

Patanjali's Eight Limbs of Yoga

The Yoga Sutras are the first ancient sacred texts that systematically describe and categorise the various paths of yoga undertaken by the ancient yogis of India. They are believed to have been written by an almost mythological person called Patanjali. Patanjali is thought to have been a physician and Sanskrit scholar, as well as a yogi, who put the ideas of yoga into an accessible form that was to be available to all. He is not considered to be the one to invent yoga, just the first to write it down and classify it. The Yoga Sutras, as they are known, explain the ideas of yoga and the various techniques to achieve yoga or 'union with the Divine'. There are eight paths or limbs of yoga that are described in the Yoga Sutras.

Yama (Ethical disciplines)

Yamas are divided into five categories:-

1. Ahimsa (non-violence)

This yama specifies that we should not have or commit any violent act in thought, word or deed, to any living creature or being. Non-violence to humans is essential. There must be other ways to solve problems or disputes rather than resorting to violence. A yogi realises that violence is destructive and non-productive; however, in some cases such as self-defence, violence may be necessary for one's survival.

If one believes that the earth is a living organism or entity, then it follows that as well as not harming any person, creature or plant, we should take care to minimise the violence done to the earth. This means that whilst humans can make use of the various forms of nature, such as plants, trees and animals, this usage must be done with utmost respect and in a sustainable way. A yogi believes that it is essential to be harmonious with nature and take only what is necessary.

Ahimsa also has a more positive meaning that is to be more loving, kind, compassionate and considerate to all beings.

2. Satya (honesty)

It is essential for a yogi to be truthful at all times. If we are completely honest then there is nothing to hide, enabling us to be open and free to communicate to others, without feeling any restrictions. Lying is deception. Dishonesty can leave us feeling blocked and will hinder our spiritual progress.

3. Asteya (non-stealing)

This means taking nothing that does not belong to you. If we have a desire to possess something that has not come to us naturally, then this desire can cause us to steal. Stealing is another form of dishonesty.

4. Brahmacharya (self-restraint)

This is sometimes translated as leading the life of a celibate. However this is not really the case for all. It can mean celibacy for those that want to commit to this lifestyle, whereas for others it can simply mean moderation in all activities including sexual activity. In other words, abstaining from sexual misconduct.

5. Aparigraha (non-coveting)

Non-coveting means not feeling the need to possess something you do not have. It is similar to Asteya, where we should not take what we do not need. It implies that everything that is needed in our lives will come at the right time, and that there is no need to worry or feel a loss or lacking of anything. This is particularly difficult to overcome, as the mind often desires things that it does not have, in the belief that the object of desire will bring happiness.

Niyama

Niyama is described as the attitude that one adopts towards oneself. They are basic rules of conduct that apply to individual disciplines.

1. Saucha (purity/cleanliness)

Saucha is the act of keeping the body, mind and spirit pure, through various methods such as bathing, physical exercise and meditation. It is also important to eat pure foods. If we eat unhealthy, processed or fatty, lifeless foods, then it is likely that the body will become ill and diseased, leading to decay and eventually, premature death. If we eat healthy, fresh food, particularly organic, that is, food grown without the use of artificial chemicals or pesticides, and also mainly vegetarian, then the body will feel healthier and lighter, and will be able to fight off illness and disease much more efficiently.

2. Santosha (contentment)

Contentment is a state of mind where we feel no lacking or desire for anything we do not already have. Contentment is something that needs to be cultivated. To be content we have to accept things as they are, and learn to trust that things are the way they are meant to be.

3. Tapas (self-discipline)

Tapas involves making a conscious effort to achieve the ultimate goal of yoga, which is 'union' with our true nature. It means being disciplined in the yoga practices and making a regular effort to burn up any desires or negativity that may get in the way of achieving this goal.

4. Svadyaya (self-study)

Svadyaya is the study of oneself. It involves making an effort to know oneself, to know who we really are; to know and be aware of how the mind works, and to realise that underneath all our thoughts, lies our true Self, the self that is the same in all living beings. Svadyaya also implies taking time to read and study the sacred texts that enable us to come to a closer understanding of our true Self.

5. Ishvara-Pranidhana (devotion)

Ishvara-Pranidhana is the devotion of all our actions towards God, Goddess, or the universal Spirit (however you would like to interpret this). If one forgets that within them is the Universal Spirit that lies within all living beings, then one is either prone to becoming egotistical or proud when things are going well, or fall into despair when things go wrong. If one believes in a higher force that we can devote our thoughts and actions towards, and trust in, then one will become more humble and not fall into despair or depression.

Asana

The third limb of yoga is Asana or physical postures. Asana have been developed over thousands of years to keep the body healthy and strong. The various postures can help improve muscle tone and strength, increase flexibility, remove toxins from the body, improve blood circulation and soothe the nerves. They can also help develop one's sense of balance and agility. Asana not only affect the body, but also have a positive effect on the mind, helping to focus and concentrate, thereby making the mind ready for meditation.

Pranayama

It is often considered that once one has a certain mastery over the asana, then the next stage is to begin Pranayama. 'Prana' means 'breath', 'energy' or 'life force', and 'ayama' means 'extension', 'stretch' or 'lengthen'; therefore, 'pranayama' can be translated as 'breath or energy extension'. Breathing techniques are used to control the breath or prana in various ways. There are many different types of exercises that have different effects. The various techniques used can clear the mind of any negativity, soothe the nerves, aid relaxation and increase movement of prana or energy around the body, clearing any energetical blockages along the way. All of the techniques help to focus the mind.

Pratyahara

Pratyahara is the conscious effort to become detached from the desires that arise through the senses. Attachment to sense desires can eventually lead to suffering and misery. Through the practice of asanas and pranayama, a yogi is training his mind to be free from sense desires.

Dharana

The sixth limb of yoga is Dharana or concentration. Once one has control over their senses, it becomes easier to focus the mind and concentrate.

Dhyana

When one can concentrate on a particular object or thought without distraction, then the mind can move more easily into Dhyana or meditation, the seventh limb of yoga. Meditation is the ability to be able to focus the mind without any distractions, until eventually, the mind becomes still, allowing a realisation of our true nature. There are many techniques of meditation, some involving observing the thoughts, others, observing the breath, but all have the same outcome or effect, which is the experience of pure bliss.

Samadhi

When one has mastered all the other limbs of yoga, then the eventual outcome is Samadhi or the feeling of pure consciousness. For some this experience may be felt only temporarily, but others such as certain Yogic masters may have this feeling constantly. It is important even at this stage however to remain unattached to this experience. Samadhi is something that will happen of its own accord, if one is patient and disciplined.

Conclusion

Although Pantanjali's eight limbs of yoga are listed in this order, it does not necessarily mean that one has to start at Yamas and then work down the list. Certain practices may come easier after having a certain mastery over another, for example, Asana can prepare the body to be able to sit still in an upright position for a greater length of time without any discomfort, enabling one to then practice pranayama in the correct posture. Pranayama then can help clear energetical blockages in the body and increase the flow of prana around the body, as well as help focus the mind, enabling one to come into meditation more easily. When one is able to focus the mind and meditate, then Samadhi will arise. Patience, practice and self-discipline are what is required.

Further Reading On Yoga Sutras

'The Heart of Yoga', by T.K.V. Desikachar. (Inner Traditions Int, Vermont, US, 1999)

'Light on Yoga', by B.K.S Iyengar

'Yoga Mind Body and Spirit', by Donna Farhi (Owl Books, NY)