

Yoga

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Yoga is one of the great words of the Wisdom Tradition, and one of the most easily diminished. It is often reduced to posture, relaxation, exercise, or stress relief. These may have their place, but they are not the heart of yoga. In the Theosophical and *Gupta Vidya* meaning, yoga is a complete science of spiritual self-emancipation. It is union through self-mastery, concentration through purification, and freedom through the cessation of the mind's restless modifications.

Professor Iyer begins from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, to yoke or to join. The word can signify joining, union, synthesis, concentration, and disciplined integration. Panini distinguishes between *yuj* in the sense of concentration, *samadhi*, and *yujir* in the sense of joining or connecting. Yoga joins the divided human being to the deeper Self, but it does so through concentration, restraint, and purification. It is the yoking of scattered energies to a higher centre.

The meaning of union needs care. Patanjali distinguishes *Purusha*, the Seer, from *Prakriti*, including the mind through which experience is received. Liberation requires their clear discrimination. Theosophical language also speaks of conscious union with the Supreme Spirit. Professor Iyer places these expressions within a broad account of yoga, but their philosophical emphases should remain visible. A reader can appreciate their shared concern with freedom without assuming that every school describes the final realization in identical terms.

Patanjali gives yoga its most exact definition: the deliberate cessation of the *chittavrittis*, the modifications of the mind-field. The ordinary mind lives in ceaseless motion. It identifies with perceptions, memories, fantasies, fears, injuries, opinions, and desires. It mistakes passing modifications for the self. Yoga begins by seeing that the mind's movements are not the Seer.

This is why yoga is not merely psychological adjustment. Professor Iyer notes that modern psychologies often aim at integration and harmonizing of conflicting elements in a person. Patanjali's concern is more radical: conquering, not coping; transcending, not merely reconciling. The mature personality is not the final goal. The goal is self-emancipation.

Yoga does not despise personality, body, speech, feeling, or relationship. It asks that all become instruments rather than masters. The body is steadied through *asana*. Breath is refined through *pranayama*. The senses are gathered through *pratyahara*. Attention is focused through *dharana*. Consciousness deepens through *dhyana*. The mind is stilled in *samadhi*. Each limb serves the release of *Purusha* from misidentification with *Prakriti*.

The eight limbs of *ashtangayoga* are logically successive, but ethically and psychologically simultaneous. One cannot truly practice meditation while neglecting conduct. One cannot cultivate breath while scattering speech. One cannot seek *samadhi* while harming beings in thought, word, or deed. Yoga is an integral unity because the human being is an integrated whole, even in ignorance.

This is why the *yamas* are foundational. *Ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya*, and *aparigraha*—harmlessness, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence, and non-possession—are not moral decorations added to meditation. They are conditions of clarity. A violent mind cannot become transparent. A lying mind cannot see truth. A grasping mind cannot know freedom.

The *niyamas* give the positive discipline: *shaucha*, *santosha*, *tapas*, *svadhyaya*, and *ishvarapranidhana*. Purity, contentment, austerity, self-study, and surrender to the Lord form the inner climate of yoga. They show that yoga is not built by technique alone. It requires a purified life, a contented heart, disciplined energy, honest self-examination, and self-offering to the Supreme Spirit in the secret heart.

Yoga is experimental. Professor Iyer says that in yoga, descriptions of reality necessarily function as prescriptions for those who have not experienced it. The doctrine is not merely a set of ideas to admire. It is instruction. When the teaching says that the mind can be stilled, it invites experiment. When it says that *Purusha* is distinct from *Prakriti*, it points to a possible realization.

The everyday usefulness is immense. A person may observe anger, fear, jealousy, anxiety, resentment, or self-defense arise. Without yoga, the reaction says, “I am you.” With yoga, a space opens. The student sees: this is a modification; this is not the Seer. In that space, speech may be softened, desire questioned, fear held without obedience, and karma met differently.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception makes this pause more useful. Suppose a shared task has gone wrong and blame begins to gather around one person. Before joining it, we can ask what was expected, whether the instructions were clear, and what pressures affected everyone involved. This is an ordinary preparation for yogic steadiness, not a claim to the Seer's realization. Attention becomes less captive to accusation and more available for repair. Truthfulness then includes facts that anger had excluded; harmlessness includes the colleague whose dignity was at risk. A practical correction can be made without turning a human being into the mistake.

The cessation of mental modifications is not blankness. It is the recovery of pure vision. The still lake reflects. The agitated lake fragments the sun. Yoga does not destroy mind; it purifies and stills it so that it can become transparent to *Buddhi*. *Manas*, turned downward, rationalizes desire and defends separateness. *Manas*, turned upward, becomes a bridge to intuition.

The danger on the path is craving for powers. *Siddhis* may arise, but Professor Iyer warns that true *samadhi* alone provides the rigorous and reliable pathway to self-mastery and sovereignty over subtle forces. H.P. Blavatsky's *Studies in Occultism* gives the decisive test: motive alone determines whether the use of power becomes beneficent or malignant. Yoga without purified motive becomes perilous.

The true *yogin* acts without appropriation. In "Kaivalya Pada", Professor Iyer describes the *yogin* as acting in such accord with Nature that action follows *nishkama*, desirelessness. Such a one does not act from personal wish but from what needs to be done. This is not indifference to consequences. It is freedom from egoic authorship.

Yoga does not culminate in private aloofness. The self-emancipated seer can guide with wisdom and compassion. The true *yogin's* consciousness strengthens spiritual aspiration in receptive minds. Yoga therefore serves Human Solidarity. Inner freedom is not withdrawal from humanity, but deeper participation in its awakening.

The Voice of the Silence gives the heart of this. The disciple must not let the senses make a playground of the mind; must not separate being from Being; must merge the Ocean in the drop and the drop within the Ocean; and must live in accord with all that lives. This is the Heart Doctrine of yoga. The stilling of the personal mind allows the universal life to be heard.

Yoga also carries reverent stewardship. The mind is not a private possession. Thought, speech, attention, motive, and influence affect the field of life. Yoga makes the student responsible for the atmosphere of consciousness one sustains. A calmer thought, a truer word, a restrained impulse, a cleaner motive—each is a small service to the whole.

Yoga helps the human being become self-determining and self-conscious in relation to the evolutionary process. Without yoga, one is carried by *samskaras*, habit, collective suggestion, desire, fear, and the *gunas*. With yoga, one begins to see the machinery of bondage. Seeing creates space; space permits restraint; restraint permits concentration; concentration permits meditation; meditation permits insight; insight opens toward freedom; freedom becomes service.

Yoga, rightly understood, gathers a divided life around an enduring purpose. Its disciplines train the student to recognize the mind's movements, refine motive, and make understanding effective in conduct. The work may begin with one faithfully observed obligation or one interval of steady attention. What matters is the direction of the whole life. As practice matures, the search for inward freedom can become a more dependable capacity to serve, with less appropriation of the work and greater care for those who share it.

Glossary

Ahimsa — Harmlessness or nonviolence in thought, speech, and action.

Anga — A limb or component; in the quoted discussion, one of the eight limbs of yoga.

Aparigraha — Non-possession or non-grasping; one of the yogic restraints.

Asana — Posture; the steady bodily position within the discipline of yoga.

Ashta — Eight; used in explaining the eight limbs of yoga.

Ashtangayoga — The eight-limbed yoga set out by Patanjali.

Asteya — Non-stealing or freedom from appropriation; one of the yogic restraints.

Brahmacharya — Continence and disciplined conservation of energy in thought and conduct.

Buddhi — Spiritual intuition or wisdom; the principle through which higher discernment illumines mind.

Chitta — The mind-field, whose modifications are examined in Patanjali's yoga.

Chittavritti — A modification or movement of the mind-field; *chittavrittis* is the plural.

Deva — A divine or celestial being; the term has different levels of meaning in the sources.

Dharana — Concentration; the gathering of attention upon a chosen point or object.

Dhyana — Sustained meditation or contemplation.

Guna — A quality or constituent of *Prakriti*; the three are *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.

Gupta Vidya — Sacred or esoteric wisdom; also the title of Professor Iyer's collected Theosophical writings.

Ishvarapranidhana — Surrender or devotion to the divine Lord within; one of the yogic observances.

Jungere — The Latin verb meaning to join or unite, compared with *yuj* in the source.

Kaivalya — Emancipation or spiritual freedom; in Patanjali, the Seer's release from mistaken identification.

Manas — Mind; the human principle of self-conscious thought and moral choice.

Nishkama — Desireless; acting without personal craving for the result.

Niyama — A positive yogic observance; *niyamas* is the plural.

Prakriti — Nature or the field of manifestation, distinguished from *Purusha* in Patanjali's yoga.

Pranayama — The regulation of breath and life-energy within the integrated discipline of yoga.

Pratyahara — Withdrawal or abstraction of the senses from their objects.

Purusha — The Seer or spiritual consciousness, distinguished from the changing field of *Prakriti*.

Samadhi — Meditative absorption; a discipline with gradations culminating in spiritual cognition.

Samskara — An impression or tendency formed through experience; *samskaras* is the plural.

Santosha — Contentment; one of the positive yogic observances.

Satya — Truth or truthfulness; one of the yogic restraints.

Shaucha — Purity, inward and outward; one of the yogic observances.

Siddhi — A developed power or capacity; *siddhis* is the plural.

Svadyaya — Sacred study and self-examination, deepening toward contemplation of the Self.

Tapas — The concentrated effort of contemplation, self-discipline, and purification.

Taraka Raja Yoga — The integral yoga discussed in Professor Iyer's exposition of Patanjali.

Vaishesika — An Indian philosophical school; the cited passage associates yoga with concentrated attention through abstraction.

Yama — Ethical restraint in yoga; also the divine figure associated with death and the teaching of immortality.

Yogin — A practitioner of yoga; *yogins* and *yogi* are related forms.

Yuj — The Sanskrit verbal root associated with yoking, joining, or concentration.

Yujir — The form of the root associated with joining or connecting in the cited grammatical distinction.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — "Patanjali's Taraka Raja Yoga", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 265.

"The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *yuj*, 'to yoke' or 'to join', related to the Latin *jungere*, 'to join', 'to unite'. In its broadest usages it can mean addition in arithmetic; in astronomy it refers to the conjunction of stars and planets; in grammar it is the joining of letters and words."

Meditation thought: Consider what your present commitments are joining together. Does the pattern of the day gather your powers around a worthy purpose?

2. R.N. Iyer — “Patanjali’s Taraka Raja Yoga”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, pp. 265–266.

“Panini distinguishes between the root *yuj* in the sense of concentration (*samadhi*) and *yujir* in the sense of joining or connecting. Buddhists have used the term yoga to designate the withdrawal of the mind from all mental and sensory objects. *Vaishesika* philosophy means by yoga the concentrated attention to a single subject through mental abstraction from all contexts.”

Meditation thought: Keep concentration and union distinct enough to study each. Notice how a chosen focus begins to collect scattered attention.

3. R.N. Iyer — “Patanjali’s Taraka Raja Yoga”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 266.

“In addition, Patanjali uses the term yoga to refer to the deliberate cessation of all mental modifications. Every method of self-mastery, the systematic removal of ignorance and the progressive realization of Truth, can be called yoga, but in its deepest sense it signifies the union of one’s apparent and fugitive self with one’s essential nature and true being, or the conscious union of the embodied self with the Supreme Spirit.”

Meditation thought: Recognize one recurring movement of mind without making it your whole identity. Ask what would help you meet it more freely.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Patanjali’s Taraka Raja Yoga”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 266.

“Thus, yoga refers to the removal of bondage and the consequent attainment of true spiritual freedom. Whenever yoga goes beyond this and actually implies the fusion of an individual with his ideal, whether viewed as his real nature, his true self or the universal spirit, it is gnostic self-realization and universal self-consciousness, a self-sustaining state of serene enlightenment.”

Meditation thought: Let the teaching enlarge your conception of freedom. What attachment currently makes an otherwise reasonable choice feel impossible?

5. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 269.

“Conquering, not coping, transcending, not reconciling, were Patanjali’s chief concerns. For him, the latter were by-products of the former, and never the reverse. The psychology of self-emancipation means the deliberate and self-conscious restraint of everything that is productive of mental confusion, weakness and pain.”

Meditation thought: Examine a habit that keeps confusion active. Choose one practical restraint that addresses its cause.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 270.

“In other words, yoga is that science in which the descriptions of reality necessarily function as prescriptions for those who have not experienced it. The analogy would be closer to music or mathematics than to the visual arts or the empirical sciences as normally understood.”

Meditation thought: Receive the description as an invitation to disciplined inquiry. Give an idea enough sustained attention to discover what its practice requires.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 270.

“For Patanjali, the true nature of *chitta*, the mind, can be known only when it is not modified by external influences and their internal impresses. For as long as modifications persist without being deliberately chosen for a purpose, the mind unwittingly identifies with them, falling into passivity, habitude, and the pain which results from a state of fragmentation and self-alienation.”

Meditation thought: Watch the moment when an impression becomes an unquestioned identity. The capacity to observe that movement prepares a different response.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 280.

“Patanjali enumerated the eight (*ashta*) limbs (*anga*) of this *Taraka Raja Yoga* as five which concern karma and lay the foundation for meditation, and three which constitute meditation itself: restraint (*yama*), binding observance (*niyama*), posture (*asana*), regulation of breath (*pranayama*), abstraction and withdrawal from the senses (*pratyahara*); concentration (*dharana*), contemplation (*dhyana*) and complete meditative absorption (*samadhi*).”

Meditation thought: Consider the limbs as mutually supporting disciplines. Which neglected aspect of conduct is making attention less steady?

9. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 280.

“The *yamas* or restraints are five, constituting a firm ethical foundation for spiritual growth, starting with *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and including *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (continence) and *aparigraha* (non-possession). Shankaracharya held that *ahimsa* – non-violence, harmlessness, defencelessness in Shelley’s phrase – is the most important of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, and is the root of restraint.”

Meditation thought: Let harmlessness include the thought with which you approach another person. A correction can remain truthful while losing its wish to injure.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 281.

“The *niyamas* or binding observances are also five, constituting the positive dimension of ethical probity. They are *shaucha* (purity), *santosha* (contentment), *tapas* (austerity, self-

discipline), *svadhyaya* (self-study) and *ishvarapranidhana* (surrender to the Lord). Like the *yamas*, the *niyamas* cannot be fully grasped as specific and bounded concepts.”

Meditation thought: Place contentment beside self-study. How might their companionship change a daily discipline?

11. R.N. Iyer — “Kaivalya Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 294.

“True *samadhi* alone provides the rigorous, progressive and reliable pathway to self-mastery and sovereignty over the subtle forces of Nature. With such complete command of the *gunas* or modes of *prakriti* as it manifests in the mind and in the external world, the adept *yogin* can alter his nature from one class of being (the human) to another (a *deva* or god, in a broad sense of the term), if the karmic conditions in life are congenial and conducive to rapid development.”

Meditation thought: The passage concerns advanced mastery. Let its distance clarify the need for preparation and purified motive in present practice.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment III, p. 37.

“Thou shalt not let thy senses make a playground of thy mind. Thou shalt not separate thy being from BEING, and the rest, but merge the Ocean in the drop, the drop within the Ocean. So shalt thou be in full accord with all that lives; bear love to men as though they were thy brother-pupils, disciples of one Teacher, the sons of one sweet mother.”

Meditation thought: Remember the common life while meeting a particular obligation. Let attention to one person deepen, rather than narrow, your concern for others.