

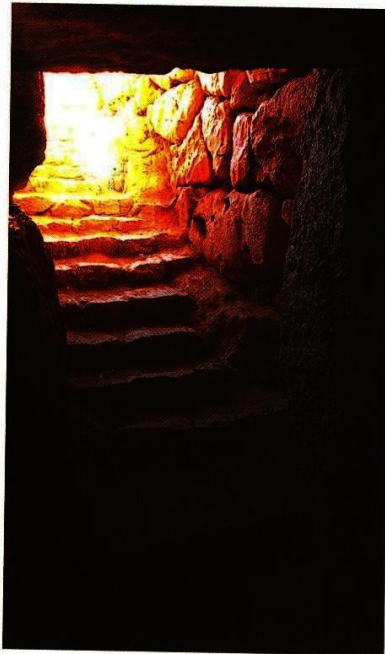
# Eight Limbs

The basic tenets of yoga are described in the form of "eight limbs" or "steps" described by the sage, Patanjali. These are aphorisms, explaining the codes of ethical behavior which will ultimately lead to self-realization.

The sage Patanjali reflected on the nature of man and the norms of society during his time. Then, he expressed his observations very systematically in the form of aphorisms, which deal with the entire span of life, beginning with a code of conduct and ending with the ultimate goal, emancipation and freedom. These aphorisms outline the fundamental tenets of yoga, known as the eight limbs or *astanga*.

## Astanga yoga

The eight steps are *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*. These are sequential stages in an individual's life journey through yoga. Each step must be understood and followed to attain the ultimate goal of Astanga yoga, that of emancipation of the self. *Yama*, or general ethical principles, and *niyama*, or self-restraint, prescribe a code of conduct that molds individual morality and behavior. *Asanas*, or yogic poses, and *pranayama*, or breath control, discipline the body and the mind by basic practices conducive to physical, physiological, psychological, and mental health. *Pranayama* controls the mind, taming baser instincts, while *pratyahara*, or detachment from the external world, stems the outgoing flow of the senses, withdrawing those of perception and the organs of action from worldly pleasures. *Dharana*, or concentration, guides the consciousness to focus attention rigorously on one point. *Dhyana*, or prolonged



Steps to self-realization  
Understand and absorb each stage  
to reach the ultimate goal

concentration, saturates the mind until it permeates to the source of existence, and the intellectual and conscious energy dissolves in the seat of the soul. It is then that *samadhi*, when you lose the sense of your separate existence, is attained. Nothing else remains except the core of one's being: the soul.

## Yama

*Yama* and *niyama* require tremendous inner discipline. *Yama* explains the codes of ethical behavior to be observed and followed in everyday life, reminding us of our responsibilities as social beings. *Yama* has 5 principles. These are: *ahimsa* or nonviolence, *satya* or truthfulness, *asteya* or freedom from avarice, *brahmacharya* or

chastity, and *aparigraha* or freedom from desire. *Ahimsa* needs introspection to replace negative, destructive thoughts and actions by positive, constructive ones. Anger, cruelty, or harassment of others are facets of the violence latent in all of us.

These contradict the principles of *ahimsa*, while lying, cheating, dishonesty, and deception break the principles of *satya*. *Brahmacharya* does not mean total abstinence, but denotes a disciplined sexual life, promoting contentment and moral strength from within. *Parigraha* means "possession" or "covetousness," the instinct within all of us that traps us in the *karmic* cycle of reincarnation after death. However, while you may be able to give up

material possessiveness, what about emotional or intellectual possessiveness? This is where Astanga yoga helps to discipline the mind, freeing it from the desire to possess, bringing it into a state of *aparigraha*, freedom from desire, as well as *asteya*, or freedom from greed.

### Niyama

*Niyama* is the positive current that brings discipline, removes inertia, and gives shape to the inner desire to follow the yogic path. The principles of *niyama* are *saucha*, or cleanliness, *santosa*, or contentment, *tapas*, or austerity, *svadhyaya*, or the study of one's own self, which includes the body, mind, intellect, and ego. The final principle of *niyama* is *isvara pranidhana* or devotion to God. Contentment or *santosa* helps to curb desire, anger, ambition, and greed, while *tapas* or austerity involves self-discipline and the desire to purify the body, senses, and mind. The study and practice of yoga with devotional attention to the self and God is *tapas*.

### Asanas, pranayama, and pratyahara

According to the *Gheranda Samhita*, a text dating to the 15th century, written by the yogic sage, Gheranda: "The body soon decays like unbaked earthen pots thrown in water. Strengthen and purify the body by baking it in the fire of yoga." Performing an asana helps create and generate energy. Staying in an asana organizes and distributes this energy, while coming out of the pose protects the energy, preventing it from dissipating. In *Yoga Sutra* 111.47, Patanjali explains the effects of an asana as "*Rupa lavanya bala vajra samhananatvani kayasampat*." This means that a perfected body has beauty, grace, and strength which is comparable to the hardness and brilliance of a diamond. While practicing an asana, one must focus attention on the inner body, drawing the mind inward to sharpen the intelligence.

Then, the asana becomes effortless as the blemishes on both the gross and the subtle body are washed off. This is the turning point in the practice of asanas, when the body, mind, and self unite. From this state begins the *isvara pranidhana*, or devotion to God. Asanas and pranayama are interrelated and

interwoven. Patanjali clearly specifies that pranayama should be attempted only after the asanas are mastered. *Prana* is "vital energy," which includes will power and ambition, while *ayama* means "stretch, expansion and extension." Pranayama can be described as the "expansion and extension of energy or life-force." Patanjali begins pranayama with the simple movement of breathing, leading us deeper and deeper into ourselves by teaching us to observe the very act of respiration. Pranayama has three movements—prolonged inhalation, deep exhalation, and prolonged, stable retention, all of which have to be performed with precision. Pranayama is the actual process of directing energy inward, making the mind fit for *pratyahara* or the detachment of the senses, which evolves from pranayama. When the senses withdraw from objects of desire, the mind is released from the power of the senses, which in turn become passive. Then the mind turns inward and is set free from the tyranny of the senses. This is *pratyahara*.

### Samyama—toward the liberation of the self

Patanjali groups *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi* under the term *samyama*—the integration of the body, breath, mind, intellect, and self. It is not easy to explain the last three aspects of yoga as separate entities. The controlled mind that is gained in *pratyahara* is made to intensify its attention on a single thought in *dharana*. When this concentration is prolonged, it becomes *dhyana*. In *dhyana*, release, expansion, quietness, and peace are experienced. This prolonged state of quietness frees a person from attachment, resulting in indifference to the joys of pleasure or the sorrows of pain. The experience of *samadhi* is achieved when the knower, the knowable, and the known become one. When the object of meditation engulfs the meditator and becomes the subject, self-awareness is lost. This is *samadhi*—a state of total absorption. *Sama* means "level" or "alike," while *adhi* means "over" and "above." It also denotes the maintenance of the intelligence in a balanced state. Though *samadhi* can be explained at the intellectual level, it can only be experienced at the level of the heart. Ultimately, it is *samadhi* that is the fruit of the discipline of Astanga yoga.