

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

A look at Patañjali's path to enlightenment



By Nora Isaacs

Modern yoga puts a tremendous focus on the physical poses. But as you might know, the challenging, invigorating, and transformative asanas we work so hard to perfect in class are but a small piece of the entire system known as yoga. In fact, doing asanas alone won't help us attain enlightenment, a state where "there is only the experience of consciousness, truth, and unutterable joy," according to yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar.

Sounds pretty good. So how do we get there? Luckily, a man named Patañjali wrote a book called

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The Yoga Sutras that charts a practical path to enlightenment that includes far more than gaining strength, flexibility, and stamina from our asana practice. As you'll see, practicing "yoga" involves every aspect of life, including telling the truth, eating healthy food, having a regular meditation practice, and reading books that advance our spiritual lives.

According to Patañjali, the principles that lead us to this coveted "state of unutterable joy" are the Eight Limbs of Yoga, or, in Sanskrit, Ashtanga Yoga. Some confusion exists around the word ashtanga, however. For many, Ashtanga means that vigorous style of yoga commonly taught at centers around the country. This style, brought to America by a teacher named Pattabhi Jois, consists of six levels, but most people stick with the Primary Series, the most commonly taught group of poses. Every class begins with 10 Sun Salutations, and Chaturanga (or "yoga push-ups") connects all the postures.

The original Ashtanga yoga, however, refers not to Pattabhi Jois's style, but to the larger system of the Eight Limbs. To avoid mixing them

up, some people call the Eight-Limbed approach "Patañjali Yoga," while others refer to Pattabhi Jois's style as "Ashtanga Vinyasa."

In Patañjali's Ashtanga, each limb addresses a different aspect of being, moving from outward to inward. By following the eight limbs, we move away

from identifying with the material world of self and objects and towards the final limb—pure awareness. While these limbs certainly work in a progression, remember that they also are interconnected, so you can also incorporate them simultaneously.

Patañjali's book is separated into four chapters; the second chapter deals with the means to achieve "yoga," which really means union, and in Book Two, Verse 28, he introduces the eight limbs:

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

- 1. Restraints (Yamas).** Includes the principles of not harming others (or self), honesty, not stealing or hoarding, and sexual abstinence.
- 2. Observances (Niyama).** These are the observances and actions you take in relation to your body and mind, including cleanliness, contentment, hard work, self-study, and devotion to God.
- 3. Postures (Asana).** Although most people think this is the most important aspect of yoga, it's merely one of the eight limbs. Asana is the physical practice of yoga, done in a "steady and comfortable" manner.
- 4. Breathwork (Pranayama).** Helps us to direct and expand the life force within.
- 5. Sense Withdrawal (Pratyahara).** This step involves withdrawing the senses so we can turn more inward.
- 6. Concentration (Dharana).** By developing the ability to focus on one object, we can learn to have stillness of mind.
- 7. Meditation (Dhyana).** By learning to flow the mind into one uninterrupted stream, the mind becomes illuminated.
- 8. Enlightenment (Samadhi).** This is the yogi's goal: Where all sense of separateness melts away, and we go beyond consciousness to a state of total union and peace. How to explain this state? According to Iyengar, it's virtually inexplicable. He describes Samadhi as a place where "the mind cannot find words to describe this state and the tongue fails to utter them. The state can only be expressed by profound silence. The yogi has departed from the material world and is merged in the Eternal."

Sound intriguing? Stay tuned. In upcoming issues, we'll illuminate each of these limbs in detail to find out exactly how to put these steps into action. 🧘

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