

Ashtanga Yoga

The Eight-Limbed Yoga

Eight Limbs or Steps



While **ashta** means eight and **anga** means limb, we can say that these are steps as much as limbs. They are limbs in the sense that they all belong to the same body of teachings and each is essential, but they are steps in the sense that there is logical order to them and to how they must be approached.

We will first list them with a translation and then define them:

- **Yama** - the five restraints or the "don'ts"
 - **Ahimsa** - Non-violence
 - **Satya** - Truthfulness
 - **Brahmacharya** - Control of the senses and celibacy
 - **Asteya** - Non-stealing
 - **Aparigraha** - Non-covetousness and non-acceptance of gifts
- **Niyama** - the five observances or the "do's"
 - **Saucha** - Purity, cleanliness
 - **Santosha** - Contentment
 - **Tapas** - Austerity
 - **Swadhyaya** - Self-study, study of scriptures
 - **Ishwara Pranidhana** - Surrender to God's will
- **Asana** - Steady posture
- **Pranayama** - Control of prana or life force
- **Pratyahara** - Withdrawal of the senses
- **Dharana** - Concentration
- **Dhyana** - Meditation
- **Samadhi** - Super-conscious state

ahimsa,
satya,
asteya,
aparigraha
brahmacharya

yama, niyama, pranayama,
pratyahara, dharanam, dhyana, samadhi,
asana

saucha
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The Foundation

yama niyama- moral and ethical practices

Just as building a foundation is an absolutely necessary phase to building any structure, the most important aspect of the construction of the spiritual edifice of raja yoga is constituted by the moral and ethical practices called yamas and niyamas.

For the majority of aspirants, the main focus of their sadhana should be the development of yama and niyama. More advanced practices such as meditation should also be pursued, but one must understand that no substantial progress will take place until the 10 practices of yama and niyama are tangibly established.

1. The Five Yamas

It should be noted that all yamas should be practiced in the spirit and by the letter. Furthermore they should be applied in deeds and words, as well as thoughts. Perfection in any of them is for the very few but much progress can be made in a given lifetime. Also they should each be practiced in relation to each other. Sometimes they will seem to conflict and much soul searching will be needed to know how to act righteously (according to dharma). Example: telling the truth may harm people.

Ahimsa

Ahimsa, or non-injury, implies non-killing. But non-injury is not only non-killing, it is much more than that. More comprehensively, ahimsa means "entire abstinence from causing any pain or harm whatsoever to any living creature, either by thought, word or deed. Non-injury needs a harmless mind, mouth and hand. Ahimsa is not mere negative non-injuring. It is positive, cosmic love." (Swami Sivananda, Bliss Divine)

Please see our detailed [ahimsa](#) page.

Satya

Satya is truthfulness. It is more than just telling the truth. One's actions should be in accordance with one's words and thoughts. God and man's true Self are truth, and in order to tune in with that consciousness we need to live truthfully at all times. Furthermore lying creates many thoughts in the mind which go against the raja yoga objective of calming the mind.

Please see our detailed [satya](#) page.

Brahmacharya

Brahmacharya has two main meanings. In the broad sense it means control of the senses or indriyas. More specifically it refers to celibacy or chastity. Like all traditional spiritual traditions, yoga advocates restraining from indulging in sensual gratification. One of the many reasons is that practicing the higher limbs of ashtanga yoga - dharana, dhyana, samadhi - requires a tremendous amount of energy or prana. This energy is built up through the practices of yoga such as asanas, pranayama and japa but is dissipated during sensual enjoyment. Of all the sensual activities, sex is the one that will be the most depleting to the psychic and nervous system. Most people don't like to hear this but, like the other yamas, everyone should practice brahmacharya to the best of their ability. It is a fact that the more people gratify their senses, the less energy they have and the less ability they have to meditate on the absolute.

Asteya

Asteya is non-stealing. This one is pretty self-explanatory. However, it is good to bear in mind that there are many subtle ways to appropriate what does not belong to us. As for the other yamas, much self-analysis will be necessary to catch the subtle lower tendencies of our mind.

arigraha

Aparigraha is non-covetousness. This involves being happy and content with what we need and not always coveting unnecessary and luxury items. To possess more than we need is a violation of this precept. Note that aparigraha includes the notion of not accepting gifts that would bind us to the giver.

2. The Five Niyamas

Saucha

Saucha is purity. The deepest and most subtle aspect of Saucha is purity of thoughts and feelings. But it also means cleanliness of the body, which for hatha yogis includes the internal cleansing practices known as kriyas. A yogi must also keep his surroundings (home,

car, workplace, etc.) very tidy and clean. Purity is the essence of the sattvo guna, of paramount importance to meditate successfully.

Santosha

Santosha is contentment. This is the ability to recognize that although it is important to try to better our environment and life situation through proper effort, the world around you is never going to be perfect and absolutely to our liking. Therefore the raja yogi should be happy with what he has and endeavor to do the best he can with what he has got.

Tapas

Tapas is austerity. The luxury and comfort of our modern society, with all its advantages, makes our mind soft and weak. To strengthen ourselves physically and mentally we must practice austerities. The highest tapas is meditation on God or the divine Self. Daily practice of yogic disciplines is considered tapas. A very good practice is fasting.

Swadhyaya

Swadhyaya literally means study of the Self. The main practice is the study of the yogic scriptures but it also includes japa (mantra repetition). Not any yoga or spiritual book qualifies as proper material for swadhyaya. For a vedantin the best scriptures are the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma Sutras. There are also many other scriptures such as the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, etc. Next come the books written by great mystics or masters such as Swami Sivananda, Swami Vishnu-devananda, or other saints from all traditions. Also suitable are books written about these masters - biographies.

Ishwarapranidhana

Ishwarapranidhana is surrender to God's will and devotion. All ethical and moral precepts of yoga culminate here.

3. Asana

Keeping in mind that the objective of raja yoga is to calm the mind down, this is only possible if one has control of the physical body. Body and mind are intimately connected and if the body is agitated the mind will be agitated as a result. In order to meditate successfully one must develop a very steady posture. Furthermore the posture must be kept still for a long time and therefore it needs to be extremely comfortable. When the meditator is not able to control his mind, he is advised to practice the asanas of hatha yoga in order to gain the needed mastery.

4. Pranayama

The raja yoga theory tells us that prana is animating the mind. Very much like the wind creates the motion of the leaves, prana creates the motion of the mind which gives rise to the vrittis. Air is the primary physical medium of prana and breathing is our best method to gain control over the prana. To meditate, the practitioner should calm his breath down until it is very shallow and even. If this is not possible he should practice the different pranayamas of hatha yoga.

5. Pratyahara

Pratyahara is the withdrawal of the senses from their objects. The natural tendency of the senses is to go out towards the objects of the world. In doing so they pull the mind out and away from the inner Self and create powerful waves on the lake-mind. Therefore, the yogi must be able to pull the senses within if he is to keep a balanced and peaceful mind.

The analogy given to us is that of the tortoise which, under perceived danger, pulls in all its limbs and head.



6. Dharana

Concentration. One-pointedness. The meditator is fully focused on the object of concentration, his mind as still as the flame of a lamp in a windless room. When this state is maintained long enough, it will lead to dhyana.

7. Dhyana

Dhyana is translated as meditation. It is a natural flow of thought or consciousness between the meditator and the object of meditation. It is a very joyous state and is compared to the flow of oil from one vessel to the next. Very natural and effortless.

In dhyana there is still duality of consciousness which is the feeling of separation between the meditator and the object of meditation. When maintained long enough this state will lead to the highest rung of the ladder of ashtanga yoga which is samadhi.

8. Samadhi

As described by Swami Sivananda this is "The state of consciousness where Absoluteness is experienced attended with all-knowledge and joy; Oneness; here the mind becomes identified with the object of meditation; the meditator and the meditated, thinker and thought become one in perfect absorption of the mind."

Much practice is necessary to attain this stage. Regular (daily practice) of all these eight limbs is absolutely necessary.

