

Nāda Yoga in Historical Perspective: A Source-Critical Reassessment

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Abstract

This article offers a historical and source-critical reassessment of the concept of Nāda Yoga. In contemporary yoga literature, Nāda Yoga is frequently described as an ancient and independent yogic system rooted in the Vedas, Upaniṣads, or medieval Haṭha Yoga traditions. However, a careful examination of the available textual evidence reveals a more nuanced historical picture. While the concept of nāda (sound, vibration, or inner sound) appears throughout a wide range of Indian religious and philosophical literature, no extant premodern source presents Nāda Yoga as an autonomous yogic school, mārga, or systematically organized tradition.

Drawing upon primary sources—including the Nāda-bindu Upaniṣad, Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, Gheraṇḍa Saṁhitā, Śiva Saṁhitā, and selected Śākta Tantras—this study distinguishes between several different meanings of nāda: as a cosmological principle, an object of meditative concentration, an aspect of mantra theory, and a stage within Śākta cosmology. It argues that these contexts should not be conflated into a single historical tradition retrospectively labeled "Nāda Yoga."

The article further examines the role of Swami Sivananda and twentieth-century neo-Vedāntic pedagogy in systematizing diverse sound-centered practices under the designation "Nāda Yoga." Rather than interpreting this development as the recovery of an ancient yogic system, the article proposes understanding it as a modern pedagogical reclassification of heterogeneous contemplative techniques inherited from multiple textual and practical traditions.

The purpose of this study is therefore not to question the practical effectiveness of sound-based contemplative methods, but to distinguish their historical origins from their modern presentation. Such a distinction allows contemporary practitioners to appreciate these methods without relying upon historically unsupported claims regarding their antiquity or institutional continuity.

1. Introduction

Within contemporary global yoga culture, Nāda Yoga is commonly presented as one of the classical branches of yoga, frequently described as an ancient "Yoga of Sound." Popular books, teacher-training manuals, and online educational resources often portray it as a complete spiritual path comparable to Rāja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jñāna Yoga, or Haṭha Yoga. Such presentations commonly attribute its origins to the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, or an uninterrupted lineage extending from antiquity to the present.

Despite the widespread acceptance of this narrative, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining whether classical Indian sources actually describe Nāda Yoga as an autonomous

yogic tradition. The frequent appearance of the word *nāda* throughout Indian religious literature does not, by itself, demonstrate the existence of a distinct school or methodological system. Like many Sanskrit technical terms, *nāda* possesses multiple meanings that vary considerably according to textual, philosophical, and historical context.

This article therefore addresses a straightforward historical question: Do premodern Indian sources present Nāda Yoga as an independent yogic system, school, or *mārga*?

Rather than approaching the subject from theological or practical perspectives, this study adopts a historical and source-critical methodology. The objective is to examine how *nāda* is employed in primary sources, to distinguish its various semantic and doctrinal functions, and to trace the historical circumstances under which the modern concept of Nāda Yoga emerged. The study argues that, based on the currently available textual evidence, no classical or medieval source presents Nāda Yoga as an autonomous yogic tradition comparable to the established categories of Rāja, Bhakti, Jñāna, or Haṭha Yoga. Instead, references to *nāda* consistently appear within already existing religious, philosophical, or meditative systems, where sound functions as one among many contemplative techniques rather than as the defining principle of an independent school.

Recognizing this distinction neither diminishes the practical value of contemporary sound-centered meditation nor challenges the legitimacy of modern pedagogical approaches. Rather, it allows historical analysis and contemporary practice to be treated as separate, though complementary, fields of inquiry.

2. Methodology

The present study employs a historical and source-critical methodology. Its primary objective is not to evaluate the practical effectiveness or spiritual legitimacy of contemporary sound-based contemplative practices, but rather to investigate how the concept of *nāda* is represented within extant premodern textual sources.

The analysis proceeds according to three methodological principles:

1. **Distinction between History and Interpretation:** Descriptive historical evidence is distinguished from modern doctrinal or pedagogical interpretation. Contemporary classifications of yoga are not assumed to reflect historical categories unless they are explicitly supported by primary sources.
2. **Contextual Semantic Analysis:** Occurrences of the term *nāda* are examined within their immediate textual and philosophical contexts. Because Sanskrit technical terminology frequently possesses multiple meanings, identical vocabulary cannot be assumed to indicate a unified historical tradition.
3. **Separation of Technique from Institution:** The study differentiates between the existence of individual contemplative techniques and the existence of an organized yogic system. The appearance of sound-based meditation within a text does not, in itself, constitute evidence for an autonomous school, lineage, or *mārga*.

Like any historical investigation, the present study is necessarily limited to the currently

available corpus of extant and published premodern sources. Future manuscript discoveries may refine or modify aspects of this picture. Accordingly, the conclusions presented here apply only to the presently accessible textual record and should not be interpreted as claims about sources that may yet come to light.

3. Source Base and the Term Nāda

The Sanskrit term *nāda* appears throughout a broad spectrum of Indian religious literature. Depending upon context, it may denote audible sound, subtle vibration, the inner sound perceived during meditation, the metaphysical principle underlying manifestation, or one stage in the cosmological unfolding of Śakti. These meanings are neither interchangeable nor historically identical.

One of the central methodological problems in modern discussions of Nāda Yoga lies precisely in the tendency to collapse these distinct meanings into a single concept. As a consequence, references originating in different historical periods, philosophical systems, and religious traditions are frequently combined to support the retrospective construction of a continuous "Yoga of Sound."

The available textual evidence suggests a more complex picture. Early Vedic literature and the principal Upaniṣads emphasize sacred sound primarily in cosmological and theological terms. The syllable *Om* (*Praṇava*) functions as the sonic expression of Brahman and serves as an object of meditation, yet these texts do not describe an autonomous discipline called Nāda Yoga. Sound is presented as one symbolic and contemplative means among many, rather than as the foundation of a distinct yogic system.

The *Nāda-bindu Upaniṣad* represents one of the earliest texts to provide a detailed description of meditative engagement with inner sound. It instructs practitioners to hear the internal sound through the right ear (verse 31), directing attention toward subtle internal auditory phenomena perceived through concentrated meditation. The text describes a gradual progression from louder sounds—such as the ocean, clouds, or kettledrums—to increasingly subtle perceptions resembling tinkling bells, flute, the *vīṇā*, and the humming of bees (verses 33-35).

Subsequently, the practitioner is advised to concentrate on these subtler sounds and maintain attention on them, without being distracted by external impressions (verses 36-37). The mind becomes fully absorbed in the sound, becoming insensitive to external stimuli (verses 38-39), and the sound, especially *Praṇava* (*Om*), serves as the object of meditation and a means of realizing the highest reality (verses 44-47). Importantly, however, even this text does not present these practices as constituting an independent school or separate yogic path. Rather, it describes a specific contemplative technique within a broader framework of meditative practice.

Distinguishing Āhata and Anāhata Nāda

A further distinction should be made between externally produced sound and the inner meditative sound. In later yogic and Tantric literature, this distinction is commonly expressed through the opposition between **āhata nāda** ("struck" or externally generated sound) and

anāhata nāda ("unstruck" or internally perceived sound).

Āhata nāda refers to ordinary acoustic phenomena produced through physical contact or vibration, including speech, singing, musical instruments, bells, drums, and other audible sounds. Anāhata nāda, by contrast, denotes the subtle inner sound perceived during deep meditative absorption, independent of external sensory stimulation. It is this inner sound that becomes the object of nādānusandhāna in the medieval Haṭha Yoga tradition.

It should be noted, however, that the Nāda-bindu Upaniṣad describes the perception of the inner sound without making the āhata/anāhata distinction a central doctrinal category. The systematic use of this terminology becomes more prominent in later yogic and Tantric traditions and is especially emphasized in modern presentations of Nāda Yoga. Consequently, the widespread identification of Nāda Yoga with the practice of listening to anāhata nāda reflects a later interpretative development rather than the explicit framework of the earliest textual sources.

Historical Periodization of Nāda

The historical development of the concept may be summarized schematically as follows.

Historical Period	Textual Sources	Doctrinal and Practical Function of Nāda
Early Period (Up to the 1st millennium CE)	Vedic Samhitās, Principal Upaniṣads	Cosmological, symbolic, and philosophical context. Sound (Om/Praṇava) acts as a symbol of Brahman and a tool for concentration, not as an independent methodological system.
Medieval Period (11th to 17th centuries)	Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, Gheraṇḍa Saṁhitā, Śiva Saṁhitā	Contemplative and technical function (nādānusandhāna). Serves as an instrumental object of concentration to induce laya (dissolution) and samādhi within the framework of Haṭha Yoga.
Modern Period (20th century to present)	Swami Sivananda (1955), Bihar School of Yoga	Systematized pedagogical domain. Reorganizes heterogeneous historical materials, vocalizations, and tools into a modular, distinct "yoga branch" suitable for modern transmission.

4. Medieval Haṭha Yoga: Nāda as a Contemplative Technique

Among the surviving medieval yoga texts, the most detailed discussions of nāda occur within the literature of Haṭha Yoga. These sources consistently present sound not as an autonomous spiritual path but as one contemplative technique among many employed to stabilize consciousness and facilitate meditative absorption.

The *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* devotes a substantial portion of its fourth chapter to the practice of *nādānusandhāna*, or sustained attention to the inner sound. The practitioner is instructed to withdraw awareness from external sensory objects and direct it toward progressively subtler auditory phenomena arising spontaneously during advanced meditation. These sounds are not presented as the ultimate goal of practice but as supports for concentration. As attention becomes increasingly absorbed, both the perceiver and the perceived sound gradually dissolve into the state of *laya*, culminating in *samādhi*.

The *Gheraṇḍa Saṁhitā* likewise associates the perception of the inner *nāda* with meditative attainment. Particularly noteworthy is its use of the expression *nāda-yoga-samādhi*. In this text, the attainment of this state is explicitly linked to the practice of *Khecari Mudrā*, a physical technique in which the tongue is turned upward toward the soft palate. The surrounding discussion focuses on bodily discipline, sensory withdrawal, and meditative concentration rather than on the doctrines, institutional organization, or transmission of an independent yogic tradition. Accordingly, the expression *nāda-yoga-samādhi* denotes a particular mode or culmination of meditative absorption, not an autonomous school or distinct yogic path.

The *Śiva Saṁhitā* presents a comparable picture. Inner sound arises as an object of meditative concentration in the process of working with *prāṇa* and the mind. Once again, sound functions instrumentally as an aid to stabilizing attention within the existing framework of Haṭha Yoga instead of presenting a separate category of yoga.

The Instrumental Nature of the Inner Sound

This interpretation is reinforced by Hans-Ulrich Rieker's influential commentary on the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*. Rieker emphasizes that nāda must be understood specifically as the "Inner Sound"—a sound perceived not by the physical ear, but by the "ear of the heart" (Rieker 1971, p. 93). Rieker draws a sharp distinction between prayer and mantra: while prayer is born in the mind and goes toward the divinity, the mantra, understood as the vehicle through which nāda manifests, is regarded as an essential attribute of the divine that enters the mind (Rieker 1971, p. 92).

According to this perspective, nāda acts as a "cognitive trap." Rieker uses the metaphor of an elephant-mind being curbed by the "sharp iron prong" of sound (Rieker 1971, p. 97). This directly maps onto the root text of the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* (4.91):

"The mind, like an elephant, is controlled by the iron hook of Nāda. It is bound by Nāda, as a

bird is caught in a net."

He explains that just as we stop hearing the individual letters of a word once we grasp its meaning, the yogi uses the nada to move beyond the sound itself into a state of laya (dissolution). Therefore, the "Inner Sound" is an instrumental stage: once the "wood" of the mind is consumed by the "fire" of concentration, the sound itself dies out, leaving only pure consciousness (Rieker 1971, p. 98). Furthermore, Rieker warns that this nāda is not a simple acoustic phenomenon accessible to anyone who closes their ears; it is a profound experience that requires the prior purification of the nadīs through prāṇāyāma (Rieker 1971, p. 93).

5. Tantric Context: The Śākta Concept of Sound

Beyond yogic contexts, the term nāda occupies a fundamentally different position in Tantric Śāktism. In this tradition, sound is not understood as a technique or a perceptual experience, but as an ontological stage in the manifestation of Śakti—a phase in the cosmological descent from the unmanifest to the manifest.

Within the Kubjikā-Krama corpus, particularly in the *Śatsāhasrasaṃhitā* (an expanded recension of the Kubjikāmatatantra), nāda appears within the second phase of cosmological manifestation (para), associated with Para Śiva and Parā Śakti. This phase consists of six sequential states (Schoterman 1982, p. 121):

1. Unmanā
2. Samanā
3. Vyāpinī
4. Śakti
5. Nādānta
6. Nāda

These six stages form the upper half of a twelve-stage cosmological sequence, which continues with the sūkṣma phase: *Nirodhikā* → *Ardhacandra* → *Bindu* → *Mā* → *U* → *A*. This structure is not a "twelve-level system of nada," but a twelve-stage cosmological progression, within which nādānta and nāda occupy positions 5 and 6. They represent the lower boundary of the para phase—the point at which undifferentiated Śakti becomes vibratory and capable of further articulation. The subsequent sūkṣma stages describe the refinement of this vibratory potential into the proto-phonemic matrix (mātrkā).

In this framework, nāda is not the beginning of audible sound but the threshold at which pure, undifferentiated energy becomes vibratory, enabling further differentiation into bindu and ultimately into articulated sound. It is a cosmological principle, not a practical method (Schoterman 1982). Other Tantric sources describe additional gradations of vibratory manifestation—such as susūkṣma, sūkṣma, avyakta, vyakta, and kṛtrima—but these classifications likewise articulate degrees of ontological unfolding, mapping the progressive condensation of Śakti from pure vibration to structured sound.

The *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* (VB) is relevant here: it includes dhāraṇās involving subtle auditory perception and inner resonance. However, within Kashmir Shaivism these are understood as

auxiliary meditative instruments, not as a distinct mārga. VB supports the idea that sound can serve as a focus for contemplative absorption, but it does not establish a separate tradition of "Nāda Yoga." Classical Śākta texts do not present nāda as a technique, a method of concentration, or an independent path; the modern concept is a retrospective construction shaped by 20th-century reinterpretations.

6. Twentieth Century: Swami Sivananda and Modern Reclassification

Swami Sivananda (1887–1963) played a particularly influential role in shaping the modern understanding of what is now called Nāda Yoga. However, his contribution should be described with terminological and historical precision. In his systematic teaching, he did not recognize it as one of the fundamental yogic paths (*mārga*). Rather, his canonical synthesis comprised four principal paths: *karma*, *bhakti*, *rāja*, and *jñāna* yoga. The category of Nāda Yoga does not appear within this foundational framework.

At the same time, in a number of his works—most notably *Tantra Yoga, Nada Yoga and Kriya Yoga* (1955)—Sivananda isolates sound-related meditative techniques and conceptual material and labels them "Nāda Yoga." In this context, the term "yoga" does not denote an autonomous salvific path or school, but rather a thematically organized pedagogical domain, comparable to his treatment of Mantra Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Laya Yoga, or Kriya Yoga. This pedagogical reclassification was further developed and expanded by Sivananda's students and affiliated lineages in the mid- and late twentieth century, most notably within the Bihar School of Yoga.

- Sivananda does not appeal to a continuous premodern lineage or an independent textual tradition of Nāda Yoga as a school or mārga;
- The materials grouped under "Nāda Yoga" are drawn from heterogeneous sources: Upaniṣadic symbolism, medieval Haṭha Yoga techniques (*nādānusandhāna*), devotional practices, and modern didactic exposition;
- The classification reflects a modern, synthetic, and modular approach to yoga, characteristic of 20th-century neo-Vedāntic pedagogy.

Thus, Nāda Yoga in Sivananda's work should be understood as a retrospective pedagogical reconstruction. It is not presented by Sivananda himself as the revival of an ancient, independent yogic path, but his authoritative synthesis played a significant role in popularizing the perception of Nāda Yoga as a distinct and historically grounded "yoga" in later discourse.

7. Contemporary Sound-Based Practices Beyond Historical Nāda Yoga

The historical analysis presented above does not diminish the practical value of contemporary sound-based meditation. Rather, it suggests that what is commonly referred to today as **Nāda Yoga** is best understood as a modern synthesis of contemplative techniques originating in

several distinct textual and practical traditions.

In contemporary teaching, sound-based meditation often distinguishes between **externally perceived sound (*āhata nāda*)** and **internally perceived sound (*anāhata nāda*)**. Practice commonly begins with sustained attention to audible external sounds—including vocalization, mantra recitation, ritual instruments, or natural soundscapes—and gradually shifts toward the perception of subtler internal auditory phenomena. Although this pedagogical progression is widely presented in modern schools of Nāda Yoga, it represents a contemporary synthesis rather than a single method systematically described in any known premodern source.

Modern sound-based practice may therefore incorporate a wide range of complementary techniques. These include **Bhrāmārī-prāṇāyāma**, the chanting of **Praṇava (A-U-M)**, mantra recitation (*japa*), devotional chanting, attentive listening to natural or ritual sounds, and **nādānusandhāna**, the contemplative observation of inner sound. Some contemporary teachers also distinguish between **linguistic sounds**, such as mantras and sacred syllables that carry semantic or symbolic meaning, and **non-linguistic sounds**, including sustained vocal resonance, bells, singing bowls, drones, and environmental sounds used as objects of meditative attention. These classifications provide useful pedagogical frameworks but are not presented as a unified doctrinal system in the classical textual tradition.

Contemporary practitioners frequently combine traditional methods with modern technologies, including electronic drones, digital *tanpuras*, recorded soundscapes, and other audio media that facilitate sustained concentration and meditative immersion. Such developments represent contemporary adaptations of sound-based contemplative practice rather than continuations of a historically unified Nāda Yoga tradition.

Recognizing this distinction does not diminish the contemplative or spiritual value of these practices. Rather, it situates them within a more historically accurate framework, allowing both their practical effectiveness and their diverse textual and historical origins to be appreciated without assuming a single continuous lineage or an ancient autonomous tradition of Nāda Yoga.

8. Discussion: Historical Reconstruction and Contemporary Practice

The historical conclusions reached in this study do not preclude contemporary reinterpretations of sound-based contemplative practice outside traditional religious frameworks. In modern contexts, practices associated with Nāda Yoga may also be understood as forms of cognitive and attentional training. From this perspective, sound functions as a stable object of concentration that facilitates the regulation of attention and supports progressively deeper states of meditative absorption.

Whether the object of attention consists of mantra recitation, external acoustic phenomena, or the perception of subtle inner sound, these practices share a common contemplative function: they cultivate sustained attention while reducing habitual cognitive distraction. From a contemporary perspective, they may be practiced without adopting the cosmological or theological models within which they were originally formulated. Contemporary practitioners may therefore approach these methods through religious, philosophical, psychological, or secular

contemplative frameworks without fundamentally altering their phenomenological structure.

9. Conclusion

The historical evidence examined throughout this study permits a more precise understanding of what modern literature designates as **Nāda Yoga**. Contrary to the widespread assumption that it represents one of the ancient and autonomous branches of Indian yoga, the surviving textual corpus presents a considerably more differentiated picture. Based on the currently available corpus of extant premodern sources, no text presents Nāda Yoga as an autonomous yogic school, independent *mārga*, or systematically organized tradition comparable to Rāja Yoga, Haṭha Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, or Jñāna Yoga.

Instead, references to **nāda** consistently occur within already established philosophical, ritual, and contemplative systems, where sound serves different functions depending on the historical and doctrinal context. In some traditions it appears as a cosmological principle, in others as an aspect of mantra theory, and in the literature of Haṭha Yoga as an object of contemplative concentration. These diverse meanings should not be conflated into a single historical tradition solely because they share a common terminology.

The evidence reviewed in this article suggests that the modern concept of **Nāda Yoga** is best understood as a twentieth-century pedagogical synthesis that integrates contemplative practices inherited from several distinct textual and practical traditions. This interpretation neither diminishes the experiential value of contemporary sound-based meditation nor questions its legitimacy as a modern contemplative discipline. Rather, it distinguishes historical evidence from later pedagogical systematization.

Historically, the available evidence does not support the existence of Nāda Yoga as an autonomous yogic tradition. Technically, the practices associated with **nāda** are more accurately understood as contemplative methods embedded within broader systems such as Haṭha Yoga and related traditions. Culturally, the modern conception of Nāda Yoga as a distinct branch of yoga emerged primarily through twentieth-century pedagogical reinterpretation and synthesis.

A more historically grounded understanding of Nāda Yoga enables contemporary practitioners and scholars alike to appreciate these practices without relying upon unsupported assumptions regarding their antiquity or institutional continuity. Recognizing their diverse historical origins does not diminish their contemplative, practical, or spiritual significance; rather, it provides a more accurate foundation for understanding both their historical development and their continuing relevance in contemporary practice.

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