

The Eight Limbs

Patanjali's eight-fold path offers guidelines for a meaningful and purposeful life.

by Mara Carrico, *Yoga Journal*

In Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, the eightfold path is called ashtanga, which literally means "eight limbs" (ashta=eight, anga=limb). These eight steps basically act as guidelines on how to live a meaningful and purposeful life. They serve as a prescription for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline; they direct attention toward one's health; and they help us to acknowledge the spiritual aspects of our nature.

Yama

The first limb, yama, deals with one's ethical standards and sense of integrity, focusing on our behavior and how we conduct ourselves in life. Yamas are universal practices that relate best to what we know as the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The five yamas are:

Ahimsa: nonviolence

Satya: truthfulness

Asteya: nonstealing

Brahmacharya: continence

Aparigraha: noncovetousness

Niyama

Niyama, the second limb, has to do with self-discipline and spiritual observances. Regularly attending temple or church services, saying grace before meals, developing your own personal meditation practices, or making a habit of taking contemplative walks alone are all examples of niyamas in practice.

The five niyamas are:

Saucha: cleanliness

Samtosa: contentment

Tapas: heat; spiritual austerities

Svadhya: study of the sacred scriptures and of one's self

Isvara pranidhana: surrender to God

Asana

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.

Pranayama

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.

Pratyahara

Pratyahara, the fifth limb, means withdrawal or sensory transcendence. 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. This withdrawal allows us to objectively observe our cravings: habits that are perhaps detrimental to our health and which likely interfere with our inner growth.

Dharana

As each stage prepares us for the next, the practice of pratyahara creates the setting for dharana, or concentration. Having relieved ourselves of outside distractions, we can now deal with the distractions of the mind itself. No easy task! In the practice of concentration, which precedes meditation, we learn how to slow down the thinking process by concentrating on a single mental object: a specific energetic center in the body, an image of a deity, or the silent repetition of a sound. We, of course, have already begun to develop our powers of concentration in the previous three stages of posture, breath control, and withdrawal of the senses. In asana and pranayama, although we pay attention to our actions, our attention travels. Our focus constantly shifts as we fine-tune the many nuances of any particular posture or breathing technique. In pratyahara we become self-observant; now, in dharana, we focus our attention on a single point. Extended periods of concentration naturally lead to meditation.

Dhyana

Meditation or contemplation, the seventh stage of ashtanga, is the uninterrupted flow of concentration. Although concentration (dharana) and meditation (dhyana) may appear to be one and the same, a fine line of distinction exists between these two stages. Where dharana practices one-pointed attention, dhyana is ultimately 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. The strength and stamina it takes to reach this state of stillness is quite impressive. But don't give up. While this may seem a difficult if not impossible task, remember that yoga is a process. Even though we may not attain the "picture perfect" pose, or the ideal state of consciousness, we benefit at every stage of our progress.

Samadhi

Patanjali describes this eighth and final stage of ashtanga as a state of ecstasy. At this stage, the meditator merges with his or her point of focus and transcends the Self altogether. The meditator comes to realize a profound connection to the Divine, an interconnectedness with all living things. With this realization comes the "peace that passeth all understanding"; the experience of bliss and being at one with the Universe. On the surface, this may seem to be a rather lofty, "holier than thou" kind of goal. However, if we pause to examine what we really want to get out of life, would not joy, fulfillment, and freedom somehow find their way onto our list of hopes, wishes, and desires? What Patanjali has described as the completion of the yogic path is what, deep down, all human beings aspire to: peace. We also might give some thought to the fact that this ultimate stage of yoga—enlightenment—can neither be bought nor possessed. It can only be experienced, the price of which is the continual devotion of the aspirant.