

THE EIGHT LIMBS OF ASHTANGA YOGA

1. **Yama – (Ethical & Social Restraints)**

- (1) **Ahimsa** – (non-injury, non harming and non- violence to self and another being in thoughts, words and deeds)
- (2) **Satya** – (truthfulness)
- (3) **Asteya** – (non stealing)
- (4) **Bramacharya** – (sense control, chastity, moderation, appropriate sexual behavior or celibacy).
- (5) **Aparigraha** – (non greed or non-hoarding)

2. **Niyama – (Moral & Personal Observance)**

- (1) **Saucha** – (cleanliness)
- (2) **Santosha** -(contentment)
- (3) **Tapas** – (austerities)
- (4) **Svadyaya** – (self study)
- (5) **Ishvarapranidhana** – (surrender to a divine source)

3. **Asana – (postures or seat, a firm positioning of the body connected to the earth)**

4. **Pranayama – (control of life force generally through awareness of breathing)**

5. **Pratyahara – (withdrawal of senses, non-attachment)**

6. **Dharana – (concentration)**

7. **Dhyana – (meditation)**

8. **Samadhi – (bliss, absorption into the higher realms of consciousness)**

Yamas - (Ethical & Social Restraints)

Ahimsa - Non harming: compassion for all living things (thought, word, and actions) The word ahimsa literally means not to injure or show cruelty to any creature or any person in any way whatsoever. Ahimsa is, however, more than just lack of violence as adapted in yoga. It means kindness, friendliness, and thoughtful consideration of other people and things. Ahimsa implies that in every situation we should adopt a considerate attitude and do no harm.

Satya - Commitment to truthfulness: Satya means “to speak the truth.” We have to consider what we say, how we say it, and in what way it could affect others. If speaking the truth has negative consequences for another, then is it better to say nothing. Satya should never come into conflict with our efforts to behave with ahimsa. This precept is based on the understanding that honest communication and action form the bedrock of any healthy relationship, community, or government, and that deliberate deception, exaggerations, and mistruths harm others.

Asteya – Non stealing: Steya means “to steal.” Asteya means the opposite — do not take that which does not belong to you. This also means that if we are in a situation where someone entrusts something to us or confides in us, we honor that trust. Non-stealing includes not only taking what belongs to another without permission, but also using something for a different purpose than that intended, or beyond the time permitted by its owner. The practice of asteya implies not taking anything that has not been freely given. This includes fostering a consciousness of how we ask for others’ time. Inconsiderate behavior demanding another’s attention when not freely given is, in effect, stealing.

Brahmacharya - Sense control: Brahmacharya is used mostly in the sense of abstinence, particularly in relationship to sexual activity. Brahmacharya suggests that we should form relationships that foster our understanding of the highest truths. Brahmacharya does not necessarily imply celibacy. Rather, it means responsible behavior with respect to our goal of moving toward the truth. Practicing brahmacharya means that we use our sexual energy to regenerate our connection to our spiritual self. It also means that we don’t use this energy in any way that might harm others.

Aparigraha - Neutralizing the desire to acquire and hoard wealth: Aparigraha means to take only what is necessary, and not to take advantage of a situation or act greedy. We should only take what we have earned; if we take more, we are exploiting someone else. The yogi feels that hoarding implies a lack of faith in God and in self to provide for the future. Aparigraha also implies letting go of our attachments and an understanding that impermanence is the only constant. The Yoga Sutra describes what happens when these five behaviors outlined above-become part of a person’s daily life. Thus, the yamas are the moral virtues which, if attended to, purify human nature and contribute to societal health and happiness.

Niyama (Personal Observances)

Niyama means “rules” or “laws.” These are the rules prescribed for personal behaviors and moral codes like the yamas. The five niyamas are not exercises or actions to be simply studied rather they represent far more than an attitude. Compared with the yamas, the niyamas are more intimate and personal. They refer to the attitude we adopt toward ourselves as we create a code for living soulfully and morally.

Saucha - Purity: The first niyama is saucha, meaning purity and cleanliness. Saucha has both an inner and an outer aspect. Outer cleanliness simply means keeping ourselves clean. Inner cleanliness has as much to do with the healthy, free functioning of our bodily organs as with the clarity of our mind. Practicing asanas or pranayama are essential means for attending to this inner saucha. Asanas tone the entire body and remove toxins, while pranayama cleanses our lungs, oxygenates our blood and purifies our nerves. “But more important than the physical cleansing of the body is the cleansing of the mind of its disturbing emotions like hatred, passion, anger, lust, greed, delusion and pride.

Santosa - Contentment: The next niyama is santosa, modesty and the feeling of being content with what we have. To be at peace within and content with one’s lifestyle finding contentment, even while experiencing life’s difficulties. Therefore, life becomes a process of growth through all kinds of circumstances. We should accept that there is a purpose for everything – yoga calls it karma – and we cultivate contentment ‘to accept what happens’. It means being happy with what we have, rather than being unhappy about what we don’t have.

Tapas - Disciplined use of our energy as in austerity: Tapas refers to the activity of keeping the body fit or to confront and handle the inner urges without outer show. Literally, it means to heat the body and, by so doing, to cleanse it. Behind the notion of tapas lies the idea we can direct our energy to enthusiastically engage life and achieve our ultimate goal of creating union with the Divine. Tapas helps us burn up all the desires that stand in our way of this goal. Another form of tapas is paying attention to what we eat. Attention to body posture, attention to eating habits, attention to breathing patterns – these are all tapas.

Svadyaya - Self Study or Scriptural study: The fourth niyama is svadyaya. Sva means “self”, adhyaya means “inquiry” or “examination”. Any activity that cultivates self-reflective consciousness can be considered svadyaya. It means to intentionally find self-awareness in all our activities and efforts, even to the point of welcoming and accepting our limitations. It teaches us to be centered and non-reactive to the dualities, to burn out unwanted and self-destructive tendencies.

Isvarapranidhana - Surrender to the divine: Isvarapranidhana means “to lay all your actions at the feet of a Divine source.” It is the contemplation on the divine source (Isvara) in order to become attuned to the source. It is the recognition that the spiritual suffuses everything and, through our attention and care, we can attune ourselves with our role as part of the Creator. The practice requires that we set aside some time each day to recognize that there is some omnipresent force larger than ourselves that is guiding and directing the course of our lives.

Asana – Postures

Asana is the practice of physical postures, It is the most commonly known aspect of yoga within Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras. The practice of moving the body into postures has widespread benefits; of these the most underlying are improved health, strength, balance and flexibility. On a deeper level, the practice of asana, which means staying or seat, is used as a tool to calm the mind and move into the inner essence of being. The challenge of poses offers the practitioner the opportunity to explore and control all aspects of their emotions, concentration, intent, faith, and unity between the physical and the ethereal body. Indeed, using asanas to challenge and open the physical body acts as a binding agent to bring one in harmony with all the unseen elements of their being, the forces that shape our lives through our responses to the physical world. Asana then becomes a way of exploring our mental attitudes and strengthening our will as we learn to release and move into the state of grace that comes from creating balance, between our material world and spiritual experience. As one practices asana, it fosters a quieting of the mind, thus it becomes both a preparation for meditation and a meditation sufficient in and of itself. Releasing to the flow and inner strength that one develops brings about a profound grounding spirituality in the body. The physicality of the yoga postures becomes a vehicle to expand the consciousness that pervades our every aspect of our body. The key to fostering this expansion of awareness and consciousness begins with the control of breath, the fourth limb – Pranayama. Patanjali suggests that the asana and the pranayama practices will bring about the desired state of health; the control of breath and bodily posture will harmonize the flow of energy in the organism, thus creating a fertile field for the evolution of the spirit. “This down-to-earth, flesh-and-bones practice is simply one of the most direct and expedient ways to meet yourself. This limb of yoga practice reattaches us to our body. In reattaching, ourselves to our bodies, we reattach ourselves to the responsibility of living a life guided by the undeniable wisdom of our body.” To this B.K.S. Iyengar adds: “The needs of the body are the needs of the

divine spirit which lives through the body. The yogi does not look heaven-ward to find God for he knows that He is within.”

Pranayama - Directing Energy

Pranayama is the measuring, control, and directing of the breath. Pranayama controls the energy (prana) within the organism, in order to restore and maintain health and to promote one's evolution. When the in-flowing breath is neutralized or joined with the out-flowing breath, then perfect relaxation and balance of body activities are realized. In yoga, we are concerned with balancing the flows of vital forces, then directing them inward to the chakra system and upward to the crown chakra. Pranayama is very important in yoga and it can go hand in hand with the asana or pose. The practices of pranayama produce a physical sensation of heat, called tapas, or the inner fire of purification. It is taught that this heat is part of the process of purifying the nadis, or subtle nerve channels of the body. This allows a more healthful state to be experienced and allows the mind to become calm. As the yogi follows the proper rhythmic patterns of slow deep breathing “the patterns strengthen the respiratory system, soothe the nervous system and reduce craving. As desires and cravings diminish, the mind is set free and becomes a fit vehicle for concentration.”

Pratyahara – Withdrawal of the Senses

Pratyahara means drawing back or retreat. The word ahara means “nourishment”; pratyahara translates as “to withdraw oneself from that which nourishes the senses.” In yoga, the term pratyahara implies withdrawal of the senses from attachment to external objects. It can then be seen as the practice of non-attachment to sensorial distractions as we constantly return to the path of self-realization and achievement of internal peace. It means our senses stop living off the things that stimulate; the senses no longer depend on these stimulants and are not fed by them anymore. In pratyahara we sever this link between mind and senses, and the senses withdraw. When the senses are no longer tied to external sources, the result is restraint or pratyahara. Now that the vital forces are flowing back to the Source within, one can concentrate without being distracted by externals, or the temptation to cognize externals. Pratyahara occurs almost automatically when we meditate because we are so absorbed in the object of meditation. Precisely because the mind is so focused, the senses follow it; it is not happening the other way around.

No longer functioning in their usual manner, the senses become extraordinarily sharp. Under normal circumstances, the senses become our masters rather than being our servants. The senses entice us to develop cravings for all sorts of things. In pratyahara, the opposite occurs. When we have to eat, we eat, but not because we have a craving for food. In pratyahara, we try to put the senses in their proper place, but not cut them out of our actions entirely. Much of our emotional imbalances are our own creation. A person who is influenced by outside events and sensations can never achieve the inner peace and tranquility. This is because he or she will waste much mental and physical energy in trying to suppress unwanted sensations and to heighten other sensations. This will eventually result in a physical or mental imbalance, and will, in most instances, result in illness. Patanjali says that the above process is at the root of human unhappiness and uneasiness. When people seek out yoga, hoping to find that inner peace which is so evasive, they find that it was theirs all along. In a sense, yoga is nothing more than a process which enables us to stop and look at the processes of our own minds; only in this way can we understand the nature of happiness and unhappiness, and thus transcend them both.

Dharana - Concentration and cultivating inner awareness

Dharana is the sixth limb of Ashtanga Yoga. The word ‘Dharana’ simply means ‘unbending concentration of mind’. Working with complete focus and concentration is something that satisfies every individual at the maximum. Each of us feel a sense of frustration when we are not able to focus. The inability to focus may be because our minds were racing with ideas, judgments, worries, songs, or even memories. The main idea underlying Dharana, is the ability to focus on something uninterrupted both by external or internal distractions. Dharana is a form of meditation that can be called receptive concentration. With the help of Dharana, a set of conditions are created that helps the mind focus in one direction and object, rather than concentrating in many directions, thereby diverting the mind. The term ‘Dharana’ is given to both the practice of deep concentration and the state in which you achieve deep concentration. Ideally, ‘Dharana’ should be performed at every moment of the day to gain utmost awareness of both body and mind.

Benefits of Dharana: Dharana aims at setting up the mind, by focusing it upon some stable entity. One good method to start it is by rolling the eyes upward and downward, in one direction to get the concentration. Any object selected for practicing has no role to play in the meditation process. The object is only used to stop the mind from wandering – through memories, dreams, or reflective thought – by intentionally holding it obsessively upon some static object. This ability is a movement toward perception of its true nature and not an escape from reality.

Dharana helps in channeling one's thoughts on a certain thing. It makes sure that you reach a level of awareness in anything you do, by focusing on every step you take. Dharana can bring richness to one's life. With the help of deep contemplation and reflection, one can create the right conditions. Dharana works with the objective to achieve the mental state, where the mind, intellect, and ego are controlled. The mind becomes purified by the practices. It becomes able to focus efficiently on one subject or point of experience. Dharana also helps in the cessation of fluctuations in the mind. The practice of Dharana, at the time when you are struggling with anger, restlessness or expectation helps in balancing those struggles. Dharana is the practice of training the mind to concentrate and focus in such a way, that we can possibly avoid frustrations. Concentrating our attention on one point allows the mind to be stable and calms the disturbance of activity, to which we are used to. The point of concentration can be anywhere within our body or outside. Therefore, maintaining a fixed and focused concentration, throughout the practice, gives consistency and clarity to the thoughts.

Dhyana - Meditation

Dhyana forms the seventh constituent or limb of the ancient science of Yoga. It is derived from the Sanskrit root "dhyai" which means, "to think of". The literal meaning of Dhyana is meditation. It concentrates upon a point of focus, with the intention of knowing the truth about it, and is the thought and meditation of spiritual things. While practicing Dhyana Yoga, we meditate on a single flow of idea. The purpose is to withdraw all senses from various objects of interest. The focus is laid upon one object. Dhyana Yoga produces a state of tranquility. Its objective is to cleanse the subconscious, develop concentration, clear the mind, and bring about various stages of unified communion with God. Practicing Dhyana Yoga allows the person to calm his mind and allow him/her to look at the outside world without any distractions. This enables him/her to reach a heightened level of awareness. Meditation, consciousness, and experience, are all but a single unity. There are different forms of Dhyana Yoga and it is very important to remember the three things given below. One-pointedness of mind is the first thing that means controlling the movement of mind. Setting boundaries to one's life to help achieve this is the second thing. This means doing actions after weighing and measuring them. The third thing is the evenness of vision or state of level-headedness, which means having the nobility and decency to think in terms of the whole world.

Benefits of Dhyana; Dhyana Yoga is a system that, in the form of meditation, tranquilizes the body and mind. In the process of meditation, we calm the mind and that leads to the realignment of our inner self to the right path. Meditation leads to have less thoughts that give rise to worries, which in turn, results in leading a simple life. It enables us to contemplate on important things to connect with the inner self. It also cuts short too many distractions from our life. The mind becomes so occupied with a subject that it concentrates deeply on the object to find the underlying differences, making a connection of the mind to that particular object. While practicing Dhyana, the consciousness of the practitioner flows in the subject and helps in becoming one with the same. The mind is totally observed in the point of focus, while concentrating on the same. On the physical level, Dhyana Yoga helps each cell in the body to refresh and regenerate itself. It also facilitates digestion and makes respiration more efficient, as well as improves circulation and quality of blood. Moreover, it improves your ability to analyze your emotions objectively, and the way you react in certain situations.

Samadhi – Bliss

Samadhi is a physical and mental state of body which denotes higher levels of concentrated meditation, or dhyana. Hindu and Buddhist scriptures consider Samadhi a precursor for enlightenment. It is part of Ashtanga Yoga. When one becomes absorbed in it, personal identity vanishes. In the moment of Samadhi, nothing mundane exists. Total Independence, the literal meaning of Samadhi, is 'to bring together, to merge'. When in Samadhi, we are assimilated with the object of our choice. We blend and become one with it. It becomes an identity without differences, and a liberated soul enjoys pure awareness of this pure identity. When the individual attains the Supreme Cosmic Consciousness from which it descended, the goal of Samadhi is reached. The final stage of Samadhi terminates at the instance the soul is freed. The absolute and eternal freedom of an isolated soul is beyond all stages and it is beyond the boundaries of time and place.