a comprehensive lifestyle
- ✓ As a spiritual discipline

The first three approaches are often grouped into the category of Postural Yoga, which is contrasted with Traditional Yoga (the final two bullets). As its name suggests, Postural Yoga focuses (sometimes exclusively) on Yoga postures. Traditional Yoga seeks to adhere to the traditional teachings as taught anciently in India. We take a look at the five basic approaches in the upcoming sections.

### *Yoga as fitness training*

The first approach, Yoga as fitness training, is the most popular way that Westerners practice Yoga. It's also the most radical revamping of Traditional Yoga. More precisely, it's a modification of traditional Hatha Yoga. Yoga as fitness training is concerned primarily with the physical body's flexibility, resilience, and strength. Fitness is how most newcomers to Yoga encounter this great tradition. Fitness training is certainly a useful gateway into Yoga, but later on, some people discover that Hatha Yoga is a profound *spiritual* tradition. From the earliest times, Yoga masters have emphasized the need for a healthy body. But they've also always pointed beyond the body to the mind and other vital aspects of the being.

### *Yoga as a sport*

Yoga as a sport is an especially prominent approach in some Latin American countries. Its practitioners, many of whom are excellent athletes, master hundreds of extremely difficult Yoga postures to perfection and demonstrate

their skills and beautiful physiques in international competitions. But this new sport, which also can be regarded as an art form, has drawn much criticism from the ranks of more traditional Yoga practitioners who feel that competition has no place in Yoga. Yet this athletic orientation has done much to put Yoga on the map in some parts of the world, and we see nothing wrong with good-natured Yoga “competitions” as long as participants hold self-centered competitiveness in check.



The increasingly popular fad of Acro-Yoga, which specializes in acrobatic moves done in combination with a partner, also falls into the Yoga-as-a-sport category. Only the fittest and most flexible are able to practice this modern variation of Yoga without risk of injury. However, purists find fault with the lack of spiritual and ethical intention behind this style of Hatha Yoga.

## *Yoga as therapy*

The third approach, Yoga as therapy, applies yogic techniques to restore health or full physical and mental function. In recent years, some Western Yoga teachers have begun to use yogic practices for therapeutic purpose. Although the idea behind Yoga therapy is very old, its name is fairly new. In fact, Yoga therapy is a whole new professional discipline, calling for far greater training and skill on the part of the teacher than is the case with ordinary Yoga. Commonly, Yoga is intended for those who don't suffer from disabilities or ailments requiring remedial action and special attention. Yoga therapy, on the other hand, addresses these special needs. For example, Yoga therapy may be able to help you find relief from many common ailments. Chapter 22 of this book shows you some basic yogic techniques for improving common lower and upper back problems.

## *Yoga as a lifestyle*

Yoga as a lifestyle enters the proper domain of Traditional Yoga. Yoga once or twice a week for an hour or so is certainly better than no Yoga at all. And Yoga can be enormously beneficial even when practiced only as fitness training or as so-called Postural Yoga. But you unlock the real potency of Yoga when you adopt it as a lifestyle — *living* Yoga and practicing it every day whether through physical exercises or meditation. Above all, you apply the wisdom of Yoga to everyday life and live *lucidly*, with awareness. Yoga has much to say about what and how you should eat, how you should sleep, how you should work, how you should relate to others, and so on. It offers a total system of conscious and skillful living.



In modern times, a Yoga lifestyle includes caring for the ailing environment, an idea especially captured in Green Yoga. (Check out the sidebar “Healing the planet through Green Yoga” in this chapter for more information.) Don’t think you have to be a yogic superstar to practice lifestyle Yoga. You can begin today. Just make a few simple adjustments in your daily schedule and keep your goals vividly in front of you. Whenever you’re ready, make further positive changes one step at a time. See Chapter 20 for more on working Yoga into your whole day.

## *Yoga as a spiritual discipline*

Lifestyle Yoga (see the preceding section) is concerned with healthy, wholesome, functional, and benevolent living. Yoga as a spiritual discipline, the fifth and final approach, is concerned with all that *plus* the traditional ideal of *enlightenment* — that is, discovering your spiritual nature. This approach is often equated with Traditional Yoga. (We discuss the journey to enlightenment in Chapter 21.)

The word *spiritual* has been abused a lot lately, so we need to explain how we use it here. *Spiritual* relates to *spirit* — your ultimate nature. In Yoga, it’s called the *atman* (pronounced *aht-mahn*) or *purusha* (*poo-roo-shah*).

According to nondualistic (based in one reality) Yoga philosophy, the *spirit* is one and the same in all beings and things. It’s formless, immortal, superconscious, and unimaginably blissful. It’s transcendental because it exists beyond the limited body and mind. You discover the spirit fully in the moment of your enlightenment.

## *What most approaches to Yoga have in common*

Most traditional or tradition-oriented approaches to Yoga share two fundamental practices, the cultivation of awareness and relaxation:

- ✓ *Awareness* is the peculiarly human ability to pay close attention to something, to be consciously present, and to be mindful. Yoga is attention training. To see what we mean, try this exercise: Pay attention to your right hand for the next 60 seconds. That is, feel your right hand and do nothing else. Chances are, your mind is drifting off after only a few seconds. Yoga asks you to rein in your attention whenever it strays.
- ✓ *Relaxation* is the conscious release of unnecessary and therefore unwholesome tension in the body.



Both awareness and relaxation go hand in hand in Yoga. Without bringing awareness and relaxation to Yoga, the exercises are merely exercises — not *yogic* exercises.

*Conscious breathing* is often added to awareness and relaxation as a third foundational practice. Normally, breathing happens automatically. In Yoga, you bring awareness to this act, which then makes it into a powerful tool for training your body and your mind. We say much more about these aspects of Yoga in Chapter 5.

## Health, Healing, and Yoga

The source of your health and happiness lies within you. Outside agents like physicians, therapists, or remedies can help you through major crises, but you yourself are primarily responsible for your own health and happiness. The following sections show you how Yoga helps you mobilize the inner strength to live responsibly and wisely.

What is health? Most people answer this question by saying that health is the opposite of illness, but *health* is more than the absence of disease — it's a positive state of being. Health is wholeness. To be healthy means not only to possess a well-functioning body and a sane mind but also to vibrate with life, to be vitally connected with your social and physical environment. To be healthy also means to be happy.



### Something for nothing?

You get out of Yoga what you put into it. One computer term particularly relevant to Yoga practice is *gigo*, which means “garbage in, garbage out.” It captures a simple truth: The quality of a cause determines the quality of the effect — what you get out of any endeavor is only as good as what you put in. In other words,

- ✓ Don't expect health from junk food.
- ✓ Don't expect happiness from miserable attitudes.

- ✓ Don't expect good results from shoddy Yoga practice.
- ✓ Don't expect something from nothing.

Yoga is a powerful tool, but you must learn to use it properly. You can buy the latest super-duper computer, but if you only know how to use it as a typewriter, that's all it is.

Because life is constant movement, you shouldn't expect health to be static. Today health is increasingly difficult to achieve because the environment has become highly toxic. Perfect health is a mirage. In the course of your life, you can expect inevitable fluctuations in your state of health; even cutting your finger with a knife temporarily upsets the balance. Your body reacts to the cut by mobilizing all the necessary biochemical forces to heal itself. Regular Yoga practice can create optimal conditions for self-healing. You achieve a baseline of health, with an improved immune system that enables you to stay healthy longer and heal faster.

Yoga is about healing rather than curing. Like a really good physician, Yoga takes deeper causes into account instead of slapping a bandage on surface symptoms. These causes are more often than not found in the mind — in the way you live and how you think. That's why Yoga masters recommend self-understanding. Most people tend to be passive in health matters. They wait until something goes wrong and then rely on a pill or a physician to fix the problem. Yoga encourages you to take the initiative in preventing illness and restoring or maintaining your health. Taking control of your health has nothing to do with self-doctoring (which can be dangerous); it's simply a matter of taking responsibility for your health. A good physician can tell you that a patient's active participation in the process greatly facilitates healing. For example, you may take various kinds of medication to deal with a gastric ulcer, but unless you learn to eat well, sleep adequately, avoid stress, and take life more easily, you're bound to have a recurrence before long. You must change your lifestyle to realize any deep-seated healing.

Yoga points the way to happiness, health, and life-embracing meaning by suggesting that the best possible meaning you can find for yourself springs from the well of joy deep within you. That joy or bliss is the very nature of the spirit, or transcendental Self (refer to "Yoga as a spiritual discipline" earlier in this chapter). Joy is like a 3-D lens that captures life's bright colors and motivates you to embrace life in all its countless forms.

## *Balancing Your Life with Yoga*

The Hindu tradition explains Yoga as the discipline of balance, another way of expressing the ideal of unity through Yoga. Everything in you must harmonize to function optimally. A disharmonious mind is disturbing in itself, but sooner or later it also causes physical problems. An imbalanced body can easily warp your emotions and thought processes. If you have strained relationships with others, you cause distress not only for them but also for yourself. And when your relationship to your physical environment is disharmonious, well, you trigger serious repercussions for everyone.



## Healing the planet through Green Yoga

The environmental crisis, which is sharpening day by day, is prompting more and more yogis and yoginis to apply Yoga's ethical standards specifically to the health of the ailing planet. This Green Yoga approach is explained in my (Georg's) and Brenda Feuerstein's book *Green Yoga* (Traditional Yoga Studies).

*Green Yoga* is Yoga that incorporates environmental mindfulness and activism in its spiritual

orientation. It centers on a deep reverence for all life and a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity; it believes the time has come to make Yoga count in more than personal terms.

If you want to get started on greening your Yoga, try carpooling or biking to your next class, or use an environment-friendly Yoga mat. Also, reduce! Reuse! Recycle!

A beautiful and simple Yoga exercise called "The Tree" (described in Chapter 9) improves your sense of balance and promotes your inner stillness. Even when conditions force a tree to grow askew, it always balances itself out by growing a branch in the direction opposite its lean, so in this posture, you stand still like a tree, perfectly balanced.



Yoga helps you apply this principle to your life. Whenever life's demands and challenges force you to bend to one side, your inner strength and peace of mind serve as counterweights. Rising above all adversity, you can never be uprooted.

