

Yoga in Bhutan

A spiritual practice rooted in Buddhist teachings



When most people think of yoga, the first thing that often comes to mind is poses, stretching, and physical flexibility. However, the true meaning and depth of yoga goes far beyond this simple interpretation, especially when we look at its place within Buddhist beliefs and spiritual life. In the Buddhist tradition, yoga is not an end in itself but a skillful means to cultivate mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. Great masters emphasize that asanas (postures) without mindfulness are mere physical exercises, and pranayama (breath control) without awareness becomes shallow breath manipulation. Therefore,

in monastic settings, physical practices are deeply integrated with ethical conduct, meditative focus, and right intention.

Public and monastic yoga

Yoga in Bhutan exists in both public and monastic settings, each with distinct approaches and purposes. While both forms of yoga incorporate asanas and pranayama, their application and sequence differ significantly. Certain pranayama techniques, such as puraka (inhalation), kumbhaka (retention), and rechaka (exhalation)—and a few kriyas (cleansing

techniques), are shared between public and monastic practices. Nevertheless, monastic (or sacred) yoga remains largely hidden from the general public.

Public (or open) yoga

Traditionally, unlike in neighboring regions, yoga has not been a part of daily life in Bhutan. Bhutanese spiritual practices have historically focused on medi-

tation, prayer, rituals, and mantra recitations rather than physical yoga practices. As a result, it was never widely practiced as part of either spiritual or health routines.

It was only in recent years, particularly during the pandemic, that Bhutanese people began embracing yoga as a tool for physical and mental well-being. With the rising global awareness of yoga's benefits, Bhutanese society is gradually incorporating it into modern well-being practices. Unlike monastic yoga, public yoga is more accessible, focusing on body-mind balance rather than deep spiritual transformation.

Monastic (or sacred) yoga

In contrast, monastic yoga is only for monks and is mostly not publicly disclosed. It serves a profound spiritual purpose, guiding practitioners toward enlightenment. A notable example is that of the Tibetan yogi Milarepa, who is said to have attained enlightenment in one lifetime. For monks, yoga is a profound spiritual practice centered on mind training, with physical poses being a component of this deeper focus.

However, unlike public yoga, monks are introduced to asanas and pranayama only after establishing a strong foundation in shamatha (calm abiding) meditation, allowing a seamless transition into Vipassana (insight) meditation. This structured sequence is designed to deepen wisdom and spiritual development.

Some advanced yogic practices, such as Trulkhor, are preserved within specific Vajrayana lineages and are only taught to qualified practitioners within the monastic body.

Sacred yoga – path to enlightenment

Since I am not an expert myself on sacred yoga, I approached two monk friends of mine, one of them Khenpo Karchung, to share some of their knowledge and understanding on the topic with me. Any omissions or mistakes in the overview below are of my own making in trying to accurately 'translate' their kind sharing.

Types of sacred yoga

There are basically three types of Buddhist sacred yoga and they all share the same ultimate goal—enlightenment.



1. Kriya Yoga: a daily way of living, focused on maintaining neatness and cleanliness, reciting mantras, and visualizing a deity above or in front. It does not involve asanas. Kriya Yoga leads to enlightenment after sixteen lifetimes.

2. Upa Yoga: a daily practice, emphasizing (internal and external) cleanliness and incorporating visualization of deities as oneself, along with mantra recitation. It is a profound meditative practice. Upa Yoga leads to enlightenment after eight lifetimes.

3. Tantra Yoga: focused on mental processes and does not emphasize external cleanliness like Kriya Yoga and Upa Yoga. It consists of asanas and pranayamas. Tantra Yoga has the potential to bring enlightenment within a single lifetime.

Not all Buddhist yogis practice every aspect of Kriya, Upa, and Tantra Yoga. The way they live and the quality of their mind differ based on their path and level of practice. For those engaged in Tantra Yoga in particular, there are specific guidelines to follow. For example: One should not exceed the prescribed yogic practices, should avoid food at least one hour before practice, and water half an hour before. Sleeping and waking patterns are often aligned with solar and lunar cycles.



Trulkhors, which are transmitted with strict lineage guidelines. These transmissions trace back to great lineage masters: Nyengyü Trulkhör and Nāropa's teachings through Lama Marpa, Rönyom Trulkhör through Rechungpa, and other transmissions through Togden Shakya Shri.

It is important to note that Nyengyü, Ladrub, and Rönyom Trulkhör are not single asanas but collections of specific sets of asanas. While not numbering in the hundreds or thousands, each contains a defined group, such as 50, 30, or 18 asanas, depending on the system and lineage. For instance, Rönyom Trulkhör includes some of the most advanced and challenging sets of asanas. Though there are occasional similarities in postures across different Trulkhör categories, each set holds its unique sequence and purpose.

Because these are sacred and secretive practices, the names, methods of practicing, and details of the asanas within each group are strictly prohibited from public disclosure. Such teachings are only revealed at the appropriate time to qualified practitioners who have demonstrated sufficient dedication and accomplishment, particularly after the successful completion of Naro Chödruk.

Moreover, it is believed that Dakinis (female embodiments of enlightened energy) protect and safeguard



these teachings from misuse and from being accessed by those without proper initiation, ensuring they remain within the correct context of practice and realization. Often, even hearing the names of certain asanas requires special preparation and supplication ceremonies (tshogkhor).

Connecting to our spiritual heritage

Engaging in yoga is not merely a form of exercise or a passing trend; it is a profound privilege that offers deep opportunities for personal growth, inner transformation, and spiritual development. Yoga, when approached with sincerity and respect, becomes a sacred journey that connects body, breath, and mind, serving as a foundation for deeper meditative practices.

Thus, while yoga as a 'system' of asanas and pranayamas may be relatively new to Bhutanese modern culture, the deeper values that yoga embodies, such as mindfulness, compassion, and inner awareness, are completely aligned with traditional

Buddhist sacred teachings. With proper understanding, yoga can serve as a bridge, supporting 'public' practitioners in Bhutan to connect with their spiritual roots while also caring for their physical and mental well-being.



YOGA YANGCHEN

She is a yoga and meditation teacher, sound healer, animal rights advocate, and content creator. Her passion in life is improving the well-being of all sentient beings, people and animals alike. Based in Thimphu, she works on changing mindsets through her well-being practice.

Connect with Yoga Yangchen

 [yogayangchenbhutan](https://www.instagram.com/yogayangchenbhutan)

 [yogayangchen](https://www.facebook.com/yogayangchen)

 [yogayangchen.com](https://www.yogayangchen.com)