

# What is Ashtanga Yoga?

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The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit root yug, which means "to yoke or harness," as in the yoking and uniting of mind and body, and of individual and universal consciousness. Hatha yoga ("forceful yoga") refers to a vast area of doctrines and practices concerned with harnessing the current of life force (prana) circulating throughout the human body. Focusing this innate life force and preventing its dissipation are said to awaken the body's dormant psychospiritual energy. This body-oriented approach to transcendence involves cleansing practices, postures, and breath control.

Ashtanga Yoga is the name given to the system of hatha yoga currently taught by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, a renowned Sanskrit scholar and yogi in Mysore, India. However, the historical definition of ashtanga yoga is "eight-limbed yoga," as originally outlined by the sage Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. Written between 400 and 200 B.C., the Yoga Sutras is the primary text of the science of classical yoga in which Patanjali collated and systemized existing techniques and knowledge of yoga.

Ashtanga Yoga as taught by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois began with the rediscovery, early in this century, of the Yoga Korunta, an ancient manuscript describing a unique system of hatha yoga practiced and created by the ancient sage Vamana Rishi. Under the direction of his guru Sri T. Krishnamacharya, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois helped decipher and collate this system of practicing asana (postures). Entrusted with preserving, refining, and teaching the system of yoga described in the Yoga Korunta, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois named this system "Ashtanga Yoga," believing it to be the original asana practice as intended by Patanjali.

The Yoga Korunta emphasizes vinyasa, (meaning "breath-synchronized movement"), a method of synchronizing progressive series of postures with a specific breathing technique (ujjayi pranayama)—a process producing intense internal heat and a profuse, purifying sweat that detoxifies muscles and organs. The result is improved circulation, a light and strong body, and a calm mind.

On a practical level, the vinyasa concept of continuous flow aids the practitioner in integrating the eight limbs of yoga described by Patanjali. Movement through postures (asana) purifies the physical body, while mastery and refinement of the breath (pranayama) through concentration (dharana) quiets the senses (pratyahara), preparing the practitioner for meditation (dhyana) and eventually, samadhi, the union of the soul with the divine. A balanced asana practice rests on ethical behavior (yama) and self-discipline (niyama). Under the guidance of a qualified ashtanga instructor, the practitioner properly can begin to cultivate the eight limbs.

In Ashtanga Yoga, the first of six sequences of postures, or "series," is commonly called the Primary Series, or yoga chikitsa (yoga therapy). Practice of the Primary Series is designed to cleanse and purify the internal organs of the body through prevention of the accumulation of waste products. Each asana has specific benefits. For example, forward-bending asanas are helpful in toning the internal organs of the abdomen and relieving constipation. The Second Series focuses on back-bending postures, and the remaining four series are very advanced. The Ashtanga Yoga system places equal emphasis on strength, flexibility, and stamina.

*--Source: Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute*

# The Philosophy of Ashtanga Yoga

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We often think of Ashtanga Yoga as a series of challenging stretches and vigorous movements. However, the real meaning of the Sanskrit word Ashtanga is “eight limbs,” which refers to the eight aspects of yogic path of personal, psychological and spiritual development. The many physical postures, or asanas, that we practice in class are **just one of these eight** steps on this path of psycho-spiritual development that reunites body, mind and spirit. These “eight limbs,” expounded by the sage Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras around 900 B.C. and summarized below, are equally valuable and worthwhile to study.

SANSKRIT TERM	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
1. Yama	Avoidances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ahimsa</li><li>• Satya</li><li>• Asteya</li><li>• Brahmacharya</li><li>• Asparigraha</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Non-harming</li><li>• Truthfulness</li><li>• Non-stealing</li><li>• Abstinence</li><li>• Non-greed</li></ul>
2. Niyama	Observances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Saucha</li><li>• Santosha</li><li>• Tapas</li><li>• Svadhyaya</li><li>• Ishwarapranidhana</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Purity</li><li>• Contentment</li><li>• Austerity, discipline</li><li>• Spiritual study</li><li>• Surrender</li></ul>
3. Asana	Physical postures
4. Pranayama	Breath regulation and control
5. Pratyahara	Sense withdrawal/ inward focus
6. Dharana	Concentration
7. Dhyana	Meditation
8. Samadhi	Bliss

“The first four limbs of Ashtanga Yoga are quite challenging. Like roots, they make one’s practice grounded and real. They allow you to function well in the real world. You can wash the dishes, take out the garbage and relate to yourself and others honestly and happily. The last four limbs (the inner limbs) sprout spontaneously from the first four. They are easy and natural, when the first four are nurtured well. The inner meditative limbs return the favor, and make the outer limbs much more deep and true.”

- Richard Freeman, Yoga teacher and scholar