What Is Yoga, Really?

A Loving Guide from Shambhala Yoga Centre

Here at Shambhala Yoga Centre on beautiful Koh Tao, Thailand, we've been guiding seekers like you since 1997. We teach Yoga in its truest form. Let's explore together what Yoga really is – starting with what it's not, then diving into its heart – because you deserve to understand this wonderful path, which can transform your life. Many people come to Yoga with different ideas, and sometimes those ideas need a bit of gentle clearing up. So let us first look at what Yoga is **not**.

Clearing the Air: What Yoga Is NOT

Yoga is so much more than what the modern world often makes it out to be. It's easy to become confused with all the contemporary twists, but let's set those aside. Remember, Yoga is a sacred journey, an exact science, and not just a quick fix.

- **Yoga is NOT just Āsanas (postures):**
  Postures are central to every Yoga tradition, and āsanas are certainly important. Postures are wonderful – they build strength and flexibility, relax the body, and they're a key part of Yoga's path. However, they're only one of eight aspects of true Yoga. If we stop there, we miss the other seven equally important limbs of the journey.
- **Yoga is NOT just wellness:**
  Yes, Yoga strengthens the body, steadies the mind, and supports the psyche. It does bring balance to your body, mind, and spirit – helping you feel more alive and at peace. Nevertheless, those are happy secondary effects, not the true aim. Without its spiritual foundation, Yoga becomes just another health routine or wellness practice – one among many, like others out there. Authentic Yoga goes so much deeper, inviting you to awaken your highest potential.
- **Yoga is NOT just an add-on:**
  Sometimes Yoga is presented as a nice extra—just another attraction on a schedule of activities. While it can indeed be an enjoyable part of a healthy lifestyle, Yoga is so much more when taught by an accomplished Yogi or Yoginī. It offers great potential – a comprehensive path to inner freedom.
- **Yoga is NOT a collection of styles:**
  Many think Yoga improves by mixing traditions – collecting techniques like one gathers souvenirs. Mixing traditions might seem exciting, but it often misses the essence. Yoga isn't improved by blending physical practices or offering a wider variety; Yoga's essence is not found in a variety of poses. Its essence is spiritual discernment, awakening, freedom, and Divine Union.
- **Yoga is NOT about the venue:**
  Yoga is not about the space where it is practiced. Ancient Yogis practiced on riverbanks, under trees in the forest, on rocks and boulders, or in open salas. Over time, those places became sacred because of the practice itself—not because of modern comforts like air-conditioning, heating, or a view. A venue may be beautiful, but it never defines the quality of Yoga instruction. We are the venue – your heart within is where the magic happens.

- **Yoga is NOT just community:**
  A supportive group (like a *Saṅgha*) can be a blessing and encourage your development. Others may inspire us, but responsibility for our practice and its integrity rests with us alone. Yoga is your personal path. Others most assuredly can motivate and support, but you're the one walking your own path.

There, we've gently set aside the misconceptions. So, if Yoga is not just postures, wellness, venues, or community, what is it then?

What Yoga Truly Is: A Path to Divine Union

Traditionally, Yoga means either ***Divine Union*** or ***the Path to Divine Union***. It is both the journey and the destination. It's a roadmap or GPS for returning home to your truest self, beyond all worries. In classical Indian spirituality, there are four main *paths* of Yoga, each like a different trail up the same mountain, leading to the same serene summit. Which is the best one? The one that fits *you* best, based on your unique temperament.

- ***Raja Yoga*** **– The Path of Meditation**
  For the mystic soul, this is self-mastery through meditation. It's what we teach here at Shambhala – Raja Yoga (Royal Path), also called Upāsanā Yoga (Meditative Path). A Raja-Yogin seeks awakening through inner stillness. Such a practitioner is called a *Raja-Yogin*.
- ***Jñāna Yoga*** **– The Path of Wisdom**
  For the philosophical and rational, Jñāna Yoga is the way of inquiry, discernment, and knowledge of the Self. Jñāna Yoga is also available on Koh Tao exclusively at Shambhala Yoga Center as private or group instruction by special arrangement. A Jñāna-Yogin unites with the Supreme through understanding and reflection. Such a seeker is a *Jñāna-Yogin*.
- ***Karma Yoga*** **– The Path of Selfless Service**
  For those with active hearts, this is the path of selfless service. You become a Karma-Yogin by giving without expecting, like helping others with pure joy. It is action turned sacred. Such an activist or public servant is called a *Karma-Yogin*.
- ***Bhakti Yoga*** **– The Path of Devotion**
  If you are devotional and loving, this is your way – exclusive devotion to a higher ideal, through worship and love, and free from self-interest or self-serving motivations. A Bhakti-Yogin finds union through the heart's pure affection. Such a devotee is called a *Bhakti-Yogin*.

These paths are common knowledge in India, where everyone is encouraged to choose what resonates.

SHAMBHALA'S PROGRAM: SĀṄKHYA & RAJA YOGA

The Spiritual Foundation: Sāṅkhya Philosophy

Before diving into practice, traditional Yoga starts with Sāṅkhya – the world's most ancient structured philosophy. It's the *basis* or *spiritual foundation of Yoga* as a whole. Sāṅkhya teaches the difference between **Nature** (*Prakṛti*); *the material world* around us – and **Spirit** (*Puruṣa*); *the hidden, transcendent reality* beneath everything. Through three simple spiritual exercises (sādhana), you gain a clear

intellectual understanding. This "theory" stage prepares you for deeper practice, shifting knowledge from your mind to your soul. It is the bedrock of Yoga's promise: spiritual *Awakening* and *Divine Union*.

While in the most traditional sense of Yoga as taught originally in the past, Yoga instruction began with Sāṅkhya. However, in modern times, most schools skip it in favor of quicker physical benefits. In rare cases, like intensive retreats, teachers might integrate it later for advanced students. Classically, it's essential – without it, without what it teaches, Yoga remains incomplete. What matters is finding balance that honors the tradition.

Prakṛti (Nature: the material world and all its changes), and
Puruṣa (Spirit: the eternal, unchanging Self).

Sāṅkhya lays the foundation. It gives students the intellectual clarity to see the difference between *Spirit* and *Nature*. This is the "theory" stage – after which comes the "practice" stage. The wisdom moves from intellectual knowledge to lived experiential revelation. This is where real Awakening begins.

The Heart of Raja Yoga: Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras and the 8-Limbs Progression

To keep the path perfectly clear, the great sage **Patañjali** wrote the *Yoga Sūtras* – the definitive text on Yoga. In just three opening lines, he explained the essence of practicing Yoga:

Atha yogānuśāsanam.
Yogaḥ citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ.
Tadā draṣṭuḥ svarūpe avasthānam.

"Now the teaching of Yoga begins.
Yoga = the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind.
Then the Seer rests in their own true nature."

– Patañjali, Yoga Sūtras 1.1-3

This is Yoga: ceasing mental chatter, worry, and rumination for supreme peace (Samādhi), beyond all frustration or suffering. Patañjali outlines Raja Yoga as an exact science for purifying and controlling the mind. It's called 8-Limbs Yoga (*Aṣṭāṅga Yoga*) for its eight sequential stages of progression (not to be confused with modern "Ashtanga Yoga"). The first six are things *you do*; the last two *happen* naturally, as you progress. These eight comprise Yoga as a path or tradition. If these are absent, it's simply NOT Yoga.

Things the student *does*:

1. **Yama (self-restraint)**: Ethical guidelines like non-violence and truthfulness
2. **Niyama (self-discipline)**: Practices like cleanliness and contentment
3. **Āsana (posture training)**: Building a strong, steady, comfortable body
4. **Prāṇāyāma (breath training)**: Mastering life energy through breath control
5. **Pratyāhāra (inward withdrawal)**: Turning senses away from all distractions
6. **Dhāraṇā (concentration)**: Focusing the mind steadily on what has been taught

Things that *happen* to the student:

7. **Dhyāna (contemplation)**: Deep, effortless meditative absorption
8. **Samādhi (union)**: The ultimate peace, clarity, and serenity – Yoga itself

This is Raja Yoga – complete, integrated, and transformative. An authentic Yoga school teaches or can teach all this. Sadly, most modern schools focus entirely on **āsana**, sometimes with bits of breathwork. Rarely do they teach Yama, Niyama, meditation, or Self-inquiry. The result is not Yoga, but "stretching classes" using Yoga postures. Helpful for health, yes – but not the path to awakening – not *"Yoga"*.

WHY SHAMBHALA STANDS APART

We have been teaching on Koh Tao, Thailand, since **1997** – Koh Tao's original Yoga Center. For decades, we have dedicated ourselves to keeping Yoga's integrity alive here on Koh Tao. In today's world, what passes for spiritual teaching and Yoga often feels shallow. The bar can be low, but where do you turn for true guidance? At Shambhala, we offer honest, no-frills, high-quality instruction in Raja Yoga and Jñāna Yoga. Our teachers are dedicated seekers who've practiced the above for decades, holding the highest standards. We watch joyfully as students transform their lives through a sincere practice of authentic Yoga. If you're ready for authentic Yoga that transforms, or are just curious to experience the type of Yoga that reflects its full heritage, you are most welcome to join us at Shambhala Yoga Center.

Shambhala Yoga Centre: *authentic Yoga in its fullest, deepest, most luminous sense.*