

Yoga Terms

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Following are common terms use in the yogic tradition. If a word or phrase in a description appears in **bold**, it can be found under its own heading.

abhaya or abhayam: lit. "fearlessness."

agni: lit. "fire." Also the internal fires of the body, often referred to as **tapas**, meaning sacred heat. When capitalized, the god of fire.

ahamkaara or ahankara: ego, self-love; selfish individuality. The mental faculty of individuation; sense of duality and separateness from others. Ahankara is characterized by the sense of I-ness (abhimana), sense of mine-ness, identifying with the body (madiyah), planning for one's own happiness (mamasukha), brooding over sorrow (mamaduhkha), and possessiveness (mama idam).

ahimsa: lit. "noninjury." Nonviolence or nonhurtfulness. Refraining from causing harm to others, physically, mentally or emotionally. Ahimsa is the first and most important of the yamas (restraints). It is the cardinal virtue upon which all others depend.

ajnana: a term of Vedanta philosophy meaning ignorance, individual or cosmic. According to nondualistic Vedanta it is responsible for the perception of multiplicity in the relative world and also for humanity's bondage and suffering.

ananda: lit. "bliss."

arjava or arjavam: lit. "straightforwardness" or "uprightness."

asana: yoga poses or postures.

Atman: the Self, or Soul; denotes also the Supreme Soul, which, according to nondualistic Vedanta, is one with the individual soul.

ayama: lit. "stretch."

ayurveda: science of life. Practiced in India for the past 5,000 years, ayurveda is a comprehensive system that combines natural therapies with a highly personalized approach to treatment of disease. Ayurvedic medicine places equal emphasis on body, mind, and spirit, and strives to restore the innate harmony and balance of the individual.

bandha: bondage to the human condition of finite existence.

Bhagavad Gita: lit. "Lord's Song." Ancient Hindu scripture describing the life and times of **Krishna**.

bhakti: lit. "devotion." Surrender to God, gods, or guru. Bhakti extends from the simplest expression of devotion to the ego-decimating principle of prapatti, which is total surrender. Bhakti is the foundation of all sects of Hinduism, as well as yoga schools throughout the world.

bhakti yoga: union through devotion. Bhakti Yoga is the practice of devotional disciplines, worship, prayer, chanting, and singing with the aim of awakening love in the heart and opening oneself to God's grace.

bhastra: one of the eight types of breath control used in **Hatha Yoga**

Buddha: lit. "the Enlightened One." The founder of Buddhism.

buddhi: The determinative faculty of the mind that makes decisions; sometimes translated as "intellect." Another translation is the higher mind, or wisdom.

chakras: nerve centers, or "wheels" of energy, located along the spine and considered a part of the **subtle body**.

cit or chit: lit. "consciousness" or "awareness." Philosophically, pure awareness; transcendent consciousness, as in Sat-chit-ananda. In mundane usage, chit means perception; consciousness.

darshana: lit. "vision" or sight." Insight or visionary states regarded as a result of meditation.

daya: compassion to all beings.

dharma: right action, truth in action, righteousness, morality, virtue, duty, the dictates of God, code of conduct. The inner constitution of a thing that governs its growth.

drishti: lit. "pure seeing."

eight limbs of yoga or the eightfold path: in Sanskrit, this is called Ashtanga Yoga or Astanga Yoga. It is a school of yoga as taught by **Patanjali**. The eight limbs are: moral restraint (yama); discipline (niyama); posture (asana); breath control (pranayama); sense withdrawal (pratyahara); concentration (dharana); meditation (dhyana); and ecstasy (samadhi).

eka pada shirshasana: foot-behind-the-head pose.

granthi: lit. "knot." Psychospiritual blockages of energy or currents within the body, the removal of which is necessary for self-realization.

gross body: physical body.

guru: one who leads a seeker from darkness to light. "Gu" means "darkness" and "ru" means "light." Guru is therefore the spiritual master who initiates and guides a seeker from darkness to light. A master; teacher. An authority of great knowledge or skill. A title for a teacher or guide in any subject, such as music, dance, sculpture, but especially religion.

hatha yoga: lit. "forceful yoga." A system of physical and mental exercise developed in ancient times as a means of rejuvenation by rishis ("seers" or Vedic bards) and tapasvins (ascetics) who meditated for long hours, and used today in preparing the body and mind for meditation. Its elements are 1) postures (asana), 2) cleansing practices (dhauti or shodhana), 3) breath control (pranayama), 4) locks (bandha, which temporarily restrict local flows of prana) and 5) hand gestures (mudra), all of which regulate the flow of prana and purify the inner and outer bodies. Hatha yoga is broadly practiced in many traditions. In the West, hatha yoga has been adopted as a health-promoting, limbering, stress-reducing form of exercise, often included in aerobic routines. Esoterically, ha and tha, respectively, indicate the microcosmic sun (ha) and moon (tha), which symbolize the masculine current, pingala nadi, and feminine current, ida nadi, in the human body.

japa: lit. "recitation" or "repetition." Reciting sacred texts, practiced verbally and mentally.

jalandhara bandha: net-holding lock. Like a fisherman would use to hold one end of his net beneath his chin, while casting out the rest of it.

Jana Yoga: yoga of knowledge.

Jana yoga vyavasthiti: steadfastness in seeking wisdom and

practicing yoga

jiva: living being or life. The individual soul, which in essence is one with the Universal Soul.

jiva-mukta: spiritual liberation. Jiva means "life," and mukta means "liberation." Jiva-mukta therefore, means to be spiritually liberated while still living in a mortal body.

jiva-mukti: one who has found spiritual freedom while still living in the flesh

kapalabhati: a breathing practice that helps stimulate the brain and energize the body. "Kapal" means "skull" and "bhati" means "light" or "luster."

karma: lit. "action" or "deed." Karma refers to 1) any act or deed; 2) the principle of cause and effect; 3) a consequence or "fruit of action."

Karma Yoga: yoga of work or service.

kirtan: chanting; signing devotional songs; mantras that are sung to music.

kosa: lit. "sheath" or "covering." The following are the five kosas as described in Vedanta philosophy: (1) the annamayakosa, or gross physical sheath, made of and sustained by food; (2) the pranamayakosa, or vital sheath, consisting of the five pranas or vital forces; (3) the manomayakosa, or mental sheath; (4) the vijñanamayakosa, or sheath of intelligence; (5) the anandamayakosa, or sheath of bliss. These five sheaths cover the Soul, which is the innermost reality or the jiva and is untouched by the characteristics of the sheaths.

krishna: lit. "puller." Related to kṛṣṭiḥ, meaning "drawing, attracting." One of the most popular Gods of the Hindu pantheon so-called because he attracts devotees to himself. He is worshiped by Vaishnavas as the eighth avatara, or incarnation, of Vishnu. He is best known as the Supreme Personage depicted in the Mahabharata, and specifically in the Bhagavad Gita. For Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Krishna is the Godhead.

kriya: lit. "act, action, undertaking, activity, or process." In a general sense, kriya can refer to doing of any kind. Specifically, it names religious action, especially rites or ceremonies to cleanse and purify the mind. In yoga terminology, kriya names involuntary physical movements caused by the arousal of the **kundalini**.

Kriya Yoga: yoga of technique.

kundalini: the divine serpent energy resting dormantly at **muladhara chakra**. This energy is stimulated by Tantra Yoga practices and can be brought to rise upwards, through the major chakras to the Thousand Petaled Lotus at the crown of the head.

Laya Yoga: laya means "absorption" or "dissolution" (of the mind). A variant of Kundalini Yoga, Laya Yoga awakens the latent power of kundalini, causing it to rise from muladhara to ajna (or beyond), thus dissolving the (conscious) mind and giving birth to the supra-conscious state of **samadhi** or **turiya**.

lingam: lit. "phallus." The masculine principal and male symbol. The lingam and the trident are both common symbols of **Shiva**.

lotus pose or asana: The most famous of **hatha yoga** poses and the optimum position for meditation. It is known as the **padmasana (lotus pose)**, as the legs are crossed, turning the soles of the feet up, which then resemble a lotus flower.

maitri: loving-kindness, friendliness, friendship

manas: the faculty of doubt and volition, sometimes translated as "mind" to refer to the lower or instinctive mind, seat of desire and governor of sensory and motor organs. Manas is termed the undisciplined, empirical mind. Manas is characterized by desire, determination, doubt, faith, lack of faith, steadfastness, lack of steadfastness, shame, intellection, and fear.

mantra: lit. "instrument of thought." A prayer or song of praise; a mystical verse or magical formula used to invoke a deity or to acquire a divine power. Commonly used to refer to any word, phrase, or prayer used for meditation. One of the two main sections of the Vedas. Mantras are chanted loudly during **puja** to invoke the gods. Certain mantras are repeated softly or mentally for **japa**, the subtle tones quieting the mind, harmonizing the inner bodies and stimulating latent spiritual qualities. Hinduism's universal mantra is "aum" or "**om**."; The Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary are but two examples of a Christian mantra.

maya: lit. "consisting of" or "made of." As in manomaya, "made of mind." A term of Vedanta philosophy denoting ignorance obscuring the vision of Reality; the cosmic illusion on account of which the One appears as the many, the Absolute as the relative.

moksha: lit. "liberation." Release from transmigration, **samsara**, the round of births and deaths, which occurs after karma has been resolved and nirvikalpa samadhi--realization of the Self, Parasiva--has been attained. Same as mukti.

mudra: lit. "seal" or "gesture." Esoteric hand gestures that express specific energies or powers. Usually accompanied by precise visualizations, mudras are a vital element of ritual worship (**puja**), dance and yoga.

mula: lit. "root." The root, base or bottom or basis of anything, as in **muladhara chakra**. Foundational, original or causal.

mula bandha: lit. "root lock," performed by contracting the muscles of the anus sphincter. It is used to redirect the downwards moving apana vayu and send it back upwards.

muladhara chakra: lit. "wheel of the root support." This chakra is the first major energy center; located near the coccyx at the coccygeal plexus, it opens to the rear.

nada: lit. "sound; tone; vibration." Metaphysically, the mystic sounds of the Eternal, of which the highest is the transcendent or Soundless Sound, Paranada, the first vibration from which creation emanates. Nada also refers to other psychic sounds heard during deep meditation, including those resembling various musical instruments. Most commonly, nada refers to ordinary sound.

nirvana or **nirvahana:** blowing out, as a flame. Annihilation of desire, passion, and ego; liberation, characterized by freedom and bliss.

om: lit. "yes, verily." The most sacred mantra of Hinduism. An alternate transliteration of Aum (the sounds A and U blend to become O).

OM Mani Padme Hum: literally, "jewel in the lotus," signifying **lingham** in the **yoni**. An ancient and sacred Tantric mantra, relating (among other things) to the maithuna (intercourse) ritual.

padmasana: See: lotus pose

Patanjali: lit. "possessed of reverence." A Saivite Natha siddha who lived sometime between about 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., but the exact date is unknown. Patanjali traveled throughout much of India, studying and analyzing what different practitioners and teachers were doing under the name of "yoga" and then codified the ancient yoga philosophy that outlines the path to enlightenment through purification, control, and transcendence of

the mind. Patanjali probably did not actually contribute any new ideas or practices to yoga, rather he provided a valuable structural analysis of the yoga of his day. His great work, the Yoga Sutras, comprises 200 aphorisms delineating Ashtanga (eight-limbed), raja (kingly) or siddha (perfection) Yoga. Still today it is the foremost text on meditative yoga.

prana: lit. "vital air." From the root word "pran," which means "to breathe." Vital energy. Prana in the human body moves in the pranamaya kosha as five primary life currents known as vayus, "vital airs or winds." These are prana (outgoing breath), apana (incoming breath), vyana (retained breath), udana (ascending breath) and samana (equalizing breath). Each governs crucial bodily functions, and all bodily energies are modifications of these. Usually prana refers to the life principle, but sometimes denotes energy, power or the animating force of the cosmos.

Prana Yoga: yoga of the life force.

pranayama: yogic control of the breath.

puja: Hindu worship; flower offerings.

Raja Yoga: integral or royal path of **Patanjali**.

samadhi: lit. "putting together" or "joining or combining with," hence, a state of "oneness" related to feelings of absorption, bliss, ecstasy, trance, complete concentration, and communion with God.

samsara: the world of change and becoming; the relative world.

sannyasa: stage of life of renunciation and liberation.

satya: truth.

Shakti: lit. "power," "ability," "strength," or "energy." The feminine aspect of divine creative expression, which in yoga is considered to reside at the base of the spine, in **muladhara chakra**.

shanti: peace.

Shiva: lit. "auspicious," "favorable," "benign," or "benevolent." The yang, or masculine, aspect of divine creative expression, which in yoga is considered to reside at the crown of the head, in the sahasrara chakra. Also, the Destroyer God; the Third Person of the Hindu Trinity, the other two being Brahma and Vishnu.

subtle body: known in Sanskrit as sukshma-sharira, the subtle body is the psychomental aspect of the human body that exists independent of the physical, or **gross body**, and is often considered to survive the death of the physical body and is involved in the process of rebirth and eternal life.

surya: sun. If capitalized, the Vedic Sun God or god of the enlightened mind.

surya namakara: lit. "obeisance to the sun." Sun salutations, a series of flowing yoga poses.

swami: lit. "one with the self." Hindu monk.

Tantra: lit. a "loom," hence: "framework," "structure," or "essential part." "Loom" is used to suggest the two cosmic principles (male-female, ying-yang, ha-tha) that make up the warp and woof of the woven fabric of life in the universe.

tapas: lit. "heat" or "glow." Sacred heat generated by certain physical or spiritual practices; ritual self-purification; austerity.

turiya: lit. the "fourth," being the fourth state of consciousness, beyond waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. This state is so far

removed from all normal states of consciousness, that it is utterly beyond words to describe it. Therefore, the writer of Mandukya Upanishad chose this simple numerical designation to avoid any misleading attempt at a descriptive name for the state, which would serve only to confuse the student. It is said of this fourth state that, "Those who know, do not say [cannot say]; and those who say, do not know [because if they did know, they could not express it in words]."

uddhiyana bandha: lit. the "flying up lock," being the abdominal lock, a pose used in **hatha yoga**. In practice, the diaphragm and all the abdominal organs beneath it, down to the sexual organs, are lifted, so that they "fly up" toward the thoracic cavity.

ujjayi: lit. "victorious." One of the eight types of breath control, or **pranayama**, used in **hatha yoga**; the process of filling up the lungs so they are fully expanded.

Upanishads: One of the sections of the Vedas. There are 108 Upanishads extant, of which 11 are the most important. Regarded as sacred revelation and composed over thousands of years, predating the origins of Buddhism circa 500 B.C.E. and continuing into the 20th century. See: **Vedas**

Vedas: ancient sacred texts of Hindu India the ultimate authority of the Hindu religion and philosophy. The earliest Vedas were oral traditions handed down from generation to generation amongst the nomadic Aryan peoples who eventually moved into the Indian subcontinent and merged with the indigenous culture. The earliest Vedas were composed perhaps as early as 3,000 B.C.E. but none were written down until the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E. They were arranged by Vyasa into four books, namely, the Rig-Veda, the Yajur-Veda, the Sama-Veda, and the Atharva-Veda.

yoga: lit. "union" or "communion." From the root "yuj," which means "to yoke" or "to harness." A term widely used today to describe a Hindu spiritual discipline of self-realization and the union of individual will to the will of God.

Yoga Sutras: classical text of **Patanjali** on yoga.