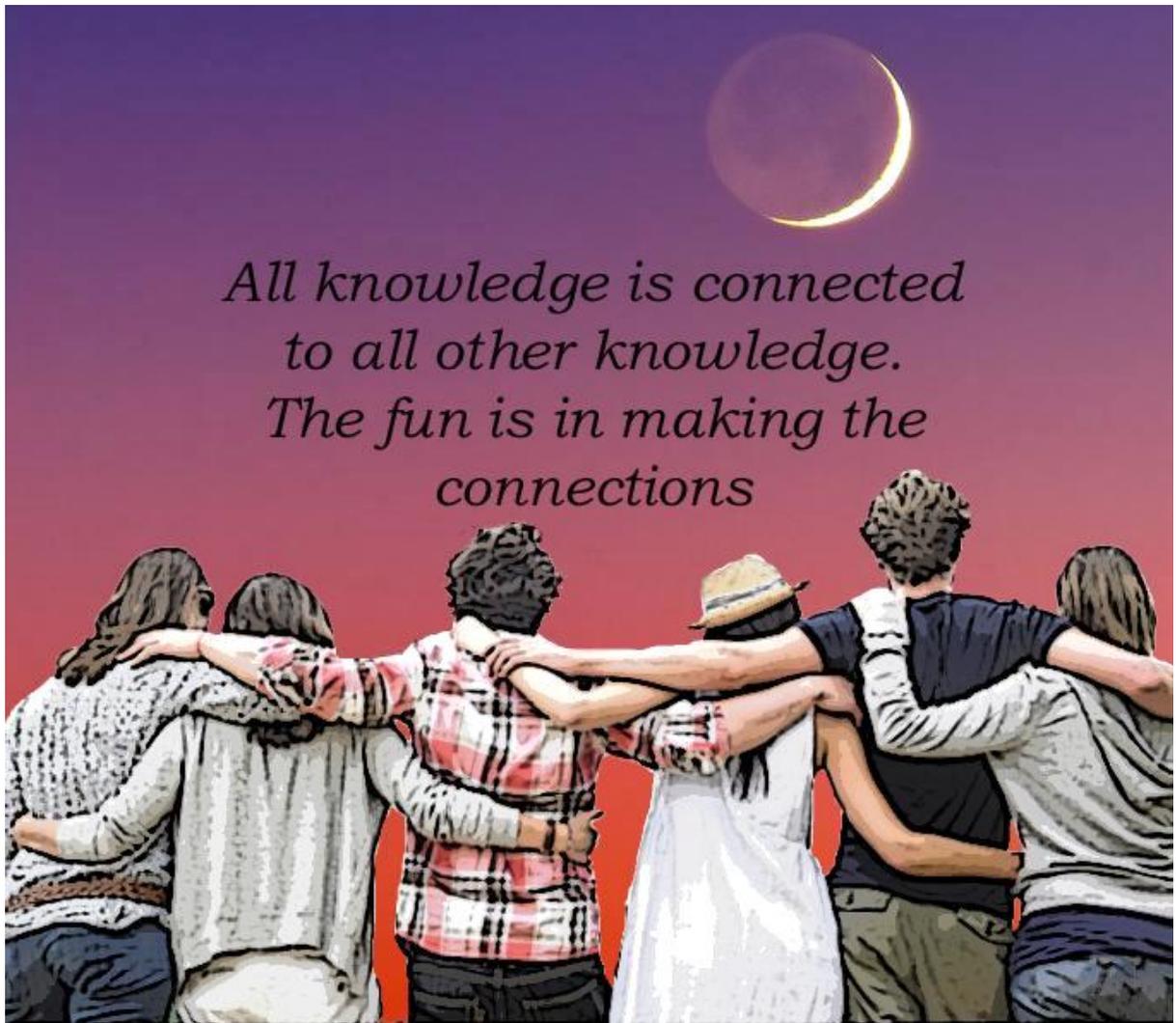


# What is yoga?



## **The word “yoga” means “union”. But what does this really mean?**

Yoga has its historical roots in Hindu philosophy. As such union has traditionally meant becoming one with God.

In the Vedantic tradition, recognition was given to the dualistic nature of our existence and yoga provided a pathway to become closer to God.

The Tantric tradition provided a new perspective, saying that God is within all of us and we are all a part of God. Tantra aimed at awakening us to our own divinity.

Common ground can be found in both traditions in the following definition of yoga, which applies to all people, regardless of their religious beliefs or even a need to believe in God.



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Yoga means union of the inner self or soul (Atman) with the oneness of all life (Brahman).

One of the most important aspects of yogic philosophy is learning to accept ourselves for who we are.

When we stretch and twist and hold difficult poses, we do much more than create a healthier body. Our mind is also exercised in a way that looks inwards, at our self.

The physical changes we experience are accompanied by changes in our body chemistry that affect our mental state, leading to a calmer mind and more happiness.

Yoga for many begins as a journey on a physical plane, but whether we realise it or not, yoga is also a journey on mental plane and a spiritual plane. It leads to a deeper understanding of yourself, to becoming one with yourself.

These inner changes help us to become genuinely happier, more caring people, better able to experience and give unconditional love. We experience self-realization/bliss/happiness, thereby achieving union – becoming one with ourselves and the universe – through unconditional love. This is what yoga means.

### **The “paths” of yoga**

The Bhagavad Gita provides guidance on the classical meaning of yoga. The Gita describes three or four types of yoga, depending upon the interpretation used:

Jnana yoga – the yoga of knowledge and wisdom – in your reading of this text now, you are practicing Jnana yoga.

Karma yoga – the yoga of selfless action – if we practice doing good things without the expectation of reward, we are practicing Karma yoga.

Bhakti yoga – the yoga of devotion – this is commonly seen in the practice of mantra (chanting). However, Bhakti yoga is much more than this. It is the act of devoting your thoughts and actions to God, to charity, to unconditional love.

To these three classifications of yoga, many interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita add a fourth classification:

Raja yoga – Royal Yoga – the yoga of yoga of the mind – the clearest example of this being meditation.

These four types of yoga are all paths to the same destination – self-realization (becoming one with God/the universe/yourself - union).

Moving forward in time, we come to Patangali’s Yoga Sutras, which describe the eight limbs of Yoga. The first two limbs, yamas and niyamas, provide guidance on how to live your life - the yogic equivalent of Christianity’s Ten Commandments.



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The yamas, or moral restraints, include

- Ahimsa – non-violence
- Satya – truthfulness
- Asteya – non-stealing and non-possessiveness
- Aparigraha – non-hoarding, non-greed
- Brahmacharya – control of sexual energy

The niyamas, or personal observances, include

- Saucha – cleanliness or purity in body, food, thoughts, intellect
- Santosha – contentment
- Tapas – commitment and austerity
- Svadhyaya – self-study with the aid of spiritual texts
- Isvara Pranidhana – devotion or surrender of the ego to the divine.

The third and fourth limbs - asana and pranayama - are what we see most commonly in hatha yoga - the use of postures and breathe control.

The fifth, sixth and seventh limbs: Pratyahara (sense withdrawal), dharana (focus) and dhyana (meditation), provide guidance on how to still the mind.

The eighth limb, Samadhi (total absorption) is the achievement of tranquility, when the yogi becomes one with the object of contemplation or, indeed, the Atman achieves union with Brahman and thus, self-realization is achieved.



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