

Yoga Philosophy: History and Culture

The Beginnings of Yoga

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THE FOUR VEDAS (Śruti):

1. Ṛgveda (hymns to deities)
2. Yajurveda (mantras for sacrifices)
3. Sāmaveda (songs of praise)
4. Atharvaveda (spells for protection)

Yoga in the Vedas

- Little evidence for systematised yoga practice in the Vedas as a whole....
- R̥g Veda: Oldest text of Vedic Hinduism, 15th -12th century BCE. No yoga as such, but some indication of visionary meditation practices? E.g. long-haired sage in hymn 10.136
- Atharva Veda (c. 1000BCE): the figure of the Vrātya, on fringes of mainstream society, engaged in yoga-like practices of breath control and tapas.

Atharvaveda 15.17.1-7

(1) His first downward breath is the time of the full moon. (2) His second downward breath is the eighth day after the full moon. (3) His third downward breath is the time of the new moon. (4) His fourth downward breath is faith. (5) His fifth downward breath is initiation. (6) His sixth downward breath is sacrifice. (7) His seventh downward breath is these payments to the priests. **(Roots of Yoga 4.1)**

The Yoga Chariot

Much later, in the great epic, the *Mahābhārata* (4th century BCE—4th century CE?), the image of the Vedic chariot becomes a metaphor for soteriological practice (i.e. methods of liberation or salvation).





The Indus Valley Seals ('Proto-Śiva')

The seals from the ancient civilisations of the Indus Valley (c.2800 BCE) are suggestive of yoga postures, but do not indicate a developed culture of yoga (in spite of claims to the contrary). They most likely represent Eurasian tree gods rather than a 'proto-Śiva' as sometimes claimed.



Śramaṇas (strivers) and the emergence of renunciant yoga

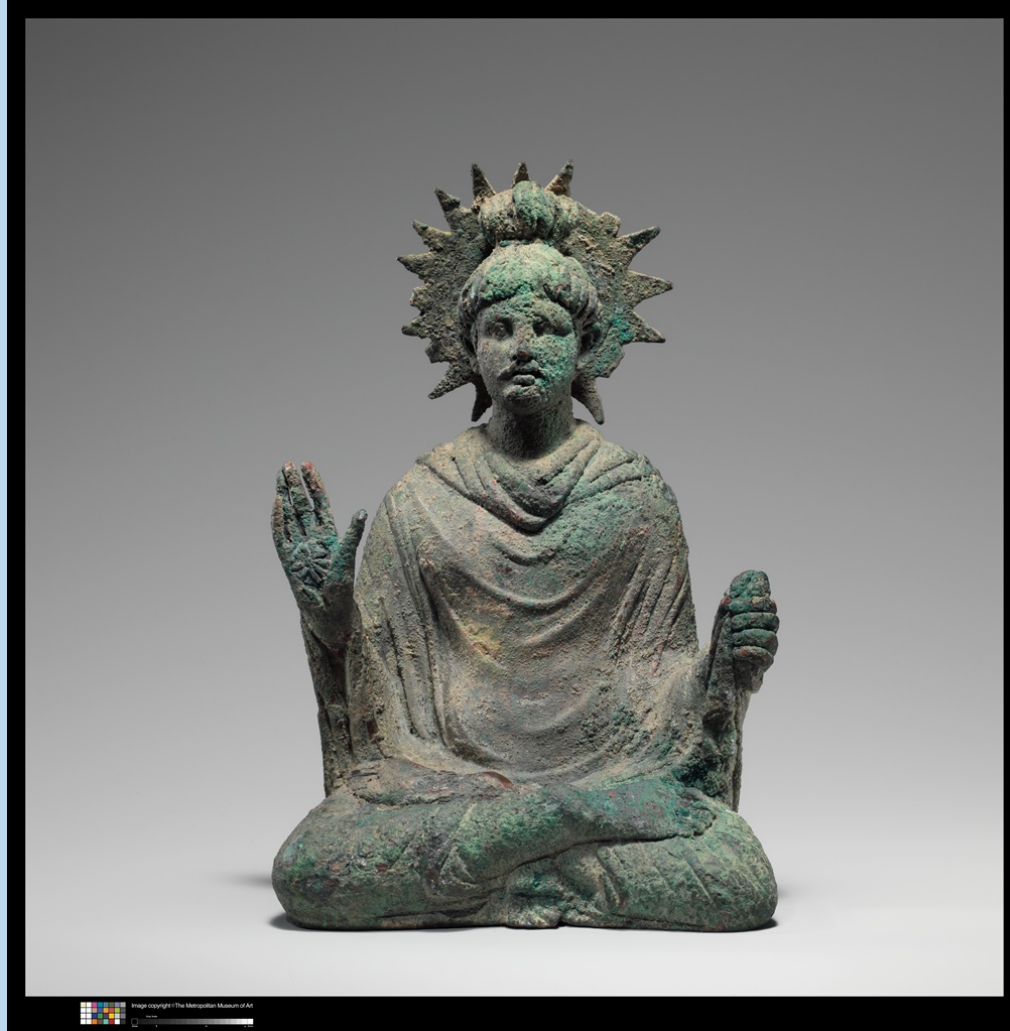
Around 500 BCE we see the rise of new groups of renunciant ascetics in India, sometimes collectively referred to as Śramaṇas ('strivers'), and identified by Johannes Bronkhorst as originating in the 'Greater Magadha' region, the area east of the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers at modern-day Allahabad in northern India.

These groups include Buddhists, Jains and the lesser known Ājīvakas.



Terracotta tile with ascetics
Yoga005.jpg, Harwan.jpg

Metropolitan Museum of Art



Seated Buddha
Gand Bronze Buddha DP123364.bmp
Metropolitan Museum of Art



Digambara Jina in Kayotsarga meditation

Digambara Jina DT202819.bmp

Metropolitan Museum of Art

THE THREE FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS ACCORDING TO BUDDHISM

1. Suffering/Dissatisfaction

2. Karma/Rebirth

3. Liberation

Dhyānāyoga (the yoga of meditation) in the *Mahābhārata*

(12.188.1-22, ROOTS OF YOGA 8.3.4)

- ┆In the beginning, mind is like drop of water/flash of lightning.
- ┆Become like a block of wood: Withdraw the senses from the external world.
- ┆The stages: *Vicāra* (deliberation), *Vitarka* (reasoning), *Viveka* (discernment)
- ┆The yogi establishes himself in own nature (*svabhāva*)....
- ┆becomes indifferent to the dualities (*dvandvas*)...
- ┆And liberated from **saṃsāra** reaches **nirvāṇa** (no more punarjanma=**reincarnation**).
- ┆—**The end of the person---**

Tapas ('heating', austerities) and Yog

Ascetics of all traditions engaged in austerities—the Buddha himself says that he tried various methods of tapas. In addition to liberation, the acquisition of supernatural powers, whether desirable or not, could result from those practices. Methods which might be differentiated as yoga and *tapas* were complementary parts of early ascetic praxis, and this continues to be the case for Hindu ascetic yogis today.

20th century practitioners of Tapas



Hermit at Gem Lake, doing penance—exposed to mid-day sun and intense fires—Mt. Abu, India. Copyright 1903 by Underwood & Underwood.



INDIA - UTAH - ~~NEAR~~ NEAR INDORE
SADHUS (HINDU PRIEST) MAKING

Rāvaṇa's Tapas



But later jealousy was born in them [i.e. rakshasa 'demons'], and they became intent on tapas. Then they satisfied Brahmā with their terrible tapas. The ten-necked one [Rāvaṇa] stood on one leg for a thousand years, subsisting on air, [surrounded by] five fires, fully concentrated.

jātasparḍhās-tataste tu tapase dhṛtaniścayāḥ/ brahmāṇaṁ
toṣayām-āsur-ghoreṇa tapasā tadā//atiṣṭhadekapādena
sahasraṁ parivatsarān/vāyubhakṣo daśagrīvaḥ pañcāgniḥ
susamāhitaḥ//

Mahābhārata 3.259.15-16

The Buddha in his Tapas-practising phase (Thailand)



Ūrdhvaabāhu ('arms up') tapas 20th century

