

SKM YOGA

Yoga Teacher Training Programme

BRANCHES &

TRADITIONS OF YOGA

A Complete Study of the Eight Great Paths

Karma · Ashtanga · Jnana · Bhakti · Tantra · Kundalini · Mantra · Hatha

Compiled & Written by

Dr. Shivam Mishra

Founder, SKM Yoga

www.skmyoga.in

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Foreword

Dear Yoga Teacher Training Students,

The tradition of yoga is not a single, monolithic path. It is a vast, luminous river formed from many tributaries — each one arising from the same divine source, each one reflecting the infinite creativity of human consciousness in its search for freedom, truth, and the deepest experience of life.

Over thousands of years, the great seers, sages, and masters of India explored the full range of human nature and developed specific paths of yoga that speak to specific types of human beings. The intellectual finds liberation through the path of knowledge. The devotional heart finds it through the path of love. The active person finds it through the path of selfless service. The disciplined practitioner finds it through the mastery of body, breath, and mind.

This study guide presents eight major branches and traditions of yoga that every yoga teacher must understand deeply. These are not separate religions or competing philosophies — they are eight facets of a single jewel. Together they form a complete map of the human journey toward liberation, wholeness, and the direct recognition of our true nature.

As you study these eight paths, I invite you not only to understand them intellectually but to feel them — to sense which path resonates most deeply with your own nature, and to appreciate how each path offers something essential and unique to the complete picture of yoga.

May this study deepen your roots as a yoga teacher and expand your ability to serve students of every kind.

Dr. Shivam Mishra

Founder, SKM Yoga

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Introduction: The Eight Branches of Yoga

What Are the Branches of Yoga?

The word 'Yoga' comes from the Sanskrit root 'Yuj,' meaning to yoke, to unite, or to join. Yoga is, at its most fundamental level, the science and art of union — the progressive dissolution of the false separation between the individual self and the universal Self, between the small ego-personality and the vast, luminous awareness that is our true nature.

Over the course of thousands of years, the yoga tradition evolved into many distinct branches and schools — each representing a unique approach to the central goal of liberation. These branches are not competing systems. They are complementary expressions of the same fundamental teaching, each refined to speak to a specific human temperament, capacity, and inclination.

Just as the human body has many systems — skeletal, muscular, nervous, circulatory — that work together to sustain life, the many branches of yoga work together to address every dimension of the human being: the body, the breath, the mind, the intellect, the emotions, the energy body, and the spirit.

"There is only one yoga — the yoga of Self-realization. The various paths are the various doorways through which different human beings may enter the same temple." — Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa

Why Eight Branches?

This study guide focuses on eight major branches of the yoga tradition that every trained yoga teacher must understand. These eight represent the most historically significant, philosophically complete, and practically relevant paths within the vast ocean of yogic teaching:

No.	Branch	Full Name	Core Principle
1	Karma Yoga	<i>The Path of Selfless Action</i>	Action without attachment to results
2	Ashtanga Yoga	<i>The Royal Eight-Limbed Path</i>	Systematic path of mental mastery
3	Jnana Yoga	<i>The Path of Knowledge & Wisdom</i>	Liberation through discriminative inquiry
4	Bhakti Yoga	<i>The Path of Devotion & Love</i>	Liberation through total love of the Divine
5	Tantra Yoga	<i>The Path of Sacred Energy</i>	Transforming all experience into liberation
6	Kundalini Yoga	<i>The Path of Awakened Energy</i>	Awakening and raising the primordial

			energy
7	Mantra Yoga	<i>The Path of Sacred Sound</i>	Liberation through vibrational consciousness
8	Hatha Yoga	<i>The Path of Physical Mastery</i>	Purifying body and energy for higher states

Each of these paths has its own philosophical foundation (Darshana), its own set of practices (Sadhana), its own sacred texts (Shashtra), and its own tradition of teachers (Guru Parampara). Understanding all eight gives the yoga teacher a truly comprehensive and panoramic view of the tradition they are transmitting.

The Three Dimensions of Every Branch

Every branch of yoga can be understood through three dimensions, which we will explore for each path in this guide:

Introduction	The historical origin, philosophical foundation, and essential character of the branch — what makes it unique and what type of practitioner it is best suited for.
Philosophy	The core philosophical teachings, key concepts, and worldview of the branch — the understanding of reality, the human being, and liberation that underlies its practices.
Parts / Practices	The specific practices, techniques, disciplines, and components that constitute the path — how the philosophical understanding is translated into actual sadhana (practice).

Note for Yoga Teachers: As you study these eight branches, remember that most authentic yoga teachers draw from multiple paths simultaneously. The great masters of yoga were never confined to a single branch. Your role is to understand all eight deeply enough to recognize their elements in students' questions, experiences, and needs — and to offer the appropriate teaching at the appropriate time.

Branch 1 of 8

KARMA YOGA

The Path of Selfless Action — Nishkama Karma

Introduction to Karma Yoga

Karma Yoga is the yoga of action — one of the oldest, most universally accessible, and most profoundly practical paths in the entire yoga tradition. Its teachings are most fully developed in the Bhagavad Gita, the great dialogue between Lord Krishna and the warrior Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, which is itself one of the most celebrated spiritual texts in world literature.

The word 'Karma' comes from the Sanskrit root 'Kri,' meaning 'to do' or 'to act.' Every action we perform — physical, verbal, or mental — creates an impression and generates a result. In ordinary life, we are bound by our actions because we perform them with personal desire and ego-attachment: we want specific results for ourselves, and when we get them we are pleased, and when we do not we suffer. This cycle of desire, action, result, and reaction is what Karma Yoga seeks to transform.

Karma Yoga is not the yoga of renouncing action — that is impossible, since even breathing and thinking are actions. It is the yoga of the right relationship to action: performing every duty with full engagement, full skill, and complete non-attachment to the personal fruits of one's efforts.

Karma Yoga is uniquely suited to householders, professionals, activists, social workers, parents, and all those whose lives are primarily expressed through active engagement with the world. It teaches that the kitchen, the office, the hospital, and the marketplace can all become places of yoga — fields of liberation — when action is performed in the right spirit.

"You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are never entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty." — Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 47

Philosophy of Karma Yoga

The Law of Karma

At the heart of Karma Yoga lies the understanding of the Law of Karma — the universal principle of cause and effect that governs all of existence. Every action generates a corresponding reaction. Every thought, word, and deed leaves an impression (Samskara) in the individual consciousness and sets in motion consequences that will inevitably return to the actor.

There are three types of Karma recognized in the yoga tradition:

Sanchita Karma	The accumulated karma from all past lives and past actions — the entire storehouse of karmic residue that has not yet ripened into experience. This is the sum total of all seeds planted by past actions.
Prarabdha Karma	The portion of Sanchita Karma that has 'begun' — the karma that is currently ripening in this lifetime. This determines the basic conditions of our birth: body, family, circumstances. It cannot be avoided.
Kriyamana Karma	The karma being created right now through present actions. This is the only karma we can directly influence. By acting rightly in the present, we plant seeds for positive future experiences.

Nishkama Karma — Desireless Action

The central practice of Karma Yoga is Nishkama Karma — desireless action, or action without craving for personal results. This does not mean acting without care or without skill; on the contrary, the Karma Yogi performs every action with total dedication and maximum excellence. But the motivation shifts: from 'I want this for myself' to 'I offer this action as a service, as a gift, as worship.'

When action is performed without ego-attachment to results, two things happen. First, the action is performed more effectively — without the distortion of personal anxiety, self-promotion, or fear of failure, the actor can bring their full clarity and skill to the task. Second, the action no longer creates new karmic bondage — it becomes what the tradition calls 'Karma Yoga' in the strict sense: action that liberates rather than binds.

Yajna — Sacrifice and Offering

Karma Yoga is deeply connected to the Vedic concept of Yajna — sacred sacrifice or offering. In the ancient Vedic tradition, Yajna referred to the fire ceremony in which offerings were made to the divine. Karma Yoga takes this concept out of the ritual context and places it in everyday life: every action becomes a Yajna, an offering to the divine, when it is performed with the spirit of selfless service and dedication.

The Bhagavad Gita states: 'The world is bound by action unless action is performed as sacrifice. Therefore, O son of Kunti, perform all your actions as sacrifice, free from all attachment.' This teaching transforms the ordinary act of work into an act of worship — and in so doing, transforms the worker.

Parts / Practices of Karma Yoga

The Six Core Practices

- Svadharma (Right Duty): Performing one's own natural duties with full dedication — the particular responsibilities that arise from one's station, relationships, and innate capacities. Acting according to Svadharma is acting in alignment with one's essential nature.
- Nishkama Karma (Desireless Action): The central practice — performing every action without craving for personal reward. Full effort, full skill, full presence — but releasing the results to the flow of natural law.
- Ishvara Arpana (Offering to the Divine): Mentally dedicating every action to the divine before performing it — transforming work into worship. This can be understood as offering to God, to the universal Self, or simply to the well-being of all.
- Prasada Buddhi (Accepting Results as Grace): Receiving whatever results arise from one's actions — whether success or failure, praise or criticism, gain or loss — with equanimity, as a gift or offering from the divine, rather than as a personal triumph or defeat.
- Loka Sangraha (Service to the World): Acting not for personal advancement but for the welfare and upliftment of all beings. This is the social and humanitarian dimension of Karma Yoga — recognizing that we are all deeply interconnected, and that our individual liberation is inseparable from the liberation of all.
- Viveka in Action (Discrimination): Bringing the discernment of right action (Viveka) to every choice — understanding which actions are aligned with Dharma (righteousness) and which perpetuate the cycle of bondage.

For Yoga Teachers: Karma Yoga is perhaps the most immediately applicable branch for yoga teachers themselves. Teaching yoga as service — not for personal recognition or financial gain alone, but as an offering to students and to the tradition — is Karma Yoga in action. Every class taught with full dedication and non-attachment is an act of liberation.

Branch 2 of 8

ASHTANGA YOGA

The Royal Eight-Limbed Path — Raja Yoga

Introduction to Ashtanga Yoga

Ashtanga Yoga — literally 'Eight-Limbed Yoga' — is the systematic path of mental and spiritual mastery codified by the great sage Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras, composed approximately 2,000 years ago. It is also widely known as Raja Yoga, the 'Royal Yoga,' because it works most directly on the source of all human experience: the mind itself.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras is a masterwork of precision and depth — 196 aphorisms that constitute the most comprehensive, systematic, and philosophically rigorous presentation of yoga practice in the entire tradition. In this text, Patanjali defines yoga in its most fundamental sense: 'Yogas chitta vritti nirodhah' — Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind.

Ashtanga Yoga is not merely a physical practice (though the modern 'Ashtanga Vinyasa' style of Sri K. Pattabhi Jois shares the name). It is a complete eight-dimensional curriculum for the transformation of the entire human being — from the outermost level of ethical conduct to the innermost experience of pure consciousness. Each of the eight limbs addresses a specific level of the human being, and together they constitute a complete map of the yogic journey.

Among all the branches of yoga, Ashtanga Yoga is arguably the most directly relevant to yoga teacher training, because it provides the overarching philosophical framework within which all the other practices — asana, pranayama, meditation — find their place and meaning.

"Yogas chitta vritti nirodhah — Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind. Tada drastuh svarupe avasthanam — Then the seer abides in their own true nature." — Patanjali Yoga Sutras, 1.2 & 1.3

Philosophy of Ashtanga Yoga

The Philosophical Foundation: Samkhya-Yoga

Ashtanga Yoga is grounded in the Samkhya philosophical system, one of the oldest and most sophisticated philosophies of ancient India. Samkhya posits a fundamental dualism at the heart of existence: Purusha (pure consciousness, the eternal witness) and Prakriti (matter, nature, the field of all manifestation).

Purusha (Pure Consciousness)	The eternal, unchanging, witnessing awareness. It has no qualities, no attributes, no activity. It simply is — pure, luminous, free. The true Self. There are as many individual Purushas as there are individual beings.
Prakriti (Nature / Matter)	The primordial creative energy that produces all of manifest existence — from the subtlest mental impressions to the grossest physical matter. Prakriti is constituted by the three Gunas: Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas.
The Three Gunas	Sattva (clarity, luminosity, harmony), Rajas (activity, passion, movement), and Tamas (inertia, heaviness, dullness). Every object, thought, and emotion in existence is a combination of these three qualities in varying proportions.
The Source of Suffering	All suffering arises from the confusion (Avidya) between Purusha and Prakriti — from mistaking the mind, body, emotions, and ego for the true Self. Yoga is the process of clarifying this confusion and restoring the Purusha to its own natural freedom.

The Five Kleshas — The Root Causes of Suffering

Patanjali identifies five Kleshas (afflictions) that are the fundamental causes of all human suffering. These are the psychological roots of all our pain, confusion, and bondage:

- **Avidya (Spiritual Ignorance):** The fundamental misperception — not recognizing one's true nature as pure consciousness. The root from which all other Kleshas grow. All of human suffering ultimately traces back to this one misperception.
- **Asmita (Ego-Sense):** The false identification of the pure witness (Purusha) with the mind-body complex. The 'I am this body,' 'I am these thoughts,' 'I am this personality' that takes itself to be the ultimate reality.
- **Raga (Attachment):** The automatic attraction toward pleasure, toward what we like, toward what gives us gratification. The force that creates craving and addiction at every level — physical, emotional, and mental.
- **Dvesha (Aversion):** The automatic repulsion from pain, from what we dislike, from what threatens the ego. The force that creates anger, fear, and avoidance — equal and opposite to Raga.
- **Abhinivesha (Clinging to Life):** The deep instinctive fear of death and the clinging to one's known existence — even among those who intellectually accept impermanence. This is perhaps the most primal of the Kleshas.

Parts / Practices of Ashtanga Yoga — The Eight Limbs

1. Yama (Ethical Restraints)	The five social ethics: Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truthfulness),
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	Asteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (energy management), Aparigraha (non-possessiveness). These form the moral foundation of all yogic practice — the necessary outer purification.
2. Niyama (Personal Observances)	Five inner disciplines: Saucha (purity), Santosha (contentment), Tapas (disciplined effort), Svadhyaya (self-study), Ishvara Pranidhana (surrender to the divine). The inner cultivation that prepares the practitioner for deeper practice.
3. Asana (Posture)	The physical postures that purify and strengthen the body, develop steadiness and ease, and prepare the physical instrument for pranayama and meditation. Defined by Patanjali as 'Sthira sukham asanam' — steady and comfortable.
4. Pranayama (Breath Regulation)	The systematic expansion and regulation of Prana (vital life force) through breath control techniques. Pranayama purifies the energy body, balances the nervous system, and removes the veils that obscure the light of awareness.
5. Pratyahara (Sense Withdrawal)	The voluntary withdrawal of attention from the pull of external sensory objects — the pivotal limb between outer and inner practice. Not suppression of the senses but liberation from their tyranny. Creates the inner silence that makes deep meditation possible.
6. Dharana (Concentration)	The deliberate practice of fixing and holding the mind's attention on a single chosen object. The systematic training of the attention faculty, building the capacity for sustained voluntary focus that is the foundation of meditation.
7. Dhyana (Meditation)	The unbroken, continuous flow of awareness toward the object of concentration. When Dharana becomes effortless and sustained — when the attention flows toward its object like an unbroken stream of oil — it becomes Dhyana.
8. Samadhi (Absorption)	The culminating state of complete absorption in which the distinction between the meditator, the act of meditation, and the object of meditation dissolves. Only the object remains, luminous and whole. The doorway to Kaivalya — liberation.

Branch 3 of 8

JNANA YOGA

The Path of Knowledge & Wisdom — Viveka-Vichara

Introduction to Jnana Yoga

Jnana Yoga is the path of direct, discriminative wisdom — the path of the philosopher, the scholar, the contemplative, and the seeker of truth through the power of clear inquiry. The word 'Jnana' (pronounced 'Gyana') means knowledge — but not the ordinary knowledge of facts and information. It refers to Para Vidya, the higher knowledge — the direct, experiential knowing of one's own true nature as pure, unlimited awareness.

Jnana Yoga is rooted in the philosophical tradition of Advaita Vedanta — the non-dual philosophy most powerfully expressed by the sage Adi Shankaracharya (8th century CE) and, more recently, by the modern master Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950). Advaita Vedanta teaches that the apparent duality between the individual self (Jivatman) and the universal Self (Brahman) is ultimately an illusion (Maya) — and that direct recognition of this non-dual truth is liberation itself.

Jnana Yoga does not lead to liberation through action or devotion but through the dissolution of ignorance. Its primary question is not 'What should I do?' but 'Who am I?' This persistent, sincere, deeply felt inquiry into the nature of the inquirer — the one who is asking the question — is the central practice of Jnana Yoga.

Jnana Yoga is traditionally said to be the most direct but also the most demanding of paths. It requires an exceptionally refined intellect (Buddhi), a strong capacity for inner stillness, and the courage to question every assumption we have about who and what we are.

"Brahma satyam jagan mithya, jivo Brahmaiva naparah — Brahman alone is real; the world is appearance; the individual soul is none other than Brahman." — Adi Shankaracharya

Philosophy of Jnana Yoga

The Core Teaching: Advaita — Non-Duality

The philosophical heart of Jnana Yoga is Advaita — the teaching that reality is ultimately non-dual. There are not two ultimate realities (self and God, individual and universe) — there is only one. This one reality is called Brahman: infinite, eternal, self-luminous, pure awareness.

The apparent multiplicity and duality of the world — the sense that I am here and you are there, that this is sacred and that is ordinary, that I am separate from God — is the result of Maya, the creative power that produces the appearance of diversity within the one undivided reality. Liberation is not going anywhere or achieving anything: it is the direct seeing-through of Maya, the direct recognition of what is always, already the case.

Brahman	The infinite, eternal, non-dual ground of all existence. Pure awareness, pure being, pure bliss. Neither created nor destroyed. The one reality underlying all appearances.
Atman	The individual Self — the pure awareness at the core of each person. On investigation, Atman and Brahman are found to be identical: 'Aham Brahmasmi' — I am Brahman.
Maya	The creative power that produces the appearance of multiplicity and duality within the one Brahman. Maya is neither real nor unreal — it is the mysterious 'as if' of cosmic creation.
Avidya	Individual ignorance — the personal expression of Maya. The specific not-knowing of one's own nature that results in identifying with the body-mind complex and experiencing separation.
Viveka	Discriminative wisdom — the capacity to distinguish the real (Brahman, the eternal) from the unreal (the world of appearances, the impermanent). The primary faculty cultivated in Jnana Yoga.
Vairagya	Dispassion, non-attachment — the natural freedom from craving that arises when one clearly sees the transient, illusory nature of all objects of desire. The necessary companion of Viveka.

Parts / Practices of Jnana Yoga

The Fourfold Discipline — Sadhana Chatustaya

The tradition of Jnana Yoga specifies four qualifications (Sadhana Chatustaya) that prepare the student for the direct inquiry into the nature of the Self:

- **Viveka (Discrimination):** The developed capacity to distinguish between what is permanent and what is impermanent, what is ultimately real and what is merely apparent. This is not intellectual hair-splitting but a deep, lived understanding of the difference between the eternal Self and the ever-changing body-mind.
- **Vairagya (Dispassion):** The natural arising of freedom from craving — not suppression of desire but a genuine loss of interest in the things of the world as sources of lasting happiness, once their impermanent nature is clearly seen. The mind naturally turns inward when its outward fascinations begin to lose their grip.

- Shatsampat (Six Virtues): Sama (calmness of mind), Dama (mastery over the senses), Uparati (withdrawal from unnecessary activity), Titiksha (endurance), Shraddha (faith in the teacher and the teachings), and Samadhana (single-pointed focus). These six qualities constitute the inner refinement that makes the mind fit for the direct inquiry.
- Mumukshutva (Burning Desire for Liberation): The intense, sincere longing for liberation that burns away all other desires and makes liberation the only real priority. Without this burning desire — called in the tradition a 'forest fire of desire for liberation' — the mind cannot sustain the depth of inquiry required.

Neti Neti — The Practice of Negation

The primary practice of Jnana Yoga is Neti, Neti — 'Not this, not this.' The practitioner systematically inquires into every layer of their experience and recognizes: 'I am not this.' Not the body. Not the sensations. Not the breath. Not the emotions. Not the thoughts. Not the ego-sense. Not even the sense of being a meditator.

What remains when everything that can be observed is recognized as 'not I'? That which cannot be objectified — the pure subject, the witnessing awareness, the Seer itself. That which knows the body but is not the body. That which is aware of thoughts but is not a thought. This is the Atman — the true Self. This recognition is the goal of Jnana Yoga.

Branch 4 of 8

BHAKTI YOGA

The Path of Devotion & Love — Para Bhakti

Introduction to Bhakti Yoga

Bhakti Yoga is the path of love and devotion — the most universal, most accessible, and perhaps most beloved of all the paths of yoga. The word 'Bhakti' comes from the Sanskrit root 'Bhaj,' meaning to serve, to love, to adore, to be deeply devoted to. Bhakti Yoga is the path of liberation through the overwhelming power of love — love for the divine in all its names, forms, and expressions.

Bhakti Yoga finds its fullest philosophical expression in the Bhagavata Purana, the Narada Bhakti Sutras, and the teachings of the great saint-sages of India — figures like Mirabai, Tukaram, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Kabir, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and Swami Vivekananda — whose lives were themselves the most eloquent demonstrations of the transformative power of devotion.

The great beauty of Bhakti Yoga is its radical democracy. It asks nothing of the practitioner in terms of intellectual capacity, physical fitness, or formal education. It asks only for an open, sincere, willing heart. The devotee does not need to understand Advaita Vedanta or master pranayama. They need only to love — wholly, completely, without reservation — and to direct that love toward the divine in whatever form resonates most deeply with their heart.

On the Bhakti path, the ego is not analyzed or controlled or transcended through effort — it is dissolved in love. The separate 'I' that causes all suffering cannot survive in the presence of total, unconditional love. Just as a river loses itself when it flows into the ocean, the devoted heart loses its sense of separation when it flows into the ocean of divine love.

"Let all actions be performed as offerings to God. Let all moments be moments of remembering the Beloved. Let every breath be a prayer. This is Bhakti Yoga." — Narada Bhakti Sutras

Philosophy of Bhakti Yoga

The Nature of Bhakti

The Narada Bhakti Sutras describe Bhakti as 'the highest love for God' (sa tvasmin parama prem rupa). This love is not ordinary human love with its conditions, expectations, and fluctuations. It is Para Bhakti — supreme devotion — a love so total, so unconditional, so all-consuming that it has no object other than the divine and no subject other than the loving heart.

Saguna Bhakti	Devotion to God with form and qualities — worship of a personal deity (Krishna, Shiva, Durga, Rama, etc.) through ritual, prayer, and the cultivation of a loving personal relationship. This is the most accessible form of Bhakti for most practitioners.
Nirguna Bhakti	Devotion to the formless, attributeless absolute — Brahman, pure awareness, the ground of being. This is the highest form of Bhakti, corresponding to the Jnana approach, where love itself dissolves into the formless ocean of awareness.
Nava Vidha Bhakti	The nine classical forms of Bhakti practice: Shravana (hearing the glories of God), Kirtana (singing praises), Smarana (remembering), Padasevana (service), Archana (worship), Vandana (prayer), Dasya (servitude), Sakhya (friendship), and Atma-nivedana (total self-surrender).
Prema Bhakti	The highest form of devotional love — selfless, unconditional, completely free from personal desire. The devotee loves God not for any benefit but simply because love is their nature. This is the state of the greatest Bhakti saints.

Parts / Practices of Bhakti Yoga

- **Kirtan (Devotional Chanting):** The communal singing of divine names and praises — one of the most powerful and immediately accessible Bhakti practices. Kirtan dissolves self-consciousness, opens the heart, purifies the mind, and creates a field of collective devotional energy. The repetition of divine names (Nama Sankirtana) is considered in the Bhakti tradition to be the most powerful practice for the current age.
- **Puja (Ritual Worship):** The formal, ritualistic offering of devotion to the divine through flowers, incense, light, food, water, and prayer. Puja is a practice that engages all the senses in worship — transforming every act of preparation and offering into an act of love.
- **Japa (Repetition of Divine Names):** The continuous, reverential repetition of a sacred name or mantra — typically performed with a mala (prayer beads) of 108 beads. Japa purifies the mind by filling it with the divine name, gradually replacing agitation, distraction, and ego-thoughts with the vibration of the Beloved.
- **Sravana (Hearing Sacred Stories):** Listening attentively to the scriptures, the lives of the saints, and the teachings of the guru. The Bhakti tradition holds that the stories of God — particularly as told in the Bhagavata Purana — have the power to directly open the heart when heard with receptive devotion.
- **Smarana (Continuous Remembrance):** The practice of keeping the thought, feeling, and sense of the divine continuously present in the mind throughout all activities of daily life. 'Remember God with every breath' is the essential instruction of all Bhakti masters.

- Seva (Selfless Service): Serving other human beings as forms of the divine — recognizing God in every face, every being, every creature. This is the meeting point of Bhakti Yoga and Karma Yoga — love expressed through action.

Branch 5 of 8

TANTRA YOGA

The Path of Sacred Energy — Shakti Sadhana

Introduction to Tantra Yoga

Tantra Yoga is one of the most widely misunderstood, most frequently misrepresented, and — in its authentic form — most profound branches of the yoga tradition. In the modern Western world, 'Tantra' has become almost synonymous with sexuality, which is a radical distortion of a tradition of extraordinary philosophical depth and comprehensive spiritual practice.

Classical Tantra is a complete spiritual philosophy and practice system that emerged in India between approximately the 5th and 12th centuries CE, expressed in a large body of texts called the Tantras and Agamas. Its central, radically world-affirming insight distinguishes it from virtually every other spiritual tradition: everything — including the body, the senses, pleasure, sexuality, emotions, relationships, the material world, and even what we would ordinarily call negative experiences — can and must be used as a vehicle for liberation.

While most classical yoga and Vedantic traditions treated the body and the material world as obstacles to be transcended or renounced, Tantra said: No. The same world that appears to bind us can liberate us — if we learn to engage with it in the right way. The body is not an obstacle to the divine; it is the temple of the divine. The senses are not traps; they are instruments of revelation. Shakti — the divine creative energy — is not separate from Shiva (pure consciousness); She is His expression, His dance, His love.

"He who realizes the truth of the body can come to know the truth of the universe." — Ratnasara (Tantric text)

Philosophy of Tantra Yoga

Shiva and Shakti — The Cosmic Dance

The foundational philosophical framework of Tantra is the relationship between Shiva and Shakti — the two ultimate principles of existence. Shiva represents pure consciousness, the unchanging witness, the formless ground of being. Shakti is the divine creative energy — the dynamic power that produces all of manifest existence, from the subtlest thought to the densest physical matter.

Shiva

Pure, formless, unchanging consciousness. The absolute witness.

	Beyond all qualities, beyond all activity, beyond all manifestation. The 'ground' of existence — the still ocean in which all waves arise and subside.
Shakti	The divine creative energy — the cosmic 'yes' that produces all manifestation. Everything that exists is Shakti — from a flower to a thunderstorm, from a loving thought to the creation of galaxies. Shakti is not separate from Shiva; She is His power of self-expression.
The Union	Liberation in Tantra is the direct experience of the union of Shiva and Shakti within one's own being — the recognition that pure consciousness and creative energy are not two but one. This is sometimes symbolized as the union of the individual Kundalini Shakti with Shiva at the crown.
The Body as Sacred	Since Shakti is the divine energy, and the body is an expression of Shakti, the body is sacred. Tantra's most radical and distinctive teaching is that the body — properly understood and engaged — is a vehicle for liberation, not an obstacle to it.

Parts / Practices of Tantra Yoga

- **Mantra Sadhana:** The use of specific sacred sound vibrations to awaken consciousness and invoke specific energies. In Tantra, mantras are not merely sounds — they are living vibrational presences. The Tantric mantra tradition is among the most elaborate and sophisticated in the entire yoga world.
- **Yantra (Sacred Geometry):** The use of geometric diagrams as objects of meditation and as maps of consciousness. The most celebrated Tantric yantra is the Sri Chakra (Sri Yantra) — a complex interlocking pattern of triangles representing the union of Shiva and Shakti and the structure of the cosmos.
- **Mudra and Bandha:** Specific gestures of the hands, body, and energy that seal and direct Pranic energy, creating specific states of consciousness and awakening specific energy centers in the subtle body.
- **Chakra Sadhana:** Systematic meditation and energy work on the seven chakras — the seven major energy centers of the subtle body. Each chakra governs specific psychological and energetic qualities, and Tantric practice systematically awakens and purifies each center.
- **Pancha Makaras (Five M's):** The most controversial aspect of certain Tantric traditions — practices involving Madya (wine), Mamsa (meat), Matsya (fish), Mudra (specific grains), and Maithuna (sexual union). In most authentic traditions, these are either practiced symbolically or replaced with spiritual equivalents. Left-hand Tantra (Vama Marga) may practice them literally; Right-hand Tantra (Dakshina Marga) does not.

- Visualization and Deity Meditation: Deep meditative identification with a specific deity or Mahavidya (great wisdom goddess) — not as an external object of worship but as an aspect of one's own consciousness being awakened and recognized.

Branch 6 of 8

KUNDALINI YOGA

The Path of Awakened Energy — Shakti Awakening

Introduction to Kundalini Yoga

Kundalini Yoga is the yoga of energy — specifically, the systematic practice of awakening, directing, and refining the primordial spiritual energy known as Kundalini Shakti, which the tradition describes as lying dormant at the base of the spine in most human beings, waiting to be awakened.

The concept of Kundalini is found throughout the Hindu, Tantric, and Hatha Yoga traditions. It appears extensively in texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the Gherand Samhita, the Shiva Samhita, and numerous Tantric texts. The word 'Kundalini' comes from 'Kundala,' meaning 'coiled' — Kundalini is traditionally depicted as a coiled serpent of pure energy lying dormant at the Muladhara Chakra (the root energy center at the base of the spine).

When awakened through specific yogic practices — pranayama, mantra, mudra, bandha, intense concentration, and the grace of the guru — Kundalini rises through the Sushumna Nadi (the central energy channel running along the spine), passing through and awakening each of the seven chakras, until it reaches the Sahasrara Chakra (the crown of the head), where its union with Shiva (pure consciousness) produces the state of Samadhi and liberation.

In the modern world, Kundalini Yoga is most widely known through the tradition brought to the West by Yogi Bhajan (Harbhajan Singh Khalsa) in 1969. This tradition — often called Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan — combines specific Kriyas (sets of practices), vigorous pranayama, chanting, meditation, and the wearing of white clothing and head coverings.

"Kundalini Yoga is the yoga of awareness. It is the most comprehensive of yoga traditions, combining meditation, mantra, physical exercises, and breathing techniques to bring quick results." — Yogi Bhajan

Philosophy of Kundalini Yoga

The Subtle Body and the Chakra System

Kundalini Yoga is built on the foundational understanding of the subtle body (Sukshma Sharira) — the energetic dimension of the human being that underlies and animates the physical body. The subtle body consists of Nadis (energy channels) and Chakras (energy centers).

Nadis	Subtle channels through which Prana (vital energy) flows through the body. The tradition describes 72,000 Nadis. The three most important are: Sushumna (the central channel), Ida (the left/lunar channel), and Pingala (the right/solar channel).
Sushumna Nadi	The central energy channel running from Muladhara (root) to Sahasrara (crown) along the length of the spine. When Kundalini is awakened, it rises through the Sushumna. Normally sealed at the base by the coiled Kundalini energy.
The Seven Chakras	Muladhara (root — earth, survival), Svadhisthana (sacral — water, creativity), Manipura (solar plexus — fire, will), Anahata (heart — air, love), Vishuddha (throat — space, expression), Ajna (third eye — light, intuition), Sahasrara (crown — pure consciousness, liberation).
Kundalini Shakti	The primordial creative energy coiled 3.5 times at Muladhara. In most people it lies dormant. When awakened, it rises through the chakras, purifying and awakening each one, until it reaches Sahasrara and merges with Shiva-consciousness in the experience of Samadhi.

Parts / Practices of Kundalini Yoga

- **Kriyas:** Specific sequences of posture, movement, pranayama, mudra, and mantra combined in a precise way to produce specific physical and energetic effects. Each Kriya is a complete unit of practice designed to awaken and balance specific aspects of the energy body. Hundreds of Kriyas exist in the tradition.
- **Pranayama:** Intense breath practices — particularly Breath of Fire (Kapalabhati), Sitali, Bhastrika, and alternate nostril breathing — that generate heat (Tapas), purify the Nadis, and awaken the Pranic energy required to raise Kundalini.
- **Mantra and Naad (Sound):** Extensive use of Gurmukhi and Sanskrit mantras — particularly the Adi Mantra (Ong Namoh Guru Dev Namoh), the Mul Mantra, and Sat Nam. Sound is understood as a direct vehicle for consciousness awakening in this tradition.
- **Mudra (Energy Seals):** Specific hand and body gestures that lock and direct Pranic energy in specific pathways — facilitating the movement of Kundalini through the chakras. Gyan Mudra, Shuni Mudra, and others are commonly used.
- **Bandha (Energy Locks):** The three great locks — Mula Bandha (root lock — contraction of the perineum), Uddiyana Bandha (abdominal lock — drawing the navel in and up), and Jalandhara Bandha (chin lock — drawing the chin toward the chest) — that create energetic pressure that directs Prana upward through the Sushumna.
- **Meditation and Tratak (Steady Gazing):** Sustained meditative practices that direct the awakened Kundalini energy through the upper chakras and into the Sahasrara. Often combined with specific mantras and mudras.

Branch 7 of 8

MANTRA YOGA

The Path of Sacred Sound — Nada Brahman

Introduction to Mantra Yoga

Mantra Yoga is the path of sacred sound — the systematic practice of using specific sound vibrations to purify the mind, focus awareness, awaken dormant energies, and ultimately access the highest states of consciousness and liberation. It is one of the oldest and most universally practiced forms of yoga, with deep roots in the Vedic tradition that go back more than 5,000 years.

The word 'Mantra' is composed of two Sanskrit roots: 'Manas' (mind) and 'Trayate' (protects, liberates). A mantra is therefore literally 'that which protects and liberates the mind' — a sacred sound vehicle that, when used correctly and consistently, gradually frees the mind from its habitual patterns of agitation, distraction, and suffering.

The philosophical foundation of Mantra Yoga is the ancient understanding — found in the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Tantric texts — that all of existence is fundamentally vibrational in nature. The universe did not begin with a big bang but with a sacred sound: AUM. All of physical reality is, at its most fundamental level, patterns of vibration — what modern physics calls energy fields and quantum wave functions. Specific sound vibrations therefore have specific effects on the vibrational patterns of the body, mind, and energy field.

Mantra Yoga is intimately connected to several other branches, particularly Bhakti Yoga (devotional chanting), Tantra Yoga (Tantric mantras as vehicles of Shakti), and Kundalini Yoga (mantra as a tool for chakra awakening). In all these traditions, sound is not merely heard — it is experienced as a living vibrational presence that can profoundly transform consciousness.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." — Gospel of John 1:1 | "Prajapati vai idam agre asit, tasya vag dvitiya asit — In the beginning was Prajapati (the Creator), and with him was the Word, and the Word was verily the Supreme Brahman." — Shatapatha Brahmana

Philosophy of Mantra Yoga

Nada Brahman — The Universe as Sound

The central philosophical teaching of Mantra Yoga is Nada Brahman — the understanding that Brahman (ultimate reality, pure consciousness) expresses itself as Nada (primordial sound or vibration). All of

manifest existence is the vibration of consciousness — the cosmic 'hum' of Brahman expressing Itself as the universe.

Para Nada	The 'transcendent sound' — the primordial vibration of consciousness itself, beyond the reach of hearing or mind. The subtlest level of sound, existing in the state of pure potentiality before any manifestation.
Pashyanti Nada	The first stirring of sound into form — the level at which a thought arises as a general intention before it has taken specific shape. The level of pure meaning without form.
Madhyama Nada	The 'middle sound' — the level at which thought takes specific mental form, just before being expressed as physical speech. The level of inner speech.
Vaikhari Nada	The 'expressed sound' — physical audible speech and all physical vibrations. The grossest level of Nada — the one we ordinarily experience as sound. Mantra practice at this level gradually purifies upward toward the subtler levels.
AUM (OM)	The primordial mantra — the sound closest to Para Nada. 'A' represents creation (waking consciousness), 'U' represents preservation (dream consciousness), 'M' represents dissolution (deep sleep), and the silence after the M represents Turiya — the fourth state of pure awareness beyond all three.
Bija Mantras	Seed syllables — single-syllable mantras that contain within them the entire potency of a specific divine energy or cosmic principle. Examples: AIM (Saraswati, wisdom), SHREEM (Lakshmi, abundance), HREEM (Bhuvaneshvari, cosmic space), KLEEM (Kamadeva, divine love), KREEM (Kali, transformative energy).

Parts / Practices of Mantra Yoga

- **Japa (Repetition):** The foundational practice — systematic, reverential repetition of a mantra, traditionally performed with a mala of 108 beads. Japa gradually replaces the mind's habitual patterns with the vibration of the mantra. Three types: Vaikhari Japa (spoken aloud), Upanshu Japa (whispered), and Manasika Japa (purely mental — considered the most powerful).
- **Kirtan (Devotional Chanting):** The communal singing of mantras and divine names with devotion and musical accompaniment. Kirtan creates a powerful resonant field in which the vibration of the mantra permeates the entire being and the surrounding space.
- **Ajapa Japa (Effortless Repetition):** The highest form of Japa — the spontaneous, continuous repetition of the mantra with every breath, without deliberate effort. The mantra 'So-Ham' (I am That) is associated with the natural sound of the breath: 'So' on the inhale, 'Ham' on the exhale. This is said to be the natural mantra of all living beings.

- **Likhit Japa (Written Repetition):** The practice of writing the mantra repeatedly as a form of concentrated, meditative Japa. Some traditions prescribe writing a mantra millions of times as a complete Sadhana in itself.
- **Mantra Dhyana (Mantra Meditation):** Using the mantra as the sole object of meditation — settling the entire attention into the sound, vibration, and meaning of the mantra, allowing the mind to dissolve into the mantra until the distinction between the repeater and the repeated dissolves.
- **Trataka with Mantra:** Combining steady gazing (Trataka) on a sacred image, flame, or symbol with simultaneous mantra repetition — engaging both the visual and auditory dimensions of consciousness simultaneously for a powerfully concentrated practice.

Branch 8 of 8

HATHA YOGA

The Path of Physical Mastery — Sthira Sukham

Introduction to Hatha Yoga

Hatha Yoga is the branch of yoga most directly familiar to contemporary practitioners and teachers worldwide, and the one that forms the most immediate foundation of modern yoga teaching. In the contemporary yoga world, virtually everything that happens in a yoga class — the asanas (postures), the pranayama (breath practices), the Savasana (final relaxation) — derives from the Hatha Yoga tradition.

The word 'Hatha' carries several layers of meaning. Most literally, it means 'forceful' or 'effortful,' reflecting the tradition's emphasis on disciplined physical and energetic practice requiring sustained personal effort. More symbolically and philosophically, 'Ha' represents the solar energy (Surya, the right nostril, the Pingala Nadi — the masculine, active, heating principle) and 'Tha' represents the lunar energy (Chandra, the left nostril, the Ida Nadi — the feminine, receptive, cooling principle). Hatha Yoga is therefore the yoga of balancing these two fundamental energetic polarities within the human being to create a state of optimal health, vitality, and inner stillness.

The classical foundations of Hatha Yoga are laid in three great medieval texts: the Hatha Yoga Pradipika (composed by Swami Swatmarama, circa 15th century CE), the Gheranda Samhita (circa 17th century), and the Shiva Samhita (circa 17th century). These texts describe a complete system of physical and energetic purification designed not as an end in itself but as the necessary preparation for deeper meditation practice and ultimately for Samadhi and liberation.

The goal of Hatha Yoga, as stated clearly in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, is not physical fitness, flexibility, or beauty — though these may naturally result from practice. The stated goal is Raja Yoga — the highest meditative states. Hatha Yoga is, in the words of Swami Swatmarama, 'a stairway leading to Raja Yoga.'

*"Hatha Yoga is a stairway for those who wish to climb to the high pinnacle of Raja Yoga. For those who have no knowledge of Raja Yoga, Hatha Yoga is like a tortoise — it gives a base."
— Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Chapter 1, Verse 1-2*

Philosophy of Hatha Yoga

The Relationship Between Body, Prana, and Mind

The foundational philosophical understanding of Hatha Yoga is the profound, inseparable interconnection between the physical body, the Pranic energy body, and the mind. This relationship is expressed in what is sometimes called the 'Yoga Triangle':

Sthula Sharira (Physical Body)	The gross, material body composed of the five elements. Yoga works on this level through Asana — purifying, strengthening, and harmonizing the physical structure to remove the physical obstacles to Prana flow and meditative stillness.
Sukshma Sharira (Subtle Body)	The energetic body — the network of Nadis (energy channels) and Chakras (energy centers) through which Prana flows. Yoga works on this level through Pranayama, Mudra, and Bandha — purifying the Pranic channels and awakening dormant energies.
Karana Sharira (Causal Body)	The deepest level — the body of causal impressions (Samskaras) and the Anandamaya Kosha (bliss body). Yoga works on this level through deep meditation, Yoga Nidra, and Samadhi — dissolving the deepest seeds of karmic conditioning.
The Key Principle	The mind and Prana are inseparable: 'Chale vate chalam chittam — when the breath moves, the mind moves. Nischale nischalatam yati — when the breath is still, the mind is still.' Purifying the physical body purifies the energy body; purifying the energy body stills the mind; a still mind naturally enters meditation.

Shatkarma — The Six Purifications

Before Asana and Pranayama can be practiced effectively, the Hatha Yoga tradition prescribes the Shatkarmas — six purification practices that cleanse the physical body of accumulated toxins, mucus, and energetic blockages:

Neti (Nasal Cleansing)	Jala Neti (water irrigation of the nasal passages) and Sutra Neti (thread passing through the nasal passage). Cleanses the sinuses, strengthens the respiratory system, and clears the Ida and Pingala Nadis.
Dhauti (Digestive Cleansing)	Various practices for cleansing the digestive tract from mouth to anus — including Vaman Dhauti (controlled vomiting) and Vastra Dhauti (swallowing a cloth). Removes Kapha excess and digestive impurities.
Basti (Colon Cleansing)	Yogic enema — drawing water or air into the colon for cleansing. The yogic equivalent of an enema, performed by using suction with specific abdominal movements. Cleanses the large intestine.
Nauli (Abdominal Churning)	The powerful, rhythmic rotation of the abdominal muscles — considered the most powerful of the Shatkarmas. Massages and stimulates all the abdominal organs, strengthens the core, and powerfully activates Samana Vayu.
Trataka (Steady Gazing)	Fixed, unblinking gazing at a single point — typically a candle flame. Cleanses and strengthens the eyes, develops concentration

	(Dharana), and is used as a foundation for Kundalini awakening.
Kapalabhati (Skull-Shining Breath)	Rapid, forceful exhalation with passive inhalation. Cleanses the entire respiratory system, purifies the frontal lobes of the brain, generates internal heat, and dramatically energizes the mind.

Parts / Practices of Hatha Yoga

The Four Pillars of Hatha Yoga Practice

- **Asana (Posture):** The physical postures that form the foundation of Hatha Yoga practice. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika describes primarily seated meditation postures and a small number of dynamic practices. The vast repertoire of physical postures practiced in modern yoga evolved within this tradition over the subsequent centuries. The key qualities of any asana are Sthira (steadiness) and Sukha (ease, comfort) — the posture must be both stable and relaxed, serving as a vehicle for inner stillness.
- **Pranayama (Breath Regulation):** The systematic expansion and direction of Prana through controlled breathing. The eight classical pranayamas of Hatha Yoga are: Nadi Shodhana (channel purification), Surya Bhedana (right-nostril breathing), Ujjayi (victorious breath), Seetkari (cooling through the teeth), Sheetali (cooling through the tongue), Bhastrika (bellows breath), Bhramari (bee breath), and Murccha (swooning breath). Each has specific effects on Prana, the nervous system, and the mind.
- **Mudra and Bandha (Seals and Locks):** Energy mudras and bandhas that seal Pranic energy within the body and direct it into the Sushumna for the purpose of awakening Kundalini and entering deep meditative states. The ten classical mudras of the Hatha tradition include Maha Mudra, Maha Bandha, Khechari Mudra, Viparitakarani, Vajroni, Shaktichalana, and others. The three key Bandhas are Mula, Uddiyana, and Jalandhara.
- **Samadhi (Meditative Absorption):** The ultimate goal that all the physical and energetic practices of Hatha Yoga are designed to support. When the body is purified, the Prana is balanced and directed, and the mind is naturally still, Samadhi arises — not through further effort but through the natural blossoming of consciousness freed from its physical and energetic obstructions.

For Yoga Teachers: Remember that in the classical understanding, the purpose of the physical practice of Hatha Yoga is always to serve the inner journey. Every asana class is, in the deepest sense, a preparation for meditation. Teaching with this understanding in mind — even in a physical class — transforms the quality of teaching and the depth of students' experience.

Conclusion: The Unity of All Eight Paths

We have now journeyed through all eight of the great branches of the yoga tradition — eight different pathways, eight different languages, eight different doorways into the same temple. And as we complete this journey, the most important thing to recognize is this: these are not eight separate religions or eight competing philosophies. They are eight aspects of a single, unified vision of human transformation.

Karma Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Tantra Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Mantra Yoga, and Hatha Yoga — all point toward the same ultimate truth. All of them, when practiced sincerely and deeply, lead to the same destination: the direct recognition of our true nature as pure, unlimited, ever-free awareness — what the tradition calls Brahman, Purusha, Atman, or Shiva.

"Just as rivers flow from different directions and ultimately merge into the same ocean, so do all spiritual paths lead to the same ultimate truth." — Swami Vivekananda, inspired by Rig Veda

The great yoga masters were rarely confined to a single path. Swami Vivekananda practiced Karma, Jnana, Raja, and Bhakti simultaneously. Sri Ramakrishna combined Bhakti and Tantra with the experience of Jnana. Swami Sivananda synthesized all paths and taught an Integral Yoga. The understanding of all eight branches gives the yoga teacher a truly comprehensive toolkit — the ability to meet each student where they are and offer the teaching that will most directly serve their growth.

A Final Word for Yoga Teachers

As yoga teachers trained at SKM Yoga, you carry the responsibility of transmitting not just techniques but wisdom — not just postures but understanding, not just information but transformation. The eight branches of yoga presented in this guide are not merely chapters in a textbook. They are living streams of wisdom, refined over thousands of years, tested by countless practitioners, and transmitted through an unbroken lineage of teachers who dedicated their lives to this work.

Honor this tradition. Continue your own practice. Never stop being a student. And remember that the greatest teaching you will ever offer your students is not a perfectly aligned Trikonasana or a beautifully sequenced class — it is the quality of your own presence: the depth of your own realization, the genuineness of your own practice, the authenticity of your own ongoing encounter with these eight great paths.

"The teacher who has ceased to learn has ceased to teach. Yoga is a living river — it flows through us only when we remain open." — Dr. Shivam Mishra, Founder, SKM Yoga

ॐ सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः

Om Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah

May all beings be happy. May all beings be free. May all beings know peace.

Dr. Shivam Mishra

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