



## Yoga: Then, Now, and Then Again

June 21, 2024

Naresh Singh

June 21<sup>st</sup>, celebrated as the *International Day of Yoga*, provides an opportunity for us to recall the underlying power of Yoga and its original purpose as compared to much of what is currently practiced under its name. The Sanskrit word 'Yoga' means to yoke, join, or unite. In its broadest sense, Yoga refers to the recognition of the union or integration of the individual consciousness (*atman*) with the universal consciousness (*Brahman*). The process required is actually a reunion, addressing the false separation that occurs between the imaginary self and the real Self or *Brahman* – the cosmic consciousness we all share. The practices originally associated with Yoga were intended to prepare the body and still the mind so that our true nature would shine through and be recognised as pure love, beauty, and wellbeing. The original Yogic philosophy, as articulated in ancient texts like the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and various *Upanishads*, encompasses a comprehensive worldview and a systematic approach to spiritual development and liberation. Some key elements of this philosophy are:

- **Purpose:** The ultimate goal of Yoga (often referred to as Raja Yoga or Classical Yoga) is spiritual liberation (*moksha*) or self-realization. It aims to transcend the limitations of the individual self (ego) and achieve union with the divine or ultimate reality;
- **Pathways to Liberation:**
  - **Jnana Yoga:** The path of knowledge and wisdom, involving the study of scriptures and philosophical inquiry to understand the true nature of self and reality;

- **Bhakti Yoga:** The path of devotion and love towards a divine being or principle, leading to union through loving surrender and worship;
- **Karma Yoga:** The path of selfless action and service – performing one’s duties without attachment to the results, thereby purifying the mind and preparing it for higher realization;
- **Raja Yoga:** The path of meditation and mental control, involving practices such as *asana* (physical postures designed to prepare the body for meditation and cultivate physical health), *pranayama* (breath control techniques to enhance life force and calm the mind), *pratyahara* (withdrawal of senses from external distractions), *dharana* (concentration – focusing the mind on a single point), *dhyana* (meditation – continuous flow of attention towards an object), and *samadhi* (union with the object of meditation, a state of profound bliss and realization);
- **Philosophical Foundations:**
  - **Samkhya:** Yoga is closely associated with Samkhya philosophy, which distinguishes between *purusha* (consciousness) and *prakriti* (matter), emphasizing the liberation of *purusha* from identification with *prakriti*;
  - **Vedanta:** Yogic philosophy also draws from Vedanta, particularly Advaita Vedanta, which asserts the non-dual nature of ultimate reality (*Brahman*) and the individual self (*atman*), advocating for the realization of this non-duality as the pinnacle of spiritual practice;
- **Ethical Foundations:**
  - **Yamas:** Ethical restraints or moral principles that guide one’s behavior towards oneself and others, including *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (moderation), and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness);
  - **Niyamas:** Ethical observances that foster self-discipline and inner purification, such as *saucha* (cleanliness), *santosh* (contentment), *tapas* (self-discipline), *svadhyaya* (self-study), and *Ishvara pranidhana* (surrender to the divine);

- **Concepts of the Mind and Consciousness:**
  - **Chitta:** The mind stuff or mental field that encompasses thoughts, emotions, and impressions;
  - **Chitta Vritti:** The fluctuations or modifications of the mind that obscure the true nature of consciousness;
  - **Citta Shuddhi:** Purification of the mind through yogic practices to attain clarity and stillness;
- **Cosmic Perspective:** Yogic philosophy views the individual as interconnected with the cosmos, part of a larger web of existence where all beings are ultimately united in their essence.

In summary, Yogic philosophy provides a holistic framework for spiritual growth and realization, encompassing ethical principles, philosophical inquiry, practical techniques for mental and physical purification, and a profound understanding of the nature of consciousness and the universe. It aims not only for personal well-being and liberation but also for the harmonious integration of the individual with the cosmic order.

Modern yoga often emphasises physical fitness, flexibility, and stress relief rather than spiritual liberation. Practices are commonly focused on achieving physical health benefits and relaxation, with varying emphasis on physical postures, breathing exercises, and meditation techniques. Yoga has become a multi-billion-dollar industry involving yoga studios, apparel, accessories, retreats, and teacher training programs. The focus on profit and marketability sometimes overshadows the original spiritual aims of Yoga. In Western contexts, yoga has been adapted to suit cultural preferences and lifestyles, often stripped of its original spiritual and philosophical contexts to appeal to a broader audience. The bewildering array of Yoga types largely focused on the body include:

- *Bikram or Hot Yoga*, which consists of a series of 26 challenging poses practiced in a room heated to a high temperature (around 40°C or 104°F). The heat is believed to enhance flexibility and detoxification.
- *Iyengar Yoga*, which focuses on precise alignment and detailed use of props (such as blocks, straps, and blankets) to help achieve postural

alignment. It is known for its therapeutic approach and attention to anatomical detail.

- *Aerial Yoga*, which combines traditional yoga poses with aerial silk hammocks suspended from the ceiling. It enhances flexibility and strength while allowing for a playful and acrobatic experience.

While modern yoga has brought physical and mental health benefits to millions worldwide, which is commendable, it has also undergone significant transformation and commercialisation, diverging from its ancient spiritual roots.

This *International Day of Yoga*, let us pause and reflect on the irony of a spiritual and philosophical system, perhaps the best in the world designed for transcendence from over-attachment to a material world including the body, should end up with an almost exclusive focus on the body. Perhaps the time has come to use the word 'Yoga' only when it includes its spiritual dimensions and find an alternative like 'Fitness Yoga' for the current preoccupations. However, beyond semantics, let us also contemplate the current state of our world.

I write this from Sonipat, Haryana, where the temperature is 46°C. Unprecedented heatwaves, wildfires, vicious storms, and numerous related disasters are occurring worldwide, largely due to accelerating climate change — a problem on which the world agreed to take corrective action a long time ago. Although global agreements like those established in Paris nine years ago set targets, we continue to fail in making necessary changes to our collective lifestyle. Our over-reliance on science and technology will not work. That is clear.

The idea for declaring an *International Day of Yoga* at the United Nations (UN) was formally proposed by the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, in his maiden address to the 69th UN General Assembly on 27 September 2014. The **Prime Minister noted:**

[W]e need to change our lifestyles. Energy not consumed is the cleanest energy. We can achieve the same level of development, prosperity and well-being without necessarily going down the path of reckless consumption. It doesn't mean that economies will suffer; it will mean that our economies will take on a different character. For us in India, respect for nature is an integral part of spiritualism. We treat nature's bounties as sacred. Yoga is an invaluable gift of our ancient tradition. Yoga embodies unity of mind and

body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature; a holistic approach to health and well-being. It is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and the nature. By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help us deal with climate change. Let us work towards adopting an International Yoga Day.

Let me conclude with the **words of a former boss of mine** (former UNDP Administrator, Gus Speth): “I used to think the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation, and we scientists don't know how to do that.”

Let me add my own words: We need a Yoga Retro Revolution to bring about the spiritual and cultural transformation that Gus Speth called for. Let's use the International Day of Yoga this year (2024) to start the revolution.

### **Author Biography**

**Naresh Singh** is a Senior Fellow at the Jindal India Institute. He is a Professor and Executive Dean at the Jindal School of Government and Public Policy.