**THE EIGHT LIMBS OF YOGA**

It is said that if we practice the eight limbs of yoga daily, we can reach union/samadhi (the eighth step). As defined in the written text by Pantanjali, called the Yoga Sutras, the eight steps or limbs of yoga are:

1. **ABSTINENCES/RESTRAINTS** (Yamas) of which there are five:
   1. **Non-Violence** (Ahimsa)
   2. **Truthfulness** (Satya)
   3. **Non-Stealing** (Asteya)
   4. **Continence** (Brahmacharya) not clinging to over-indulgence in sensual pleasures
   5. **Non-Possessiveness** (Aparigrapha) not coveting or clinging, not over-indulgencing in strong desires to material objects.
2. **OBSERVANCE** (Niyamas) of which there are five:
   1. **Purity** (Saucha): Cleanliness & eating pure foods that help to purify the physical & energy bodies.
   2. **Contentment** (Santosha): To be cheerful, non-complaining, free from strong desires and satisfied with simple needs.
   3. **Austerity** (Tapas):Using self-discipline through simple living, keeping our will on our spiritual goals and practicing the 8 limbs of yoga.
   4. **Study** (Svadyaya): Attentively studying the sacred scriptures and study of one’s self, “Who am I? What is my purpose? How may I serve?”
   5. **Attentiveness to the Creator** (Ishvara Pranidhana): Devotion, surrender, trust, gratitude.
3. **POSTURES** (Asanas): The postures practiced in yoga, comprise the third limb. In the yogic view, the body is a temple of spirit, the care of which is an important stage of our spiritual growth. Through the practice of asanas, we develop the habit of discipline and the ability to concentrate, both of which are necessary for meditation.
4. **BREATHING** (Pranayamas): Generally translated as breath control, this fourth stage consists of techniques designed to gain mastery over the respiratory process while recognizing the connection between the breath, the mind, and the emotions. As implied by the literal translation of pranayama, "life force extension," yogis believe that it not only rejuvenates the body but actually extends life itself. You can practice pranayama as an isolated technique (i.e., simply sitting and performing a number of breathing exercises), or integrate it into your daily hatha yoga routine.

**These first four stages of Patanjali's ashtanga yoga concentrate on refining our personalities, gaining mastery over the body, and developing an energetic awareness of ourselves, all of which prepares us for the second half of this journey, which deals with the senses, the mind, and attaining a higher state of consciousness.**

1. **SENSE WITHDRAWAL** (Pratyahara): Unplugging. Turning the attention inward, being the observer of ourselves. It is during this stage that we make the conscious effort to draw our awareness away from the external world and outside stimuli. Keenly aware of, yet cultivating a detachment from, our senses, we direct our attention internally. The practice of pratyahara provides us with an opportunity to step back and take a look at ourselves.
2. **CONCENTRATION** (Dharana): After learning to uplug & withdraw our senses, we now bring our attention to developing our focusing skills by focusing on a sound, mantra, or object, life a candle flame or a flower to try and train the mind for meditation.
3. **MEDITATION** (Dhyana): Contemplation, attention to calming the mind. A state of being keenly aware without focus. At this stage, the mind has been quieted, and in the stillness, it produces few or no thoughts at all. This prepares us for the next stage, Samadhi.
4. **UNION** (Samadhi): Connection of our conscious with the creator conscious, reaching enlightenment, self-realization and liberation.

The word Yoga means Union, to yoke together, or to join. To bring together the physical with the spiritual. As defined in the Yoga Sutras, “Yoga is a state of being in which the mind is empty of thought and one attains the Union with the divine consciousness.” There are six pathways developed by the ancient yogis: **1. Jnana** **Yoga:** Union by Knowledge (Study, see above). **2. Bhakti Yoga:** Union by devotion and worship. **3. Karma Yoga:** Union by action, practicing selfless service to mankind. **4. Mantra Yoga:** Union by sound, (saying Om, singing hymns or sentences like “be still and know that I am God.” **5. Hatha Yoga:** Union by bodily control (postures). **6. Raja Yoga:** Union by mental control, quieting the mind (meditation). Pantanjali organized these pathways of the ancient yogis and created the eight limbs later.

There are thousands of ways to practice Yoga. There are many ways in which it is being taught. As stated in the Bhagavad Gita “Even a little of this sacred knowledge will release one from much suffering.”