

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

Raja yoga is frequently described as the scientific path to yoga. This is because it lays out in a very clear, simple, and systematic way a series of steps that a practitioner of yoga can follow to achieve enlightenment. These steps, which are detailed in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, form a sort of ladder, each practice building sequentially on the practice that precedes it. The eight limbs, or rungs, of raja yoga, presented from the first to the eighth are as follows:

1. Yama. Yama means "self-restraint" or "self-control" in Sanskrit. The yamas are a set of ethical practices, somewhat like the commandments of the Old Testament, which form the basis for spiritual development. In order to be liberated, the yoga aspirant first must abstain from engaging in behavior that will be detrimental to his well-being and that of others. Patanjali prescribes five yamas that are to be observed: nonviolence (ahimsa); not telling lies, or being truthful (satya); not stealing (asteya); not wasting one's sexual energy, or literally, demonstrating "brahmic conduct" (brahmacarya); and not being greedy (aparigraha). By practicing these five yamas, one develops the self-control necessary for the pursuit of the highest goals of yoga.
2. Niyama. Niyama means restraint in the sense of "discipline" or "moral observance" in Sanskrit. The niyamas are a set of ethical principles by which the practitioner of yoga is advised to conduct his life. Patanjali details five niyamas that are to be practiced: purity (saucha), contentment (santohsa), asceticism (tapas), study (svadhyaya), and surrender to a higher power (Isvara-pranidhana). Taken together, the niyamas provide a prescription for right living.
3. Asana. Asana means "seat" or "posture" in Sanskrit. The asanas are a prescribed set of physical postures, or poses, that are meant to purify and steady both the body and mind. For many people, yoga is synonymous with these postures, which form the basis of what is known as hatha yoga, which is derived from the system of raja yoga. The asanas play such an important role in yoga that they have given rise to many approaches to practicing them. Much of the confusion as to what yoga is in the West is caused by these various approaches to executing the physical postures of yoga. Because of the importance that these poses play in yoga and the diversity of ways in which they can be practiced, the first few sections of Yoga for Men are devoted to a description of the various styles of yoga that have developed in response to the practice of raja and hatha yoga.
4. Pranayama. Pranayama means "control (or extension) of the breath" in Sanskrit. The breath (prana) is more than just the air we take in and exhale, however. Breath is also synonymous with vital energy, or the life force. Without breath there is no life. Practitioners of yoga believe that it is essential to learn to control the breath in order to still the mind. Consequently, detailed practices have been developed to enhance the flow of breath, or vital life force. These practices include various ways of inhaling, retaining, and expelling the breath. The practice of pranayama is so vital to yoga that you will find a separate section detailing the most frequently practiced of these breathing techniques in Chapter 16.
5. Pratyahara. Pratyahara means "withdrawal" or "starving the senses" in Sanskrit. The practice of pratyahara entails withdrawing the senses from sensory objects, as in sleep.
6. Dharana. Dharana means "concentration" in Sanskrit. Once the practitioner of yoga has withdrawn the senses from external objects, he practices concentration, for instance, by focusing single-pointedly on an object of awareness, such as a mental image or a sound.
7. Dhyana. Dhyana means "meditation" in Sanskrit. As the practitioner's

concentration

develops, it deepens into meditation.

8. Samadhi. Samadhi means "bliss" or "ecstasy" in Sanskrit. Once the aspirant has perfected the preceding steps on the ladder of yoga, he enters into a state sometimes referred to as superconsciousness, in which the individual self merges with the infinite consciousness of the universe. This state of bliss is the ultimate goal of raja yoga.

These eight practices comprise the eight-runged ladder referred to as ashtanga yoga. Taken together, they form a kind of guide to developing self-control. The first two sets of

practices prescribe how to establish self-discipline over one's conduct and behavior toward

others through a system of do's and don'ts of ethical behavior. The next two practices teach

how to achieve self-discipline of the physical body. The last four practices provide detailed

instruction on how to gain mastery of the senses and mind, leading to self-realization.

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