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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.