

# Chapter Three

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## Branches of Yoga

I am often asked “What kind of Yoga do you to *DO*?” My answer is simply, “All of it.” The usual response I get is either a blank stare/puzzled look or the person says something like, “You even do that Yoga in a really hot room?” I always smile and if the person is willing, I explain that there are five branches of Yoga, not styles, and I try to practice all of them.

The question above comes from the understanding or belief that Yoga is a bunch of funky postures that only really flexible people can do. Briefly mentioned in the introduction is a short story to illustrate this misconception.

I was once at a Yoga conference at a convention hotel in Miami Beach. While in the lobby waiting for the elevator, a businessman (obviously with another conference) said, “Oh, your one of those *Yoga* people.” I explained that it was a great, ancient practice of holistic purification and suggested he try it sometime. His response was typical of the lay person, “I can’t do Yoga. I am not flexible like that.” I then explained that his reason for not trying Yoga was akin to a person saying they can’t go to school because they don’t know how to read. In other words, you go to school to *learn* how to read. You go to a Yoga class to increase flexibility, not just physically but in every way. Needless to say, it was a silent ride to the floors of our destination.

The truth is, Yoga is so much more than the postures. The poses themselves are a key part of only one of five branches of Yoga, and they are a subcategory of the eight-limb path. The poses, called Asana (see subsequent chapter), are done to move energy and cleanse the physical body. While they have some valuable side effects, they are only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. In this chapter, we will explore all five branches of Yoga and discover that this practice can, and should, be done both on and off the mat.

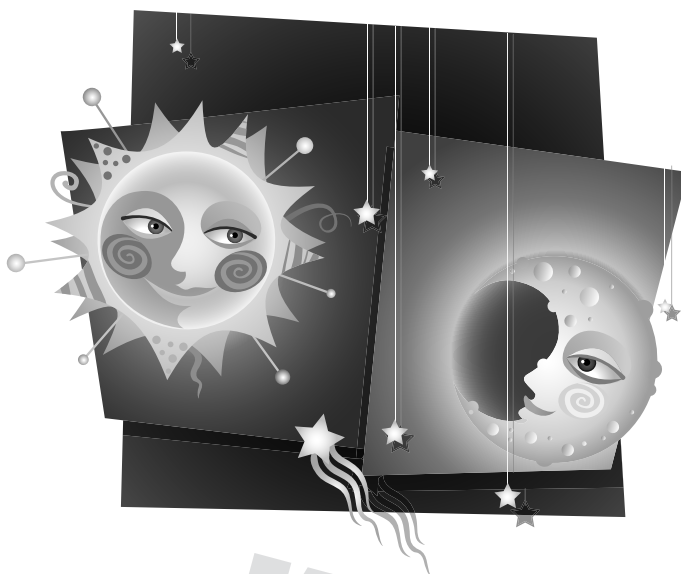
### Hatha Yoga

This branch is what most people understand and come to Yoga for, at least initially. Hatha is the path of integration through the physical body. Integration in Yoga means uniting body, mind, and spirit. So this branch focuses more on the body as being a channel to the soul.

Hatha comes from the root Ha, meaning sun, and Tha, meaning moon. The sun and the moon are two opposites that unite. A brilliant and very spiritual teacher once



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told me that the sun and the moon have had a love affair for millennia, constantly chasing each other around the sky, apart, yet together as one. I thought that was a beautiful analogy and a great way to describe Hatha Yoga. It is the union of opposites meant to connect earth with the sky. As stated previously, Asana are a key part of one branch, Hatha. In the postures, there is always one action rooting down and another rising up. One part of the body supports another—unity in action.

There are many different *styles* of Yoga that fall into the Hatha branch. Some popular examples are:

**Ashtanga** – Originated with Krishnamacharya, developed by K. Pattabhi Jois and is a set series of postures designed to open the body and mind. There are six different series, beginning with the Primary series.

This style is the model for the 8-limb path as Ashtanga translates to “8 limbs.” This is a very physically challenging practice, but leaves you energized yet relaxed.

**Vinyasa/Power** – An adaptation of Ashtanga, this practice links movement with breathing using sun salutations, standing, seated, backbending, and inverted poses. Seane Corn, Shiva Rea, Max Strom, and Baron Baptiste are well-known gurus of this style.

**Sivananda** – Developed by physician Swami Sivananda as a means to integrate intellect, body, heart, and mind by using slow postures, held for periods of time, and meditation.

**Iyengar** – A vigorous practice using props to include straps and blocks, focusing on precise alignment and breathing techniques.

**Kripalu** – Style originated with Swami Kripalu, who developed a meditative style practice designed to quiet the mind and create stillness.

**Kundalini** – This practice incorporates postures, dynamic breathing techniques, meditation on mantras, and chanting.



**Bikram** – A set series of 26 poses done in a very hot room. Designed and patented by Bikram Choudry. This style is extremely intense and very athletic. You will sweat like never before!

**Viniyoga** – Therapeutic Yoga approach designed as a healing modality tailored for each individual practitioner. Especially useful for rehabilitative purposes or for students with special concerns.

**Restorative** – A very gentle style designed to completely relax the body so the mind can become still; mostly reclined poses held for several minutes of stillness.

These are several mainstream styles, but there are many others being practiced all around the U.S. and the world. The key is to find the style that best suits your needs and one that you will be able to practice consistently. A regular practice is key. I like to say that it is far better to do a little Yoga a lot, rather than a lot of Yoga a little. In other words, get to your mat! Move, breathe, and feel, even if it is just for a few minutes.

## Raja Yoga



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Raja, or Royal, Yoga is the path of integration for the meditative mind. Patangali, an ancient sage, developed and wrote about this as an 8-limb path. The limbs encompass ethical and moral behavior, postures, breathing techniques, turning inward, concentration, and meditation. The limbs themselves may seem much like rungs on a ladder. Practice the first, then the second, then the third, etc. However, the path is meant to be all-encompassing, utilizing each aspect as a compliment to the others. This style of Yoga is practiced to ultimately still the mind from its chatter so that we can come into supreme awareness or higher consciousness.

We will examine the limbs individually in subsequent chapters on the Yamas and Niyamas, Asana, Breathing Techniques, and Meditation.



## Karma Yoga



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Karma Yoga is the path of integration through Selfless Service. The concept of Karma usually means to most, “What comes around, goes around.” With respect to this branch, this is somewhat true. However, it’s more about engaging in acts of kindness and giving, simply for the sake of providing service. Behavior and actions are done without any attachment to the results and with no expectation of compensation.

Volunteer work and community service are great ways to practice Karma Yoga. There are countless opportunities to contribute our time to help others, people and animals, in need. Homeless shelters, nursing homes, boys and girls clubs, hospitals, schools, animal shelters and Give Kids the World or Make a Wish Foundations are excellent places to start contributing.

Donating clothing, furniture, appliances, cell phones, and other needed items is also a great way to give back. There are always people right in our own backyard in need of the basic necessities. Monetary donations to causes like the Red Cross Disaster Fund, cancer research, AIDS research, etc., are also a practice of Karma Yoga.

Even subtle things like random acts of kindness, paying the toll for the person behind you, opening doors for others, and extending a warm genuine smile to a stranger are all ways to give back.

Mahatma Gandhi said “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” So, find ways to give back and contribute. Make someone’s day just because it’s the right thing to do. In turn, you will find a deep sense of joy and self-love as a result.



## Bhakti Yoga

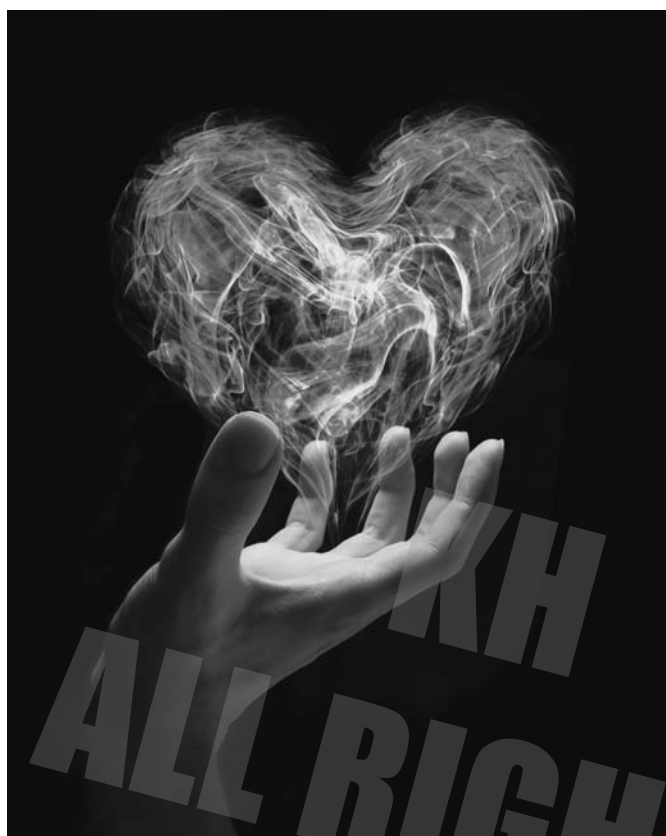


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This is the path of integration through Devotion and Unconditional Love. Practicing Bhakti Yoga can be done both on and off the mat, anytime, anywhere. On the mat we can dedicate our entire practice, every breath, every movement for a greater purpose. When my mom was going through her cancer treatment, I would do my morning practice as a prayer for her and as a means of sending her healing vibration. Often we would talk later in the day and she would tell me that she thought about a me in a particular way. Sometimes it was a specific memory or other times it was just in general. In either case, I always knew that she felt the vibration I was sending her way. She has now passed, but I still devote my practice to her often and use it as a way to communicate with her on a metaphysical level. This is Bhakti Yoga.

You can practice this way by bringing to mind someone who needs a special blessing, prayer, or lots of love. Begin practicing with their well-being in mind. Imagine that every breath and posture is for their benefit. You will find that you start holding poses longer than you normally would, you will breathe a little deeper and the practice will become a moving meditation of prayer. This is a very powerful way to approach your work on the mat. It takes time, but it's about progress not perfection.

Unconditional Love is a very abstract term. It means different things to different people. Let's start with the word "Unconditional." By definition it means absolute or without limits. The word "Love" means a profoundly tender, passionate attachment for another person. Although we "Love" in many different ways, Unconditional Love is known as Universal Love.



Where do we see evidence of Unconditional Love? How about a mother's love for her child or the love we feel towards brothers or sisters or very close friends. Whenever I look into the eyes of my dogs as they stare back at me with such reverence, I see Unconditional Love. These examples are rather easy, and one would almost expect to see evidence of this concept in these circumstances. Where this gets tricky is when we are asked to apply Unconditional Love towards a stranger, or even harder, someone who we feel has wronged us in some way. This is difficult because of resentment and anger that sometimes lingers for years. The practice of Bhakti Yoga is recognizing that all beings are born of the same love and light—no one has more, no one has less. It is true also that everyone makes mistakes. When we learn to let go of bitterness and anger toward another, we not only free ourselves, but we allow ourselves to open up to the possibility of loving that person in a Universal way. More on this concept is discussed in the chapter on Forgiveness.

Is this a tall order? Certainly it is! It would be far easier to do 100 Vinyasas (Sun Salutation variations) than to see love and light in someone we are in conflict with. The question is then, what good are the Vinyasas if we still continue to hold the toxic emotions of blame and resentment toward another? That's why Bhakti Yoga *should* be practiced! Take it in small doses.

Don't start with the huge "rocks," like people who have done grave injustices. Start small with perhaps an argument you had with a co-worker. Take a few minutes to sit still, close your eyes, and start to breathe as deeply as you can. Picture their faces and with every exhale say to yourself "I forgive" or "I let go." After a few breaths you will start to feel the vibrational effect. And, this will make it much easier to move through any disagreement. Remember that it takes practice. Just as professional athletes practice their sport, we must practice Universal Love. It's about progress not perfection. We are all peaceful warriors in training.

## Jnana Yoga



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This is the path of integration through Knowledge and Wisdom. When we study, learn, and then apply what we know to our daily lives, we are practicing Jnana Yoga.



The title of this book, “Life’s Lessons On and Off the Mat,” is a reflection of this concept. Everything that happens on our mats during our practice is a mirror image to things that happen in our lives. If we pick up on the subtle lessons, then we can improve the quality of our lives.

Certain poses mirror the emotions, fears, doubts, and irrational thoughts that we feel outside the Yoga class. There are numerous examples, but I will start with balance poses. When I see new students take on the challenge of balancing on one leg, I see frustration, anger, impatience, and even self-limiting beliefs. I even hear students say “I can’t!” Why do we think we are supposed to be perfect and not fall out of a balance pose? The answer... our culture.

In this country, the media floods the market with picture-perfect ideals, models, cars, clothes, and other material possessions. We feel that if we do not fit the image the media projects, then somehow that makes us failures. Then we start to create this ridiculous expectation of ourselves to be somewhat in line with perfection. If we don’t hit the mark, well then we aren’t good enough. And so starts the cycle of negative self talk.

On the mat, I teach balance poses as a lesson in patience, self-acceptance, and tolerance. I encourage students to break through their own limitations, get out of their own way, and explore their full potential. I remind them that EVERYONE falls out of balance poses because it is supposed to happen. When we can make peace with this concept, internalize it, and learn the lesson on the mat, then we are better equipped to handle setbacks or perceived failures in our day-to-day lives.

Another example is holding Yang (active) poses like Chair or Warrior poses. These postures are very simple and basic in terms of degree of difficulty. Yet holding them for 30 seconds to two minutes is anything but easy. These poses teach us to breathe deeper and be calm in stressful situations. Also, they show us that life is cyclical in the respect that we fluctuate from hard times to easier times. In the difficult times, we must learn to come to our breath, relax into the moment, and know that everything changes sooner or later.

The last example I will use, in terms of poses, is inversions. Downward Dog, Dolphin, Headstand, and Handstand are in this category. They teach us to release fear and anger. Somehow we think turning upside down is scary and we avoid it. However, life turns upside down all the time. There are times we are angry or frustrated. Bringing the head below the heart energetically softens these emotions and allows the mind to quiet down. Inverted poses improve memory and concentration and are very effective when used before tests, speeches, presentations, or any time we need to remember things and stay calm or focused.

Notice I did not mention any physical benefits of the postures in the examples. That information will be covered later when we discuss Asana. The references I made to the poses were specifically to illustrate that even in our physical practice we are learning and studying. This is all for the purpose of applying the knowledge once we step off the mat and into our lives.

Off the mat, the practice of Jnana Yoga can be done in many ways, such as reading and researching the many facets of Yoga as a whole. A good place to start is with the Yoga Sutras of Patangali, The Upanishads, and The Bhagavad Gita. These are ancient texts that outline theoretical and philosophical aspects of Yoga.



Or, bring your knowledge search current and study the myriad of publications on Yoga topics from postures to breathing to meditation. There are books on Ayurveda, the sister science to Yoga. On anatomy. On different styles of Yoga. On therapeutic practice. You name it, it's out there. The key is to gather the knowledge and let it soak in long enough. Then take the information and apply it in your life. This is wisdom.

Journal writing and self-inquiry work are also excellent ways to explore this branch and take your practice deeper. We will discuss different techniques in the chapter on Higher-Level Questions.

## Uniting the Branches



The best way to approach a well-rounded Yoga practice and to weave this method of purification into your life is to start incorporating all of the branches into your life. They are meant to be intertwined and to compliment each other. This is why there is no other modality quite like Yoga. It feeds us physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It's been around for thousands of years and has always withstood the test of time for a reason—it simply works.

So get to your mat, open your mind and your heart. Learn, and then live it. That is the ultimate intention of Yoga. Remember that the mind and heart are like a parachute. They work much better when they are open.



***“Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.”***

**—Mahatma Gandhi**

Uniting the branches of Yoga brings us great happiness. When our physical bodies feel healthy and strong, we are positive. When we quiet the mind down long enough to tap into that source of peace we have within us already, we are joyous. When we are of service to others without attachment, we are kind and compassionate. When we embrace unconditional love and devotion to all beings, we are free. And, when we engage in learning, embrace never-ending knowledge and turn it into wisdom, we are empowered.

A tree has many branches that are part of its whole existence. As we incorporate, practice and live all of the branches of Yoga, we can unlock the key to our own true happiness. But we must do so one breath, one moment, one day at a time...

I was inspired to write this poem after a trip to the Kashi Ashram in Melbourne, Florida. I had an incredible experience of true happiness! Please enjoy...

### **Happiness**

Happiness is a tricky concept, do you know what it means?  
We attach our joy on our looks, bank account and success, it seems...

On what other people do, their actions and how they make us feel  
How absurd is that, it surely isn't real...

For no one can “make us” feel happy or feel sad  
Yet we give up our power, or steam roll, either case is bad...

Happiness is being content with who you are  
It has nothing to do with the perfect partner, or your car...

This is a hard lesson to grasp, I struggle with it as well, that's true  
If you are going to practice Yoga, true Yoga, than you should embrace this too...

Otherwise it's just postures, movements and sweat  
If that's how you see Yoga, then your happiness is at threat...

Learning to breathe through the tough times and the fires of hell  
Will strengthen you, inspire you and open your heart as well...


Let go of judgement, opinions, what's right and what's wrong  
If you can't do that, then just keep playing the same old song...

If you do choose that road, nothing will change  
And you will be stuck in a life that has limited range...

Embracing this concept in Yoga is the MOST important part  
To stop following your head and live from your heart...

Is it easy? Hell NO. But it is SIMPLE I guess  
To let go of attachment and simply say YES!





YES to life is the essence of the Mantra OM  
And it will fill your heart and take you home...

“Home is where the heart is,” that’s a saying we have all heard  
But if you embrace that Mantra, it’s true, every word...

If we look to our hearts, always, we will see  
That we really can be joyous, happy and free...

So join me on this quest and help spread the word  
Touch people and lives, this is a message to be heard.

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*What does Unconditional Love mean to you? Where do you see evidence of this in your life?*

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