

The Meaning of Yoga: Key Points

Definition of Yoga (distilled from the widest range of key yoga texts possible):

"Yoga as process means joining oneself firmly to a spiritual discipline, the central element of which is the gentle entrainment of all the energies of the body, mind, and senses: bringing them to a single point of tranquil focus."

Yoga, then, is a wholly *internal* process—the point of focus could theoretically be anything. The focal points that are easiest to work with are those described in the yoga scriptures: e.g. the breath, an *āsana*, a subtle center (*cakra*), a form of God, etc. [Though in *karma-yoga*, the focal point is whatever action you are performing, such as sweeping the floor or playing with a child.]

Note that the definition above is for yoga as "method", and the Sanskrit word *yoga* also commonly denotes the *state of being* that that method ultimately leads to. "Yoga" in the sense of goal, then, is simply the perfection of the above process, **a state of focused, integrated, expansive yet grounded awareness that is continuous and effortless**, a state in which one responds to each moment with one's whole being and without the need for deliberation or effort. **Yoga as result means total integration, yielding a full connection to the present moment and a full awareness of reality.**

This definition is related to an argument implicit in the texts on Tantric Yoga about the source of all joy, which follows: All the moments of *ānanda* (sublime contentment, joy, bliss, total ease and freedom) you have ever had in life have had one common element: you were **fully aware of and open to the present moment, focused yet relaxed, fully present to the given experience with your whole being**. In other words, you experienced a state of spontaneous integration and connection to reality, and it is this very presence and integration (*yoga*) that gave rise to the *ānanda*. Indeed, it is the only thing that has ever caused *ānanda*—the external circumstances are only the enabling factors for the arising of that state of presence and integration. In other words, all the true joy in your life has been caused by yoga! Yoga as *method*, then, is nothing other than the development of your ability to bring about that integrated and present state at will—i.e., the development of an internal trigger for it. The ultimate goal, though, is not simply to maximize the number of these "peak experiences" in life, but rather to perfect one's ability to infuse the energy and insights of these experiences into the "ordinary" world of everyday life.

Practices of early yoga (e.g. Patañjali's "classical" yoga, early Buddhism, etc.): meditation (both *śamatha*, "stilling" and *vipāśyana*, "mindfulness" types), *prāṇāyāma*, study/ contemplation, retreat, dietary restriction, proper seated posture for meditation (*āsana*)—all presupposing and built on a theory of mind-body connection universal to all yoga.

Practices of later (Tantric) yoga: meditation, visualization, inner worship, cultivating discernment, *prāṇāyāma*, mantra, working with the "subtle body" (*cakras* and *kundalinī*), and bodily postures in three classes: *āsanas* (seated postures), *karanas* (standing postures or inversions), and *mudrās* (spontaneous postures of hands, body, or awareness).