

## Yoga: past and present

### History

Yoga originated in India approximately 5,000 years ago. Its classical period however, was approximately 300 CE when the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali were written. The Yoga Sutras systematically laid down the principles and the aims of Yoga in 196 short statements called Sutras. These Sutras were committed to memory and the teacher would expound upon their meaning over time. From this foundation Yoga evolved into a diverse set of practices and schools of thought.

*'Yoga is very ancient, certainly much older than the archaeological record, which is the only reliable one we have at present. The archaeological finds indicate a well-established system of yoga practice, which must have existed long before the figurines and seals that have been found were fashioned. One of the difficulties of tracing a history of yoga has been that by its nature it leaves nothing behind except myths and legends of miraculous powers possessed by some of the more accomplished practitioners of the art. Only in the last thousand years or so have efforts been made to provide it with intellectual content such as would elevate it to the status of philosophy in its own right. The attempts have not been successful because yoga is not an intellectual activity. So in India it has tended to run in harness with the Samkhya philosophy, of which more later. Yoga has in fact tended all along to be anti-intellectual, even anti-religious. To be true to itself it must ever stand close to the spontaneous fount of human creativity. It is more intuitive than reasonable, more experimental than formalistic, more other-worldly than of this world, and more akin to art than to science.*

*The reason why Yoga survives, and will continue to live, is that it is the repository of something basic in the human soul and psyche.'*<sup>1</sup>

Although Yoga's history is bound up with India and it has been closely aligned with many of the religions, Yoga itself is not religious.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Yoga became more widely understood and practised, partially because of the British presence in India and Britain's exposure to the philosophy behind Yoga, but also because of the growth of people traveling to India in the 1960s and 1970s. These two elements laid the seed for what we see today where Yoga is taught in gyms, on beaches and in parks and is seen as a part of the modern interest in health.

### BKS Iyengar and Iyengar Yoga

One of the defining individuals who brought about this transformation was BKS Iyengar. Iyengar lived in India and was born in 1918. Throughout his life he taught Yoga with a focus on the postures called asanas. Iyengar came to prominence in the 1960s through his book *Light on Yoga*. Iyengar understood that Yoga asanas made the body fit, had a profound effect upon our state of mind, and generated a sense of wellbeing.

His method of teaching was to focus on precise instructions delivered systematically that the students followed. This developed concentration as well as strength and flexibility. He pronounced that Yoga could be practiced by everyone regardless of age or ability and used props and supports to make the practice accessible to the broadest range of individuals possible. Iyengar taught the renowned violinist Yehudi Menuhin who sponsored his visits to Europe and the USA. Menuhin and many others developed a lifelong practice of Iyengar Yoga due to the physical and mental benefits they gained through its practice.

Yoga Mandir teaches Iyengar Yoga and all our teachers are registered with the BKS Iyengar Yoga Association of Australia [www.iyengaryoga.asn.au](http://www.iyengaryoga.asn.au) .

<sup>1</sup> Worthington, Vivian, History of Yoga

## Yoga for the modern era

Much of the Yoga taught in the world today is focused on postures (asanas). This approach is now referred to as posture based practice. As it has become more popular, new approaches and styles of Yoga have emerged. In many ways Yoga has become an alternative to gym.

The physical benefits of Yoga are significant. Because of its focus on alignment Iyengar Yoga is often practiced to alleviate backache, sore knees and stiffness in the shoulders. It is often used by sports people to support their training and performance demands. Iyengar Yoga seeks to establish a balance between strength and stretch. Students in Years 11 and 12 engaged in the college system are often focused and stressed and both their body and mind are continuing to evolve. If Yoga were offered on a regular basis during school hours, it would be an excellent opportunity for students to alleviate the strain on their bodies as well as provide responses that can be applied to the aches and pains so many students experience.

Increasingly Yoga is also being recognised for its mental health potential. Our schooling system recognises that the mind affects the body and so too the body affects the state of the mind. Primary schools take children out of the classroom to move and exercise within the routines of the week. This movement calms and assists the students to return to work within the classroom with less disruption in a more focused way. As students grow older, their opportunities to move get reduced as the educational pressures increase. When taught well, Yoga requires the older student to focus their attention on specific parts of the body to perform the asanas with precision and alignment. This has a calming and steadying effect to both the mind and the body.

The focus in the College program is on developing **Mobility and stability**. Mobility is delivered through a combination of movement base and asanas where the body and the breath are synchronised. This coordination of body and breath has a calming effect on the mind. Stability comes through standing asanas that focus on muscle coordination in much the same way as dance.

In an era when we, as a society, spend longer hours than ever at desks and on computers, Yoga has greater relevance for today's youth than ever before.

Yoga Mandir is seeking to establish links with individual schools and colleges who would be willing to offer our College Program as an elective to their students. Details of the College Program are included in this College information pack.