

8 Limbs of Yoga
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Patanjali's yoga sutras outline the path of raja yoga, a royal union with the Universal Spirit. His eight-fold path is not a religion or a philosophy, but it is both a science and an art. It takes us on an experiential ride, through familiar territory, into deep inner space.

The first two paths, ethics (yama) and discipline (niyama) bring us into harmony with mankind. They offer us guidelines of action in the world, rather than rules, and lead us towards the highest truth, for both ourselves and others. Yama includes non-violence (ahimsa), truth (satya), non-stealing (asteya), continence or self-restraint (brahmacharya), and non-coveting (aparigraha). Niyama includes purity (saucha), contentment (santosa), ardour or austerity (tapas), study of the Self (svadhyaya), and dedication to the Lord (Ishvara pranidhana). Understanding that we live in a world of our own delusions, Yamas and Niyamas help protect us and others from our faulty reasoning. They are the foundation for right living, and necessary in all circumstances of life.

The third stage, posture (asana) keeps us strong and healthy and in harmony with nature. Many asanas resemble plant, animal, and human forms, and teach us that the same Universal Spirit flows through all the creatures and works through the process of evolution. Asana purifies the body and nervous system, opening up pathways for energy and knowledge that flow along specific shapes and forms. Through asana, we come to know the power of mind over body, and learn to transcend matter and form. Freed from our preoccupation with the physical form, we become aware of more and more subtle forms of energy, and touch the power available in the moment of now.

The fourth and fifth stages, breath control and extension (pranayama) and sense withdrawal (pratyahara), free us from our preoccupation with the mind and the senses, so we are able to turn our gaze to see the power within. Being the source of vitality or life in the body, a yogi generates power and extends his life by extending his breath. The breath is also a direct link to the mind and so we also directly affect the mind. When thoughts slow and senses are withdrawn, attention can turn inward, toward the spirit at the source of our being.

The last three stages, concentration (dharana), meditation (dhyana) and divine communion (samadhi), take us into "the innermost recesses of the soul", and bring us into harmony with ourselves and with our Creator. Through dharana, we conquer the waves of distortion and calm the mind, so we can become receptive to the truth hidden in the silence. Through maintaining focus on this constant, we become enraptured in a state of meditation, or dhyana, where the truth of our focus comes shining forth. We find ourselves connected to each thing we thought was separate, and our knowledge expands beyond normal boundaries. And then we come to the level of superconsciousness, samadhi, transcend all limitations, and become encompassed by the joy inherent in the state of being itself.

Insight and wisdom come in stages, from a place of knowing that leaves behind no doubt. We gradually let go of the idea we hold of ourselves as egoistic individuals. We transcend small-mindedness, and open our mind to the soul of the world. There is no room for dogma when the truth is known experientially. In the process, many components happen simultaneously, and so the eight-fold path is also said to be eight-limbed. Joy is found in everything, and love permeates all. We become a vehicle, or channel, for the true Self, and a true expression of love in a world of Soul.