

8.1

Ashtanga Yoga

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

Patanjali, who wrote the Yoga Sutras (the word *sutra* literally means thread) prescribed an experiential path also known as *Raja Yoga*; and the goal of the Path is Samadhi. The sutras are based on the science of mind control (Yoga Psychology). The sutras explain a systematised path called the "Eightfold Path" to realisation of the Divine known as *Ashtanga Yoga* (*Ashta* means eight, and *anga* means limbs).

Patanjali names five obstacles that prevent us from experiencing Samadhi. These obstacles are called *Kleshas* and they hamper us today as much then they hampered Yogis thousand of years ago:

- **Avidya**: ignorance or unreal cognition
- **Raga**: excessive attachment to pleasurable things
- **Dvesha**: excessive aversion or hatred
- **Asmita**: egoism
- **Abhinivesha**: fear of death

One can say that all 5 **Kleshas** stem from the first, *Avidya*.

To rid oneself of these *Kleshas*, Patanjali recommends an eight-limbed system of yoga called ASHTANGA, or Raja Yoga. Each limb of the tree of Raja Yoga represents a purifying yoga practice.

The eight limbs follow:

1. YAMAS – Ethical and moral observations.

Ahimsa: non-violence and non-harming in any form to any living creature. This creates compassionate living, as true non-violence is a state of mind and heart.

Satya: truthfulness in mind, word and action. This is considered to be the highest law of morality.

Asteya: non-stealing, to free ourselves from possessiveness and envy.

Brahmacharya: abstinence and the practice of moderation in all things.

Aparigraha: non-greed in order to simplify life by adopting an attitude of generosity and non-hoarding.

2. NIYAMAS – Restraints to create inner integrity.

Saucha: purity and cleanliness of mind, body, heart and environment.

Santosha: cultivation of inner contentment, in order not to hold others responsible for our happiness.

Tapas: This refers to the activity of keeping the body fit, or to confront and control the inner urges. Literally it means to heat the body, and by so doing, to cleanse it. Behind the notion of tapas lies the idea we can direct our energy to engage fully in life, and achieve our ultimate goal of creating union with the Divine. Tapas helps us burn up all the desires that stand in our way of this goal. Another form of tapas is paying attention to what we eat, to body posture, to eating habits, to breathing patterns, and so on. Tapas can also be referred to as the performance of austerities

Svadhya: study, not only of an intellectual kind but also of oneself, to develop self-understanding of our inner nature.

Isvara-pranidhana: realization, devotion, dedication and surrender to the divine presence within all life.

3. ASANA - means “seat” and refers to the art and science of body postures that have evolved over many centuries. Apart from cultivating *kanti* (physical beauty) due to the enhanced *pranic* flow (life energy) through the body, *asanas* remove fickleness of mind to restore mental and physical health, strength, wellbeing and vitality. *Asana* practice also reflects the tendencies, strengths, weaknesses and actions in our life. The real importance of the *Asanas* is the way they train and discipline the mind.

4. PRANAYAMA - Breath regulation

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 and life-force,” therefore *Pranayama* is the practice whereby life energy is expanded through the regulation and control of the breath. *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*.

5. PRATYAHARA - Sensory withdrawal

The *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Yoga Sutras* and many other Yoga texts repeatedly suggest that the path to success requires withdrawal of the senses from the objects of desire. When the mind is released from the power of the senses, the mind in turn becomes passive. Then the mind turns inward and is set free from the tyranny of the senses. This is *Pratyahara*. By withdrawing our senses from external stimulation, we are able to connect to this inner well of contentment, rather than relying on outward sensory stimulus and grasping in order to fulfil our unquenchable desires. The process of introspection and *Pratyahara* also leads to self-understanding and acceptance.

6. DHARANA - Concentration

The practice of *Dharana*, or single pointed concentration, can take many forms. Methods include being completely attentive to the flow of the breath in harmony with the movement of the body, or focusing on the glow of a candle flame. Whatever technique is used, the aim is the same – to focus and discipline the mind in order to move into a meditative state.

7. DHYANA - Meditation

Through the practice of single pointed focus, or concentration, meditation will begin to follow naturally. It is where we can go beyond time, space, conditions and limitations, allowing our individual core of consciousness to expand and connect with the infinite universal consciousness. The ancient sages described meditation as yoking with nature, as they conceived the infinite universe to be part of the nature of life, death and beyond.

8. SAMADHI - State of union with God or the Divine.

When one has mastered all the other limbs of yoga, then the eventual outcome is Samadhi or the feeling of pure consciousness. For some this experience may be felt only temporarily, but others may have this state constantly. There are even different levels of realisation.

The final realisation of our true nature is sometimes called enlightenment, or Moksha. Samadhi is something that will happen of its own accord if one is patient and disciplined.

Even after the experience of Samadhi, we continue on our path, observing the Yamas and Niyamas, and so the 8 limbs become a continuous life journey.

7.1 Nadi Sodhana

Alternate Nostril Breathing

Nadi – energy channel, Sodhana – cleansing

Contraindications and Cautions

- Difficulty breathing, or shortness of breath.
- Tightness in the chest or behind the forehead.
- If any of the above are experienced, discontinue the *Pranayama* exercises and allow the breath to return to normal.
- Avoid holding the breath.
- Avoid over-breathing (hyper ventilation), keep to a normal size breath at all times.
- Do not practice **Nadi Sodhana** if you have a blocked nose.

Benefits

- Cleanses the energy channels throughout the body.
- In this breathing exercise the left and right side of the nostrils are used alternatively for both inhalations and exhalations. This activates the left and right sides of the brain and body revitalising and bringing both into harmony with each other.

Technique

- Place the hands into *Gyan Mudra* resting on the knees.
- Place the tips of the index and middle fingers of the right hand to the eyebrow centre, with the ring finger resting lightly on the left side of the nose and the thumb resting lightly on the right side.
- Start by exhaling from both sides, then inhale from both sides.
- Gently close the left side with your ring finger, exhale with a slow exhalation of the *tidal breath* through the right side. *Brief pause.*
- The practice of *Nadi Sodhana* begins now by inhaling slowly through your right side. *Brief pause.*
- Open the left side first, then gently close the right side with your thumb, and exhale slowly through your left side. *Brief pause.*
- Gently inhale slowly through your left side. *Brief pause.*
- Open the right side then gently close the left side with your ring finger and exhale through the right side. *Brief pause.*
- **Note:** these two breaths constitute one cycle.
- Continue as instructed for as many breath cycles you are comfortable with.
- Finish by exhaling through the right side then release the right hand into *Gyan Mudra* (the same as the left) and allow the breath to return to normal.
- Lie down for several minutes.

Common Mistakes

- Pressing too hard with fingers.
- Collapsing in sitting position and / or allowing head turn or dropping to the right.
- Over-breathing (hyper ventilating).

Please Note - Pranayama should never be forced – it should be relaxed and joyful. If the nose is blocked, only do the practice by visualization.

9.3

Breath Awareness Meditation

Mastery of the Mind

The mind is like a lake, its surface broken by ripples of thought. In order to see the Self which lies beneath, first you must learn to still the ripples, to become the master of your mind rather than its servant. For most of your waking hours the mind is tossed from one thought to another, pulled by desires and aversions, by emotions and memories, both pleasant and unpleasant. Of all the forces that agitate the mind it is the senses that most often disturb the concentration, giving rise to fantasies and desires. The mind is by nature constantly searching for happiness, vainly hoping to find satisfaction once it attains what it desires. On acquiring the desired object, the mind is temporarily silenced, but after a short while the whole pattern starts again, because the mind itself remains unchanged and the true desire unfulfilled.

Yoga teaches us that we possess a source of joy and wisdom already inside us, a fund of tranquillity that we can perceive and draw nourishment from when the movement of the mind is still. If we can channel this desire for contentment inward instead of attaching it to external objects that are by nature ephemeral, we can discover how to live in peace.

Witnessing the Play of Thoughts

During meditation you experience the mind as an instrument. Just by concentrating for a short period each day, you start to see how much movement exists in the mind, and how little you live in the present. From this brief encounter with a different mode of perception, you can learn to observe and thus leading to a change in the way of thinking. One of the most useful tools for controlling the mind is to stop associating with your emotions, thoughts and actions. Instead of identifying with them, you simply step back and assume the role of witness, as if you were watching someone else. By observing yourself dispassionately in this way, without judgment or praise, your thoughts and emotions lose their power over you – you start to see both mind and body as instruments that you can control. In detaching from the games of the mind, such as misidentification with the body, you learn to take responsibility for yourself.

Meditation in Daily Life

You are unlikely to succeed in taming the mind in your brief session of meditation if you allow it free rein the rest of the time. The longer you spend with the mind concentrated, the sooner you will be able to focus when you sit down to meditate. There is much that you can do to keep your mind centred. While walking, for example, try to synchronize your breathing with your footsteps – inhale for three steps, exhale for three. Breathing slowly and with control quietens the mind down too. When reading a book, test your concentration by stopping at the end of a page to see how much you can remember. Most important of all, keep your thinking as positive as possible. On days where your peace of mind is shattered by anger or unhappiness, you can often calm yourself by focusing on the opposite emotion – countering feelings of hatred with love, for example, doubt with faith or hope. By using these simple techniques you will slowly accustom your mind to a state of concentration. You will begin to notice that external influences are having less effect on you. Whether you have a difficult week at the office or an enjoyable day out in the country, your mood remains the same, for your inner core is growing stronger. You gain the security of knowing that in the midst of the changes that are life's essence, you can remain constant and assured.

The Principles of Meditation

Meditation, like sleep, cannot be taught – it comes by itself, in its own time. But if you follow the right steps to begin with, you can speed up your progress considerably. To help people to understand the basic steps and stages of meditation, there have been Ten Principles formulated. The most essential thing is to establish meditation as a regular habit in your life, using the same place and time each day is very beneficial.

This will train your mind to respond without delay once you sit down to meditate – much as your stomach is conditioned to expect food at mealtimes. After a few months of regular practice, your mind will begin to demand this quiet time of its own accord. Two of the most auspicious times of the day for meditation are at dawn and at dusk, when the atmosphere is charged with spiritual energy. But if neither of these times is possible, simply choose a time when you can be alone and undisturbed.

You may want to wrap a blanket around yourself before you start so as to keep warm. It is most important that your sitting position is steady and relaxed, as your concentration will be disturbed if you are uncomfortable. Before beginning, instruct your mind to be silent and to forget all thoughts of the past, present or future. Now regulate your breathing – this will control the flow of prana which in turn will help to still the mind. As the breath slows, so does the mind. You should not attempt to combat the restlessness of your mind, as this will only generate more thought waves. Simply detach yourself from your thoughts and create a ***Dhristi*** (a single point of focus, such as the breath), this **anchors** the mind in the present moment.

Principles to help with Meditation

1. Set aside a special place for meditation – the atmosphere you build up will help still the mind.
2. Choose a time when your mind is free of everyday concerns – dawn and dusk are ideal.
3. Using the same time and place each day conditions the mind to slow down more quickly.
4. Sit with your back, neck and head in a straight line, ideally facing North or East.
5. Instruct your mind to remain quiet for the duration of your meditation session.
6. Regulate your breathing – start with a few deep breaths, then slow it down to a natural rhythm.
7. Let a rhythmic breathing pattern happen.
8. At first, let your mind wander – it will only grow more restless if you force it to concentrate.
9. Applying your chosen technique, hold your object of concentration at this focal point throughout your session.
In the long tradition of meditation, there is a great variety of different techniques – some using the power of sound, others using visual symbols or breathing. But all have a common aim: to focus the scattered rays of the mind on a single point, so as to lead the meditator to a state of self-realization.
10. Meditation comes when you reach a state of being able to silently watch the fluctuation of your mind, when you can settle in the witness state of pure awareness.