

Patanjali's Classical Yoga refers to the 'Eight-Limbed Path' of yoga practice. Like a tree with different branches that extend from the same trunk, the eight limbs are different forms of practice, but lead to the same goal of reunification with Consciousness. The consciousness with which we seek unification is our own true nature as embodied spirit.

Although the imagery of branches on a tree implies a sequential approach, in practice the limbs can work simultaneously to draw us closer to our essential nature.

The limbs are:

Yamas:

The Yamas are universal ethical disciplines referring to qualities that are supportive of yoga practice and which yoga practice cultivates: Non-violence, Truthfulness, Non-stealing, Self-restraint, and non hoarding. A spontaneous practice of Non-violence to every sentient being is indicative of a n understating that we are all connected. What we do to another we are doing to ourselves, as we are all forms of the One.

Niyamas:

Niyamas are individual disciplines which include Purity, Contentment, Dedication, Self-study, and Devotion. These qualities can be cultivated – perhaps a better word would be 'revealed' – with the Yogi. All the Yamas and Niyamas can be thought of as disciplines which reveal our true nature. Sustained effort and devotion is necessary however, since our unconscious habits and predilections will otherwise remain unseen.

Asana:

The asana practice promotes physical strength, flexibility, health, a stable nervous system, and an ability to sit for periods of time without discomfort, which a necessary prerequisite to meditation. Patanjali, in his Yoga Sutras, only refers to asana as a posture for meditation, and probably never foresaw the present emphasis on physical ability and fashion as part of asana practice. Each of us is a little different in physicality, bone structure, and affinity for aspects of yoga practice. Many of us would be unable to sit in meditation, as the body's energies are scattered and one-pointed concentration is difficult at first. Mindful asanas practice creates a physical and energetic body capable of withdrawing into itself, as performing postures is an exercise of moving prana consciously. Without this awareness, yoga practice would not be able to "Cure the body of that restlessness which is a sign of its inability to contain without working them off in action and movement the vital forces poured into it from the universal Life-Ocean" (Sri Aurobindo).

Pranayama

Pranayama is not simply breath control. Prana, or the essential life-force, is responsible for all functions of the body – heart, organs, brain, and breath. The breath is our most obvious link to prana, and the one that we can influence the most. Practicing pranayama brings us another step closer to refining our internal awareness of the movement of prana. The practice of becoming more sensitive is not to be approached with an attitude of domination, control, or athleticism, but an opportunity to set the ego aside and simply notice.

Pratyahara

When the body becomes more readily still and the movement of prana is noticeable, the practice of sense of withdrawal becomes possible. This stage of practice is akin to the ripples on a lake becoming stilled. External objects, be they desires created by the mind or anything else, are seen clearly as only temporary. When we no longer cling to these objects and non-attachment becomes possible, our true nature turns inward.

Dharana

Dharana is a state of refined concentration, with the movement of prana stable. This state is a precursor to meditation.

Dhyana

This is the deep state of meditation where the yogi is wholly immersed, and senses are stilled. The lake of individual consciousness is so still it reflects clearly the ultimate reality, that all is One.

Samadhi

Here classical yoga states that individual consciousness and universal consciousness merge. The bliss experienced here is said to be millions of times that of the experience of the ordinary, separate mind. Bliss in this context is outside of normal experience and beyond all words.