

# Eight Limbs of Yoga

**Yoga History:** About 2,500 years ago, Patanjali was the first person to write down the philosophy of yoga in his book called *The Yoga Sutras*. The word *sutra* is Sanskrit for thread. So the book is meant or translated as how to live our lives, how to thread or weave all the components, experiences, people, and choices into our lives in a manner that promotes peace, equanimity, and harmony with the world around us. The Eight Limbs of Yoga are outlined in the Sutras.

1. **Yama:** ethical disciplines towards others
  - a. Ahimsa: Non-violence
  - b. Satya: Truth
  - c. Asteya: Non-stealing
  - d. Brahmacharya: Moderation
  - e. Aparigraha: Non-hoarding
  
2. **Niyama:** ethical disciplines toward ourselves.
  - a. Saucha: Purity
  - b. Santosha: Peace
  - c. Tapas: Austerity
  - d. Svadhyaya: Self-study
  - e. Isvara Pranidhana: Dedication
  
3. **Asana:** Postures. Through the practice of asanas, we develop the habit of discipline and the ability to concentrate, both of which are necessary for meditation.
  
4. **Pranayama:** Breathing techniques, breath control, or breath regulation. This fourth stage consists of techniques designed to gain mastery over the respiratory process while recognizing the connection between the breath, the mind, and the emotions. As implied by the literal translation of pranayama, "life force extension," yogis believe that it not only rejuvenates the body but actually extends life itself. You can practice pranayama as an isolated technique (i.e., simply sitting and performing a number of breathing exercises), or integrate it into your daily hatha yoga routine.

**These first four stages** concentrate on refining our personalities, gaining mastery over the body, and developing an energetic awareness of ourselves, all of which prepares us for the second half of this journey, which deals with the senses, the mind, and attaining a higher state of consciousness.

5. **Pratyahara:** Withdrawal of the senses. It is during this stage that we make the conscious effort to draw our awareness away from the external world and outside stimuli. Keenly aware of, yet cultivating a detachment from our senses, we direct our attention internally. The practice of pratyahara provides us with an opportunity to step back and take a look at ourselves. This withdrawal allows us to objectively observe our cravings: habits that are perhaps detrimental to our health and which likely interfere with our inner growth. Usually, Savasana can be a time when we engage in the practice of pratyahara.

6. **Dharana:** Mental concentration. As each stage prepares us for the next, the practice of pratyahara creates the setting for dharana, or concentration. Having relieved ourselves of outside distractions, we can now deal with the distractions of the mind itself. No easy task! In the practice of concentration, which precedes meditation, we learn how to slow down the thinking process by concentrating on a single mental object: a specific energetic center in the body, an image, or the silent repetition of a sound. In pratyahara we become self-observant; now, in dharana, we focus our attention on a single point. Extended periods of concentration naturally lead to meditation.

7. **Dhyana:** Meditation. Meditation or contemplation is the uninterrupted flow of concentration. Although concentration (dharana) and meditation (dhyana) may appear to be one and the same, a fine line of distinction exists between these two stages. Where dharana practices one-pointed attention, dhyana is ultimately a state of being keenly aware without focus. At this stage, the mind has been quieted, and in the stillness it produces few or no thoughts at all. The strength and stamina it takes to reach this state of stillness is quite impressive. But don't give up. While this may seem a difficult if not impossible task, remember that yoga is a process. Even though we may not attain the "picture perfect" pose, or the ideal state of consciousness, we benefit at every stage of our progress.

8. **Samadhi:** Nirvana. At this stage, the meditator merges with his or her point of focus and transcends the Self altogether. The meditator comes to realize a profound connection with all living things. With this realization comes the experience of bliss and being at one. On the surface, this may seem to be a rather lofty, "holier than thou" kind of goal. However, if we pause to examine what we really want to get out of life, would not joy, fulfillment, and freedom somehow find their way onto our list of hopes, wishes, and desires? What Patanjali has described as the completion of the yogic path is what, deep down, all human beings aspire to: peace. We also might give some thought to the fact that this ultimate stage of yoga—enlightenment—can neither be bought nor possessed. It can only be experienced.