

YOGA THROUGH THE AGES

Yoga is the ancient art and science of attaining complete harmony and ultimately leading to liberation of the human being from the cycle of repeated births and deaths. It has been mentioned and described in great details in various texts of Hindu mythological origin. The first recorded modern day compilations are available from the time of Indus Valley Civilization (3000 BC). Various statues, paintings and other artifacts suggesting the practice of Yoga have been found during the excavations of this civilization.

The history of Yoga clearly dates back to 5000 to 8000 years. Harappa and Mohenjodaro excavations have revealed seals with Yogic figures on them. Thus it can be concluded that Yoga was practiced then also. Though the exact date of compilation of Vedas is disputed and perhaps the dispute can never be resolved, it is still generally believed that Yoga was practiced in some form or the other even before the Vedic civilizations.

Rig Veda considered to be the oldest Veda has descriptions of Yogic *asanas* and process of meditation. It is believed to be the earliest recorded version of Yoga. Vedanta and Upanishads considered to be the end of Vedas also have elaborate references to Yogic philosophies.

A lot of the history of Yoga cannot be traced because many practices and principles have been transmitted over the years by word of mouth. But most of the historians agree upon some distinct time periods whereby Yogic practices and philosophies can be marked. These mainly are:

Vedic Period: The Vedic period mainly consists of the time when Vedas were composed. Yogic teachings mainly imparted by Rishis are the main highlight of this period. These historical accounts may be created by the students of the *Ashram* of the Rishis they were attached with. Many Rishis were considered to be in divine communication with the ultimate creator. Yoga was a medium for this communication. Emphasis on purity of thoughts and deeds was the prime objective. This period signifies the highest order of Raj Yoga.

Pre-classical Period: This is the period of creation of Upanishads and Vedantas. The Bhagwad Gita was composed around 500 BC and it is one of the oldest scriptures that have the philosophy of yoga incorporated in it at every stage. The Upanishads and Vedantas also propagate a lifestyle replete with yogic practices. The Upanishads further embark upon a journey of explanation of the Vedas and give detailed meaning to the Vedic philosophies with a completely new dimension.

Classical Period: This is the period when Patanjali's Yoga Sutras was composed. It is still considered to be the base of many different styles of yoga practices. Patanjali is considered to be the father of yoga and various commentaries on his original work are still given by various gurus. He gave the eight limbed practice of Ashtang yoga, which is practiced till date in many forms. Many different styles of yoga derive their methods in part or principle from this methodology.

Post-classical Period: Throughout the ancient ages to the current times, Yoga has passed the test of time and is still considered to be the most wholesome and complete way of rejuvenation. Many different cultures and religions have adapted and imbibed the Yogic philosophies and made them an inseparable part of their chosen lifestyle. Thus Yoga may have initiated essentially from Hindu philosophy but it has transgressed all boundaries and become an integral part of many different religions and cultures, the main ones being Buddhism, Jainism and Tibetan Buddhism. Even Western world has adapted Yoga into its lifestyle with many followers from all across the world. In this period the most important development that happened was to digress from the ancient practices where mind was considered most important tool to direct the self towards the divine. In this period the body was given prime importance and various techniques and asanas were developed to develop the body as a means of attainment of the divine. Various techniques of Tantra yoga, Kundalini yoga and Hatha yoga are a product of this period.

Modern Period: In the modern period of 19th century and 20th century yoga was propagated to the Western world by many gurus. This signifies the modern period. The Western world which was technologically very advanced accepted and embraced the methodology of yoga with open arms. In this period the various techniques of yoga also underwent a great change so as to suit the convenience of Western temperament and thus they digressed considerably from the ancient practices. A lot of new methodologies suiting the inclinations of the modern world have come into being. Excessive and indiscriminate usage of sex in Kundalini yoga, Kriya yoga and Tantra yoga has been seen propagated. Also, something popularly known as Nude yoga has been initiated, this has no mention whatsoever in the ancient texts.

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