



Ashtanga Yoga / Eights Limbs of Yoga Introduction & Overview

Description

Vocabulary



1. ANTARANGA YOGA â?? Internal aspects of the Eight Limbs of Yoga
2. ASANA â?? Posture or seat
3. ASHTANGA YOGA â?? Eight Limbs of Yoga
4. BAHIRANGA YOGA â?? External aspects of the Eight Limbs of Yoga



5. DHARANA â?? Concentration or attention
6. DHYANA â?? Meditation
7. EIGHT LIMBS OF YOGA â?? Raja Yoga practices as described in this lesson
8. NIYAMAS â?? Observances; qualities of an â??evolutionary personalityâ?•
9. PRANAYAMA â?? Breathing techniques for directing energy
10. PRATYAHARA â?? Turning senses inward
11. SAMADHI â?? Absorption or union
12. SAMYAMA â?? *Dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi* together
13. YAMAS â?? Restraints; guidelines for engaging with others

Introduction



- Ashtanga Yoga (Eight Limbs of Yoga) are practices, or tools, of [Raja Yoga](#).
- Other [branches or paths of yoga](#) focus on other practices, such as chanting in Bhakti Yoga and service in Karma Yoga.
- The Eight Limbs of Yoga are *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*.
- While some sources refer to the limbs as a progressive path, many present them like limbs of a tree – not a sequential progression but rather all interrelated aspects of practice.
- Experts Alan Finger and Wendy Newton explain: ‘The eight limbs are both a sequential system and a holistic practice. There is an internal logic to moving from one limb to the next in the given order.’ But the Eight Limbs can also be applied as a holistic practice in which all the limbs function simultaneously and synergistically. From this holistic perspective, the practices are done



in a way that best suits the needs of the individual in order to evolve spiritually.â?•

- The first five limbs are the external aspects and the last three are the internal aspects.

A HOLISTIC PRACTICE THAT CAN SUIT INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

The eight limbs are both a sequential system and a holistic practice. There is an internal logic to moving from one limb to the next in the given order. The *yamas* and *niyamas* help us to approach *asana* with the proper intention for practice; *asana* prepares the body for working with the breath; quiet and controlled breath helps us to withdraw the senses, which helps us focus the mind, and so on. But the Eight Limbs can also be applied as a holistic practice in which all the limbs function simultaneously and synergistically. From this holistic perspective, the practices are done in a way that best suits the needs of the individual in order to evolve spiritually. â?? Alan Finger & Wendy Newton

The Buddhaâ??s Eightfold Path

While there are numerous links and similarities between Yoga philosophy and Buddhist philosophy, in terms of historical teachings, they are distinct.

- The Eight Limbs of Yoga are not the same as The Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism.
- In Buddhism, â??the eight parts of the path to liberation are grouped into three essential elements of Buddhist practice â?? moral conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. The Buddha taught the eightfold path in virtually all his discourses.â?• The Noble Eightfold Path is right understanding (*samma ditthi*), right thought (*samma sankappa*), right speech (*samma vaca*), right action (*samma kammanta*), right livelihood (*samma ajiva*), right effort (*samma vayama*), right mindfulness (*samma sati*) and right concentration (*samma samadhi*).
- In previous versions of this lesson, we included a potential translation of Ashtanga Yoga as the Eightfold Path; however, that is unnecessarily confusing. It seems most clear to use the translation, â??The Eight Limbs of Yogaâ?• in order to clearly distinguish this philosophy from another important philosophical teaching, the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism. (See more in [Tricycle: The Buddhist Review](#).)

PURPOSE: TO REMOVE THE VEILS

To remove the veils that hide the deepest layers of your being, Maharishi Patanjali elaborated the eight [limbs] of yogaâ??Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhiâ?|. These are the components of Raja Yoga, the royal path to union. â?? Deepak Chopra & David Simon

INTERDEPENDENT & OF SIMILAR VALUE

The raja yoga of Patanjali is divided into eight limbs, and these eight limbs are interdependent and of similar value. *Yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama* and *pratyahara* form the external aspect, *bahiranga*, or exoteric yoga. *Darana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi* form the internal aspect, *antaranga* yoga. â?? Swami Satyananda Saraswati

A ROAD MAP TO SAMADHI THAT CAN BE APPLIED INDIVIDUALLY & IN NUANCED WAYS



The Eight Limbs are like a road map to *samadhi*! How one uses the map of the Eight Limbs depends on one's karma and where one is in the development of one's practice. One might need to spend time going from limb to limb in a prescribed order, because it is not always clear what our karmic circumstances are. Once we have established our practice and developed some perspective, or *viveka*, we might be able to quickly transcend a trouble spot and apply the limbs in more individualized and nuanced ways. Our unique karmic circumstances dictate where, how, and for how long we need to focus our effort. What yoga practice looks like for each yogi is highly individual and changes over time.

— Alan Finger & Wendy Newton

THE LIMBS ARE NOT YOGA

The [8 Limbs] are not Yoga. They are the limbs of Yoga, the tools of Yoga. They are not even the only tools of Yoga! [Bhakti, Jnana, Karma, etc. use other tools.]. So many tools! Krishna tells Arjuna that "Yoga is evenness of mind" and that "That skill [evenness of mind] in action is Yoga." This means any action performed with an evenness of mind is Yoga. Yoga is the stilling of the modifications of the mind. [Things you can see such as asana] are not Yoga; they are possible tools of Yoga. They are places where Yoga may be experienced but so is washing the dishes or driving a car. If anything can become a tool of Yoga, then why take the time to practice on a mat at all? *Sadhana*, devoted practice, is key to Yoga. When was the last time that your mind was even or still while driving or while washing the dishes? Devoting time to intentionally learning to still the mind is required to be able to carry that experience into everyday life so that every moment of life becomes Yoga, Everyday Yoga.

— Ramdas

THE SUTRAS ARE NOT MORAL IMPERATIVES

The Yoga Sutra is not presented in an attempt to control behavior based on moral imperatives. The sutras don't imply that we are "bad" or "good" based upon our behavior, but rather that if we choose certain behavior, we get certain results. If you steal, for example, not only will you harm others, but you will suffer as well.

— Judith Lasater

BENEFICIAL EVEN WHEN ULTIMATE GOAL NOT ACHIEVED

These limbs impart their own benefits, even if one is not able to achieve the ultimate goal of yoga in this lifetime.

— Srivatsa Ramaswami

External Aspects

The external aspects (*bahiranga yoga*) are *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama* and *pratyahara*. The first five limbs eliminate the external causes of mental distraction. (I. K. Taimni)

Yamas

- Translations: Restraints, Social Behavior, Ethics

- *Yamas* are guidelines for engaging with others. They are *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya* and *aparigraha*.
- *Yamas* and *niyamas* are not moral imperatives that describe good and bad behavior. Rather, they describe how certain behavior brings certain results. The practitioner learns to choose thought, word and deed.
- See [Yamas & Niyamas](#)

Niyamas

- Translations: Observances, Personal Behavior
- *Niyamas* are qualities of an "evolutionary personality." They are *saucha*, *santosha*, *tapas*, *svadhyaya* and *ishvara pranidhana*.
- The final three *niyamas* together comprise [kriya yoga](#).
- *Yamas* and *niyamas* are not moral imperatives that describe good and bad behavior. Rather, they describe how certain behavior brings certain results. The practitioner learns to choose thought, word and deed.
- See [Yamas & Niyamas](#)

Asana

- Translations: Posture, Seat, Position
- *Asana* is an "expression of mind-body integration."
- *Asana* is not emphasized in the Yoga Sutras; it is discussed in only 3 of the 196 *sutras*.
- See [Eight-Limbed Path: Asana](#) and [Asana Hub](#)

Pranayama

- Described as Conscious Breathing Techniques, Mastering Life Force, Directing Energy
- *Pranayama* refers to breath practices designed to enhance one's life force energy.
- Successful *pranayama* practice "reduces the obstacles that inhibit clear perception."
- See [Pranayama Philosophy](#) and [Pranayama & The Breath Hub](#)

Pratyahara

- Translations: Sensory Withdrawal, Turning Senses Inward
- *Pratyahara* is the point at which we move from the outer to the inner aspects of yoga. It is where attention is withdrawn from the outer world and turned inward. It is the preparation for concentration and meditation.
- See [Pratyahara](#)

EXTERNAL ASPECTS ELIMINATE OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE

Asana and pranayama eliminate the disturbances arising from the physical body. *Pratyahara*, by detaching the sense-organs from the mind, cuts off the external world and the impressions which it produces in the mind. The *sadhaka* is thus in a position to grapple with [the mind] without any interference from the outside. It is only under these conditions that the successful practice of dharana,



dhyana and samadhi is possible. â?? I. K. Taimni

FOUNDATION OF SKILLFUL LIVING

The *Yamas* & *Niyamas* are the foundation of skillful living. [They] are like a detailed map, telling you where you are and how to look for the next landmark. The *Yamas* and *Niyamas* free you to take ownership of your life and direct it towards the fulfillment you seek. Gaining the skills to choose attitude, thought and action may be the grandest adventure you can choose. â?? Deborah Adele

THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THE EIGHT LIMBS

A civil society functions when all agree on certain basic ethics, called *yamas* in yoga. The ability to cooperate with others is arguably the most important of the eight limbs of yoga; its importance is emphasized by its placement at the very beginning of the limbs. Social ethics can be practiced more often than the other limbsâ?| All other limbs look to the *yamas* as their foundation. â?? Nicolai Bachman

NIYAMAS: INTERNAL YAMAS

The *niyamas* are like internal (ni) *yamas*. The first limb was about behaving ethically toward others. Now we treat ourselves with care. â?? Nicolai Bachman

Internal Aspects

The internal aspects (*antaranga yoga*) are *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*. Together, these are called *samyama*.

- While the first five limbs (the external aspects) are in the Yoga Sutras chapter on practice, these internal aspects are in the next chapter on accomplishments. As Nischala Joy Devi notes, this â??affirms that they are not practices in themselves; rather, they are progressive internal states that evolve from the earlier cultivated practices.â?•
- Attention moves progressively inward through three stages.

Dharana

- Translations: Concentration, Attention
- *Dharana* may be considered the beginning of meditation.
- The process can be described as letting go of everything that is not the object of meditation.
- See [Dharana](#) and [Meditation Hub](#)

Dhyana

- Translations: Meditation, Witnessing Awareness
- *Dharana* leads to *dhyana*. The distinction is that in *dhyana* the concentration is uninterrupted, becoming continuous without distraction.
- *Dhyana* can be considered a result of *pratyahara* and *dharana* â?? not a practice in itself.



- See [Dhyana](#) and [Meditation Hub](#)

Samadhi

- Translations: Absorption, Union, Pure Unbounded Awareness, “Tasting the Realm of Eternity and Infinity” (Deepak Chopra)
- In *dhyana*, consciousness of self remains. In *samadhi*, there is no self-consciousness. *Samadhi* involves losing one’s self / identity / ego.
- *Dharana* leads to *dhyana* which turns into *samadhi*. During an ecstatic experience such as playing music, one may experience fleeting moments of each.
- In *samadhi*, there is no consciousness of concentration.
- In *samadhi*, there is union with the object of concentration. There is no longer awareness of a subject being separate from an object.
- See [Samadhi](#)

SAMYAMA IS IN BOOK 3

It always intrigues me that only five of the eight facets of ashtanga yoga have commentaries in Book II, “Sadhana Pada.” The last three, *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi* are designated to Book III, “Vibhuti Pada.” It affirms that they are not practices in themselves; rather, they are progressive internal states that evolve from the earlier cultivated practices! “Doing” transforms into “being.” If we are well primed, the transition to these subtle levels from the other preceding practices is effortless. Many may choose to “do meditation,” but this is more often than not a technique derived from pratyahara practice. “Nischala Joy Devi

ATTENTION MOVES PROGRESSIVELY INWARD

It is attention itself, which is progressively moving inward through these few stages:

- Attention leads to concentration (*dharana*).
- Concentration leads to meditation (*dhyana*).
- Meditation leads to absorption (*samadhi*). “swamij.com

DHARANA AND DHYANA

Normally what we are doing when we say we are meditating is [dharana](#). After long practice of *dharana*, gradually the “flow of cognition” gets a little longer and it becomes *dhyana*. “Sri Swami Satchidananda

DHYANA IS CONTINUOUS DHARANA

Dhyana is continuous [dharana](#), attention so focused that peripheral noise does not interfere with our concentration. *Dharana* is focusing on a single object, but thoughts about the object vary. *Dhyana* occurs when only a single idea is present in the heart-mind. “Nicolai Bachman

DHYANA AND SAMADHI THE RESULT OF PRATYAHARA AND DHARANA

While success in *dharana* and *pratyahara* can be measured in a quantitative way, limbs seven and eight—*dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (absorption)—are qualitative limbs that are the result of *pratyahara* and *dharana* being practiced precisely and to a deepening extent. —Gregor Maehle

EVEN BRIEF CONCENTRATION IS SUCCESS

Even brief concentration is success: It is easy to think that a meditation session was “not good” because it did not bring some deep sense of bliss. Actually, when one understands the tremendous value of simple concentration training, then even the brief, shallower practices are seen in a proper context of having positive value. Even the few minutes, or few seconds where the mind is gently focused on its chosen object are fruitful in the path of meditation. Each moment of positive experience leaves its positive trace in the depth of the mind field. It may seem invisible at first, but those moments add up over time, as concentration eventually begins to become meditation which in turn sets the stage for glimpses of *samadhi*. —swamij.com

Sutra 2.28: Necessity of yoga practice

YOGANGANUSTHANAD ASUDDHI KSAYE JNANADIPTIR A VIVEKAKHYATEH

- By the practice of the limbs of Yoga, the impurities dwindle away and there dawns the light of wisdom, leading to discriminative discernment. —Sri Swami Satchidananda
- The practice and inquiry into different components of Yoga gradually reduce the obstacles such as misapprehension [2.3]. Then the lamp of perception brightens and the distinction between what perceives and what is perceived becomes more and more evident. Now everything can be understood without error. —T.K.V. Desikachar
- By the practice of the parts of yoga impurity diminishes until the rise of spiritual knowledge culminates in awareness of reality. —Swami Satyananda Saraswati
- By embracing Asthaanga Yoga, the Eight-Faceted Path, Intuitive Wisdom dawns and reveals our inner radiance. —Nischala Joy Devi
- Through practice of these limbs of yoga, impurity is overcome and wisdom and an enduring capacity to make distinctions are achieved. —AshtangaYoga.info
- As soon as all impurities have been removed by the practice of spiritual disciplines—the limbs—of yoga—a man’s spiritual vision opens to the light-giving knowledge of the Atman. —Swami Prabhavananda (YogaSutraStudy.info)

Sutra 2.29: Eight parts of yoga discipline

YAMANIYAMASANA PRANAYAMA PRATYAHARA DHARANA DHYANA SAMADHAYO STAV
ANGANI

There are eight components of Yoga. These are:

- *yama*, our attitudes toward our environment.
- *niyama*, our attitudes toward ourselves.
- *Asana*, the practice of body exercises.
- *pranayama*, the practice of breathing exercises.
- *pratyahara*, the restraining of our senses.



- *dharana*, the ability to direct our minds.
- *dhyana*, the ability to develop interactions with what we seek to understand.
- *samadhi*, complete integration with the object to be understood.

â?? T.K.V. Desikachar

Asthaanga Yoga, the Eight-Faceted Path, embraces:

- *Yama*: reflection of our true nature
- *Niyama*: evolution toward harmony
- *Asana*: comfort in being, posture
- *Pranayama*: enhancement and guidance of universal prana (energy)
- *Pratyahara*: encouraging the senses to draw within
- *Dharana*: gathering and focusing of consciousness inward
- *Dhyana*: continuous inward flow of consciousness
- *Samadhi*: union with Divine Consciousness.

â?? Nischala Joy Devi

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