

The Science of Upanishads – Part 39: Foundations of Modern Yoga Practice: Raja Yoga and The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

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Over the past several decades, the word Yoga has become a common household term in the Western World, with an estimated 14.9 million Americans and 0.5 million Britons to have incorporated some form of Yoga practice into their daily lives. Yoga is now widely available, from being offered in Yoga Centres to shopping malls, businesses, hospitals, churches and schools. As a matter of fact, near the end of the 20th century Yoga had become a major, commercialized, multimillion dollar business, with Asanas (postures), sequences, and styles being patented by various industries and used to advertize a plethora of commodities, ranging from yogurt to mobile phones. Therefore, it is important to understand and analyze how, why, and in what form this ancient practice discovered by Indian Rishis traveled from East to West and instantly captured the curiosity and interest of the western civilization, as well as how the original Indian yoga practice metamorphasized into the form that is more suited to the western practitioners.

Most Yoga practices in the West pride themselves as part of Raja Yoga. Raja means King. Just as a king acts with independence, self-confidence and assurance, a Raj Yogi is anticipated to be autonomous, independent and fearless. The basic premise of raja yoga is that our perception of the divine Self (Atman) is obscured by the disturbances of the mind. If the mind can be made still and pure, the Self will automatically shine forth. In one of the earlier Mandir Bulletins, Raja Yoga was briefly mentioned only as an integral part of the three major paths (Jnana, Karma, and Bhakti Margs) to attain Moksha rather than an independently separate Marg. In old Sanskrit texts, Raja Yoga is described as the goal and a state of *samadhi*, rather than a method to attain it, where one experiences nothing but the bliss of the undisturbed, the natural state of calm, serenity, peace, communion within and contentment. The term also became a modern retronym, when Swami Vivekananda in the 19th-century equated Raj Yoga with the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*.

Most modern yoga practices rely heavily on *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, a series of aphorisms written by sage Patanjali in ~250 CE, and accept it as the basis for Raja Yoga. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali specify eight "Limbs" of Yoga, called *Ashtanga Yoga*:

(1) Yama - Self-Control

(2) Niyama - Discipline

(3) Asana - Physical Poses

(4) Pranayama - Breath Exercises

(5) Pratyahara - Withdrawal of the Senses from External Objects

(6) Dharana - Concentration

(7) Dhyana - Meditation, and

(8) Samadhi - Complete Realization

The three most commonly practiced limbs are Pranayama (breathing exercises), Dhyana (meditation), and Asana (physical posture). *Asana (the physical poses) is what most people in the West have come to know simply as Yoga.* So what should you expect when you head to a

yoga class? While meditation and breathing exercises may be offered as options, Asana has largely assumed a primary role in most types of contemporary Yoga practice, especially in the West.

More discussion to follow on each of the eight Angas (limbs) of Ashtanga Yoga.....

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