

Weaving Gratitude into The Eight Limbs of Yoga

by Dr. Donna Jagielski, Owner, Blessings, Balance & Breath Yoga

"Now you are dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete." Colossians 3:10 (The Message Bible)

The 8 Limbs of Yoga can best be described in Christian yoga as related to the metaphor Paul offers us in the scripture found in Colossians 3:10-20 where we are instructed to take off old, dirty, soiled clothes, which represent sin, and put on new fresh clothes, a renewal in the image of Christ.

When we examine the first two limbs, the Yamas and Niyamas represent exceptionally well. The Yamas are considered external actions and are categorized as "do not." They are broken down into five subcategories (non-harming, truthfulness, non-stealing, abstinence, and non-hoarding). This category can be considered the clothes we remove.

The Niyamas are considered internal actions and are the "dos" we should follow. This category is related to the new and fresh clothes we wear. The five subcategories of the Niyamas focus on our self-discipline. These areas include practicing cleanliness, contentment, heat/continued practice, self-knowledge, and surrender to the divine, as Christians, surrendering fully to Christ.

The third limb focuses on the physical practice, referred to as asana. The true practice of asana is not just a "workout" but a meditative practice where we are fully present during each posture, synchronizing our mind and breath. This is similar to Colossians 3:15: "Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of

this is going off doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness." There is a strong sense of unity, peace, and harmony when we are in a synchronous rhythm in a yoga class with the others around us, similar to when we sing and praise the Lord during worship. It is a discipline we find internally with ourselves and in the strength of being surrounded by others.

The fourth limb is pranayama, our breath control. When we can control our breath, we maintain our calm state and reduce stress. Our breath shortens and becomes rapid when we are upset, filled with anxiety or anger. This is where we put on the clothes of being even-tempered and the contentment we found in the Niyamas. Colossians 3:13 instructs us to *"be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you."*

The fifth limb of pratyahara is a withdrawal of our senses. With this limb, we disconnect ourselves from the external world. Sometimes, to dive deeper into this limb, we will follow an asana sequence with our eyes closed to remove the distractions around us and the temptation of comparing ourselves with the others in the room. In Colossians 3:12, Paul described one particular item of clothing from this new wardrobe as "quiet strength." Our "quiet strength" can come from an internal focus such as pratyahara.



The sixth limb, dharana, is focused on concentration, which relates to meditation. We can not fully achieve a meditative state if we cannot concentrate.

The seventh limb, dhyana, is meditation. The intertwining of limbs six and seven are dependent on one another. We can not meditate on the word of God if we cannot concentrate. Thus, we cannot fully focus if we don't remove external distractors, so we rely on limb five. Colossians 3:17 has interwoven limbs five, six, and seven of withdrawal, concentration, and meditation by explaining that all details of our lives are to be done in the name of the Lord. Be that of words, actions, thoughts....all aspects of our lives to be done in the way of the Lord. Maintaining this one-pointed focus, be it in words, actions, and thoughts, is the clarity needed to achieve the concentration to meditate on the word of the Lord.

Finally, the eighth limb is samadhi, which is enlightenment. This is where our focus as Christian yoga practitioners is placed on Colossians 3:14, which is all about love. We can't go wrong if we put love first. "And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It is your all-purpose garment. Never be without it." As we continue to work towards our goal of being like Christ, no matter what actions he took, even with a display of anger in the temple (Matthew 21:12), he did so out of love. He wanted fairness for his people and did not want them to be cheated by the profiteering merchants. Suppose we focus on being grateful for the bountiful love around us and in us and approach everything and everyone with love. In that case, we will practice and implement the eight limbs of yoga within our practice and daily lives, and most importantly, we will live the life that Jesus has intended for all of us.

Dr. Donna Jagielski holds a doctorate in education from ASU. She is a RYT-200 and RCYT-95, and a member of the Yoga Alliance. She currently leads Christ-centered yoga for the Women on the Move program she facilitates at her Phoenix church and also leads yoga at a juvenile detention center in Phoenix.



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Balance &
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Yoga

Dr. Donna Jagielski
RYT-200, RCYT

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Email:
blessingsbalancebreathyoga@gmail.com

