

Patanjali and Ashtanga yoga

By Karen Barbarick

All people crave peace and happiness. Our ultimate goal in life is to achieve this peace and happiness. What is the magical tool that promises joy, peace and prosperity in one's personal life and communities? The answer is "Yoga". Yoga provides us with individual and social well-being, physical fitness, intellectual awakening, mental peace and contentment of the Soul.

The eight fold path (Ashtanga yoga) offers a map of how to obtain more peace and happiness by following clear directions on how to get there. The purpose of yoga is self-realization. This includes mastering the mind and parting the veils of ignorance to reveal our true selves. Your true self is an infinite, beautiful, unshakable, expression of divinity. Once this is fully realized and embraced true happiness and peace can occur.

Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhayana, and Samadhi

Yama – (Abstinence) is the first discipline toward obtaining perfection

1. Ahimsa (Non Violence)- This is considered the most important of the yamas. Not doing harm or not desiring to do harm are the rules of this yama. When on the mat, we incorporate ahimsa by being compassionate toward ourselves and others. Modify poses when you need to and don't beat yourself up when for not getting as far in the pose as you would like. Maybe an injury prevents you or you are too hot for one more Vinyassa. Perhaps it would be

best to take a day off. When we follow these steps you disassociate from the ego and the quality of your practice grows.

2. Satya (Truthfulness) – This yama is practiced in thoughts, actions and deeds. When we apply ourselves selflessly and acknowledge that we are exactly where we need to be right now we are affirming a bigger picture of an ultimate truth that keeps us in the moment and we stop fighting against the present moment by way of planning, idealizing, reflecting or avoiding. We are then left with the raw truth which is the beauty of the moment.
3. Asteya (Non Stealing) – This can refer to physically taking something that isn't ours or it can mean something far more subtle. One subtle form of stealing that often occurs is when we adopt the desires of others as our own. Or when we are on our mat we start envying our neighbor for being in a posture better than us as we may be struggling just to balance. A good way to look at this is "Don't start comparing your beginning with somebody else's middle".
4. Bramacharya (Non Sensuality) – This yama tells us to avoid expenditures of energy that are non-productive. This basically means over-doing it and "it" means any over use of your senses. Sometimes we look at this yama in a strictly sexual context but when applied to our mat it has to do with the expenditure of energy in a pose. Try to soften your jaw, muscles and breath. Move from pose to pose with the least amount of effort for example while moving from upward facing dog to downward

facing dog try not to move your hands or feel to readjust. Notice your habitual extraneous movements and retrain yourself to let them go.

5. Aparigraha (Non-greed): Greed leaves us constantly unsatisfied. It's a constant craving and an itch that just cannot be scratched. Perhaps, on the mat, this can mean dissatisfaction with your asana. It's the gap between what you want to be able to do and what you are currently able to do. Instead, accept each practice, whether or not it meets your expectations, with loving gratitude. After all, gratitude is the polar opposite of greed.

Niyama (observance) – These are the physical and mental purifications.

1. Saucha (purity) – This refers to mental and physical cleanliness. We achieve this by cleansing our bodies and minds and then filtering what is allowed to pass through them. Oftentimes on our mat we may have memories and emotions that surface in our mind. It is best to acknowledge them, feel them, and eventually let them go rather than to suppress them. We can filter them by meditating or by focusing on the infinite or the still point. We can watch as negative thoughts change into positive ones and we can cleanse the body through taking deep breaths to oxygenate the blood, by sweating and detoxifying with twists and refueling our system with clean water and healthy diet.

2. Santosha (contentment) – When we are content, we live in the present moment, without focusing on fulfilling our desires. Santosha leads to faith, which steadies the mind and leads us to Self-Realization. On the mat contentment does not mean complacency. It simply means that everything is exactly as it should be. Every breath, thought and movement is an expression of the Divine. Let this be your intention.

3. Tapas (Acceptance) – With this Niyama we get to experience spiritual maturity as we realize that with struggle comes growth. If we are on our mat and are instructed to hold a pose longer than is comfortable we may start internally getting angry or judging the teacher. If we accept the moment as a temporary situation and push past our comfort zone then the byproduct is self-esteem and feeling victorious.

4. Svadhyaya (Self Study) – This includes study of scripture, study of the lives of great masters and yogis, study of nature, life, sound and mantra. There is a Sanskrit word called Swastha meaning “established in the Self”. When we know ourselves we can internally direct our practice, take responsibility and follow through in a complete and grateful way. We see this most deeply in our Sadhana daily practice as we come to the mat with all our aspects of personality. Some positive and some negative this is where we can see where we require growth, personal development or leadership skills.

5. Ishwara (Devotion or Worship to the Supreme) – When we surrender our ego and dedicate our practice to something greater than ourselves we are in fact saying YES to our Self and the True Nature of who we are as part of the whole of the Universe. The foundation of Karma Yoga is that every act of dedication to a love one, someone in need, to a cause or to a higher power we cultivate more bliss as we pass goodness onto others. No good deed goes unnoticed although this is not the reason why we practice Ishwara.

Asana (postures) – Asana defined means that which is firm and pleasant. An easy and steady posture enables the yogi to practice meditation without feeling strain or physical discomfort. We practice yoga asana to maintain functionality of the body and to open it for comfort during meditation.

Pranayama (regulating the breath)- Pranayama is control of the breath forming a rhythmic pattern to calm down the mind. When on our mat we can experience the sound of our breath as a lullaby to our own Self.

Pratyahara (withdrawing the senses) – This is where we pull our energy inward away from the objects of the outer world. When we are on our mat we may begin looking around at others to see how we compare. Practice Pratyahara on your mat with single pointedness, using bandhas, mudras, and mantras as well as breathe retention. These tools are like seatbelts for your 5 senses.

Dharana (concentration) – Fixing the mind on an object is Dharana. When the Chitta or mind-stuff is confined and limited to a certain place it is being harnessed and trained to enhance will-force.

Dhyana (Absorption)- An unbroken flow of knowledge on an object. The mind focuses on one object, it holds itself to one point and if the mind succeeds in receiving the sensations only through that part or point and if the mind can keep itself in that state for some time then you've popped through the eye of the needle and reached Dhyana.

Samadhi (to become one with the Light) – When a total giving up of all forms and all that is left is primal truth that is Samadhi that is true meaning and is reflected as God Consciousness or Super Conscious State.