

The Science of Upanishads - Part 23:

Yoga and Its Beneficial Effects On Body, Mind, and Spirit

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Yoga is one of the major and most significant contributions of India to the modern world, which has revolutionized the entire field of exercises because of its unparalleled physical, mental as well as spiritual benefits.

It was discovered by the ancient Indian Rishis (Sages), dating back to pre-Vedic times, and is well documented in Vedas and Upanishads. **The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali**, a comprehensive treatise on Yoga written in the early first century, is now considered **a standard text to preach Yoga** all over the world. The word “**Yoga**” is derived from the Sanskrit word “**Yuj**”, which literally means “**To Unite or To Integrate**”. So, by definition, **Yoga is all about harmonizing one’s body with mind (Samadhi or Concentration) through various means of breathing exercises (Pranayamas), poses (Asanas), and meditation (Dhyana).**

The earliest evidence of Yogis and Yoga tradition is found in the Kesin hymn 10.136 of the Rigveda. Early references to practices that later became part of yoga, are made in **Brihadaranyaka Upanishad**, the earliest Hindu Upanishad. For example, the practice of **Pranayama** (consciously regulating breath) is mentioned in hymn 1.5.23 of Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (c. 900 BCE), and the practice of **Pratyahara** (concentrating all of one's senses on self) is mentioned in hymn 8.15 of **Chandogya Upanishad** (c. 800–700 BCE). Ascetic practices (Tapas), concentration and bodily postures used by Vedic priests to conduct Yajna (sacrifice), might have been precursors to Yoga. Vratya, a group of ascetics mentioned in the Atharvaveda, emphasized on bodily postures which may have evolved into yogic **Asanas**. Early Samhitas also contain references to other group ascetics such as Munis, the

Kesins, and Vratyas. Techniques for controlling breath and vital energies are mentioned in the Brahmanas (texts of the Vedic Corpus, c. 1000–800 BCE) and the Atharvaveda. Nasadiya Sukta of the Rig Veda suggests the presence of an early contemplative tradition. The hymns in Book 2 of the **Shvetashvatara Upanishad** state a procedure in which the body is held in upright posture, the breath is restrained and mind is meditatively focussed, preferably inside a cave or a place that is simple, plain, of silence or gently flowing water, with no noises nor harsh winds. The **Maitrayaniya Upanishad** mentions sixfold yoga method – breath control (*pranayama*), introspective withdrawal of senses (*pratyahara*), meditation (*dhyana*), mind concentration (*dharana*), philosophical inquiry/creative reasoning (*tarka*), and absorption/intense spiritual union (*samadhi*)

[*Read Here for More on the History of Yoga and Its References in the Upanishads*](#)