

Study Of Yoga With A Historical Aspects

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Abstract

Despite more than a century of research, we still don't know much about the earliest beginnings of Yoga. We do know, though, that it originated in India 5,000 or more years ago. Until recently, many Western scholars thought that Yoga originated much later, maybe around 500 B.C., which is the time of Gautama the Buddha, the illustrious founder of Buddhism. But then, in the early 1920s, archeologists surprised the world with the discovery of the so-called Indus civilization—a culture that we now know extended over an area of roughly 300,000 square miles (the size of Texas and Ohio combined). This was in fact the largest civilization in early antiquity. In the ruins of the big cities of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, excavators found depictions engraved on soapstone seals that strongly resemble yogi-like figures. Many other finds show the amazing continuity between that civilization and later Hindu society and culture. The earliest references to Yoga come from four shastras known as the Vedas. The Vedas are historically recognized as the earliest existing form of scriptures of humankind. The shastras explained and regulated aspects of life from supreme reality to life on earth, and were orally passed from guru to disciple for thousands of years before being written down. Through many centuries, the art of Yoga, a relaxing, yet energizing technique of stretching the physical body and enhancing spiritual awareness, has evolved into a combination of a Yoga techniques and passive treatments, including medicinal treatments, we call Yoga therapy.

Keywords: Yoga therapy, Buddhism, Jainism, Vedic Yoga, Preclassical Yoga

Introduction

In Yoga, theory and practice, as well as left brain and right brain, go hand in hand so to speak. Study (*svādhyāya*) is in fact an important aspect of many branches and schools of Yoga. This is another way in which Yoga's balanced approach shows itself. If you want to know where something is going, it is good to know where it came from. "To be ignorant of what happened before one was born," said Cicero pointedly in his *Orator*, "is to remain ever a child." History provides context and meaning, and Yoga is no exception to this rule. If you are fond of history, you'll enjoy what follows. Many of the facts and ideas presented here have not yet found their way into the textbooks or even into most Yoga books. We put you in touch with the leading edge of knowledge in this area. If you are not a history buff, well, perhaps we can tempt you to suspend your preferences for a few minutes and read on anyway. There was nothing primitive about what is now called the Indus-Sarasvati civilization, which is named after two great rivers that once flowed in Northern India; today

only the Indus River flows through Pakistan. That civilization's urbane population enjoyed multistory buildings, a sewage system unparalleled in the ancient world until the Roman empire, a huge public bath whose walls were water-proofed with bitumen, geometrically laid out brick roads, and standardized baked bricks for convenient construction. (We are so used to these technological achievements that we sometimes forget they had to be invented.) The Indus-Sarasvati people were a great maritime nation that exported a large variety of goods to Mesopotamia and other parts of the Middle East and Africa. Although only a few pieces of art have survived, some of them show exquisite craftsmanship.

Yoga and the Indus-Sarasvati Civilization

This means that Yoga is the product of a mature civilization that was unparalleled in the ancient world. Think of it! As a Yoga practitioner you are part of an ancient and honorable stream of tradition, which makes you a descendant of that civilization at least at the level of the heart. Many of the inventions credited to Sumer rightfully belong to what is now known as the Indus-Sarasvati civilization, which evolved out of a cultural tradition that has reliably been dated back to the seventh millennium B.C. In turn it gave rise to the great religious and cultural tradition of Hinduism, but indirectly also to Buddhism and Jainism.

India's civilization can claim to be the oldest enduring civilization in the world. Its present-day problems should not blind us to its glorious past and the lessons we can learn from it. Yoga practitioners in particular can benefit from India's protracted experimentation with life, especially its explorations of the mysteries of the mind. The Indian civilization has produced great philosophical and spiritual geniuses who between them have covered every conceivable answer to the big questions, which are as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago.

The Big Questions

Traditional Yoga seeks to provide plausible answers to such profound questions as, "Who am I?", "Whence do I come?", "Whither do I go?," and "What must I do?" These are the sorts of questions that, sooner or later, we all end up asking ourselves. Or at least, we have our own implicit answers to them, though may not get round to consciously formulating them. Deep down, we all are philosophers, because we all need to make sense of our life. Some of us postpone thinking about these questions, but they don't ever go away. We quickly learn this when we lose a loved one or face a serious health crisis.

So, we might as well ponder these questions while we are in good shape. And don't think you have to feel morose to do so. Yoga doesn't champion dark moods, but it is definitely in favor of awareness in all its forms, including self-awareness. If we know the stuff we are made of, we can function a lot better in the world. At the very least, our self-knowledge will give us the opportunity to make conscious and better choices.

The history of Yoga can conveniently be divided into the following four broad categories:

1. **Vedic Yoga**
2. **Preclassical Yoga**
3. **Classical Yoga**
4. **Postclassical Yoga**

These categories are like static snapshots of something that is in actuality in continuous motion—the “march of history.”

Vedic Yoga

Now we are entering somewhat more technical territory, and I will have to use and explain a number of Sanskrit terms.

The yogic teachings found in the above-mentioned Rig-Veda and the other three ancient hymnodies are known as Vedic Yoga. The Sanskrit word veda means “knowledge,” while the Sanskrit term *rig* (from *ric*) means “praise.” Thus the sacred Rig-Veda is the collection of hymns that are in praise of a higher power. This collection is in fact the fountainhead of Hinduism, which has around one billion adherents today. You could say that the Rig-Veda is to Hinduism what the Book of Genesis is to Christianity.

The other three Vedic hymnodies are the *Yajur-Veda* (“Knowledge of Sacrifice”), *Sama-Veda* (“Knowledge of Chants”), and *Atharva-Veda* (“Knowledge of Atharvan”). The first collection contains the sacrificial formulas used by the Vedic priests. The second text contains the chants accompanying the sacrifices. The third hymnody is filled with magical incantations for all occasions but also includes a number of very powerful philosophical hymns. It is connected with Atharvan, a famous fire priest who is remembered as having been a master of magical rituals. These hymnodies can be compared to the various books of the Old Testament.

It is clear from what has been said thus far that Vedic Yoga—which could also be called Archaic Yoga—was intimately connected with the ritual life of the ancient Indians. It revolved around the idea of sacrifice as a means of joining the material world with the invisible world of the spirit. In order to perform the exacting rituals successfully, the sacrificers had to be able to focus their mind for a prolonged period of time. Such inner focusing for the sake of transcending the limitations of the ordinary mind is the root of Yoga.

When successful, the Vedic yogi was graced with a “vision” or experience of the transcendental reality. A great master of Vedic Yoga was called a “seer”—in Sanskrit rishi. The Vedic seers were able to see the very fabric of existence, and their hymns speak of their marvelous intuitions, which can still inspire us today.

Preclassical Yoga

This category covers an extensive period of approximately 2,000 years until the second century A.D. Preclassical Yoga comes in various forms and guises. The earliest manifestations were still closely associated with the Vedic sacrificial culture, as developed in the Brāhmanas and Āraṇyakas. The Brāhmanas are Sanskrit texts explaining the Vedic hymns and the rituals behind them. The Āraṇyakas are ritual texts specific to those who chose to live in seclusion in a forest hermitage.

Yoga came into its own with the Upanishads, which are gnostic texts expounding the hidden teaching about the ultimate unity of all things. There are over 200 of these scriptures, though only a handful of them were composed in the period prior to Gautama the Buddha (fifth century B.C.). These works can be likened to the New Testament, which rests on the Old Testament but at the same time goes beyond it.

One of the most remarkable Yoga scriptures is the Bhagavad-Gītā (“Lord’s Song”), of which the great social reformer Mahatma Gandhi spoke as follows:

When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the Bhagavad-Gītā. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies—and my life has been full of external tragedies—and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gītā. (Young India, 1925, pp. 1078-79)

In its significance, this work of only 700 verses perhaps is to Hindus what Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is to Christians. Its message, however, is not to turn the other cheek but to actively oppose evil in the world. In its present form, the Bhagavad-Gītā (Gītā for short) was composed around 500 B.C. and since then has been a daily inspiration to millions of Hindus. Its central teaching is to the point: To be alive means to be active and, if we want to avoid difficulties for ourselves and others, our actions must be benign and also go beyond the grip of the ego. A simple matter, really, but how difficult to accomplish in daily life!

Preclassical Yoga also comprises the many schools whose teachings can be found in India’s two great national epics, the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata (in which the Bhagavad-Gītā is embedded and which is seven times the size of the Iliad and Odyssey combined). These various preclassical schools developed all kinds of techniques for achieving deep meditation through which yogis and yoginis can transcend the body and mind and discover their true nature.

Classical Yoga

This label applies to the eightfold Yoga—also known as Rāja-Yoga—taught by Patanjali in his Yoga-Sūtra. This Sanskrit text is composed of just under 200 aphoristic statements, which have been commented on over and over again through the centuries. Sooner or later all

serious Yoga students discover this work and have to grapple with its terse statements. The word *sūtra* (which is related to Latin suture) means literally “thread.” Here it conveys a thread of memory, an aid to memorization for students eager to retain Patanjali’s knowledge and wisdom.



The Yoga-Sūtra was probably written some time in the second century A.D. The earliest available Sanskrit commentary on it is the Yoga-Bhāshya (“Speech on Yoga”) attributed to Vyāsa. It was authored in the fifth century A.D. and furnishes fundamental explanations of Patanjali’s often cryptic statements.

Beyond a few legends nothing is known about either Patanjali or Vyāsa. This is a problem with most ancient Yoga adepts and even with many more recent ones. Often all we have are their teachings, but this is of course more important than any historical information we could dig up about their personal lives.

Patanjali, who is by the way often wrongly called the “father of Yoga,” believed that each individual is a composite of matter (*prakriti*) and spirit (*purusha*). He understood the process of Yoga to bring about their separation, thereby restoring the spirit in its absolute purity. His formulation is generally characterized as philosophical dualism. This is an important point, because most of India’s philosophical systems favor one or the other kind of nondualism: The countless aspects or forms of the empirical world are in the last analysis the same “thing”—pure formless but conscious existence.

Postclassical Yoga

This is again a very comprehensive category, which refers to all those many types and schools of Yoga that have sprung up in the period after Patanjali’s Yoga-Sūtra and that are independent of this seminal work. In contrast to classical Yoga, postclassical Yoga affirms

the ultimate unity of everything. This is the core teaching of Vedânta, the philosophical system based on the teachings of the Upanishads.

In a way, the dualism of classical Yoga can be seen as a brief but powerful interlude in a stream of nondualist teachings going back to ancient Vedic times. According to these teachings, you, we, and everyone or everything else is an aspect or expression of one and the same reality. In Sanskrit that singular reality is called brahman (meaning “that which has grown expansive”) or âtman (the transcendental Self as opposed to the limited ego-self).

A few centuries after Patanjali, the evolution of Yoga took an interesting turn. Now some great adepts were beginning to probe the hidden potential of the body. Previous generations of yogis and yoginis had paid no particular attention to the body. They had been more interested in contemplation to the point where they could exit the body consciously. Their goal had been to leave the world behind and merge with the formless reality, the spirit.

Under the influence of alchemy—the spiritual forerunner of chemistry—the new breed of Yoga masters created a system of practices designed to rejuvenate the body and prolong its life. They regarded the body as a temple of the immortal spirit, not merely as a container to be discarded at the first opportunity. They even explored through advanced yogic techniques the possibility of energizing the physical body to such a degree that its biochemistry is changed and even its basic matter is reorganized to render it immortal.

This preoccupation of theirs led to the creation of Hatha-Yoga, an amateur version of which is today widely practiced throughout the world. It also led to the various branches and schools of Tantra-Yoga, of which Hatha-Yoga is just one approach.

Modern Yoga

The history of modern Yoga is widely thought to begin with the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. It was at that congress that the young Swami Vivekananda—swami (*svāmin*) means “master”—made a big and lasting impression on the American public. At the behest of his teacher, the saintly Ramakrishna, he had found his way to the States where he didn't know a soul. Thanks to some well-wishers who recognized the inner greatness of this adept of Jnāna-Yoga (the Yoga of discernment), he was invited to the Parliament and ended up being its most popular diplomat. In the following years, he traveled widely attracting many students to Yoga and Vedânta. His various books on Yoga are still useful and enjoyable to read.

Before Swami Vivekananda a few other Yoga masters had crossed the ocean to visit Europe, but their influence had remained local and ephemeral. Vivekananda's immense success opened a sluice gate for other adepts from India, and the stream of Eastern gurus has not ceased.

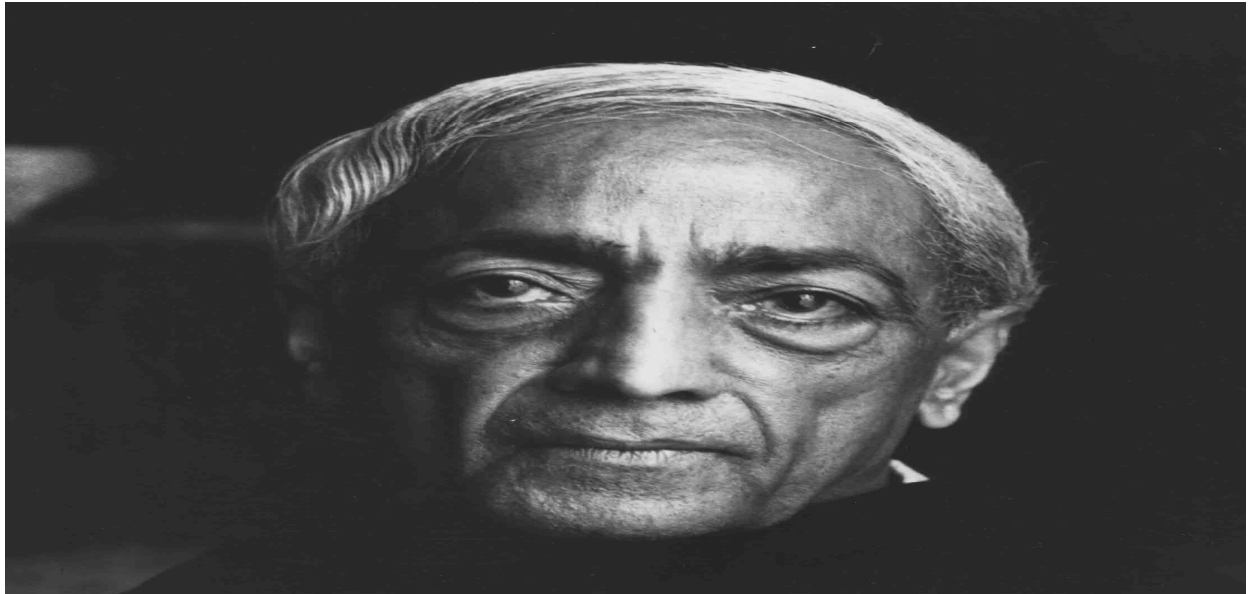
After Swami Vivekananda, the most popular teacher in the early years of the Western Yoga movement was Paramahansa Yogananda, who arrived in Boston in 1920. Five years later, he established the Self-Realization Fellowship, which still has its headquarters in Los Angeles. Although he left his body (as yogins call it) in 1952 at the age of fifty-nine, he continues to have a worldwide following. His Autobiography of a Yogi makes for fascinating reading, but be prepared to suspend any materialistic bias you may have! As with some other yogis and Christian or Muslim saints, after his death Yogananda's body showed no signs of decay for a full twenty days.

Of more limited appeal was Swami Rama Tirtha, a former mathematics teacher who preferred spiritual life to academia and who came to the United States in 1902 and founded a retreat center on Mount Shasta in California. He stayed for only two years and drowned in the Ganges (Ganga) River in 1906 at the young age of thirty-three. Some of his inspirational talks were gathered into the five volumes of *In Woods of God-Realization*, which are still worth dipping into.

In 1919, Yogendra Mastamani arrived in Long Island and for nearly three years demonstrated to astounded Americans the power and elegance of Hatha Yoga. Before returning to India, he founded the American branch of Kaivalyadhama, an Indian organization created by the late Swami Kuvalayananda, which has contributed greatly to the scientific study of Yoga.

A very popular figure for several decades after the 1920s was Ramacharaka, whose books can still be found in used bookstores. What few readers know, however, is that this Ramacharaka was apparently not an actual person. The name was the pseudonym of two people—William Walker Atkinson, who had left his law practice in Chicago to practice Yoga, and his teacher Baba Bharata.

Paul Brunton, a former journalist and editor, burst on the scene of Yoga in 1934 with his book *A Search in Secret India*, which introduced the great sage Ramana Maharshi to Western seekers. Many more works flowed from his pen over the following eighteen years, until the publication of *The Spiritual Crisis of Man*. Then, in the 1980s, his notebooks were published posthumously in sixteen volumes—a treasure-trove for serious Yoga students.



Since the early 1930s until his death in 1986, Jiddu Krishnamurti delighted or perplexed thousands of philosophically minded Westerners with his eloquent talks. He had been groomed by the Theosophical Society as the coming world leader but had rejected this mission, which surely is too big and burdensome for any one person, however great. He demonstrated the wisdom of Jnāna-Yoga (the Yoga of discernment), and drew large crowds of listeners and readers. Among his close circle of friends were the likes of Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Charles Chaplin, and Greta Garbo. Bernard Shaw described Krishnamurti as the most beautiful human being he ever saw.

Yoga, in the form of Hatha-Yoga, entered mainstream America when the Russian-born yoginī Indra Devi, who has been called the “First Lady of Yoga,” opened her Yoga studio in Hollywood in 1947. She taught stars like Gloria Swanson, Jennifer Jones, and Robert Ryan, and trained hundreds of teachers. Now in her nineties and living in Buenos Aires, she is still an influential voice for Yoga.

In the 1950s, one of the most prominent Yoga teacher was Selvarajan Yesudian whose book *Sport and Yoga* has been translated into fourteen or so languages, with more than 500,000 copies sold. Today, as we mentioned before, many athletes have adopted yogic exercises into their training program because . . . it works. Among them are the Chicago Bulls. Just picture these champion basket ball players stretching out on extra-long Yoga mats under the watchful eye of Yoga teacher Paula Kout! In the early 1950s, Shri Yogendra of the Yoga Institute of Santa Cruz in India, visited the United States. He pioneered medical research on Yoga as early as 1918, and his son Jayadev Yogendra is continuing his valuable work, which demonstrates the efficacy of Yoga as a therapeutic tool.

In 1961, Richard Hittleman brought Hatha-Yoga to American television, and his book *The Twenty-Eight-Day Yoga Plan* sold millions of copies. In the mid-1960s, the Western Yoga movement received a big boost through Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, largely because of his brief

association with the Beatles. He popularized yogic contemplation in the form of Transcendental Meditation (TM), which still has tens of thousands of practitioners around the world. TM practitioners also introduced meditation and Yoga into the corporate world. It, moreover, stimulated medical research on Yoga at various American universities.

In 1965, the then sixty-nine-year-old Shri Prabhupada arrived in New York with a suitcase full of books and \$8.00 in his pockets. Six years later he founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and by the time of his death in 1977, he had created a worldwide spiritual movement based on Bhakti Yoga (the Yoga of devotion).

Also in the 1960s and 1970s, many swamis trained by the Himalayan master Swami Sivananda, a former physician who became a doctor of the soul, opened their schools in Europe and the two Americas. Most of them are still active today, and among them are Swami Vishnudevananda (author of the widely read *Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*), Swami Satchitananda (well-known to Woodstock participants), Swami Sivananda Radha (a woman-swami who pioneered the link between Yoga spirituality and psychology), Swami Satyananda (about whom we will say more shortly), and Swami Chidananda (a saintly figure who directed the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh, India). The last-mentioned master's best known American student is the gentle Liliya Folan, made famous by her PBS television series *Liliya, Yoga & You*, broadcast between 1970 and 1979.

In 1969, Yogi Bhaajan caused an uproar among the traditional Sikh community (an offshoot of Hinduism) when he broke with tradition and began to teach Kundalini Yoga to his Western students. Today his Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization—better known as 3HO—has more than 200 centers around the world.

A more controversial but wildly popular guru in the 1970 and 1980s was Bhagavan Rajneesh (now known as Osho), whose followers constantly made the headlines for their sexual orgies and other excesses. Rajneesh, a former philosophy professor, drew his teachings from authentic Yoga sources, mixed with his own personal experiences. His numerous books line the shelves of many second-hand bookstores. Rajneesh allowed his students to act out their repressed fantasies, notably of the sexual variety, in the hope that this would free them up for the deeper processes of Yoga. Many of them, however, got trapped in a mystically tinged hedonism, which proves the common-sense rule that too much of a good thing can be bad for you. Even though many of his disciples felt bitterly disappointed by him and the sad events surrounding his organization in the years immediately preceding his death in 1990, just as many still regard him as a genuine Yoga master. His life illustrates that Yoga adepts come in all shapes and sizes and that, to coin a phrase, one person's guru is another person's uru. (The Sanskrit word uru denotes "empty space.") Another maxim that applies here is *caveat emptor*, "buyer beware."

Other renowned modern Yoga adepts of Indian origin are Sri Aurobindo (the father of Integral Yoga), Ramana Maharshi (an unparalleled master of Jnana-Yoga), Papa Ramdas

(who lived and breathed Mantra-Yoga, the Yoga of transformative sound), Swami Nityananda (a miracle-working master of Siddha-Yoga), and his disciple Swami Muktananda (a powerful yogi who put Siddha-Yoga, which is a Tantric Yoga, on the map for Western seekers). All these teachers are no longer among us.

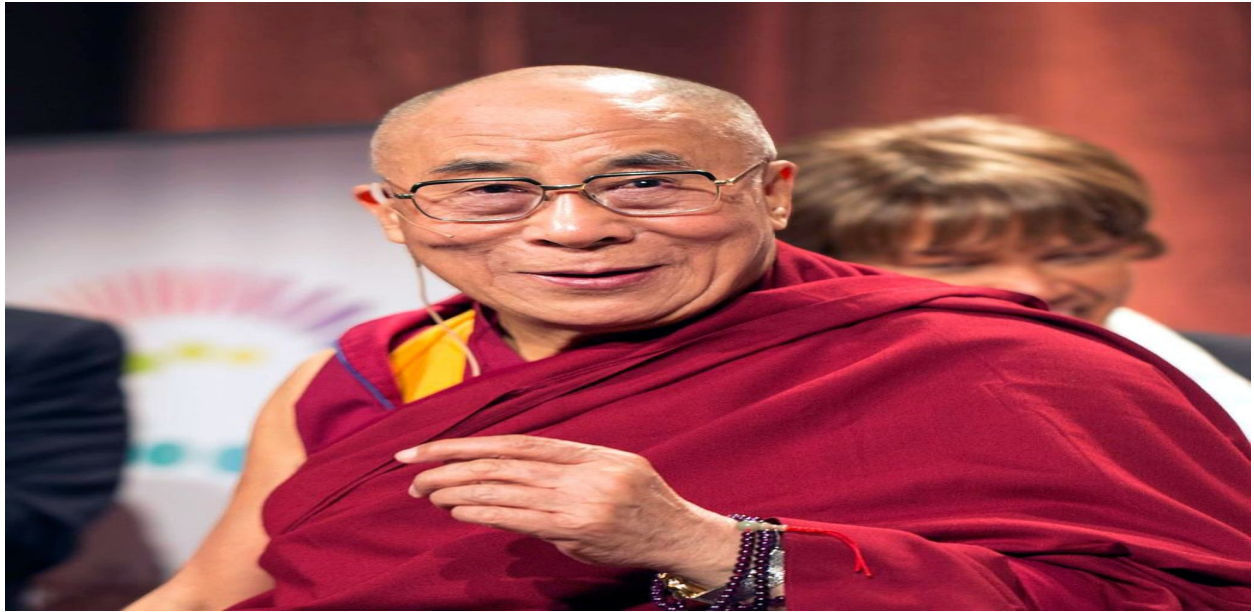
The great exponent in modern times of Hatha-Yoga was Sri Krishnamacharya, who died in 1989 at the ripe old age of 101. He practiced and taught the Viniyoga system of Hatha-Yoga until his last days. His son T. K. V. Desikachar continues his saintly father's teachings and taught Yoga, among others, to the famous Jiddu Krishnamurti. Another well-known student of Sri Krishnamacharya and a master in his own right is Desikachar's uncle B. K. S. Iyengar, who has taught tens of thousands of students, including the world-famous violinist Jehudi Menuhin.

Mention must also be made of Pattabhi Jois and Indra Devi, both of whom studied with Krishnamacharya in their early years and have since then inspired thousands of Westerners.

Of living Yoga masters from India, I can mention Sri Chinmoy and Swami Satyananda (a Tantra master who established the well-known Bihar School of Yoga, has authored numerous books, and has disciples around the world). There are of course many other great Yoga adepts, both well known and more hidden, who represent Yoga in one form or another, but I leave it up to you to discover them.

Until modern times, the overwhelming majority of Yoga practitioners have been men, yogins. But there have also always been great female adepts, yoginīs. Happily, in recent years, a few woman saints—representing Bhakti-Yoga (Yoga of devotion)—have come to the West to bring their gospel of love to open-hearted seekers. Yoga embraces so many diverse approaches that anyone can find a home in it.

An exceptional woman teacher from India who fits none of the yogic stereotypes is Meera Ma ("Mother Meera"). She doesn't teach in words but communicates in silence through her simple presence. Of all places, she has made her home in the middle of a quaint German village in the Black Forest, and every year is attracting thousands of people from all over the world.



Since Yoga is not restricted to Hinduism, we may also mention here the Dalai Lama, champion of nonviolence and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. He is unquestionably one of the truly great yogis of modern Tibet, who, above all, demonstrates that the principles of Yoga can fruitfully be brought not only into a busy daily life but also into the arena of politics. Today Tibetan Buddhism (which is a form of Tantra-Yoga) is extremely popular among Westerners, and there are many lamas (spiritual teacher) who are willing to share with sincere seekers the secrets of their hitherto well-guarded tradition.

If you are curious about Westerners who have made a name for themselves as teachers in the modern Yoga movement (understood in the broadest terms), you may want to consult the encyclopedic work *The Book of Enlightened Masters* by Andrew Rawlinson. His book includes both genuine masters (like the Bulgarian teacher Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov on whom I have written a book—*The Mystery of Light*) and a galaxy of would-be masters.

Conclusion

In ancient times gurus passed their knowledge to disciples. Currently many schools and online Yoga teacher training programs offer generalized and specialized Yoga therapy training. General Yoga therapy training enables therapists to treat a wide range of conditions and specialized therapy training focuses on one specific condition, such as depression, back pain, insomnia, and many others. Programs are a combination of healthcare, anatomy, Yoga, and business management classes, lasting from 200 to 500 credit hours for certification. Yoga therapy, also known as restorative Yoga therapy, helps individuals loosen joints, ease sore muscles, and tone internal organs with a combination of passive, or assisted, Yoga, acupressure, reflexology, energy work and massage techniques. During the Yoga therapy session, the energy lines (sen) and energy centers (marma points) are activated to create vital energy (prana) which alleviates symptoms of discomfort on physical, mental, and emotional levels.

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