

Raja Yoga's 8 Limbs (Ashtanga Yoga)

We live and so we suffer! (Peace is possible too!) Most religions see our union, reunion, casting away from and returning to as central to their theologies and practices. Yoga is no different. The Vedanta poses the thought that we suffer because we see ourselves as different from everything around us and even in us. (We are our sickness, suffering, joy and pain. Let's own it, claim it all as coming from the Divine within us.) And from this fundamental error the other *kleshas* arise. (See section on suffering) *Kleshas* are obstacles. Obstacles to what? Our happiness, peace and union with what we seek. The Vedanta then gives us the way through these obstacles with the 4 Paths (please see section on 4 Paths.) And from Raja Yoga, the pathway of integration, comes the 8 Limbs.

Found in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* beginning in Chapter 2, sutra 28, the pathway to uninterrupted discriminative discernment and finally *samadhi* is illuminated.

To be able to see the permanent in the temporary and to see Truth in the untruth is a function of uninteruptive discriminative discernment (II, 26). This is a function of a clear and one-pointed mind, where the greater Truth of any event, situation, statement, person, behavior, color, taste, sound, feeling, etc is seen and understood and absorbed. And from this point, where true meditation is a way of life and the seer and seen become one, the state of *samadhi* is available. For most of us, this is not a natural and spontaneous occurrence. And unlike Rinzai Zen where enlightenment, or *kensho*, happens with the slap of a hand, we must practice diligently and have faith and discipline. The 8 Limbs are also called "stages" because we practice first self restraint and have a healthy moral attitude with others before we begin going deeper into the mind. While we can always practice many limbs at once, the capacity for our minds to do deeper investigation of our essence and Truth will become easier if we practice the 8 Limbs in order. At least from the perspective of Raja Yoga, these 8 Limbs, starting from the *yamas* and *niyamas*, lead into one another, and simultaneously help us go deeper into our Self.

The 8 Limbs are set out as follows:

1. *yamas*-“rules for social behavior”
2. *niyamas*-“rules for personal behavior”
3. *asana*-postures
4. *pranayama*-breath (*prana*) retention and control
5. *pratyahara*-sense withdrawal
6. *dharana*-concentration
7. *dhyana*-meditation
8. *samadhi*-Awareness and Absorption

Let's begin with *Samadhi* (and I do so with respect to those who have come back from this state and taught us.) *Samadhi* is said to be the state of being where the mind is no longer used to discriminate as now the Self that is all things has been perceived. And those in this state are no longer trapped by the outward world and have found bliss and joy in the Divine Self within. This state is said to be reached through meditation. (It has been said that there are actually several states of *samadhi*, each leading to the ultimate seedless state where no karma is created.)

Dhyanana, or meditation, is a state of constant awareness on the inseparable nature between object, seer and seeing. Meditation is not a practice but a way of Being. We can live in meditation when the mind is completely one-pointed and can enjoy the complete and whole relationship to what is meditated on. Before this stage can occur we must develop the skills to control the mind and direct its attention on one object for a long period of time. And here is where the practice of concentration is essential.

Dharana is the ability to focus the mind on one object, and this practice is commonly and mistakenly called meditation. Technically, we are practicing an aspect of concentration when we sit down and follow the breath. Here are the practices of watching candle flames, or listening to the sound of the river passing by. We train the mind to still itself on an object, while at this stage we are no longer controlled by the impulses of the small mind because we have practiced sense withdrawal. And without the mind's constant pull and attraction toward the senses we can practice concentration in peace.

Pratyahara, or sense withdrawal, is the practice of watching the mind's reaction to various senses or by shutting off specific senses. Usually we are distracted by the smell of food from the kitchen, or the sound of a cello in another room. Our senses make the mind believe we need things and so we go to great lengths to satisfy the senses. Here we learn to use the senses for their proper purposes, the *sattvic* purpose. I love Satchidananda's point of view that the senses are like a mirror and when the mind is directed outward the senses reflect what is out there. And when directed inward the senses reflect the Greater Self within. Would you rather be a reflection of the city, its noise and pollution or of your Inner Light? And how do we get the inflections of the mind stilled enough to look inward? By controlling the flow of our energy, both physical and mental, through pranayama we have the ability to look inward.

Pranayama is the practice of breath inhalation, retention, exhalation and retention. That's it. 4 stages of breathing, in, hold, out, hold. Sometimes we play with the ratio of breathing vs. retention, and other times we manipulate the pranic flow using one nostril or the other. (Please see section on pranayama.) Our main goal is to balance the energies of mind and body, thus still both and readying ourselves to do the deeper work necessary. This practice goes beyond the physical realm of breathing. Here we create and sustain our relationship to the greater energy that informs our life, not just our breath. So with prana (life force) ayama (expansion) we expand the life force that's within us. Another translation is prana yama, meaning prana control, also a useful guide when practicing. Allowing for various translations our main focus is helping our minds and body rest and rejuvenate..

Asanas, or postures, are used to prepare the body to sit for long periods of time needed to investigate within. Asanas are traditionally Ayurvedic in practice and are generally used to condition the body to its healthiest and balanced state. If there is an internal issue of the digestive system the teacher might offer a specific asana to counter the dis-ease and to prevent future ailments.

And finally, in the Raja Yoga tradition before asanas are practiced we look first at our behaviors, both externally and internally. The Yamas and Niyamas are the first stages of the 8 Limbs and here we find guidelines for living our lives. I said to Dana they

are like the ladder to the slide, if we want to play, we must first go up the ladder! I will not go deep into these 10 practices as Dana has written an amazing exploration of these principles in another section. I will, however, briefly state that there are practical and subtle meanings of each principle. Think of these 10 principles as having three layers of meaning. **One is the literal**, “do not harm.” The second layer is that **generally we will break that vow**, “every step alone we kill thousands of bacteria.” The third and most subtle layer is the idea that these principles only exist in the relative world. Absolutely speaking **there is no death, nothing to lose or gain, no untruth as all exist within the Great Truth**, etc. So be aware of the various layers of truth when exploring these concepts and practices for your self. And know when you break a vow you can take it again immediately. And know that even deeper there is no vow to break!

A Side note on the different perspectives between the schools of Raja and Hatha Yoga

The Traditional Hatha Yoga perspective does not include the yamas and niyamas in their 8 Limbs. Instead they include shatkarmas and mudra/bandhas. This is a point of contention between the two schools, although personally I have never heard a Raja Yoga arguing about this point. My dear friend is a Traditional Hatha Yogi and she and I have spent some wonderful times playfully arguing about the virtues between the two “distinct” paths! Hatha yoga prescribes to the thought that most people are not capable of following such guidelines and need to first purify their bodies and senses before attempting to control their behaviors and mind.

“In this day and age it may be difficult to try and force yourself to keep to these rules, therefore, Swatmarama does not stress their importance.” (HYP p.66) Here is one of the reasons that THY does not include the yamas and niyamas in their preliminary practice. The author goes on to say:

“However, hatha and raja yoga have become two different systems. Raja yoga says yama/niyamas first . . . Hatha yoga . . . does not emphasize any moral disciplines.” (HYP p. 145) Don’t be fooled by this rhetoric! And don’t get involved in a debate on the Limbs with a Hatha Yogi!

Raja Yoga is the goal of Hatha Yoga. And therefore Hatha yogis place more emphasis on asana, pranayama, mudras, shatkarmas, and bandhas to purify the body first before attempting to investigate and control the mind.

For our purposes we are coming from the Raja Yoga tradition, using Hatha yoga as a tool for balancing our energies, cleansing the body and opening us up to the possibility of a greater Union.

While not even close to complete, this is an introduction on the 8 Limbs. Patanjali has given us a guidebook and pathway for achieving and receiving the greatest gifts available to us, Peace and Joy!

A Quick Reference:

We can start with the Vedantic view of suffering. Then the Bhagavad Gita gives us the 4 Yogic Pathways to end our suffering and know God. Finally, Raja Yoga provides the necessary and practical daily practices that help us transform our selves into the Greater Self through self-control, breath and postural work, sense withdrawal, concentration, meditation and finally absorption into Greater Awareness and God. All paths lead to the same Truth!