

The Eight Limbs *of yoga*

PATANJALI'S
EIGHTFOLD PATH
TO
ENLIGHTENMENT
BY
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To many, yoga means postures – or physical positions of the body, but it is much, much more. The word itself implies a linking or blending or harmony – of what with what? Well, harmony within the individual and also with the environment. Harmony and balance between all the systems of the body. Body/mind harmony where the person develops an awareness of the environment within the body and what its needs are – and also aware of one's mental state. Staying focused on the task at hand and in the present moment.

Our actual practice of yoga also requires harmony and balance, bearing in mind that our physical postures form but one of an eight-step system for an all round integrated approach – this will achieve vitality of body, calmness of mind and peace in one's soul.

In the very earliest days of yoga, its teachings were passed from teacher to student, through the generations, and (as far as we know) this wealth of knowledge remained undocumented until approx. 500 BC, when Patanjali wrote the Yoga Sutras – a book of aphorisms or short sayings of wisdom from which man could shape his values. To give his students direction with their yoga practice, he devised the first ever known "system" of yoga, an eightfold approach to enlightenment. This he entitled "Astanga" which literally means "asta" – eight, "anga" – angles or limbs. This system proved very thorough and easy to follow, and as a way of living, all-encompassing.

If you look at the diagram (on page 14), you will see the eight steps clearly shown, and their names written in both English and Sanskrit (the ancient Indian dialect). You will see that the first two steps - the philosophical aspects of yoga - form the broad base of the triangle. In other words, our yoga practice must have as its stable base, sincerity and commitment towards taming the ego-based personal weaknesses, or the other practices are of little use. There are those who are adept at many of the advanced postures – but still behaving in old inappropriate patterns in their daily life. There is no progress here. Let's go through each step and how this ancient system is still relevant in today's world.

STEP ONE: ATTITUDES (Yamas)

Below are the five main yamas or attitudes with which we can upgrade the way we relate to others, both at home and globally:

1. Non Violence (Ahimsa).

Non violence on all levels. This means curtailing criticism, avoiding gossip, being open to the ideas of others. Being willing to forgive. Being gentle with oneself and others. "Reconciliation" is a classic example of ahimsa in action in our own country.

2. Truth (Satya)

Being authentic and living with personal values – telling the truth – removing the masks we wear, no hypocrisy. Avoiding falsehood and empty pursuits and platitudes. Being true to yourself.

3. Non Stealing (Asteya)

This yama covers good business ethics and freedom from hoarding. Sharing.

4. Moderation (Brahmacharya)

A very important yama – balancing the "ha"

and "tha" (as in Hatha yoga). Balancing action and stillness, work and play etc. Control of excessive need for stimuli and sensations. Discernment – choosing exactly how and with whom you will spend your time. Control of personal weaknesses and raging emotions.

5. Non Covetousness (Aparigraha)

Happiness is making the most of what you have so this yama is about letting go of competitiveness (sometimes in yoga class!) and keeping up with others. Instead of the tendency to secretly envy the success of others, developing a healthy self-esteem to allow the pursuit of and response to personal challenges.

STEP TWO: DISCIPLINES (Niyamas)

The Niyamas are about our own personal discipline, to build a strong will and character. These are some of the main Niyamas:

1. Cleanliness (Saucha):

This covers not only cleanliness of the body, but also purity of the mind, developing positive mental habits. An important aspect of keeping the body and mind clean is a healthy diet.

2. Contentment (Santosa):

Santosa is about accepting what is – opening up to what life presents us, and doing the best with the here and now. If we cultivate contentment in the mind (through meditation), we find it in our lives. Santosa is also about surrender – this is not defeat, but a gentle trust in the universe and in the natural unfoldment of our lives. To truly develop contentment, we need to practise non-attachment (vairagya) – and this for most of us remains an on-going challenge!

3. Enthusiasm (Tapas)

This Niyama covers the challenges of endurance, dedication and setting personal values and disciplines which reflect self-respect, (for example, by being punctual). It's about persistence and patience, and developing habits of positive enthusiasm.

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4. Self Reflection (Svadyaya)

Reflecting on one's behaviour. Devotional or uplifting reading (like personal growth), spiritual study. The true yogi will enrich his life with the genuine truths of all spiritual paths, so he can formulate his own personal values to live by and to give meaning to his life.

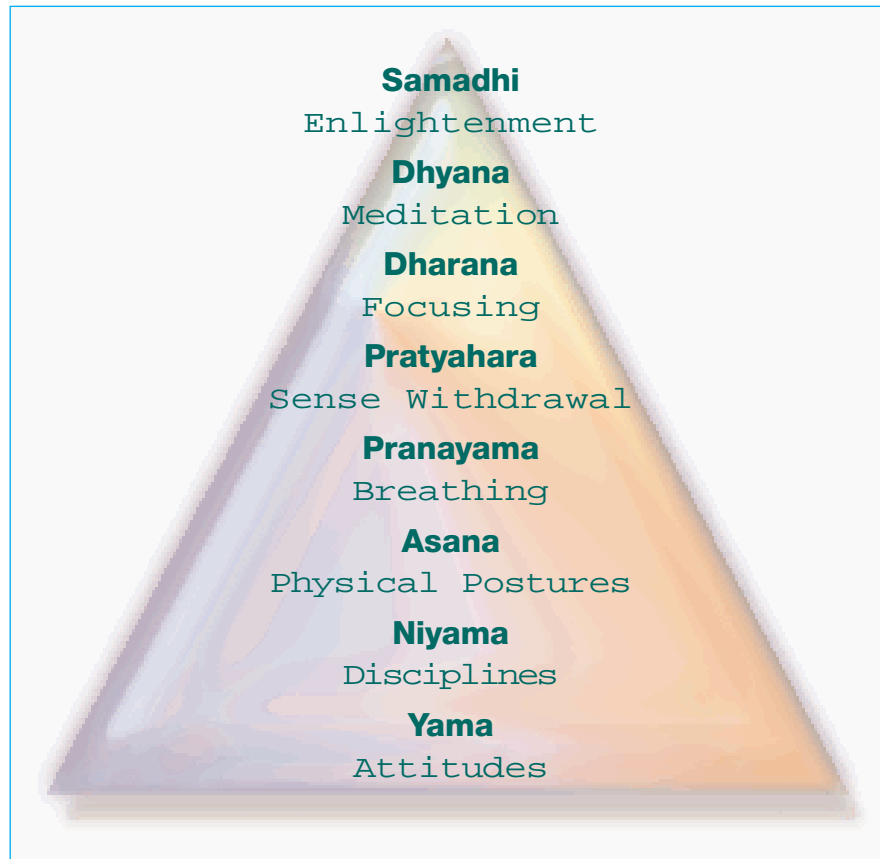
5. Devotion to Oneness

(Isvara Pranidhana):

Aspiring to a higher ideal. Listening to the quiet voice within. Being present unto the fullness of every moment – a sincere yearning towards personal and universal harmony. Realising the inter-connectedness of all living things. Devotion to all life and to union with a Higher Energy.

STEP THREE – POSTURES (Asanas):

The postures are usually what initially attracts one to yoga; however they form but one-eighth of an authentic, traditional yoga practice. The postures help to keep the body strong, flexible and in balance. Yoga postures are a great way to keep vitality and health in the body/mind. There are 84 classic postures



PATANJALI'S EIGHTFOLD PATH TO WISDOM.

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(asanas) which can be modified for any person of any age or condition. These postures are done standing, sitting, lying supine or prone, and cover forward, backward and side bends as well as twists and balances. It's important to consider your physical postures within the framework of this Astanga system – that is, we view the body as the temple of the spirit, and we keep it in good working order both as a discipline, and to prevent too much discomfort during practices which require stillness. Even strong postures can be approached from a gentle perspective, rather than that of an ego-related "performance". In conjunction with a good diet, our yoga postures will not only keep

the body healthy, but also act as a preventative to disease, or maintain flexibility during periods of injury or ill-health. While it is true that the postures themselves will not bring enlightenment (the ultimate goal of yoga), they are nevertheless an important stage on the spiritual path. Equilibrium and vitality become the normal state of mind after the regular practice of the asanas.

STEP FOUR – BREATHING (Pranayama)

The breath is an integral part of our yoga practice – for the breath is life itself. During our yoga workout, as we release tension and open the body with deep breathing we are in

fact harnessing the Life Force (prana) to flow to every single corner of the body – bringing energy and vitality. So it's very important to use the breath to "let go" into held postures, with the dual attitudes of stability and lightness (from Patanjali's Yoga Sutras) because physical or mental tension or discomfort in fact represents blocked energy. There are breathing techniques with very different applications:

- To energise (deep breathing releases the ribcage and diaphragm)
- To relax (the breath is your natural tranquilliser!)
- To heal – special breaths to help with asthmatic conditions
- To cleanse – freeing up airways from pollution and other blockages
- To calm the mind – with breathing which is slow and rhythmic
- As a point of focus during meditation
- As the vehicle for a deep inner journey
- Deep breathing gives your postures (asanas) more power
- Warming breaths, cooling breaths
- Focusing on the breath increases all over self-awareness

STEP FIVE – SENSE WITHDRAWAL (Pratyahara)

This step (to move away from) is, essentially, a preparation for meditation. To move beyond the thinking mind into a deep, still place is not possible while we are functioning through our senses – touch, smell, sight, taste and hearing. These are truly wonderful aspects of our physical body through which we go about our daily lives. Due to the pace of modern life, our senses are almost constantly being bombarded by external stimuli, and too much will block us from our true Self, the quiet voice within. So the practice of Pratyahara is to train the mind to occasionally take a break from the senses, or move beyond them, to help the mind reach a place of stillness. It's a bit like putting yourself into neutral gear; and this practice will bring about a deep calmness, a centring and sense of "wholeness", quite apart from all other people and things. It is usually practised in the sitting position, with the guidance of a qualified teacher.

STEP SIX – CONCENTRATION OR FOCUS (Dharana)

There are many yogic practices to help us train the mind to remain focused on one point. It may be a picture or statue of a deity of your choice, or a candle, or a breathing practice, or it may be a concept (say, peace or love) that the mind is focused on. This Dharana practice is a necessary link with the previous (Pratyahara) and next practice, meditation (Dhyana) and one which is quite challenging! Many students lose heart if they can't master this one straight away, but it's a lifetime of practice and an attitude of not being too "goal" oriented or too hard on yourself, which brings results – however small. Just keep coming back to it – with no preconceived ideas. You may find after regular practice of Dharana that you notice a mental clarity and increased energy – due to less mental chatter and disturbance. This practice is usually done sitting in a comfortable position (not necessarily cross-legged).

STEP SEVEN – MEDITATION (Dhyana)

Dhyana is not a practice that you sit down and do – rather it is the meditative state into which the mind will gently move, after it has become absolutely still – during your preferred focusing technique. For the beginner, this stage may be reached only briefly or for a matter of seconds, and with regular practice perhaps for a little longer; but its effects are long-lasting and flow into one's daily activities. There are little windows of insight and clarity not experienced before, and these bring a soulful, tranquil dimension to your life – a life with added meaning. One's "inner" or spiritual life will unfold and develop, with Dhyana a vehicle for the journey – a truly rewarding journey.

Journey to what?...

STEP EIGHT – ENLIGHTENMENT (Samadhi)

Samadhi is often interpreted as a bliss state. It is more than that – it is a merger of man with one's Higher Energy – the true purpose of yoga. The yoga practices and steps of the Astanga bring us closer to our own essence (or source), and with the merging and practice of all the previous seven steps one is led a little closer to step eight, Samadhi – the state in which some realised beings remain! But even for us mere mortals, Samadhi can happen – sprinkled throughout our lives and

manifesting as better relationships, better acceptance of self, deep and true contentment, interconnectedness with all other beings – of knowing one is nothing, and at the same time a part of everything – belonging – whole. It is no accident that the word "whole" is so very close to the word "holy". An interesting analogy lies also with the word "enlightenment" – notice the middle section of the word ("light") – the opposite of "heavy", but it is also the opposite of "dark". During states of Samadhi, one is free of the burdens (or weight) of one's "baggage", and at the same time led out of the darkness of ignorance and pettiness. A re-awakening occurs – into the fully aware state of the human soul.

The eight steps form a complete and holistic approach to the practice of yoga. This is the authentic traditional yoga – more far-reaching than postures alone. They are meant to be practised in an integrated way, rather than step by step. However, the first five steps are usually recommended as excellent preparation for the following three steps. But with any yoga practice, you follow what feels right for you, there are many roads to the same destination – that of merging with a Higher Energy; and yoga has no specific dogma – how much or how little you follow the eightfold path is entirely up to you.

Each of the eight steps of Astanga have been explained in simple terms, as an introduction only, so that it is easily understood by beginners and experienced yogis alike. In later issues, we will deal with each step in a separate, in-depth way.

Loretta McArthur completed teacher training with Swami Sarasvati in 1987, and later qualified for International Yoga Teachers Association membership. In 1989 she opened the Brisbane School of Yoga and Movement, and in 1995 co-authored a set of yoga cards sold worldwide. Loretta has recently moved to the Sunshine Coast hinterland where she will specialise in private yoga classes, annual retreats and writing yoga articles. For further information please contact (07) 5441 4611