

# Tapas : Building and Maintaining Our Inner Heat

## Yoga's third Niyama: Tapas

The word "tapas" in Sanskrit is often translated as "heat," though its implied meaning is having self-discipline. You might consider it as having a "burning enthusiasm," which helps us to achieve our goals, express our creativity, help others, and meaningfully contribute in the world. This happens because we make time for our passions and keep agreements we have made with ourselves.

Following your path/purpose (or dharma) is not always easy; often it takes tireless work. Tapas is the fuel to keep doing the work. Often, this means resilience amidst failure. When considering Tapas we might think back to Santosha (contentment). Some of the most rewarding things in life require hard work. Sometimes we use the fire within to push through to achieve what we most desire. But sometimes the inner fire becomes dim and it feels impossible to achieve anything. We must always remember the fire can never be extinguished, so keep your attention on it, and it will surely grow.

### **Personal reflection questions for Tapas:**

> Do I make agreements with myself that I have difficulty keeping?

What holds me back from keeping the agreement?

> What are 2-3 habits I have that support my health?

> What are 2-3 habits I have that support my purpose/dharma?

> Do I observe silence? Do I speak unnecessarily?

> Do I make choices that are indulgent, or choices that build my strength and character?

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# Physical Health Benefits of Yoga

Yoga, though an old practice, has gained popularity in today's society. For a majority, yoga enables them to take a break from their busy lives. In addition, yoga provides them with many physical and health benefits. Below is a list of physical and health benefits of yoga.

## **Enhances the Strength of the Body**

Yoga is popularly known for its capability to relieve both tension and anxiety in the mind. However, it can also have an effect on an individual's exercise capacity. A study shows that individuals who practice yoga report greater improvement in the strength of their muscles, flexibility of their bodies, endurance and cardiorespiratory fitness when compared to those who do not practice.

## **Enhances Weight Loss and Body Balance**

Individuals who practice yoga are mindful eaters and are more concerned about their health. Therefore, they do not eat any food they find around. Researchers found that those who practice yoga for at least 30 minutes a week for a duration of four years do not gain weight during middle adulthood. Those who were overweight actually lost their weight during the study. In short, those who practice yoga have a lower body mass index than those who don't practice yoga.

## **Improves Quality of Life**

Yoga has become a common therapy used to increase the quality of life for many people. Practicing yoga significantly boosts mood and lowers fatigue, especially in women suffering from

breast cancer. Such women experience less pain and show improvements in the level of relaxation and acceptance compared to others who do not practice yoga.

### **Cardiovascular Benefits**

A study shows that yoga has an effect on the risk factors associated with cardiovascular diseases. It helps reduce blood pressure in people suffering from hypertension and improves the baroreceptors' sensitivity. This enables the body to detect the imbalances in blood pressure and restore normalcy. Researchers also found that yoga reduces the amount of cholesterol in the body. In addition, it lowers the blood sugar levels in patients suffering from diabetes mellitus. Due to these benefits, yoga is currently being included in several cardiac rehabilitation programs.

### **Relieves Migraines**

Migraines are serious recurring headaches that can really make life uncomfortable. Traditionally, doctors used medications to manage and relieve symptoms of this condition. More researchers have found evidence indicating that yoga can be a useful therapy in managing this disease. According to the researchers, yoga stimulates the vagus nerve, which is effective in relieving the symptoms associated with acute pain.

Many studies have confirmed that yoga has multiple physical and health benefits. Therefore, adding it to your daily routine can improve your health and increase strength and your body's flexibility. A few minutes of yoga per day are enough to make a big difference.

[Related articles on Yoga.](#)

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# The Health Advantages of and Medical Conditions Helped by Meditation

You may have heard about the health benefits of yoga in improving mental and physical health and improving flexibility, and you might assume that meditation is the same thing. Although meditation can certainly be incorporated into yoga, on its own, it is an entirely different practice.

## How Meditation Works

Meditation involves *stopping your mind* while maintaining a state of awareness. It is much more than sitting and concentrating in a quiet area for a designated amount of time; it involves clearing your mind of thoughts, achieving a deep inward peace, and maintaining alertness in the process.

People often use certain postures, breathing techniques, and even chants to help facilitate the process, but these are not required, and they are not the act of meditation itself, just support tools.

As a beginner, you might consider taking a meditation class (or a yoga class that heavily emphasizes meditation) or invest in a video that introduces you to the concept of meditation and teaches you various techniques for facilitating the process. It does not come as easily for some as it does for others. Achieving a profound, deep sense of self, a “thoughtless alertness,” requires some guidance at first.

## Specific Ways That Meditation Improves Health

Not only is meditation one of the very best ways to reduce

stress, which is linked to a whole host of health issues and according to the Benson-Henry Institute, 60 to 90% of doctor visits are for conditions that are caused by stress, but Harvard University researchers conducted a study that connects deep relaxation to genetic changes in the body.

**They found that “disease fighting genes” are more active in people who regularly practice meditation, compared with people in the control group.**

**These genes protect the body against a number of health issues, including:**

- Heart Disease
- Asthma
- Infertility
- Arthritis
- Various skin conditions
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome
- Meditation even helps to boost immunity, and studies show that cancer patients have recovered more effectively due to meditation and are less at risk for developing another tumor.
- The benefits of stress reduction cannot be overstated.

**Meditation makes the body less responsive to stress hormones, which lowers blood pressure, improves blood circulation, improves digestion and immunity, and establishes emotional and neurological “balance.”**

How does this work exactly?

It largely comes down to hormones. Stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenalin increase blood pressure and heart rate, while “feel good” chemicals such as serotonin, which are released in a state of relaxation, work to repair cells.

**More Health Boosting Benefits Of Meditation**

- According to the Benson-Henry Institute, chronic pain patients reduce their physician visits by 36% when they practice regular meditation.
- Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes, a journal of the American Heart Association, reported in their 2012 issue that a 5 year study on patients who had coronary heart disease found a 48% reduction in deaths, heart attacks, and strokes in those subjects who regularly practiced Transcendental Meditation versus those who did not.
- An analysis of a controlled trial, published in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine on October 2013 reported significantly greater effect of Transcendental Meditation in reducing anxiety over conventional medical treatments and other forms of meditation and relaxation practices.
- According to Behavioral Medicine, Volume 16, a 50% reduction in visits to HMO doctors was found when a relaxation-response based practice, like meditation is used.

## **How To Incorporate Meditation Into Your Life**

Here are ideas for incorporating meditation into your own life. Beginners could focus on numbers 1 and 2, and over time experiment with the other ideas.

- 1. Participate In A Group Class.** You may be able to find a class in your community specifically dedicated to meditation, but due to popular culture, it may be easier to find a yoga class that heavily focuses on meditation, such as Kundalini Yoga or Ananda Yoga. Many people prefer taking these classes long-term as opposed to meditating by themselves because the group setting helps them to better focus or because they enjoy the sense of community.
- 2. Use A Video or Audio To Guide Your Meditation.** Some meditation videos can be found for free online, such as through YouTube, or you can order a professional DVD or

online subscription. If you prefer a mix of yoga and meditation, the best types of yoga to focus on include Kundalini, Ananda, Jivamukti, and Integral. Be sure to check out the free guided meditation file – available at the right of this page.

3. **Devote 20+ Minutes In The Morning Or Evening.** Research shows that just 20 minutes of consistent meditation sessions can have tremendous health benefits. Make time before your day starts or before you go to bed to meditate. Some people find that their minds are clearer at these times.
4. **Use Free Time To Meditate In Nature.** Many people find that sitting in nature – under a tree, on top of a mountain, or in a quiet place in the sunshine – helps them to facilitate the meditation process. It's also a great way to get outside for Vitamin D.
5. **Meditate While At Work.** This is certainly the most difficult way to meditate because distractions at work can interrupt the process, but many people have been able to achieve a state of meditation *while* performing job duties. Talk about being dedicated to the cause!

Everyone is different. Experiment with different ways of meditating too see what you like and what comes easiest for you. Also try experimenting at different times of the day and for different periods of time, but aim for at least 20 minutes to reap the most benefit. The health effects on your body are well worth the effort!

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## **Basic Overview of the Yoga**

# Sutras of Patanjali

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are a compilation of 196 aphorisms. It is a comprehensive fundamental text of yoga, and an instrumental part of Hindu scriptures said to be compiled by the sage, Patanjali. Its influence on yoga philosophy cannot be over-emphasized.

Although Patanjali's exact roots and time of existence is quite unsure, and there are varying myths about his birth, he is ascribed to have been from the medieval era, and contributed immensely to the growth and prominence of yoga sutras. The yoga sutras of Patanjali are said to have been compiled from about 250 BCE to 250 CE. It is further widely acclaimed that although Patanjali compiled the yoga sutras, he however did not create them. Archaeological sources reveal that the yoga sutras are no new practices, but ancient traditional exercises that have been in existence and in practice as far back as 3000 BCE.

*Yoga* is Sanskrit, translated to mean 'yoke'. *Sutra* on the other hand, also Sanskrit, is translated as 'thread'. The yoga sutras are a means to gain self-realization through deep reflection, and synergy of the mind, body and soul.

According to Patanjali, "yoga is the progressive settling of the mind into silence. When the mind is settled, we are established in our own essential state, which is unbounded consciousness. Our essential nature is usually overshadowed by the activity of the mind."

Patanjali's yoga sutra is a book that teaches how practical and deliberate yoga can lead to attainment of Moksha, following the discipline associated with practicing yoga. It is compiled in such a way that the essence of yoga, the progress and spiritual growth associated with it is succinctly embedded. In the sutras, Patanjali takes into consideration



the gratification as well as the challenges that one is bound to encounter in the process of its practice, and establishes ways in which they can be triumphed.

Patanjali's compilation does not try to modify or change the traditionally practiced yoga sutras, it however makes the process and methods easily accessible, and understandable. With the practical and instructive teachings, Patanjali's yoga sutras makes it easy for yogis, both old and new to be able to direct their focus and energy to a single source or stream. The yoga sutras are highly similar to the Samkhya school of thoughts, except the former acknowledges the Divine and ultimate reality which is God, while the latter does not acknowledge God, because it lacks evidence to back its existence.

While the book is an important part of the Hindu scriptures, the yoga sutras are not limited to just Hindus. They are for all, and can be practiced by absolutely everyone; everyone who seeks to gain spiritual growth, understanding, peace and tranquility, an evenness between mind and body. The sutras encourages people to look deep within themselves, and find who they truly are, and what their purpose truly is, in the quiet and stillness of their thoughts. The calm that transcends the distractions of our mental activities and outside stimuli.

It is a dominant stimulant of positive energy, and promotes oneness and harmony between individuals and nature. This is perhaps the reason why people springing from varying denominations, whose beliefs and practices differ a great deal, are seen indicating very apt and keen interest in the yoga sutras, and even go farther to incorporate them into their daily, weekly, or even monthly routines. The basic and inherent truth is that the practice of yoga has spanned way longer before its compilation by Patanjali, not just by Hindus, and the tradition has continued. The difference is that they are now more elaborately and succinctly summarized in the 194 sutras, and easily accessible and understandable,

hence, gathering a broader audience willing to engage to gain inner peace and control over their mind.

The yoga sutras are divided in four chapters or books.

- **SAMADHI PADA:** It is the first book, consisting of 51 sutras. Its teachings are on the general nature of yoga and its techniques. It explains a stage where those who practice yoga experience an out of body encounter via meditation.
- **SADHANA PADA:** It is the second book, and consists of 55 sutras. It expatiates on the mastery of discipline. It is of two forms: the preliminary, which is kriya yoga, and the first five of the eight limbs of yoga known as bahiranga or external.
- **VIBHUTI PADA:** It consists of 56 sutras, and is the third book. It is based on the last three limbs of the eightfold system, and is referred to as the antaranga or internal. It also explains supernatural exhibitions and influences that are orchestrated through the practice of yoga, both in positive and negative aspects.
- **KAIVALYA PADA:** A compilation of 34 yoga sutras. It is the fourth and last book. It is focused on describing liberation from the death and rebirth cycle, the Moksha. It deals with a deeper knowledge of self and detachment.

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## Hinduism Goal of Moksha

One belief in Hinduism is that of reincarnation. The belief that one would die and be reborn as many times as need be until they obtain Moksha, the ultimate goal of all Hindus. This cycle of death and rebirth is known as the Samara. A person's quality of life typically determines what caste they would belong after rebirth. The higher the caste, the more the

blessings.

The Samsara is said to have begun with religious movements at about the first millennium BCE. These movements include Hinduism, which believes that life is a complicated and repeated process of death and rebirth. They think it as bondage, and Moksha, the liberation.

Basically, people build up karmic connections through their actions. It could be good or bad. It is all dependent on how one has lived. If you live a life of devotion, free of troubles, you transcend into a higher caste, which as aforementioned, depicts more blessings, if you have lived a life causing chaos and increasing pain in the society, you transcend into a lower caste.

Also known as *vimoksha*, *vimukti*, and *mukti*, moksha is the total liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. Its attainment is the highest goal in Hinduism. A state of freedom and liberation into a higher consciousness. It is derived from the Sanskrit *muc* which *translates* to being free, liberation. Moksha is the fourth goal of Hinduism. It is achieved only by overcoming the desires of the flesh, and all worldly sentiments, and living a life of benevolence. It is attainable both in the present lifetime and after death. To further buttress what it embodies, is to simply put that, it is a state where oneness with Brahman, the ultimate reality is attained. A state of peace and blessedness. This stage is known as the *paripurna-brahmanubhava*; the experience of oneness with Brahman.

Moksha is however thought somewhat differently by the varying school of thoughts in Hinduism. While it is thought of as liberation from the samsara, i.e., the cycle of death and rebirth, it is thought by others to be the end of the sufferings that are accompanied by the cycle of death and rebirth. Moksha is also referred to as *kaivalya* by some.

In some schools of thought in Hinduism, when Moksha has been attained by an individual during his/her lifetime, it is referred to as *jivanmukti*, and the person who experiences this liberation, is called the *jivanmukta*, which translates to self-realized person. Moksha after death is however, referred to as *videhamukti*.

There are no definite and stipulated ways on how everyone can achieve Moksha. The Hindu books reveal that there are many different paths, all of which lead to liberation. Liberation which has been earlier stated to mean being in a state of oneness with Brahman. A state of absolute detachment from vanity and the outside world, a state of quietness and absolute control of the thoughts, which accordingly, is referred to as the ultimate form of bondage and liberation. This is because the mind suggests multiple thoughts to us, both positive and negative all day long. All of which create noise and some form of chaos in our mental state, disrupting our ability to concentrate and remain in oneness with the Brahman. When one is incapable of quieting their minds, and harmonizing with the Supreme Being, they remain in the state of bondage. However, when they are able to overcome the desires and temptations suggested by the mind, then they can achieve Moksha. The Hindu scriptures rightly states that if one cannot wield total control of their mind, they lack the weapons necessary to achieve Moksha.

In clearer terms, the Upanishads mention that the mind is basically of two kinds. The pure and impure. It is referred to as impure when it is brimming with desires of the flesh, and pure when it gains freedom from them.

Although the paths and processes to attaining Moksha are endless, there are three paths which could be termed as a summary of what the road to achieving Moksha would seem like. They are;

- The karma yoga, also known as the path of action.

- Bhakti yoga, which is the path of devotion.
- Jnana yoga, or the path of knowledge.

As countless stated, Moksha comes when one achieves oneness with God. However, there are different basic schools of thought regarding the nature of what oneness with Brahman indicates in Hinduism. One of these thoughts, and perhaps, most prominent is the *Advaita Vedanta*, otherwise known as non-dualism. It is the belief that a person's spirituality is tied to the ultimate reality, Brahman. Its doctrine is that total submission to Brahman is the way to achieve Moksha.

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## Ganesha Guides Us to Overcome Obstacles

Ganesha, the Hindu god of wisdom, is granted the task of helping us get past all of life's difficulties. He represents the will and power we have to overcome our challenges and is the protector and guide when we go through difficulties, no matter how hard they seem.

Born to the gods Parvati and Shiva, Ganesha is a symbol of growth and potential as a baby, with maturing responsibilities to us in his older age.

Ganesha is known by the epithet *vighnesvara* in Sanskrit. It means, 'the master of what agitates us.' This simply means Ganesha is capable and always available to help us solve distressing problems, and is in absolute control over situations that causes us anxiety. His duty is to place these obstacles on our path, while always watching over us, and helping us get on with them, for the purpose of spiritual growth. Ganesha aids us with understanding of how to deal with

the obstacles we encounter. He teaches us that problems are only a means to an end. So these challenges aren't exactly obstacles, but provide a path leading us to self-realization and a greater truth.

He is also the representation of the *Pratyahara*. He helps us attain self-withdrawal; for us to intently detach ourselves and aim concentration on the inner without any distractions from the external. Simply put: a gradual process of learning to refrain from outside stimuli and focus more on internal awareness.

As the god of wisdom, he is further dubbed the 'master of the mind.' He guides us to make the right decisions, and bestows us with wisdom from the inside. He propels our creativity and intelligence, and always comes to the rescue when he is called upon. He further serves as a guide to help us distinguish and envision through the gates of perception. He helps access the memories and knowledge we've accumulated in the course of living our lives, to keep us in tune with the development of our inner cycles and intuitions, or nudges.

Ganesha is the god you look for when you seek protection, or seem to be at a loss or crossroads, or looking for a new beginning. He is there to offer us timely insight. He is everything you want him to be. Ganesha is the remover of obstacles, guardian of the gates, the master of the mind, the Lord of new beginnings.

His physical representation is a person with an elephant-head, adorned with a crown. He's got a big belly, and is often depicted riding on a mouse adorned with a jeweled carpet. He has four arms, one of which holds sweets and other an axe.

These physical representation show him as an embodiment of the encumbrances of our daily lives; the axe symbolizes his admonition to us to cut down and destroy our attachments to the past and the things of the world.

We are urged to practice the Ganesha Maha Mantra whenever we encounter challenges, in order to gain deeper insights and understanding on how to tackle them, and imagine Ganesha coming to your aid as one of his boundless attributes. The mantra helps ward off bad vibes and keeps your thoughts in place. The Ganesha Maha Mantra:

**OM GAM GANAPATAYE NAMAHA**

It is to be chanted before starting a new venture, and meditated upon to gain a higher understanding and deeper revelation. The mantra is connecting to Ganesha (aka Ganapataye) and the speaker is offering salutations to Ganesha linked with the universal sound of OM.

Remember that Ganesha is ready for you whenever you need help with an obstacle in your path. Keep Ganesha in mind as needed throughout 2019!

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## 8 Limbs of Ashtanga Yoga

*ASHTANGA* is Sanskrit for eight limbs. It is a two word phrase incorporated as one: ashta, meaning eight, and anga, meaning limbs. This eightfold system of yoga dates as far back as 2,000 years ago, and was taught by Patanjali.

The eight limbs of yoga are basically guides on how to live a more productive, aligned, purposeful, and intentional life. All of the eight limbs are intertwined; understanding and practicing them opens someone to a realization of one's true self and consciousness, destroying all obstacles standing in their way, as well as the impurities of the mind and body. It also results in directing focus towards our health, and aids in the acknowledgement and development of our spiritual

inclinations.

The 8 limbs of yoga include; Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi. Each is to be practiced individually, however, all should be allowed to flourish synchronically.

**1. YAMAS:** The first of the eight limbs encompasses morality and advocates living by upright values. It promotes ethical behavior to allow for a more peaceful and just society. The Yamas are universal principles of life. There are five yamas, all of which are strategically put in place to align our inner beliefs with the external environment.

- **AHIMSA:** This refers to nonviolence. It means to abstain and stay free from violence in thoughts, words, and actions. Practicing the art of nonviolence constitutes and propagates peaceful living and coexistence among humans.
- **SATYA:** Satya means truthfulness. And just like Ahimsa, it is a virtue that should be reflected both on the inside and outside. We must learn to be truthful both in words, and in actions. By virtue of this Yama, we are also admonished to follow a true and honest path, in alignment with our hearts. Satya preaches that by being honest and truthful, your actions become more successful.
- **ASTEYA:** Asteya preaches against stealing. It encourages refraining from stealing of property, ideas, works, wealth, credit, etc. It further stipulates that by engaging in non-stealing, wealth and jewels are accorded.
- **BRAHMACHARYA:** Brahmacharya refers to abstinence. It endorses living a life dedicated to finding self realization, and attaining a higher truth, and restraining from pursuing vanity. It promotes spiritual



development through abstinence.

- **APARIGRAHA:** This means non-possessiveness. It teaches how to overcome greed, possessiveness, discontent, in order for one to gain knowledge of the past, present, and future.

**2. NIYAMAS:** These are observances, personal spiritual practices to aid spiritual growth. There are five niyamas that encompass the values upon which we interact with ourselves. They are: Sauca, Santosha, Tapas, Svadhyaya, and Isvara Pranidhana.

- **SAUCA:** Sauca means purity. Its teachings are centred on maintaining internal and external purity by keeping the mind, body, and environment clean.
- **SANTOSHA:** This means contentment. Santosha presents us with the need to appreciate what we have and have accomplished, for it is the only way to gain true inner peace. It encourages satisfaction with what we already have.
- **TAPAS:** This refers to self discipline, or spiritual austerity. It is a medium through which the body, and mind are cleansed.
- **SVADHYAYA:** This means the study of self and the sacred scriptures. Observance of the Svadhyaya results in spiritual awakening and tuning of one's mind to spiritual unfoldments.
- **ISVARA PRANIDHANA:** This refers to absolute submission to God. By so doing, one is able to attain *Samadhi*.

**3. ASANAS:** This is what most people call "yoga" but it is actually *only* the poses one makes during yoga class. It is the third limb, and its practice results in a synchronism between the mind and body. The asanas help us develop self-discipline,

and the ability to concentrate, both important factors of meditation.

**4. PRANAYAMA:** This literally means “life force extension.” It is the fourth limb, and basically refers to gaining control over the respiratory process. Simply put, mastery of breath control.

**5. PRATYAHARA:** The Pratyahara is the fifth limb. And it is the withdrawal from the external world to focus on our inner cycle. It is detachment from the attractions and distractions from the outside world. It preserves the mind, and keeps it from engaging in unintentional activities.

**6. DHARANA:** The sixth limb. It is referred to as the one pointed concentration. It involves deep concentration in order to bring the mind under absolute control.

**7. DHYANA:** Dhyana is seventh on the list. It is meditation; a process that involves absolute focus and control of the mind. It doesn't allow for distractions to disturb the process.

**8. SAMADHI:** This is the final limb, and is referred to as a state of self-realization, and consciousness.

With so much knowledge of the 8 limbs of yoga, *Ashtanga*, where will you start first on your journey to samadhi?

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## Hinduism 101, What you need to know

A religion which is better described as a way of life, **Hinduism** has no definite and designated order, worship pattern, holy book, founder, religious head, particular

service day, etc. It is a truly diverse way of life and currently ranks as the world's third largest religion, following Islam and Christianity, and is mostly accounted for as the oldest organized religion, originating from the Indus Valley, now Pakistan, over 3,000 years ago. Hinduism is a combination of diverse religious and spiritual beliefs that have evolved over the years in India (since about 1500 BC) into a broad and internationally accepted religion.

As in every religion, Hinduism acknowledges the existence and belief in a supreme being. Hindus are, however, not monotheistic in nature. They are better referred to as henotheists (worshiping a single god, but not denying existence of other gods) and/or polytheists (believing in multiple gods). Hindus believe in Brahman, whom they acknowledge as the ultimate reality. Brahman embodies all things, and is embodied in all things. Brahman is divided into three separate Gods, whom are collectively referred to as the Holy Trinity.

The Holy Trinity consists of Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. Hindus acknowledge several other gods and goddesses as manifestations of the Brahman, the supreme deity, and include: Ganesh, the god of wisdom; Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity; Saraswati, good of learning and wisdom; and Krishna and Rama, both incarnations of Vishnu. The numerous and varying gods and goddesses acknowledged in Hinduism are often represented in the *mandir* (temple).

Hinduism is basically one of the most religious tolerant denominations as it allows for freedom of beliefs and practices. The belief is that all religions are a pathway leading to God, hence, Jesus is acknowledged in Hinduism as an incarnation of a God.

Unlike Christianity or Islam, Hinduism has no stipulated day or time for conducting worship services. People visit the

*mandir* at their discretion, to give adulations to all the gods. A Hindu temple usually has four or five shrines, or even more around the main hall, each of which accommodates a *murti* (statue of a god who has been consecrated in a special ceremony). Modes of reverence and prayers are usually different. While some people prostrate in front of the *murti*, or bow to it, others may decide to take turns in a clockwise cycle, or simply just stand in front of it and meditate.

Priests are responsible for performing rituals to the *murtis* at specified times during the day, when people gather to partake by watching and receiving blessings. More often than not, during these rituals or consecrated services, sanctified food is shared with the people. This process is referred to as the *prasad*. It is similar to communion as taken by Christians.

## Goals of Hinduism

The goals of Hinduism are basically the major binding beliefs, or tenets of the religion. They are the responsibilities expected of all members of Hinduism, and not exclusive to priests. They are mainly four: Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha.

- **DHARMA:** This is the principle that orders the universe; and one's conduct in conformity with such a principle. Simply put, it is the order of fair action, moral, and ethical behavior in association with the universe.
- **ARTHA:** This refers to the principle of wealth gathering. Its primary purpose is the accumulation of wealth to help others, and to prevent any hindrances to dharmic living.
- **KAMA:** Also known as Hindu god of desire, is a principle that advocates fulfilling one's desires. Desires can manifest in various forms, from being wealthy, powerful, sexually satisfied, and/or for recognition.

- **MOKSHA:** Typically known to be the ultimate goal of Hinduism, Moksha is the final liberation of soul from *samsara* (reincarnation). It is the end of the death and rebirth cycle, along with all the sufferings it encompasses.

There are other binding beliefs of Hinduism, other than the four goals mentioned above. There is *Samsara*, which is the belief in reincarnation: a continuous cycle of death and rebirth until one attains the Moksha. It is basically an evolution into an upper caste or lower caste. This is determined by the quality of one's life. If one has lived a fair, just, and selfless life, he/she translates into a higher caste in the next life, while if one has lived a life of deceit, and wrongdoings, he/she translates into a lower caste.

Traditionally, there is a caste system in Hinduism. A show of hierarchy. It was, however, outlawed in India in 1949. Nonetheless, it hasn't been completely expunged, and traces of it have still remained, especially due to the spiritual law of *samsara*. The order of the caste system is: the Brahmin (priest), Kshatriyas (soldiers/nobility), Vaishyas (merchant), Sudras (labourers), the Untouchables (known as Harijans, by Gandhi). Belonging to a higher caste is usually a sign of blessing.

There is also the belief of reaching oneness with the Brahman. Accordingly, this can only be done when one successfully embodies the principle of detachment from all worldly things. Detachment can be achieved using three practical methods; the way of knowledge, the way of works, and the way of devotion.

## Major Texts in Hinduism

There are five major texts, Holy Scriptures, in Hinduism. The Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas.

- **THE VEDAS:** These are four books of knowledge, chants,

and collected hymns that form the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature, and the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism.

- **THE UPANISHADS:** This is a Hindu text, considered to be an early source of the religion, found mostly in the concluding part of the Brahman, and in the Aranyakas. It lays out the theological basis of Brahman.
- **RAMAYANA:** This is one of the ancient Sanskrit epics of Hindu mythology about the incarnation of Vishnu, the Rama.
- **MAHABHARATA:** This is a Sanskrit epic describing a war between two families of cousins. Within the book is the story of Bhagavad Gita, and elaborations on theology and morality.
- **PURANAS:** These are post-Vedic texts, containing a narrative of the history of the universe, from creation to destruction, genealogies of the kings, heroes and demigods, and descriptions of Hindu cosmology, philosophy and geography.

Hinduism is a vast and deeply rich spiritual way of life. If you have interest in this topic, please start by reading one of the classic texts. I recommend [\*The Ramayana: A Modern Retelling of the Great Indian Epic\*](#) as a great start!

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## Padahastasana for Height

My first yoga teacher really loved Padahastasana. He started us almost every class with a relaxed version. We would be in the pose until everyone got situated on our mats. Sometimes Darren would ask us to hold the pose for really a long time. I don't think we ever were in the pose for less than a minute

(unless we were the late comer) and it was usually more like two or three minutes, or more.

At first, it was a difficult pose to get into, not to mention hold for so long. My back wouldn't loosen up, or I would start to feel dizzy, or my arms would start to get sore. I began to think it was maybe a sort of punishment!

But then, after a few weeks, the pose started to feel like a break. I started to feel the benefit of the pose and as I grew stronger, the pose became like a secret connection to the deep peace each practice brought me.

This pose is good for your back, abdomen, and legs. By keeping the fold, your hamstrings find greater flexibility and your internal organs are massaged. A sort of inversion, the pose increases blood circulation (especially to the brain), which improves your concentration and keeps you calm.

Your calves and lower back also gain more flexibility, and as you breathe deep, and hold the pose with intent, you increase strength of the abdomen. It has been argued that this pose helps to lengthen the spine (making you taller!).

The pose also improves digestive disorders and if practiced regularly can remove fat from the abdominal area.

It is important to go gently into this pose so that you gain the strength you need to stay in it for a while. As you fold over, be sure to extend the top of your head out in front of you, always lengthening your spine. Tuck in your belly as you extend out and fold down into the pose.

It also helps to sort of sway a little once you are in the pose, to find the relaxation in it. Keep your nose as close to your knees/thighs as possible, without tucking your neck too far.

Be there are breathe. Find your calm strength, and as you rise

back up at the end, draw your shoulders back and feel yourself that much taller.

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## 5 Eye Exercises to Improve Your Vision

This article isn't for everyone, like those with unresolvable eye issues. It is for people who have either lived with for a while, or are now starting to experience blurry vision – both nearsighted or farsighted.

I am excited to share with you some tips on how eye exercises can strengthen your eyes and improve your vision. I've been fortunate to have good vision for most my life. In graduate school, when I was spending a significant number of hours reading and writing on the computer, I noticed that I couldn't see far away as clearly as I had in the past.

My yoga teacher at the time showed us a few techniques for relieving stress in the eyes. Because she was amazing and brought so many good things to my life, I thought, yeah, I'll give it a try. I proceeded for the next several weeks to dedicate a short time every day to performing a regimen with my eyes.

Long story short: I started leaving my glasses at home when I went to my classes. My sight had improved enough that I could see the blackboard clearly, even from the back row.

Our modern life is full of reasons why our vision is failing: spending hours and hours on the computer or phone, watching TV, spending long periods under fluorescent lighting.

Glasses and contacts are an amazing invention, but once you



start wearing them, your eyes don't have to work as hard, which in turn worsens your vision.

Give these exercises a try for a month and watch how strong your eye muscles can be!

## **1. Palms**

Rub the palms of your hands together fast for a few seconds to generate some heat. Then cup your hands around your orbital bone (the bone around the eye socket) and leave them there for 30 seconds. While your hands cover your eyes, keep your eyes closed. Enjoy the break your eyes receive. Warm your hands and cup your eye sockets three times.

## **2. Clock**

Seated comfortably and without moving your head, move only your eyes to look up as high as you can – that's 12 o'clock. Then move your eyes clockwise to go all the way around the clock: from 1 o'clock, back up to 12. Keep your eyes looking as far to the edges as you can. Go 3 times around clockwise, then 3 times around counter-clockwise. This should be done as slowly as possible.

## **3. Focus**

By mixing up what you are looking at helps improve your eye muscles. Bring a pen to just in front of your eyes with your right hand, then hold another pen with your left hand at arm's distance. Focus on the close pen, then the pen a couple feet away, then on a point across the room, and then at a point outside a window. Position yourself so that you don't have to move your head for this. Look at each of the four spots for two seconds, and rotate through these points for about 2 minutes total.

## **4. Zoom**

Extend your arm out while holding a pen. Slowly bring the pen

to 2-3 inches away from your face, all the while keeping the pen in focus. Slowly move the pen back to an arm's distance, again, keeping your eyes focused on the pen. Repeat this several times.

## **5. Blink**

I was surprised to learn that when we are looking at a computer/phone screen or reading we blink less than when we are looking at things further away. [[Check out this cool study on spontaneous eye blink rate.](#)] Dry eyes can lead to blurry vision. You can help your keep your eyes moist by blinking several times very quickly. Blink 10 times, then sit with your eyes closed for 20 seconds. Repeat this exercise 5 times.

Train your eyes to use their full functioning and you will be surprised how how strong you can make them! There is also the 20-20-20 rule... Every 20 minutes look at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds. This helps to give your eyes light exercise throughout your day.

Keep your eyes strong and in good health and before long, you too, might be able to ditch those glasses!