



Yoga's Spiritual Roots

What does the word "yoga" mean in Sanskrit?

The word "Yoga" refers to the *whole*, a complete system, not merely one *part*, i.e., postures, or Asanas. According to the ancient sages, the entire purpose of Yoga is spiritual in nature. (Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati)

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit root '**yuj**' meaning to yoke, to unite, to join, to harness, and to bring together. Yoga is concerned with the science and art of being, knowing and acting/doing (*Ravi Ravindra*). The depth of this union is the human consciousness merging with Divine consciousness. Other words used to describe "union" are *Samadhi* (Bliss), *Moksha* (Freedom), and *Nirvana* (Liberation). The state of freedom is beyond the dualities of being-nonbeing, knowledge-ignorance and action-non-action.

When did yoga originate?

A way of living called **Sanātana Dharma** **सनातन धर्म**, a way of Eternal Living, was believed to be in existence about 100,000 years ago during *Satya Yuga* – Golden Age, a time of everlasting peace, abundance and Eternal Truth seekers (sages, rishis, yogis) according to archeologists' findings. Yoga appears to be part of this lifestyle, however was discovered only 6000 years ago.

*Many claim that Yoga is primordial. It has existed whenever and wherever human beings in their search for self-realization, have attempted to connect with **The One** (Ravi Ravindra).* IN other words, Yoga arose at the beginning of human civilization when man first realized his spiritual potential. It was believed to be revealed to the rishis so that humanity could have an opportunity to realize its divine nature (*Swami Satyananda Sarasvathi*). The rishis mastered the yogic system and were able to guide sincere aspirants on the path of yoga.

Where did yoga originate?

The exact history and origins of yoga are uncertain. *It was not until the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization that the knowledge and evidence about the origins of yoga surfaced. . (<http://www.swamij.com/history-yoga.htm>).* On the banks of river Indus (Sanskrit –*Sindhu*) and river Sarasvati, in a country *now* Pakistan which *then* was all a part of *India*, several carvings was discovered. Indus Valley Civilization (3300–1700 BC) depicts figures in a yoga- or meditation-like posture, a form of discipline, suggesting an existence of this practice according to Archaeologist, Gregory Possehl. *Hence, yoga is frequently associated with India. Since one of the major religions of India is Hinduism, yoga inadvertently, gets associated with Hinduism.*

Is the word India a Samskritham/Sanskrit word?

The country has three names, *Bhārath*, *Hindusthan*, and *India*. The term **India** is Greek for *Hindía*. *Hindía* in Byzantine ethnography denotes the region beyond the Indus River, writes Herodotus, a Greek historian in 5th century BC. The name is derived ultimately from *Indus/Sindhu*, the Sanskrit name of the river located in the Indus Valley, but also meaning

"river" generically. Lucian, a Syrian writer used the Latin word *India* in the 2nd century. The name India was also known in Anglo-Saxon and was used in King Alfred's time (23 April 871 – 26 October 899).

The name **Bhārath** is currently in use for the Republic of India. *Bhāratha* is the official Sanskrit name of the country. *Bhārata Ganarājya*, is the name is recorded in the ancient Indian texts, the Puranas. The Sanskrit root **bhr-**, "to bear / to carry", has a literal meaning of "to be maintained", also means "one who is engaged in search for knowledge".

The term *Bhāratha* as a name for India is also attributed to a prince, Bharatha, son of King Dushyantha mentioned in the Mahabharatha (the core portion of this epic is sometimes ref to as Bharatha). The area spanning Bharatha's kingdom was known as *Bharathvarsha* (varsha, meaning division of the earth or subcontinent). The Indian national emblems (passports, currency, government documents, etc.) have the Sanskrit inscription of *Bhārata Ganarājya* "भारत गणराज्य" on them.

From: *Vishnu Purana* (2.3.1) (Scriptural Text)

Uttharam Yathsamudrasaya Himaadreyshaiva Dakshinam /

Varsham Tad Bhāratham Nāma Bhārathī Santhathihi //

उत्तरं यत्समुद्रस्य हिमाद्रेः चैव दक्षिणम् ।

वर्षं तद् भारतं नाम भारती यत्र संततिः ॥

"The country that lies north of the ocean and south of the snowy mountains is called *Bhāratam*; there dwell the descendants of *Bharatha*."

This term *Bhāratam* in classical Sanskrit literature is taken to comprise the territory of the republic of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and eastern portions of Afghanistan. This corresponds to the approximate extent of the historic *Maurya* Empire under the emperors of *Chandragupta Maurya* and *Ashoka the great* (4th-3rd centuries B.C.), Mughal Empire (17th century), the Marata Empire (18th century) and the British Raj (19th and 20th centuries)

The name **Hindusthan** is derived from an Iranian/Arabic equivalent of the *Al-Hind* referring to Republic of India in the 11th century Islamic conquests. This comprised of region of between Indus (W) and Brahmaputra (E) rivers and between Himalayas (N) and Vindhya (S-C) Mountains. (Sanskrit *sthāna*-place,land). During the British Raj, Hindusthan was used with India to denote the land of Hindus (people who practiced the religion-Hinduism) when comparing to the other population of those practicing Islam and Christianity. Zahir ud in Muhammed Babur decided to conquer parts of India in 1503 having heard of her riches (pearls, gems, diamonds, gold, silks) from his ancestors. St Thomas the Apostle, came in 52A.D. bringing Christianity to southern India. Conversions into these 'new' religions began slowly, but was fueled by the British in order to divide and weaken the India.

What constitutes Hinduism?

The original name for the beliefs and practices of people living in the Indus Valley and *Bharata varsha* (Indian Subcontinent) was called **Sanātana Dharma** सनातन धर्म or *Eternal Law*. **Sanātana** means perpetual, constant, eternal, and permanent. **Dharma** is a complex term that means observances, duty, and righteousness, course of conduct, morality, ethics and justice among others. *It is a perennial philosophy with no beginning or*

no end, beyond historical date of founding. A person practicing **Sanātana Dharma** sees Dharma as absolute, cosmic law that governs all the processes of the universe. **Sanātana Dharma** does not have one founder, one scripture and a fixed date of origin.

The word Hindu and Hinduism was not always found in classical writings of India. They cannot be traced back to classical Indian languages of Sanskrit or Tamil. (*Steven Rosen*). The word Hindu is Persian, Iranian root for *Sindhu*, a word that means river. As the word evolved it came to refer specifically to the cultural settlement along Indus/Sindhu river (the river flowed from Tibet through Pakistan into the Arabian Sea).

Historic Persian explorers entered *Bhārata Ganarājya*, Indian subcontinent from the northwest along the Indus/Sindhu River. When they published the details, the word Sindhu was misrepresented because of the phonetic peculiarities of their native language (Urdu/Persian) forced the sound sibilant 's' to become an aspirated 'h'. Hence, people living along Sindhu/Indus River came to be known as Hindhus, people of the Indian Subcontinent.

Muslim conquerors in 17th century referred to the locals as Hindus and referring to those who had not converted to the religion of Islam, and their land became Hindhustan.

The coming of the *British in 18th century* brought the Anglo-saxon influence and the language of English to India. They continued to use the term Hindu to distinguish between Hindus and Muslims and in addition Christians, to create religious and political chaos in order to stay in power. At this time, the western scholars and politicians began to add *the suffix 'ism'* to the word Hindu emphasizing the religious and political overtones of these words (*Steven Rosen*).

History of Yoga falls into four broad categories

Vedic Yoga

The existence of the *Vedas* marks this period approximately 2500 B.C.E (more than 6000 years ago). They have been passed through oral tradition for over 100,000 years. They came to us in written form approximately 6,000 years ago. The *Vedas* (sacred knowledge) is the (revealed – **Shruthi**) scripture that is the basis of modern-day Hinduism. The *Vedas* contains the *oldest known Yogic teachings and practices*, in addition to hymns, rituals and ceremonies that strive to surpass the limitations of the mind, hence called *Vedic Yoga*.

During this time, the *Vedic* people relied on *rishis* or dedicated *Vedic Yogis* to teach them yogic practices and how to live in divine harmony. *Rishis* were also gifted with the ability to 'see' (visions) the ultimate reality through their intensive spiritual practice. It was also during this time that *Yogis were living in seclusion* (in forests, mountains- Himalayas, Arunachala).

Pre-Classical Yoga

The creation of the *Upanishads* marks the time of Pre-Classical Yoga (1000 – 500 B.C.E.) The *Upanishads* are regarded as part of/extension of the *Vedas*. They describe philosophy, meditation and nature of Brahman. There are 108 *Upanishads* (10 main). The *Upanishads* further explain the teachings of the *Vedas* as dialog between the teacher (*Guru*) and student (*shishya*). (*Upa* – near, *ni* – at, *shad* – sit) The references to yoga made in the *Upanishads* indicate that the science of hata yoga was well known before this period.

Later, around **500 B.C.**, *Rishi Vyasa* created the Bhagavad-Gita or Lord's Song and this is currently the oldest known Yoga scripture (**Smruthi** - remembered). The Gita was a conversation between *Prince Arjuna* (individual representation/human consciousness) and *Shri Krishna* (Divine Consciousness). It is devoted entirely to Yoga where Shri Krishna confirms yoga as an ancient practice. However, it does not point to a specific time/dates wherein Yoga could have started.

In the Gita, four types of yoga are discussed: Bhakti or loving devotion, Jnana or realized knowledge or contemplation, Karma or selfless actions and Raja or the royal path of meditation and its allied practices. The Gita explains that the student can choose to practice one of the types according to his/her personality but also the importance of having a unified practice of Bhakthi Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga and Raja Yoga. The complete 6th chapter of the Gita is dedicated to meditation.

In the same period, evidence of *Hata yoga* has also been found at St Augustine, southern province of Columbia in South America. Archeologists have excavated large stone figures and carvings depicting hata yoga practices.

Classical Yoga

The Classical Period 500 B.C. – 100 B.C.E is marked by another creation - *the Yoga Sutra*. Written by *Rishi Patanjali* around the *second century*, it was an attempt to define and standardize Classical Yoga. It is composed of 195 aphorisms or sutras (from the Sanskrit word which means thread) that expound upon the Raja Yoga and its underlying principle, Patanjali's Eightfold path of Yoga (Ashtanga- Eight Limbs of Classical Yoga). The earliest known Sanskrit commentary on the sutras is *Yoga- Bhashya* (speech on yoga) by *Rishi Vyasa* in the fifth century. *Classical Yoga or Classical Ashtanga Yoga (Classical Eight Fold Path)* is the practice that is taught here at Yogalife Intitute.

Between the 6th and 15th century A.D. yogic texts such as Hata Yoga Pradipika, Goraksha Samhitha, Gherand Samhita and Hatarathnavali were written.

Yoga shares some characteristics not only with Hinduism but also with Buddhism that we can be traced in its history. During the **sixth century B.C.**, Buddha started teaching the practice of the Middle Path (*Majjhima Patipada* in Pali or *Madhyama Pratipada* in Sanskrit), which stresses the importance of Meditation and the practice of physical postures. Siddharta Gautama, the first *Buddha, the "Awakened One"* (also called *Shakya Muni*) studied Yoga and achieved enlightenment (*Nirvana*) at the age of 35.

Post-Classical (Modern) Yoga

Post-classical Yoga differs from the first three since its focus is more on the present environment and its needs. It no longer strives to liberate a person from reality but rather teaches one to accept it and live in the moment. During the early 19th century, Yoga was introduced in the West. It was first studied as part of Eastern Philosophy and transformed into a movement for health and vegetarianism around the 1930's.

Swami Vivekananda who came in 1800's to attend a conference of world religions in Boston brought with him the teachings of Bhakthi Yoga and Karma Yoga. In the 1930's **Paramahansa Yogananda** expounded on meditation and yogic lifestyle in the teachings

of Kriya Yoga. In the 1960's, there was an influx of teachers from India, **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Sivananda, Swami Rama**, who expounded on the practices Yoga.

Swami Sivananda wrote more than 200 books on Yoga and Philosophy and had many disciples who furthered Yoga. Some of them were **Swami Satchidananda** who introduced chanting and Yoga to Woodstock; **Swami Sivananda Radha** who explored the connection between psychology and Yoga, **Swami Vishnu Devananda** who continued to expound his guru's Shivananda's teachings and **Yogi Bhajan** who started teaching Kundalini Yoga in the 70's. Up to this day, Yoga continues to proliferate and spread its teachings, crossing the boundaries of culture and language. If you subscribe to Yoga Journal, you will find a long list of international yoga teachers who have dedicated their practices to the spread of yoga.

What is the original type of yoga?

Although the word yoga refers almost universally to the physical practice (*Hata yoga*) which emphasizes body postures (asanas), the philosophy steering the practice is gaining a stronger foothold as well. *Hata* means force, physical effort, having been struck or hit)

The widely accepted, original type of yoga is the one mentioned in *Pathanjali's पतञ्जलि Yoga sutras* (2:29) called *Ashtanga* or Eight-Fold Path, or also as Classical (orthodox/traditional) *Astanga*. He also refers to it in certain sections as *Kriya yoga* (2:1). *Swami Vivekananda* describes Pathanjali's Eight-Fold path as *Raja yoga* or Royal path.

How many types of yoga are there?

Consider these types as different approaches based on personality/experiences everyone's path is different to go beyond the ordinary human condition and reach for the Higher Self (Georg Feurstein)

Yoga of Fitness/Physical - **Hata Yoga**

Yoga of Devotion - **Bhakti Yoga**

Yoga of Realized knowledge - **Jnana Yoga**

Yoga of Selfless Action - **Karma Yoga**

Yoga of Sound - **Svara Yoga**

Yoga of Chanting - **Mantra Yoga**

Yoga of Energy - **Kundalini Yoga**

Yoga of Meditation - **Raja Yoga**

Yoga of Action - **Kriya /Karma Yoga**

Yoga of Creation - **Tantra Yoga**

What is difference between types and styles of yoga?

The original Hata Yoga has been described by **Sage Pathanjali** in the book the **Yoga Sutras** – The Scripture of Yoga, as *Classical Ashtanga Yoga or the 8 Fold Path*.

Modern Yoga teachers modified the original Classical yoga to suit the audience and create interest and commitment. *Each of these teachers popularized their modified version as a separate style of yoga by using their name or giving it another name. All styles share this lineage.* They all utilize the combination of asana, pranayama and/or meditation.

No style is superior to another. Choosing a yoga style is just a matter of preference. Although Yoga instructors get their training and certification in **one particular style**, they may borrow ideas from other styles to suit their teaching needs. Most popular styles are **Bikram** – Bikram Choudhoury, **Iyengar** – BKS Iyengar, **Kripalu** – Yogi Amrit Desai, **Shivananda** – Swami Shivananda, **Integral** – Swami Satchidananda, **Viniyoga** or *Vinyasa* (Flow)–T. Krishnamacharya and his son TKV Desikachar. It is difficult to place Power yoga as a type or a style; still, it is a set of practices developed by teachers like Beryl Bender

Birch and Baron Baptiste to maximize the physical aspect of the practice. Practitioners should use caution while taking a power yoga class to avoid long term injuries.

What are Yoga's' Scriptures/ texts?

Yoga existed long before Pathanjali, which was passed to disciples through oral tradition only for centuries. *Rishi Pathanjali पतञ्जलि* is the author of *Yogasutras* 150 B.C.E or 2nd century, first ever codified and documented treatise on yoga, so that they not be lost in the degeneration of humanity.

The main yoga texts are - **Pathanjali's YogaSutras** (8 fold path), **Hata Yoga Pradhipika** (4 chapters), **Gheranda Samhita** (7 limbed -collection of verses), and **Goraksha Samhita** (6 limbed). The *Guru* had the students memorize the verses; meditate upon them to help the students arrive at their own meaning and explanations (*jnana* – realized knowledge). The Guru also held classes /gatherings (*pravachans*) to explain/instruct (*upadesha*) on the verses. They provide guidelines to the *sadhaka* (yogic practitioner) how to progress with his/her *sadhana* (spiritual practice).

There are many translations and interpretations of the Yoga sutras and other texts. It is best to ask your yoga teacher to recommend a translation that might suit your personality at first and then go deeper into the study with other elaborate interpretations.

Is yoga a religion?

A religion defines God in terms of a specific faith (Bob Butera). Yoga is **not** a religion. It **does not** dictate rigid dogma or doctrine to follow in order to find a sense of identity or spiritual harmony. Other ways to describe the "wholeness" of Yoga:

Yoga is Darshana /philosophy that teaches how to connect the body (*sharira*) and mind (*manas*) in order to "see" or merge with the Spirit (*Brahman*) (Chapter 1 - Ravi Ravindra).

Yoga is a Shastra/Science where, for example, the practices of Pranayama have led to measureable outcomes in terms of health and life span.

Yoga is a Sadhana/Spiritual Practices, a system with detailed steps and tools to support the study of the self/Self. One can choose to follow these practices to observe a path of spirituality to achieve a higher purpose in life.

Yoga is a Maarga/Path, a trail that has many signs – maps (eight-fold path *Ashtanga*), manuals (*Yogasutras*), obstacles (*kleshas*), detours (*siddhis*), and most importantly a teacher (*Acharya /Guru*).

Yoga is a lifestyle. "The philosophy has moral values that can be integrated in everyday life, its principles are of universal application and its doctrines are in harmony with human advancement all around." (*P.N. Mukerji- Swami Hariharananda*). One can **choose** to use these diverse practices in various aspects of daily life such as in physical health/well being, nutrition, breathing, communication, work, relaxation, etc., in order to merge the outer and inner realities. However, this way of life is an experience, which cannot be understood intellectually and will become living knowledge only through practice and experience (*Swami Satyananda Saravathi*)

Because yoga was discovered in India, and Hinduism is a major religion of India, yoga tends to get associated with Hinduism. However, one can practice yoga and remain faithful to their personal, chosen religion.

What is the state of Yoga today (2011)?

Modernization of Yoga has multiple meanings. The ancient rishis mastered the system of yoga and developed various techniques; presented appropriate modifications in order for the disciples to pass the yogic sciences to future generations to follow. Through personal experience, the realized yogis, the True Gurus, were able to guide sincere aspirants on the path of yoga. As the nature of living has changed, modernized, the quality and temperament of teachers and the students have changed as well.

If one is practicing the tenets of Yamas and Niyamas, it would not be Ahimsa to criticize or to judge the practices of the current time. However, with sincere study and relating the current practices to the ancient tradition of yoga, one may become fascinated by how flexible, how moldable the practice of yoga can be. Or as the humanity expresses its "current" needs in terms of health, healing, nutrition, fitness, therapeutic aspects, etc., appropriate yogic practices have appeared to surface. In other words, dedicated yoga teachers have deepened their study of yogic sciences and uncovered the treasure of yogic practices, adjusted these practices to suit the current health and disposition of the 'modern humans'. (The web articles listed in the References list is worth your attention.)

What are the beliefs and practices of Sanathana Dharma?

One practicing **Sanātana Dharma** सनातन धर्म is called a Sanaathana Dharmi.

Hindu **beliefs** – One formless Divine (Brahman), individual soul (Atman), Karma (What goes around comes around –As you sow, so you reap) and reincarnation or rebirth, Bhakthi (stages of devotion), Vairagya (renunciation) and Moksha/Nirvana/Samadhi (liberation/Bliss)

Hindu **Practices** - ashramas (stages of life), varnashrama dharma (divisions based on ability and temperament and not birth or caste /jaathi system), puja (worship), pilgrimages (Yaathra), Utsavas (festivals), Upvasa (fasting), Vrathas (vows – mauna), Japa (repetition of Lord's name), Satsang, companionship of spiritually minded and Pravachans, attending spiritual talks by yogic masters, pundits/scholars and of course gurus.

What are the Hindu scriptures?

Hinduism or **Sanātana Dharma** सनातन धर्म **does not have one founder, one scripture and one way of life.** Most frequently quoted scriptures are the *Vedas, Upanishads, ithihasas (epics Mahabharath, Ramamyana), puranas (Bhagavatham, Vishnu), Shasthras (Artha, Shilpa, Vaasthu)* '**Veda**' in Sanskrit means knowledge, to know. The *Vedas* are books of revelation, eternal Truths revealed to the rishis called Shruthi. They are the divine recordings of "cosmic sounds of truth", heard by rishis or sages or seers. Handed down orally for centuries, portions were preserved by priestly families and Gurus. The Vedas do not owe their authority to anyone. They are themselves the authority as they are eternal, as they are the Knowledge of the Lord.

Vedic texts have existed in written form dated between 1500-500 BCE, the exact date the Vedas came into existence has never been fixed. They may be the oldest sacred texts in

existence seen in archeological finding of Indus Valley possibly in 6000 BCE. Hindu mythology credits **Vyasa**, regarded as an incarnation/avatar of Shri Krishna, as the scribe of the Vedas and Mahabharath. The name 'Vyasa' means compiler of the Vedas.

However the names of authors of different works do not offer any chronological clue either as these do not refer to specific individuals. It is certain that there were more persons than one bearing names of *Vyasa* or *Yagnyavalkya* and living at different periods of time. Similarly, there were several authors known as *Pathanjali* which was but a family surname according to *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. (P.N.Mukerji)

Vyasa used this knowledge to forecast the era/**yuga** of Kali, an evil genius who appeared at the same instant *Krishna* avatar was completed to cause deterioration in humanity. In Hindu chronology, the age of Kali or Kaliyuga began on February 18, 3102 BCE, will last 432,000 years.

Vedas also called as SAMHITAS (In Sanskrit collection); this grouping of metric texts, or mantras, contains four Vedic Samhitas:

- 1- **Rig Veda** (Verse Veda, or stanza of praise) collection of hymns in praise of Brahman.
- 2- **Yajur Veda** (the Veda of sacrificial formula) means to fire sacrifice in prescribed steps. It contains prose mantras, ceremonies and rites.
- 3- **Sama Veda** (the Veda of Chants, or Knowledge Melodies) with 1,549 stanzas was designed for Tala (rhythms) and Raga (melodies). Taken from the Rig-Veda, except for some 78 stanzas, the hymns were sung according to fixed melodies, hence the collection's name.
- 4- **Atharva Veda** (Knowledge of Atharvas, or Priest of Fire) contains spells and exorcisms, a mixed bag of enchantments. These charms were as much to bless as to curse. They contain amulets to ward off demons, wizards, disease and oppressors of Brahman. Its beneficial potions assure love, domestic bliss, health, longevity, safe journey, and luck.

Each Veda consists of four parts to suit the four stages (**Ashramas** or Vedic Lifestyles) in a man's life:

1. The Mantra-Samhitas or hymns
2. The Brahmanas or explanations of Mantras or rituals
3. The Aranyakas (philosophical interpretations of the rituals - forest schools)
4. The Upanishads (The essence or metaphysical reflections)

The *Mantra portion* of the Vedas is useful for the **Brahmacharins** (celibate; one who belongs to the first of the four Ashramas or orders of life; one who lives in purity and studies the Veda; the first 25 years of life).

The *Brahmana* portion is suitable for the householder (**Grihastha**; one who belongs to the second of the four Ashramas or orders of life; from 25 to 50 years of age).

The *Aranyakas* are intended for the **Vanaprasthas** or hermits who prepare themselves for taking Sannyasa. (Vanaprastha = one who leads the third stage of life; weans from the material world of temptations- from 50 to 75 years of age).

The *Upanishads* are useful for the **Sannyasins**. (Sannyasi or Sannyasin = a monk; one who has embraced the life of complete renunciation; one belonging to the fourth or the highest stage of life; from 75 to 100 years of age).

UPANISHADS are essence of the Vedas communicated in dialog form. 'Upanishad' means "to sit with devotion near the feet of a realized teacher". They are also referred to as *Vedanta*, literally, the end of the Vedas. Scholars attribute 7th – 8th century BCE for the ten main (mukhya) Upanishads. Although many have been lost and some modified, there are over 100 available in prose, verse, or both.

The Upanishads are the most important portion, the essence of the Vedas. It contains the knowledge of formless *Brahman*, who destroys ignorance and moves toward liberation. *Upanishads* explain the nature of God, and the relation between the soul and matter. The philosophy of the Upanishads is sublime and profound. The Upanishads speak of the identity of the individual soul (*Jivatman*) and the Supreme Soul (*Paramatman*). They reveal the most subtle and deep spiritual truths.

In order to make it more applicable to the lay people, Hindu philosophers transformed the Upanishads and Vedas further through various other interpretations into six schools of thought called Dharshana (visions) or philosophy - *Nyaaya*, *Vaisheshika*, **Saankhya**, **Yoga**, *Purva-Meemaamsa* and *Utthara Meemaamsa*.

Does yoga belong to a specific school of philosophy (Dharshana)?

Although *Yoga* and *Sankhya* are listed as two separate schools or Dharshanas (philosophy), both systems operate on similar philosophies. In India, these two are regarded as twins, the two aspects of a single discipline (Heinrich Zimmer). *Sankhya* cosmology deals with the theoretical structure and evolution of the universe (which is similar to the *Purusha* and *Prakrithi* descriptions in Pathanjali's Yoga system), state of bondage (*karma bandha*) and state of release (*Moksha*). However, yoga also outlines practical techniques for gaining the release (*kaivalya*) from the cycle of birth and death. The strands of Sankhyan thought can also be found in Vedic explanations of creation and frequently mentioned in the Mahabharath and Yogavashishta (Dialog between Rishi Vashishtha and Sri Rama before accompanying Rishi Vishvamitra to the forest)

Why are there so many gods in Sanātana Dharma सनातन धर्म /Hinduism?

It is greatly misunderstood that Hinduism is polytheistic. Most occidentals do not realize that Hinduism is a monotheistic belief in one God, who as Creator is beyond time, space and physical form called **Brahman**. There is no exact translation to this Sanskrit word.

"Truth is One. Sages call It by different names" – Rig Veda. *The entire pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses are merely symbolic representations of different attributes of the Brahman (formless), the One Unmanifested (Avyaktha) Spirit.*

The inability of the human eye to visualize the formless Brahman led to the multiplicity of "Gods"- taking on human form with supernatural powers. Depending on the needs and personalities of the devotees, He appears to them in the form they like to worship (Swami Harshananda).



The attributes of Brahman are infinite; however, a few tangible attributes/God-forms are respectfully accepted. For example, Earth is worshiped as Mother, *Devi Prakrithi*, *Surya* (sun) *Varuna* (Water) worshipped by farmers, *Shiva* –destroyer of Ego, *Krishna* – to cultivate universal Love, *Lakshmi* – for eternal abundance, *Durga/Shakthi* – for courage and will power, *Ganesha* –remover of obstacles, etc. The humans are the bubbles, various god-forms are like the waves, and Brahman is the ocean. It is only when the bubble gets attached to wave that it becomes conscious of its unity with the ocean (Swami Harshananda).

How are these gods worshipped?

The symbols of the cross, revered holy pictures and statues of Jesus and Virgin Mary, the star and crescent moon and the word Allah in Arabic, Star of David, Menorah, etc are used as symbols of faith and worship. Similarly, Hindu Gods are depicted in human forms and worshipped as deities or idols (*murthi*) made out of stone, marble, metal.

As the statues of Jesus or the Holy Quran is placed in a sacred place called the Church or the Mosque, the idol of the Hindus Gods are placed in the Temples (Devalaya, Mandir) and in an special "Altar" at homes for worship. In addition, Hindus are told that the most scared temple is the temple of one's heart, the place where the formless Brahman resides.

The Divine in the tangible form for human eyes to behold – the idea we need something to visualize in order to practice "remembrance of the Lord" as often as possible. The statue-like forms of divinity allow easy access to the Lord, who is beyond the view of the senses (*indriyas*) (Rosen, Chapter 11#191).

For example, the goddess-pose (Mahadevi Asana) – not to be misunderstood as a religious pose, but symbolizes the essence of the female energy, presence of the Divine spark, remembrance of the vastness of the universe/nature (Mother Earth) by demonstrating unconditional love and gratitude for eternal abundance.

There are many ritual and ceremonies listed in the Hindu Scriptures that are practiced by the Hindus as a way to worship the "gods".

Has Hinduism undergone changes or reforms?

YES, Constantly since Aryans came through Indus Valley, through Alexander's conquest, Persian and Mughul empires, the British rule and through all the saints and sages of the modern times like Shri Shankaracharya, Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, Swami Chinmayananda, Amma, Shri Shri Ravi Shankar, etc.

The basics as recorded in the Vedas and Upanishads and the Gita remain the same, while the translations and interpretations are modernized to serve humanity's need to question, to analyze, to debate, to reason and comprehend. Writers like Sri Aurobindo, Sri Eknath Easwaran, Swami Adishwarananda from the East and a host of writers from the West, like Thomas Ashley Farrand, Georg Feuerstein, David Frawly and many more who translate and interpret these ancient texts beautifully to serve the needs of today's yoga practitioners as they evolve and practice.

Is chanting of Mantra (munthra) or names of Gods in yoga classes considered religious?

No. The word "*mantra*" is derived from two Sanskrit words. The first is "*manas*" or "mind," which provides the "man" syllable. The second syllable is drawn from the Sanskrit word "*trai*" meaning to "protect" or to "free from", or "to cross over". Therefore, the word mantra in its most literal sense means "to protect the mind from negative influences", "to be free from the mind's influences", or "to merge or cross over from the conscious to the unconscious" or "to cross over the ocean of rebirth." **The mental repetition of the mantra or the Holy name is one of the simplest and most effective ways of practicing the presence of God (Eknath Easwaran).**

Simply put a mantra could refer to a prayer (verse or a word) or any positive affirmation. While Hindu Mantras are made from the sounds of the ancient language of Samskrutham/Sanskrit, any ancient prayer one chooses in the language of his or her choice can be as powerful.

The mantras (especially those from the ancient Vedas and Upanishad or the Gita), have been revealed to illumined sages, meditated upon by yogis are endowed with the power and potency to bring about energy/prana changes in the person chanting it. A newly created affirmation or prayer has to gather its strength and establish potency, and hence may not be as effective. *By reading the meaning of the mantra or Holy Name (can be from any religion) and setting an intention (Sankalpa) before chanting helps the student of yoga realize the deeper meaning of the mantra and to align oneself to the higher purpose hence making the yoga practice meaningful and spiritual.*

When we chant in a group (*Satsang – Sat is good/Truth, sung is together*) the mantras we choose may or may not have the names of Gods in them, just higher spiritual meaning. Read the following mantras for examples.

AUM Namah Shivaya – Five syllable Mantra

The word *shiva* means auspiciousness and perfection. It refers to a Being who is Perfect without any kind of dependency on anything external to make It complete. The prefix *namaH* is the mantra of salutation. The mantra *namaH shivAya* salutation invokes the Perfect Being Shiva to be present and to guide your practice.

The subtle meaning of this mantra is:

namaH - not mine; *shivAya* - belongs to shiva. It is negating the ahamkara (ego principle) and realizing everything to belong to Lord Shiva or the Perfect Being.

Asatoma Sadgamamya Tamasoma Jyothirgamaya

Mrutyorma Amrutham gamamya

Aum Shanthi Shanthi Shanthihi

O' Lord, lead me from the unreal to the real, from darkness to the light, from death to eternal life). AUM has multiple meanings and associations; simply put, it is considered the eternal sound, the energy of creation (In the Beginning there was The Word) and is chanted to invoke the presence of the Perfect Being. Or you have the option to skip the chanting of AUM with which yoga practice may begin or conclude, by staying silent or chanting the

name of Allah or Jesus/ Amen or any other prayer that comes to mind. And the word "Shanthi" means peace for all.

Are there different types of Gurus? (Freedom Tobais Cole- Yoga Living Magazine Nov/Dec 2004)

Often people translate as a teacher. In Samskritham/Sanskrit *Guru* is the remover of darkness/ignorance by breaking down the sounds/*aksharas* (letters) within the word. "Ga" stand for darkness or obstacles, "u" stand for suppression and removal. Together - 'gu' means removal of darkness. "ra" is the fire bija (seed sound) and represents good and bad of fire - anger and insight; 'ru' is the suppression of the negative aspects of fire that disturbs the pure vision. The literal working translation of *Guru* is spiritual teacher, guide, and mentor, one who removes the veil of darkness/ignorance of the Truth.

It is important to remember that the **title of Guru** can be bestowed to a person only by his or her *True Guru*. In Yoga and Vedic Sciences, there are three levels of *Guru*.

Shiksha guru teaches you the basics telling you where to search for information. On a spiritual level, it can be your yoga teacher, or Sunday school teachers, mentors, etc. This guru can be at the same spiritual level as you but just know things that you have not found out yet. *Shiksha Guru* is frequently referred to as an **Acharya** (teacher or mentor) or **Pandit** (scholar). (there many other words in Samskritham that indicate teacher,)

Dhiksha Guru is a teacher who is capable of giving you initiation into a mantra or meditation or certain kind of *sadhana* (spiritual practice). They pass on certain live energy or understanding to you. On a religious level, it can be a priest or a rabbi. On a spiritual level, this can be someone who has *mastered a spiritual practice* and is passing on the teaching. These Gurus may also be referred to as **Svami** or **Paramamhasa**

Sat Guru is one who has achieved the final goal of a particular path and is a guiding light to the student. On a *religious level* these are - Jesus, Krishna, Rama, etc; on *spiritual level*- Saints (St Francis of Assisi, St John, Brother Lawrence), yogis (Paramahansa Yogananda, Svami Vivekananda, Svami Rama), etc. The key to remember is that they have achieved the final goal- Samadhi and can affect/influence you,- embodied or not.

Sat Gurus have transcended. Shiksha gurus are many and easy to find. Good Dhiksha gurus are hard to come by and you will get them only when you are 'ready'.

Finally, there is the **Adhi Guru** or Supreme Guru, which means the First or the Original Guru. Some interpret this as a first teacher of a lineage. However, Rishi Pathanjali in the *Yogasutras*, Book 1 verse 25-27 refers to *AUM* as the seed of knowledge, the Highest Guru. He advises that constant repetition of *AUM* and *Meditation on AUM* to bring *guru thathva* (the essence of the inner guru) by manifesting as various levels/forms of gurus we encounter into our lives. This practice helps strengthen our *guru karma* (ability for awareness, clarity, joy OR vibrations to attract a true guru) and open the way for true knowledge and profound understanding. *Yoga teaches us that the types of gurus we attract to ourselves in life are a reflection of our guru karma.*

See **Guru Mantra** below.

**Guru Brahma Guru Vishnu Guru Devo Maheshvaraha /
Guru Saakshaath Param Brahma Tasmai Shri Guravay Namaha //**

Guru Is Brahma (The God of Creation Who plants the qualities of goodness)

Guru Is Vishnu (The God of Sustenance Who nurtures and fosters the qualities of goodness)

Guru Is Maheswara (The God of Annihilation Who weeds out the bad/negative qualities)

Guru Is Supreme Brahman Itself, My Salutations Unto That Guru

Another meaning to this verse:

The Guru creates, The Guru Preserves, The Guru dissolves the universe. The Guru in fact is the Absolute, Salutations to the Guru within.

*Indicates that no matter what **name and form** you pray to the guru, the **Adhi Guru** the first and foremost is the formless Brahman.*

What are the qualifications of a True Guru?

Advaita Philosophy (Vedantha) requires anyone seeking to study this philosophy to do so from a Guru. The Guru must have the following qualifications: (Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.12)

1. *Shrotriya* – must be learned in the Vedic Scriptures and Sampradaya (its allied sciences)
2. *Brahmanishtha* – literally means established in Brahman, must have realized the oneness of Brahman in everything and in himself (attained highest level of Samadhi/Nirvana)

The seeker must provide services to the Guru and submit questions with all humility in order to remove all doubts (see Bhagavad Gita 4.34). By doing so, advaita says, the seeker will attain moksha (*liberation from the cycle of births and deaths*).

According to Adi Shankaracharya, knowledge of Brahman springs from inquiry into the words of the Upanishads, and the knowledge of Brahman that shruti/listening provides cannot be obtained in any other way. The teacher does not merely provide stimulus or suggestion. It is the teacher who through exegesis of shruti and skillful handling of words generates this knowledge of Brahman in the disciple.

How does one find a True guru?

When the *shishya* (student) is 'ready', the *Guru* will appear – is ancient saying in Bharath/India. Meaning the guru will find you if you are truthful and disciplined to your practices. Just like a teacher should have qualifications, so should a disciple. According to ancient teachings, (Buddhist/Vedic) proper disciple should fulfill the three requisites:

- the student should have a lack of prejudice, be open-minded,
- demonstrate intelligence and a critical mind: not blindly following orders and
- a fervent aspiration: wanting to practice and experience results (not just scholarly study).

And most importantly, one must crave, yearn, pine, or have a deep longing to want to experience the Divine, the Truth, the Bliss (Paramahansa Yogananda)

If you cannot find a teacher, notice if you are able to fulfill the above requirements for a proper disciple, and work to improve your own attitude rather than running around the world to find 'your' guru. Depending on your own *karma*, you may need to do quite a lot "practices" (spiritual and yogic) to find the right guru. Self-study and self-inquiry (Aathma Vichara- Ramana Maharshi), reflecting on what you really expect from a teacher may help if you are impatient and expect too much overnight (*Dalai Lama*).

As we mature, our needs for a spiritual teacher will also change. At a particular stage, we may be drawn to a strict regimented instructor. At other times, we may need a nurturing and compassionate teacher. Then there are times learning happens through other sources. Hopefully, along the way our awareness expands, self-acceptance grows and we have absorbed wisdom of different guides and traditions. Nevertheless, how do we gauge a teacher's accountability and honor? (Jane M. Hart) The **Buddha** gave us a brilliant code called **The Four Reliances**.

Rely on the message of the teacher; Not his personality

Rely on the meaning; Not just on the words

Rely on the real meaning; Not on the provisional one

Rely on your wisdom mind, Not on your ordinary, judgmental mind.

To progress with a Guru, you sincerely need full willingness to accept and affirm your Guru's advice and practice whatever he is teaching you. A true Guru can perceive all divine guidance, all your personal karma, and all your spiritual blockages. Hence, the sole purpose of his teachings is to bring you to yoga – union with the Divine.

How does one convert to Hinduism?

As mentioned earlier Hinduism got its name and the status as a religion from foreign invaders who were unable to understand the beliefs and practices existing in those ancient times. They labeled the practices as rituals and beliefs as dogma in comparison to the practices of their own religions.

In addition, the "hindu religion" itself has undergone changes to adapt to the modernization. Some changes may be negative as in falseness and misdirection by the priestly class, but mostly positive in the way of simplifying the practices for everyday life and the process of re-establishing Samskritham as "living" language. (Samskrita Bharati – educational institution to learn Sanskrit as a spoken language)

Since, **Sanātana Dharma** **सनातन धर्म** is an ongoing path, "a way to perfection", "perennial philosophy" (Alodus Huxley) anyone can follow it to the highest union (yoga). You can start wherever you are, but as on any road, the scenery – our values, our aspirations, our understanding of life around us changes as we make progress. (Eknath Easwaran).

There are no documented methods of conversion in the ancient Vedic teachings, however with more requests from practicing yogis, modern priests have adapted certain ancient practices of purification (yagna/homa, nama karana –re-naming) and made it into a formal process to accommodate the demand of conversion. This allows individuals to surrender their previous practices and adopt and commit to a new way of life.

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