

# Chapter 1

## Yoga 101: Building a Foundation

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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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**A**lthough *Yoga* is now a household word, many people don't know exactly what it is. Far more than just physical exercise, Yoga can transform you, even if it's not your intention when you first step onto the mat. 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 the richness of Yoga, with its many different branches and approaches. Yoga 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. Yoga may have originated in India, but 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 aspect — it's like a skyscraper with many floors and numerous rooms at each level. Yoga isn't *just* gymnastics, fitness training, a way to control your weight, stress reduction, meditation, or a spiritual path — it's *all* these tools and a great deal more.

The Yoga we enjoy today comes from a 5,000-year-old Indian tradition. Some of the exercises look like gymnastics and so, not surprisingly, have made their way into Western gymnastics. These exercises, or postures, help you become (and 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 that charge your brain and the rest of your body with delicious energy.

You can also use Yoga as an efficient system of healthcare that has proven its usefulness in both restoring and maintaining health. Yoga continues to gain acceptance within the medical establishment; 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, neck, knees, and hips).

Still, Yoga is far more than a system of preventative or restorative healthcare. Yoga looks at health from a broad, holistic perspective that integrative medicine is only now rediscovering. 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.” The system of Yoga, then, is 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, so they collapse under stress. They don’t understand their own emotions. Afraid of life, they’re easily hurt emotionally.

Yoga also seeks to unite the rational mind and the emotions. People frequently bottle up their emotions and don’t express their real feelings. Instead, they choose to rationalize away these feelings. 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 so that you 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. People can't thrive in isolation. Even the most independent individual is greatly indebted to others. When 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 22.

## ***Finding yourself: Are you a yogi (or a 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*. Becoming a *yogi* or *yogini* means you do more than practice Yoga postures. Yoginis embrace Yoga as a self-transforming spiritual discipline. A yogi who has really mastered Yoga is called an *adept*. If such an adept also teaches (and not all of them do), this person is traditionally called a *guru*. The Sanskrit word *guru* literally means "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 anyone who claims 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, with an eighth branch we added at the end:



- ✓ **Bhakti (*bhuk-tee*) 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 (*haht-ha*) Yoga, the Yoga of physical discipline:** All branches of Yoga seek to achieve the same final goal, enlightenment (see Chapter 23), but Hatha Yoga approaches this goal through the body instead of 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 is like trying to climb Mt. Everest without the necessary gear. We focus on this particular branch of Yoga in this book.  
  
Hatha Yoga is much more than posture practice, which is so popular today. Like every form of authentic Yoga, it's a *spiritual* path.
- ✓ **Jnana (*gyah-nah*) 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 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 (*kahr-mah*) 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.
- ✓ **Mantra (*mahn-trah*) 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*. From a traditional perspective, such words aren't really mantras, but they can be helpful nonetheless.

## The Eight Limbs of Yoga

In traditional Raja Yoga, students move toward enlightenment, or liberation, through an eight-limb approach:

- ✓ **Yama (yah-mah):** Moral discipline, consisting of the practices of nonharming, truthfulness, nonstealing, chastity, and greedlessness. (For an explanation of these five virtues, head to Chapter 22.)
- ✓ **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. (Chapter 23 explains this practice and the next.)
- ✓ **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.

- ✓ **Raja (rah-jah) 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 eight-fold 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 “Taking a Closer Look at Hatha Yoga,” later in this chapter.)
- ✓ **Tantra (tahn-trah) Yoga (including Laya Yoga and Kundalini Yoga), the Yoga of continuity:** Tantra Yoga is the most complex and most widely misunderstood branch of Yoga. In the West and India, Tantra Yoga is often confused with “spiritualized” sex; although some (so-called left-hand) schools of Tantra Yoga use sexual rituals, 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.

## 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 karma, but also go beyond good karma, to no karma at all.

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 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 “Taking a Closer Look at Hatha Yoga,” later in the chapter.

✓ **Guru (goo-roo) Yoga, the Yoga of dedication to a Yoga master.** This branch is one we added to the great Yoga tree. 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 23 for more about enlightenment). In Guru Yoga, you honor and meditate on your guru until you merge with him. Because the guru is thought to already be one with the ultimate reality, this merger duplicates his spiritual realization in you.

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



## Taking a Closer Look at Hatha Yoga

In its voyage to modernity, Yoga has undergone many transformations. One of them was Hatha Yoga, which emerged around 1100 AD. (We focus on this branch of Yoga throughout this book.) The most significant adaptations, however, occurred 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** is the most widely recognized approach to Hatha Yoga. Characteristics of this style include precision performance and the aid of numerous props. B.K.S. Iyengar, the brother-in-law of the famous T.S. Krishnamacharya (1888–1989) and uncle of T.K.V. Desikachar, developed this approach. Iyengar has trained thousands of teachers, including many 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*) focuses on the breath and emphasizes practicing Yoga according to your individual needs and capacities. Shri Krishnamacharya first developed this approach, and his son T.K.V. Desikachar continued it. 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) and Sannidhi of Krishnamacharya Yoga (SKY), 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's still sweeping the world.
- ✓ **Ashtanga Yoga** is by far the most athletic of the three versions of Hatha Yoga. This version combines postures with breathing. Ashtanga Yoga differs from Patanjali's eightfold path (also called Ashtanga Yoga), although 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.) This approach originated with Shri Krishnamacharya but grew in popularity thanks to K. Pattabhi Jois. Jois was born in 1915 but had such a modern outlook that he drew eager Western students to his Ashtanga Yoga Institute in Mysore, India, 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.
 

*Power Yoga* is a generic term for any style that closely follows 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 variations of Ashtanga Yoga.
- ✓ **Kripalu Yoga** is a three-stage Yoga approach tailored to 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. Swami Kripalvananda (1913–1981) created Kripalu Yoga, and his disciple Yogi Amrit Desai further developed it.



## 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 consists of the letters *a*, *u*, and *m*, joined by the nasal humming of the

letter *m*. The *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 23 in our coverage of meditation.



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- ✓ **Integral Yoga** aims to integrate the various aspects of the body-mind using a combination of postures, breathing techniques, deep relaxation, and meditation. Swami Satchidananda (1914–2002), a student of the famous Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, India, introduced this type of Yoga at the Woodstock festival in 1969, where he taught the baby boomers to chant *om*. Over the years, Integral Yoga has attracted thousands of students.
- ✓ **Sivananda Yoga** includes a series of 12 postures, the Sun Salutation sequence, breathing exercises, relaxation, and *mantra* chanting. It's 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 more than 6,000 teachers, and you can find numerous Sivananda centers around the world.
- ✓ **Ananda Yoga** is a gentle style that prepares students for meditation. Its distinguishing features are the silent affirmations associated with holding the postures. Ananda Yoga is anchored in the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) and Swami Kriyananda (Donald Walters; 1926–2013), one of his disciples. 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; it's also the name of a style of Hatha Yoga. Its purpose is to awaken the serpent power (*kundalini*) by means of postures, breath control, chanting, and meditation. Sikh master Yogi Bhajan (1929–2004), who came to the United States in 1969, developed the approach; he 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.”)
- ✔ **Prime of Life Yoga** is my own (Larry's) creation. This style follows the principle of modifying postures to match the needs and abilities of the student. It offers a safe, user-friendly approach targeted to men and women ages 45 to 75, which represents the largest segment of the U.S. population. Hallmarks of this approach are its focus on the breath, function over form, a mix of dynamic and static movement, and Forgiving Limbs. Prime of Life Yoga has roots in the contemporary teachings of the late Sri T. Krishnamacharya and his son T.K.V. Desikachar. Sri T. Krishnamacharya altered his approach to teaching after his experience working with his first Western male student, Dr. Albert Franklin, who was the U.S. ambassador to India at that time. Not surprisingly, we cover aspects of Prime of Life Yoga in more detail throughout this book: We talk about Forgiving Limbs in Chapter 3 and explore the basics of the breath in Chapter 5. The principle of function over form shows up throughout the book in the instructions for the postures.
- ✔ **Somatic Yoga** is an integrated approach to the harmonious development of body and mind, based on both traditional yogic principles and modern psychophysiological research. It's the creation of Eleanor Criswell, EdD, emeritus professor of psychology at Sonoma State University in California, founding director of the Humanistic Psychology Institute (now Saybrook University, San Francisco), and emeritus professor of The International Association of Yoga therapists; she has taught Yoga since the early 1960s. This gentle approach emphasizes visualization, very slow movement into and out of postures, conscious breathing, mindfulness, and frequent relaxation between postures.
- ✔ **Moksha Yoga** champions a green philosophy. It uses traditional postures in a heated room and includes relaxation periods. This approach is based on the style of Bikram Yoga (listed next) and is popular in Canada.
- ✔ **Bikram Yoga** has a set routine of 26 postures. This very vigorous style requires a certain fitness level for participation, especially because it calls for a high room temperature. Founder 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.

You also may hear or see 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 Yin Yoga (developed by Paul Grilley).



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

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

Since Yoga came to the West from its Indian homeland in the late 19th century, it has undergone various adaptations. Broadly, you can look at yoga in four overlapping approaches.

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

The first two approaches are often categorized as Postural Yoga; it contrasts with Traditional Yoga, which generally encompasses the last two approaches. As its name suggests, Postural Yoga focuses (sometimes exclusively) on Yoga postures. Traditional Yoga seeks to adhere to the traditional teachings taught anciently in India. We take a look at the four basic approaches in the upcoming sections.

### *Yoga as fitness training*

The first approach, Yoga as fitness training, is the most popular way 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, 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.



If what motivates you is the prospect of having tighter buns or improving your golf game, you can certainly find that through Yoga. As you progress with a dedicated practice, your body will become stronger and more agile, and your buns will tighten, too. As a “meditation in motion,” though, Yoga also can impact your performance on the green. The focus and coordination you develop on your Yoga mat will spill over to your swing — and to the rest of your life.

## *Yoga as therapy*

The second approach, Yoga as therapy, applies yogic techniques to restore health or full physical and mental function. While the idea behind as a therapy is quite old, it’s growing into a whole new professional discipline. Different from even a highly experienced Yoga teacher, Yoga therapists have specialized training to apply the tools of Yoga to promote and support healing. Commonly, Yoga is intended for people who don’t suffer from disabilities or ailments that require remedial action and special attention. Yoga therapy, on the other hand, addresses these special needs and enables people who cannot participate in a typical group setting to enjoy Yoga’s many fruits. Chapter 24 delves deeper into this facet of Yoga.

## *Yoga as a lifestyle*

Yoga as a lifestyle enters the proper domain of Traditional Yoga. Although practicing Yoga only once or twice a week for an hour or so and focusing on its fitness training aspect is beneficial, you unlock the real potency of Yoga when you adopt it as a lifestyle — *living* Yoga and practicing it every day through physical exercises or meditation. Above all, when you adopt Yoga as a lifestyle, you apply the wisdom of Yoga to your everyday life and live with awareness. Yoga has much sage advice about everyday living, including diet and sleep habits, how you relate to others, and where you focus your attention and energy. 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.) Lifestyle Yoga, which emphasizes being kind to others and the planet, is a fundamental concept in Yoga. It’s where you begin. 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 22 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 fourth 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 22.)

Different people understand the word *spiritual* differently, 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.

### **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.

## *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. Feel your right hand, and do nothing else. Chances are, your mind drifts off after only a few seconds. Yoga asks you to rein in your attention whenever it strays.
- ✓ *Relaxation* is the conscious release of unnecessary tension in the body.



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

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

## *Pointing the Way to Happiness: Health, Healing, and Yoga*

The source of your health and happiness lies within you. Outside agents such as physicians, therapists, or remedies can help you through major crises, but you yourself are primarily responsible for your own health and happiness.

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.

## No such thing as a free lunch

You get out of Yoga what you put into it. You're probably familiar with the adage of our data-crunching age: "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-generation computer with a dizzying array of functions, but if you only know how to use it as a typewriter, that's all it is.

Life is constant movement, and health is, too. In today's world, your body must handle an onslaught of toxins that's unique to our times. During 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 better baseline of health, with an improved immune system that enables you to stay healthy longer and heal faster.

Yoga is about healing, not curing. Like a really good physician, Yoga takes deeper causes into account; it doesn't just slap a bandage on surface symptoms. Often these causes are rooted in the mind — in the way you live and how you think. For this reason, Yoga masters recommend self-understanding. Instead of waiting until something goes wrong and then relying 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. We're not talking about self-doctoring (which can be dangerous); instead, you need to take responsibility for your health. A good physician knows that a patient's active participation in the process greatly facilitates 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 the transcendental Self (refer to "Yoga as a spiritual discipline," earlier in this chapter). Joy is like a 3D 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 with your physical environment is disharmonious, well, you trigger serious repercussions for everyone.

A beautiful and simple Yoga exercise called the tree (see Chapter 8) 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 opposite direction. 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.

### Healing the planet through Green Yoga

Climate change and other aspects of environmental degradation are on everyone's mind. Contemporary Yoga philosophy encourages applying Yoga's ethical standards to the health of the ailing planet. Georg and Brenda Feuerstein explain this Green Yoga approach in their 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.

Carpooling or biking to your next class and using an environmentally friendly Yoga mat are just a couple ways to get started.

## *Locating Your Starting Place in the World of Yoga*

Now that you know the lay of the land, consider what motivates you to practice Yoga, as well as your lifestyle, physical style, and any limitations. Then find the style of Yoga and practice environment that's a good fit for you.

- ✔ Are you primarily looking for a method of stress management?
- ✔ Do you need to get your body moving after spending long hours in front of your computer?
- ✔ Do you seek quiet time and decompression after running after the kids all day?
- ✔ Are you drawn to a mental image of yourself with six-pack abs and tight buns?
- ✔ Do you aspire to reach transcendence?
- ✔ Are you a spiritual person in search of an outlet?
- ✔ Are you a secular person who yearns for moments of focus and balance?
- ✔ Do you have health concerns, such as lower back problems, that might limit your movement?
- ✔ Are you an athletic person looking for variety?
- ✔ Have you been a couch potato until now?

If your goals are entirely spiritual, choose a branch of Yoga that can best help you achieve those goals. You may resonate with Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga, or Tantra Yoga. If your main interest is in improving your health or overall physical well-being, or if you primarily want to become fit and flexible, select a style of Hatha Yoga that fits you best. To help you wind down, go with one of the more restorative styles. To get the juices flowing and blood pumping, try one of the flow styles. And Viniyoga and Prime of Life styles of Yoga are especially well suited for people with physical concerns such as achy backs and shoulders.

All forms of Yoga, when done with intention, can help you relax and give you a feeling of oneness. That oneness is Yoga.