

AN ANALYTICAL COMPARISON OF YOGIC PRINCIPLES IN ASHTANGA YOGA AND SRI ANANDA YOGA

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ABSTRACT

Yoga, as one of the most ancient and holistic systems of physical, mental, and spiritual discipline, has manifested across centuries in diverse philosophical and practical forms. Among its most systematized expressions are Ashtanga Yoga, as codified by the sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*, and Sri Ananda-Yoga, a modern synthesis that integrates devotional, meditative, and energetic practices toward the attainment of divine bliss (*ananda*). This paper undertakes a comparative study of these two traditions, examining their philosophical underpinnings, structural frameworks, practical methodologies, psychological dimensions, and ultimate soteriological goals. Drawing on classical Sanskrit texts, secondary scholarly literature, and empirical data from structured surveys and textual analysis, this study identifies significant similarities and critical divergences between the two systems. Findings suggest that while both traditions pursue liberation and inner transformation, they differ markedly in their emphasis on austerity versus joy, structured discipline versus devotional spontaneity, and individual effort versus grace. This comparative inquiry contributes to a deeper understanding of yoga's multidimensional heritage and its relevance to contemporary practitioners.

Keywords: *Ashtanga Yoga*¹, *Patanjali*², *Yoga Sutras*³, *comparative yoga studies*⁴, *spiritual practice*⁵, *ananda*⁶, *dhyana*⁷, *samadhi*⁸, *Indian philosophy*⁹.

1. INTRODUCTION

Yoga is an ancient Indian science of life that encompasses a vast spectrum of disciplines designed to harmonize body, mind, and spirit. The word "yoga" derives from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning to yoke or unite, signifying the union of the individual self (*jivatman*) with the universal consciousness (*paramatman*) [1]. Across millennia, this foundational concept has been expressed through numerous schools and traditions, each presenting a distinct pathway toward liberation (*moksha*). Among these, Ashtanga Yoga – the eightfold path articulated by the sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* (approximately 400 CE) – stands as one of the most systematized and widely studied frameworks in the history of Indian philosophy [2]. In contrast, Sri Ananda-Yoga represents a

tradition that emphasizes the cultivation of divine bliss, devotional awareness, and the integration of energy practices as a means of realizing the highest state of consciousness [3]. The contemporary global yoga movement, while enormously popular, often conflates these traditions or reduces them to their physical dimensions alone. This conflation obscures the profound philosophical, methodological, and teleological distinctions that define each tradition. A rigorous comparative study is therefore both timely and necessary. By examining Ashtanga Yoga and Sri Ananda-Yoga side by side not merely as systems of postures but as comprehensive philosophies of existence this paper seeks to illuminate what is distinctive, complementary, and universally instructive in each approach [4].

1.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this comparative study lies in its potential to deepen both academic and practical understanding of yoga's diverse traditions. In an era when yoga is practiced by an estimated 300 million people worldwide, questions of authenticity, philosophical coherence, and pedagogical efficacy have become increasingly urgent [5]. Ashtanga Yoga, rooted in Patanjali's classical exposition, offers a highly structured eightfold method (*ashtau angani*) that has been the subject of extensive philosophical commentary for over fifteen centuries [6]. Sri Ananda-Yoga, while drawing on Vedantic and Tantric influences, presents a more devotional and experientially oriented path whose comparative analysis with classical yoga has received relatively limited scholarly attention [7]. By juxtaposing these two traditions, this study contributes to the growing field of comparative yoga studies and provides practitioners, scholars, and educators with a nuanced framework for understanding yoga's internal diversity [8].

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is guided by the following objectives: (i) to examine the philosophical and textual foundations of Ashtanga Yoga as expounded in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali and to identify the defining characteristics of each of its eight limbs; (ii) to explore the philosophical basis, structural components, and practical methodology of Sri Ananda-Yoga with particular reference to its emphasis on bliss, devotion, and energy cultivation; (iii) to undertake a systematic comparative analysis of the two traditions across multiple dimensions including cosmology, practice, psychology, pedagogy, and soteriology; (iv) to analyze patterns of similarity and difference through the application of structured data collection instruments; and (v) to discuss the implications of these findings for contemporary yoga scholarship and practice [9].

1.3 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study is primarily textual and philosophical in its orientation, drawing on classical Sanskrit sources, modern translations, and secondary scholarly literature. Empirical data is gathered through structured questionnaires administered to a sample of yoga practitioners and teachers who have studied both traditions. The study is limited by the inherent difficulty of comparing traditions that have evolved across different historical

and cultural contexts, and by the relatively smaller body of academic literature specifically dedicated to Sri Ananda-Yoga in comparison to the extensive scholarship surrounding Patanjali's system [10]. Furthermore, the diversity of interpretation within each tradition – particularly the proliferation of modern adaptations – means that the study necessarily focuses on foundational texts and classical expositions rather than all contemporary variants.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The scholarly literature on Ashtanga Yoga is vast and spans over fifteen centuries of philosophical commentary. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, composed of 196 aphorisms divided into four chapters (*padas*), has been the subject of foundational commentaries by Vyasa (*Yoga Bhashya*, approximately 4th–5th century CE), Vacaspati Misra (*Tattva Vaisharadi*, 9th century CE), and Vijñana Bhikṣu (*Yoga Varttika*, 16th century CE), each of which has shaped subsequent interpretation of the eight limbs [11]. Modern scholarship has engaged extensively with these texts: Georg Feuerstein's *The Yoga Tradition* (1998) provides a comprehensive historical and philosophical survey of yoga's many schools, situating Ashtanga Yoga within the broader context of Indian religious thought [12]. Edwin Bryant's *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (2009) offers a meticulously annotated translation that has become a standard reference for both scholars and practitioners [13]. Ian Whicher's *The Integrity of the Yoga Darsana* (1998) engages critically with questions of ontology, epistemology, and liberation in classical yoga, challenging reductive interpretations and emphasizing the integrative dimension of Patanjali's system [14].

The literature on Sri Ananda-Yoga is comparatively more limited in scope but growing in depth. Swami Kriyananda (J. Donald Walters), a direct disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda, developed Ananda Yoga as a synthesis of Yogananda's teachings with classical Hatha and Raja Yoga elements, emphasizing the awakening of higher awareness and the cultivation of *ananda* through asana, pranayama, and affirmation [15]. Yogananda's own *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) and his *God Talks with Arjuna: The Bhagavad Gita* (1995) provide foundational theological and philosophical context for understanding the tradition's emphasis on divine love, devotion, and the progressive expansion of consciousness [16]. In the broader domain of bliss-oriented yoga, Swami Satyananda Saraswati's *Four Chapters on Freedom* (1976), a commentary on the *Yoga Sutras*, and Swami Sivananda's writings on integral yoga provide important comparative reference points [17].

Comparative studies of yoga traditions have been undertaken by scholars including Mark Singleton (*Yoga Body*, 2010), who historicizes modern postural yoga and its relationship to classical systems [18]; Knut Jacobsen (*Yoga in Modern Hinduism*, 2018), who examines the plurality of yoga philosophies in contemporary Hindu practice [19]; and David Gordon White (*The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography*, 2014), who traces the reception history of Patanjali's text and its complex relationship to practice traditions [20]. However, a focused comparative study specifically addressing Ashtanga Yoga and Sri Ananda-Yoga across the dimensions of philosophy, practice, psychology, and soteriology remains a gap in the existing literature, which this paper seeks to address.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design that integrates textual analysis with empirical survey research. The textual analysis component involves a close reading of primary sources principally Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* with Vyasa's *Bhashya*, and the foundational texts of Sri Ananda-Yoga including the writings of Swami Kriyananda and Paramahansa Yogananda alongside a systematic review of secondary scholarly literature [21]. The empirical component involves the administration of a structured questionnaire to a purposively selected sample of 120 yoga practitioners and teachers who possess direct experience with both Ashtanga Yoga and Sri Ananda-Yoga traditions. Participants were recruited from yoga institutes, ashrams, and online yoga communities in India and internationally. The questionnaire comprised 50 items organized around five thematic dimensions: philosophical orientation, structural framework, practical methodology, psychological experience, and perceived outcomes. Data from the questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores, standard deviations, and percentage distributions, presented in five comparative analysis tables. Qualitative insights from open-ended questionnaire items were analyzed thematically. The study adheres to standard ethical protocols including informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation [22]. Reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a score of 0.84, indicating high internal consistency. Content validity was established through expert review by five scholars specializing in yoga philosophy and Indian studies.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The first table examines the philosophical foundations of both traditions across five parameters: cosmological framework, ontological premise, epistemological method, ethical basis, and ultimate goal. Data was collected through a 10-item Likert-scale instrument administered to the study's 120 participants, who were asked to rate the degree to which each tradition emphasizes each parameter on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very strongly).

Table 1: Philosophical Foundations Comparative Analysis

Parameter	Ashtanga Yoga (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Sri Ananda-Yoga (Mean $\pm$ SD)
Cosmological Framework (Samkhya dualism)	4.6 $\pm$ 0.41	2.3 $\pm$ 0.67
Non-dualistic Vedanta orientation	2.1 $\pm$ 0.55	4.5 $\pm$ 0.38
Epistemological rigor (pratyaksha, anumana, agama)	4.4 $\pm$ 0.48	3.2 $\pm$ 0.71
Ethical austerity as foundational	4.7 $\pm$ 0.39	3.5 $\pm$ 0.62
Ultimate goal of liberation (moksha/samadhi)	4.8 $\pm$ 0.31	4.6 $\pm$ 0.42

The data in Table 1 reveals that Ashtanga Yoga is perceived by practitioners as significantly more aligned with Samkhya dualism (mean 4.6) compared to Sri Ananda-Yoga (mean 2.3), which in turn scores markedly higher

on non-dualistic Vedanta orientation (mean 4.5 versus 2.1 for Ashtanga Yoga). This finding reflects a fundamental philosophical divergence: Patanjali's system operates within a dualistic metaphysical framework that posits the ultimate distinction between *purusha* (pure consciousness) and *prakriti* (matter), whereas Sri Ananda-Yoga, rooted in the Vedantic synthesis of Yogananda's lineage, tends toward a non-dualistic understanding of reality in which consciousness is the sole ultimate ground [23]. Both traditions, however, converge strongly in their emphasis on liberation as the supreme goal (means 4.8 and 4.6 respectively), affirming their shared soteriological orientation despite divergent metaphysical premises. The second table compares the structural organization of both traditions with respect to the prominence and role of each major category of practice. Participants rated how centrally each structural element features in each tradition.

Table 2: Structural Framework of Practice Comparative Analysis

Structural Element	Ashtanga Yoga (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Sri Ananda-Yoga (Mean $\pm$ SD)
Ethical disciplines (yama/niyama)	4.7 $\pm$ 0.38	4.1 $\pm$ 0.54
Postural practice (asana)	3.9 $\pm$ 0.61	3.8 $\pm$ 0.58
Breath regulation (pranayama)	4.3 $\pm$ 0.45	4.4 $\pm$ 0.47
Sensory withdrawal (pratyahara)	4.5 $\pm$ 0.42	3.3 $\pm$ 0.69
Devotional/affirmational practices	1.8 $\pm$ 0.72	4.7 $\pm$ 0.36
Meditative absorption (dhyana/samadhi)	4.8 $\pm$ 0.33	4.6 $\pm$ 0.40

Table 2 presents one of the most striking contrasts between the two systems: the role of devotional and affirmational practices. Sri Ananda-Yoga scores exceptionally high in this category (mean 4.7), while Ashtanga Yoga's classical framework does not include devotional practice as a structural element in the same manner (mean 1.8), though it does include *Ishvara pranidhana* (surrender to the Lord) as one of the *niyamas* [24]. Conversely, the emphasis on *pratyahara* (sensory withdrawal) as a distinct and emphasized stage is considerably stronger in Ashtanga Yoga (mean 4.5) than in Sri Ananda-Yoga (mean 3.3). Both traditions converge strongly on meditative absorption as a central practice (means 4.8 and 4.6), confirming that despite structural differences, inner transformation through meditative depth remains the experiential core of both paths.

The third table examines the psychological dimensions of each tradition, including their treatment of the mind (*chitta*), emotional life, and the role of psychological purification in the path to liberation. Participants rated the extent to which each tradition addresses each psychological dimension.

Table 3: Psychological Dimensions Comparative Analysis

Psychological Dimension	Ashtanga Yoga (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Sri Ananda-Yoga (Mean $\pm$ SD)
Suppression/transcendence of mental modifications (vrittis)	4.8 $\pm$ 0.29	3.4 $\pm$ 0.67
Cultivation of positive emotional states (bhavana)	3.2 $\pm$ 0.64	4.6 $\pm$ 0.41
Role of joy/bliss (ananda) in practice	2.7 $\pm$ 0.78	4.9 $\pm$ 0.22
Emphasis on detachment (vairagya)	4.7 $\pm$ 0.36	3.6 $\pm$ 0.61
Integration of shadow/emotion in practice	2.4 $\pm$ 0.81	4.2 $\pm$ 0.53

Table 3 highlights the most psychologically significant divergence between the two traditions: their attitudes toward emotional life and the role of joy in practice. Sri Ananda-Yoga scores exceptionally high on the cultivation of *ananda* (mean 4.9) and positive emotional states (mean 4.6), reflecting the tradition's foundational conviction that bliss is not merely the goal but the very medium of spiritual practice [25]. In contrast, Ashtanga Yoga's classical formulation emphasizes the cessation or stilling of mental modifications (*chitta vritti nirodha*, Yoga Sutra I.2) as the primary psychological task (mean 4.8), and correspondingly places high value on detachment (*vairagya*, mean 4.7) as a prerequisite for liberation [26]. The relatively low score of Ashtanga Yoga on the integration of shadow and emotion (mean 2.4) versus Sri Ananda-Yoga (mean 4.2) further underscores the latter tradition's more affirmative and experientially embracing approach to the inner life. The fourth table examines the pedagogical modalities through which each tradition transmits its teachings, including the role of the teacher, the use of texts, the place of community (*sangha*), and the importance of progressive stages.

Table 4: Pedagogical Approaches Comparative Analysis

Pedagogical Factor	Ashtanga Yoga (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Sri Ananda-Yoga (Mean $\pm$ SD)
Guru-disciple relationship centrality	4.5 $\pm$ 0.43	4.6 $\pm$ 0.39
Scriptural/textual study as practice	4.6 $\pm$ 0.41	3.9 $\pm$ 0.56
Community/sangha emphasis	3.3 $\pm$ 0.67	4.5 $\pm$ 0.44

Progressive staged practice	4.7 ± 0.38	4.3 ± 0.50
Use of music/chanting/affirmation	2.1 ± 0.74	4.6 ± 0.41
Integration of service (karma yoga)	2.9 ± 0.71	4.2 ± 0.53

Table 4 reveals that both traditions share a strong commitment to the guru-disciple relationship as the primary vehicle of transmission (means 4.5 and 4.6 respectively), affirming the pan-yogic principle that authentic practice is transmitted person-to-person rather than through texts alone [27]. However, significant differences emerge regarding community emphasis and the use of devotional modalities such as music, chanting, and affirmation. Sri Ananda-Yoga places considerably greater weight on *sangha* (mean 4.5 versus 3.3) and on the use of affirmational practices (mean 4.6 versus 2.1), reflecting its roots in a community-oriented ashram culture and its use of Yogananda's system of "Energization Exercises" and devotional chanting as integral pedagogical tools [28]. The integration of service as a pedagogical element is also notably stronger in Sri Ananda-Yoga (mean 4.2 versus 2.9), drawing on the broader Vedantic and Gandhian currents of *seva* that inform its practice culture.

The fifth table presents practitioners' self-reported perceptions of the outcomes and experiential markers associated with sustained practice in each tradition, rated on a 5-point scale from "never" to "always."

Table 5: Perceived Outcomes and Experiential Markers Comparative Analysis

Outcome/Experience	Ashtanga Yoga (Mean ± SD)	Sri Ananda-Yoga (Mean ± SD)
Experience of deep mental stillness	4.6 ± 0.42	4.4 ± 0.47
Sustained experience of joy/bliss	3.5 ± 0.63	4.8 ± 0.28
Sense of ethical clarity and discipline	4.7 ± 0.37	4.2 ± 0.51
Experience of devotional love/bhakti	2.9 ± 0.74	4.7 ± 0.35
Physical health and vitality	4.4 ± 0.48	4.1 ± 0.54
Progressive reduction of ego identification	4.5 ± 0.44	4.4 ± 0.46
Sense of unity/non-separation	4.1 ± 0.57	4.6 ± 0.42

Table 5 provides perhaps the most practically significant set of findings in this study, revealing how practitioners actually experience the fruits of each tradition. Both traditions produce comparably deep outcomes in the domains of mental stillness (4.6 and 4.4), ethical clarity (4.7 and 4.2), physical vitality (4.4 and 4.1), and reduction of ego identification (4.5 and 4.4), suggesting that despite philosophical and structural differences, both paths are effective vehicles for inner transformation [29]. The most pronounced difference appears in the domain of sustained experience of joy/bliss, where Sri Ananda-Yoga scores markedly higher (mean 4.8) compared to Ashtanga Yoga (mean 3.5), and in devotional love/bhakti experience (4.7 versus 2.9). Conversely, Ashtanga Yoga practitioners report a higher sense of ethical clarity and discipline (4.7 versus 4.2), consistent with the strong emphasis on *yama* and *niyama* as the foundational limbs of practice. The finding that Sri Ananda-Yoga practitioners report a slightly higher sense of unity and non-separation (4.6 versus 4.1) is consistent with the tradition's non-dualistic metaphysical framework.

5. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis presented in this study reveals a rich and nuanced picture of two major yoga traditions that, while sharing the same ultimate aspiration toward liberation and inner transformation, pursue that aspiration through markedly different philosophical frameworks, structural methodologies, and experiential emphases. The most fundamental divergence identified across all five dimensions of analysis is the difference between Ashtanga Yoga's essentially dualistic, disciplinary, and cognitive orientation and Sri Ananda-Yoga's non-dualistic, affirmative, and devotional approach to the spiritual path. In Ashtanga Yoga, as Patanjali systematically articulates, the practitioner's task is defined as the cessation of the modifications of the mind-stuff (*yogash chitta vritti nirodhah*, Yoga Sutra I.2) through the progressive mastery of eight limbs ordered from the ethical and physical toward the meditative and transcendent [30]. This framework presupposes a metaphysical dualism in which pure consciousness (*purusha*) is ontologically distinct from the material domain of mind and matter (*prakriti*), and liberation consists in the complete discriminative separation (*viveka-khyati*) of the former from the latter [2]. The psychological corollary of this framework is a practice culture that places high value on restraint, detachment, and the systematic neutralization of the emotional and cognitive turbulence that obscures pure awareness. The data from Tables 2, 3, and 5 strongly confirm this characterization: Ashtanga Yoga practitioners consistently report high scores on dimensions related to mental stillness, ethical discipline, and detachment, while reporting lower scores on joy, devotion, and affirmative emotional cultivation.

Sri Ananda-Yoga, by contrast, operates within a broadly non-dualistic Vedantic framework in which consciousness understood as inherently blissful (*sat-chit-ananda*) is recognized as the ultimate reality of both the self and the world [3]. From this perspective, the spiritual path is less a matter of suppressing mental activity than of progressively expanding one's identification with the blissful ground of being that underlies all experience. The role of *ananda* in Sri Ananda-Yoga is therefore not merely an outcome but a method: the cultivation of joy, devotional love, and energetic aliveness in practice is understood as both a sign of and a vehicle for the awakening of higher consciousness [15]. This finding, supported strongly by the data in Tables 1,

3, and 5, invites a reconsideration of the common assumption often implicitly accepted in classical yoga scholarship that spiritual maturity must be accompanied by an increasing emotional austerity. Sri Ananda-Yoga's high scores on outcomes related to unity-experience and non-separation, combined with its high scores on joy and devotion, suggest that an affirmative and bliss-oriented approach may be equally efficacious in producing the experiential fruits of advanced spiritual practice. The pedagogical comparison (Table 4) reveals an important practical implication: Sri Ananda-Yoga's stronger emphasis on community, chanting, and affirmation suggests that it may be particularly accessible and sustaining for practitioners who are motivated by relational and devotional dimensions of practice, while Ashtanga Yoga's emphasis on textual study and rigorous progressive stages may attract practitioners who are intellectually and disciplinarily oriented. Neither approach is inherently superior; rather, this finding affirms the classical yogic understanding articulated across the Gita's exposition of jnana, bhakti, and karma yoga that different temperaments require different pathways to the same ultimate reality [16].

6. CONCLUSION

This comparative study of Ashtanga Yoga and Sri Ananda-Yoga has illuminated both the profound unity and the significant diversity that characterizes India's yoga heritage. Both traditions converge in their commitment to inner transformation, their recognition of the guru-disciple relationship as the primary vehicle of authentic transmission, their emphasis on meditative depth as the experiential core of the path, and their shared aspiration toward liberation as the ultimate human possibility. These convergences affirm the underlying coherence of the yoga tradition across its many expressions and remind contemporary practitioners that despite surface-level differences, all genuine yoga paths draw from the same well of ancient wisdom. At the same time, this study has identified significant and substantive divergences between the two traditions that have important implications for scholarship, pedagogy, and practice. Ashtanga Yoga, with its Samkhya-based dualism, its emphasis on ethical restraint and cognitive discipline, and its systematic progression through eight carefully ordered limbs, offers a rigorous and psychologically precise map of the inner journey toward liberation. Sri Ananda-Yoga, with its non-dualistic metaphysics, its affirmative cultivation of bliss and devotional love, and its integration of community, service, and energetic practices, offers a more relationally warm and experientially embracing path whose fruits as the empirical data in this study confirm are no less profound. For yoga scholars, the most significant contribution of this study may be its demonstration that the domain of comparative yoga studies has much still to yield. The juxtaposition of classical and modern traditions, of disciplinary and devotional approaches, and of dualistic and non-dualistic frameworks opens productive questions about the nature of liberation, the role of emotion in spiritual life, and the relationship between structure and spontaneity in the spiritual path. For practitioners, this study offers an invitation to approach yoga's diversity not as a source of confusion but as an expression of the tradition's remarkable capacity to meet human beings where they are in all the diversity of their temperaments, needs, and spiritual aspirations.

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