

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

Intro

The word “Yoga” is a Sanskrit derivation meaning “to bind, attach, join, direct one’s attention on, to use and apply”. It also means “integration” or “union”. The union of our mind, body and soul both within ourselves and with God. There are eight stages or “limbs” of Yoga. Following the path of these eight limbs leads ultimately to the uniting of the body, mind and soul with the Universal Spirit.

1. Yama

“Yama” is the first of the eight limbs. It represents the five ethical disciplines: (1) Ahimsa (non-violence); (2) Satya (truth); (3) Asteya (non-stealing); (4) Brahmacharya (continence) and Aparigraha (non-coveting),

These five disciplines are based on the moral rules or norms of society. In that sense they reflect “societal” disciplines external to the individual. My interpretation of this is a sort of “social contract” that each individual enters into with the World in order to maintain an orderly, harmonious and moral society.

When the five disciplines are not followed, human emotions of greed, desire and attachment left unchecked give rise to evils such as chaos, crime, violence and coveting. The five ethical disciplines seek to redress these evils by changing the orientation of one’s thinking.

2. Niyama

Niyama sets out rules which relate to individual (as opposed to collective) discipline. There are five niyama: (1) Saucha (purity or cleanliness); (2) santisa (contentment); (3) tapas (ardour or austerity); (4) svadhyaya (study of self); and (5) Isvara (dedication to God).

Niyama build on the disciplines of Yama. Unlike Yama which seek to maintain collective harmony, Niyama disciplines relate to the growth of the individual. The commitment of the individual to self.

Taking for example, the first discipline of Saucha or “purity”. In order to maintain well-being and health, one needs to cleanse the body externally. It is equally important to cleanse the mind of impure thoughts which if left unchecked, bring misery and frustrations. Similarly with the food we put into our bodies, we must ensure that it is pure, nourishing and wholesome. When

we practice Saucha, we are pursuing an individual path of growth and well-being.

3. Asanas

Asanas or postures take us to the third (and probably most well-known in the Western World) limb of Yoga. Asanas bring steadiness to both mind and body. It creates lightness and space as well as strength and agility within the body and mind. In doing so, Asanas protect the body from disease and develop control over the mind.

In performing asanas, you begin to understand your body. You begin to re-adjust and reflect on the poses so that the limbs and body parts are in positioned correctly and there is a feeling of integration and calmness of body.

In “The Tree of Yoga”, Iyengar makes the distinction between “consciousness” and “awareness” and how, by practising asanas, we can extend our awareness of the different part of our body until it equals our consciousness. At this point, we achieve total awareness which is Meditation.

4. Pranayama

Iyengar compares Pranayama to the leaves on a tree, aerating the tree and providing nourishment for its healthy growth. Prana means breath, respiration, life, vitality, wind, energy or strength. Ayama means length, expansion or stretching. Together Pranayama connotes extension of breath and its control.

Mastery or control of the breath serves to regulate and still or quieten the mind. Pranayama is made up inhalation, exhalation and retention. When you inhale, you bring “energy” into the body. In a physical sense, this helps to cleanse and de-toxify the body. In a spiritual sense, you are bringing external “cosmic breath” into contact with the inner body.

Retention of breath (either on the inhale or the exhale) provide a space or pause. It allows greater control of the breath and promotes awareness. As described above.

Exhalation allows the removal of toxins from the body. But in a more spiritual sense, it is the surrender of our egos and the bringing of the internal energy into contact with the external so that they are one and the same.

Pranayama is the bridge between the physical and the spiritual.

5. Pratyahara

The fifth limb of yoga is Pratyahara where the senses withdraw or are brought under control. Another way to think about Pratyahara is the drawing of the senses from the periphery of the body towards the core of the body, enabling a sense of liberation from external forces and a centering of mind, spirit and body.

To practice Pratyahara, it's important to understand the three gunas and how human beings are affected by these gunas. The three gunas are: (1) Sattva (illuminating, pure or good qualities which lead to clarity or serenity); (2) Rajas (mobility or activity making a person active and energetic, tense and wilful); and (3) Tamas (dark, restraining quality which obstructs tendency of Rajas to work and of Sattva to appear).

Through discipline and study, we can understand which feelings, thoughts, word and behaviours are prompted by which gunas and thereby work to eradicate the negative gunas and work towards the Sattva-guna.

The full realisation of Pratyahara is when we no longer affected by the pull of the gunas and become free from pain and sorrow or triumph and disaster ie complete equilibrium and emancipation from self and suffering.

6. Dharana

Iyengar uses the metaphor of the tree's sap to describe Dharana. Dharana is concentration or complete attention. Iyengar describes Dharana as *"the juice which flows within the branches and the trunk of a tree towards the root"*.

Dharana is equally everywhere nourishing the body all at once. It is performing an asana wholly with cells, nerves, intelligence and consciousness in alignment as opposed to compartmentalising or focusing on only one part of the body or consciousness. It is one body tempered by Asanas, the mind refined by Pranayama and the senses brought under control by Pratyahara. In Dharana, we learn to control the fluctuations of consciousness.

7. Dhyana

Where Dharana or consciousness is achieved without varying or wavering in the intensity of awareness, Dharana becomes Dhyana. Dhyana is constant and total awareness without interruption. This is meditation.

8. Samadhi

In the tree of Yoga, Samadhi is represented by the fruit of the tree. He describes the spiritual essence of the tree as concentrated in the juice of its fruit which is the ultimate result of the growth of the tree.

Sama means balanced or in harmony. It is the end of the yogic journey. Samadhi is a state of full consciousness. There is no longer a sense of "I" only the experience of total integration with the universe, truth and joy. The subject and the object, the internal and the external dissolve and there is only the soul.