

Patanjali's Eight Limbs of Yoga

Offering the true depth of yoga....

While visiting Kripalu Yoga and Health Center a few weeks ago, I had a wonderful opportunity to train with Rob Striker, a yoga master who has been leading and practicing yoga for about 40 years. During the session, he spoke at length about the depth of yoga and its eight limbs as written by Patanjali 2500 years ago. These eight limbs help us dive deeper, bringing our thoughts inward and encouraging us to integrate our mind, body and life force (prana).

According to Devarshi (Steven Hartman, past dean of yoga at Kripalu Yoga and Health Center), 2500 years ago yoga was taught in an individual setting by a guru (teacher) rather than in group classes, so the student could learn the depth of yoga as it relates to their own self.

Over time, our western approach to yoga has evolved to become more of a group environment with a concentration on the limb called "asana" (meaning poses). Even so, many have found themselves reaching further into all that yoga offers as their individual practice deepens.

Following is an in-depth look at the eight limbs of yoga. These limbs can be followed sequentially, though it isn't necessary. The first four limbs of Patanjali's yoga focus on developing our mastery over our physical bodies, minds, emotions, and breath, as well as expanding the energetic awareness of the self. This lays the foundation for the next three limbs which involve expanding the mind and senses, and all limbs move toward a higher state of consciousness in the 8th limb.

1. Yamas

The 5 yamas are standards of moral codes for one's life. They enhance not only our own lives but the lives of those around us.

- Ahimsa (non-violence) is applied first to yourself in your physical yoga practice, then to your thoughts and actions, and then to all living things.
- Aparigraha (non-possessiveness, non-attachment) is releasing the need to possess, grasp, indulge, and acquire.
- Asteya (non-stealing) is removing theft.

- Brahmacharya (moderation of activity, energy) is walking in awareness of the truest reality and remembering a Higher Being.
- Satya (truthfulness, honesty) is being truthful with yourself, and truthful and transparent with others.

2. Niyamas

The 5 niyamas offer an internal development of body, mind, and spirit, helping build and maintain self-discipline and inner strength on the yogi path.

- Ishvara pranidhana (surrender to life) is the dissolving of our egocentric nature and the letting go of our constant identification with ourselves.
- Shaucha (purity or cleanliness, internally and externally) is opening oneself to spiritual growth by treating our bodies as well as our environment with integrity.
- Santosha (contentment, acceptance) is being aware of the gifts present in the moment.
- Svadhyaya (self-study/observation, looking inward) is being open to personal growth through the self-discovery of our flaws, strengths, and weaknesses.
- Tapas (devotion and commitment) is the yogic practice of intense self-discipline, cultivating a sense of passion and courage to burn away impurities on the physical, mental, and emotional level.

3. Asana

Asanas are physical poses practiced in yoga. They were designed to keep the physical body flexible, supple, and able to sit for long periods of time during meditation and Pranayama. Asanas are also for purification, the opening of body channels, and the clearing of blockages within the body.

4. Pranayama

Pranayama is the formal practice of techniques designed to work, develop, and gain mastery of one's breath, leading to the connection of body, mind, and spirit. Pranayama is also the control, manipulation, and channeling of breath, enhancing energy, vitality, and focus. This, then, leads into the next stages of concentration. Learning the techniques to control one's breath reduces anxiety, conflict, and stress, and creates space where the mind remains calm, positive, and enthusiastic.

5. Pratyahara

Pratyahara is the conscious withdrawal of our sensory engagement with the world. This practice develops the ability to choose responses from an internal, balanced knowingness rather than reacting from external stimuli.

6. Dharana

Dharana is a single item concentration (focus), developing the ability to focus attention on one thing or one activity at the exclusion of all else. It removes conflict, slows the mind, and is the preparation for dhyana.

7. Dhyana

Dhyana is meditation and the focusing inward for an uninterrupted flow of attention on a subject or mantra for an extended amount of time. The observer and the object being observed merge and become one.

8. Samadhi

Samadhi is a state of meditative consciousness resulting in union with the divine, transcending the self. (surrender; letting go) The meditator transcends the ego self completely and becomes one with the Universe.

The results of these progressions can lead one into a better understanding of the core self which hopefully will offer more contentment and letting go, thus allowing us to come into deep surrender.