

Astanga Yoga – the Eight Limbs of yoga

The sage Patanjali lived around 500 to 200 BCE and is referred to as a *svayambhū* or evolved soul who learned to transcend sorrows and joys. He wrote the *Yoga Sutras*, the first written record of an oral tradition, to help humanity by describing how to overcome the afflictions of the body and the fluctuations of the mind – the obstacles to spiritual development.

The Sutras contain four chapters or *pādas*:

- 1- *Samadhi pāda* – on contemplation
- 2- *Sādhana pāda* – on practice, or the means to achieve *samadhi*
- 3- *Vibhūti pāda* – on properties and powers that the yogi comes across in his development
- 4- *Kaivalya pāda* – on emancipation and freedom

The *Sādhana pāda* describes eight limbs. The first five prepare the yogi for the results or fruits of practice.

1. *Yama* – ethical disciplines, which are the rules of morality for society and the individual, which if not followed lead to chaos, violence, untruth, stealing, dissipation and covetousness: *ahimsa* (non-violence); *satya* (truth); *asteya* (non-stealing); *brahmacharya* (continence); and *aparigraha* (non-coveting).
2. *Niyama* – rules of conduct that apply to individual discipline: *saucha* (purity); *santosa* (contentment); *tapas* (ardour or austerity); *svadhyaya* (study of the Self); *Ishvara pranidhana* (dedication to the Lord).
3. *Asana* – postures; practice brings steadiness, health and lightness of limb, which produces mental equilibrium and prevents fickleness of mind.
4. *Pranayama* – *Prana* = breath, respiration, life, vitality, wind, energy, or strength. Relates to the the soul as opposed to the body. *Ayama* means length, expansion, stretching or restraint.
5. *Pratyahara* – If there is a rhythmic control of breath, the senses – instead of running after external objects of desire – turn inwards, and man is set free from their tyranny. Senses are brought under control.

Those are the practices, these are the fruits:

6. *Dharana* – when body has been tempered by *asana*, mind refined by fire of *pranayama*, senses brought under control by *pratyahara*, then sadhaka reaches 6th stage: concentrated wholly on a single point or on a task in which he is completely engrossed. State of complete absorption.
7. *Dhyana* – the mind which thinks of the all-pervading divinity is ultimately transformed into the likeness of that divinity. Steady constant flow of concentration. Body, breath, senses, mind, reason and ego all integrated in the object of his contemplation – the Universal Spirit. He remains in a state of consciousness which has no qualification whatsoever. No feeling except a state of supreme bliss.
8. *Samadhi* – the end of the sadhaka's quest. At the peak of his meditation he passes into the state of *samadhi*, where his body and senses are at rest as if he is asleep, his faculties of mind and reason are alert as if he is awake, yet he has gone beyond consciousness. The person in a state of *samadhi* is fully conscious and alert. No sense of 'I' or 'mine'.

(see BKS Iyengar's *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* pages 31-40 for *yama-niyama*; 40-52 for other limbs).

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