

# AN OVERVIEW OF YOGA

Yoga is an ancient system for wellbeing that consists of much more than yoga poses or postures (asanas).

Yoga is a way of living, a lifestyle.

Yoga is designed to bring increased awareness of your body and your thoughts through various techniques and teachings.






## THE EIGHT LIMBS OF YOGA


The Sutras have been compiled by the sage Patanjali Maharishi who is often called the founder of Yoga. In the Yoga Sutras, the Eight Limbs of Yoga are defined as the progressive series of steps or disciplines which purify the body and mind, ultimately leading the yogi to enlightenment. We will highlight each of these eight limbs of Yoga in this eBook.

The “Yoga Sutras of Patanjali” is a step-by-step path towards the realization of yoga. The eight limbs are:

1. Yama - Restraints
2. Niyama - Observances
3. Asanas – Postures or Poses
4. Pranayama – Regulation of Breath
5. Pratyahara – Draw the Senses Inward to Still the Mind
6. Dharana - Concentration
7. Dhyana - Meditation
8. Samadhi – Super consciousness

This spiritual life can be summed up in six simple commands: “Serve, Love, Give, Purify, Meditate, Realize”





## 1. YAMAS (restraints)

## 2. NIYAMAS (Observances)

The Yamas are restraints and the Niyamas are observances. They may be thought of as moral guidelines that help us move deeper into ourselves and can lead us to a more meaningful life. The sutras describe the Yamas and Niyamas as the first two limbs of the eight-limb path. The Yamas and Niyamas are the most logical places to start, as they relate to your behavior outwardly in the world and inwardly toward yourself. Incorporating these principals or ‘commandments’ into your life can have a profound effect on your yoga practice and your peace of mind.


### YAMAS


Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra lists five Yamas, or moral restraints, which apply specifically to how you behave outwardly toward other beings.

- Ahimsa - Non-Violence, Freedom from Harming
- Satya - Truthfulness
- Asteya - Non-Stealing, Freedom from Stealing
- Brahmacharya - Moderation
- Aparigraha - Non-Hoarding, Freedom from Grasping

**Ahimsa** - (Non-violence, Freedom from Harming) - Minimize the amount of harm you are causing to yourself and others in thought, word, and deed, by becoming aware of the ways in which you may bring suffering to others. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra says, “When you are established in Ahimsa (non-harming), others will stop harming you.” You will become a vessel of gentle love and kindness.

**Satya** - (Truthfulness) - Before you speak, ask yourself, “Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?” Satya includes right speech and truthful communication, as well as skillful listening. When approached with a piece of gossip, be a discerning listener. When truly practicing Satya, one’s words and deeds are all in alignment with one another. Don’t think one thing and





then say something else, be truthful. Practice Ahimsa as well, by telling the truth in the kindest way possible.

**Asteya** - (Non-stealing, Freedom from Stealing) - Do not take what does not belong to you. Do not take what you have not earned. This applies to material things, as well as respecting others' time, energy, and hard work. If you always show up for appointments late, you are stealing another's valuable time. If you take credit for someone else's idea or hard work. Asteya also means balance between giving and taking.

**Brahmacharya** - (Moderation) - The yogic path discourages overindulgence in many things, including food and sex. Obsession with these things may cause you to lose touch with what is important in life. Brahmacharya is often described as moderation, specifically sensual. In classical yoga, Brahmacharya refers specifically to sexual moderation. Never use sexuality to dominate or manipulate another being. Being faithful to your partner would be a form of Brahmacharya. Don't be overly hard on yourself, everything in moderation, including moderation.


**Aparigraha** - (Non-hoarding, Freedom from Grasping) - Develop sensitivity to what you really need. Do not take so much that others do not have enough. Do not be possessed by your possessions. If you are lusting after the next great thing, you will always have a sense of lack, which leads to suffering and a feeling of separation. If there is something you want, take the necessary steps to make it happen. Let go of your attachment to the outcome.


## NIYAMAS

Patanjali's Yoga Sutra lists five Niyamas, or observances, which apply specifically to how you conduct yourself on a more personal level.

- Saucha - Cleanliness
- Santosha - Contentment
- Tapas - Self Discipline
- Svadhyaya - Self Study
- Isvara-pranidhana - Surrender

**Saucha** - (Cleanliness) - Cleanliness and purity can be practiced on several different levels. A clean environment and living space: clear clutter, keep belongings organized and practice good feng shui. A clean body: clean diet, good hygiene, a well-kept appearance. A clean






mind: consider the amount and the quality of the information you are subject to on a daily basis and be selective about the books and magazines you read, how much time you spend online and what television shows and movies you choose to watch. Clean company: spend time with people who uplift your spirit and inspire you to be your best and set clear boundaries if you have toxic people in your life.

**Santosha** - (Contentment) - Look to yourself and your own innate goodness for happiness; that is the only place you will truly find it. Santosha also means being present. Rather than wishing for things to be different in your life, accept and appreciate the reality of what is. Do you really need things to be different to be happy? Choose to be happy now. Cultivate Santosha by making gratitude a daily practice. Notice the moments you are happy, even if they seem to be few and far between. Keep a gratitude journal. Count your blessings. Remind yourself often, “I have enough. I am enough.”

**Tapas** - (Self Discipline) - Transform yourself in the fire of positive change! The term Tapas means “heat” and it refers to the discomfort that comes with breaking habitual thought and behavioral patterns to effect positive transformation in your life. If you have ever tried to break a bad habit, you will know that process is often accompanied by physical discomfort. You also recognize that the discomfort is a necessary step toward the change you are seeking. Having Tapas is rolling out your yoga mat and doing your practice, even when you would rather not do so. It’s holding an uncomfortable yoga pose for those last three difficult breaths because you know it will make you stronger.

**Svadyaya** - (Self Study) - Be aware of your actions as they are happening. Reflect on them later. Use your reflections to make positive changes to those actions in the future. Taking time to reflect quietly on your day through journaling or contemplation is a wonderful way to practice Svadyaya. Studying of yoga texts and scriptures is also said to be a form of Svadyaya, as you are studying the highest self. *“The person practicing Svadyaya reads his own book of life, at the same time that he writes and revises it.”* - B.K.S. Iyengar, Light on Yoga

**Isvara-pranidhana** - (Surrender) - Give your life force energy to something higher than yourself. This is devotion and surrender of the smaller self to the higher self. We practice Isvara-pranidhana every time we dedicate or offer up our yoga practice to someone else. This has a powerful effect on your practice. It creates new sense of purpose when your practice is infused with intention and energy. Isvara-pranidhana also means letting go of doubt and making room for faith.






### 3. ASANAS (POSTURES OR POSES)

Asanas are postures to be held rather than exercises. They are performed slowly and combined with deep abdominal breathing. These movements not only awaken your awareness and control of your body but also have a deep spiritual effect, freeing you from fear and helping to instill confidence and serenity. At the end of a yoga session, you will find yourself not only relaxed but also energized.

There are three stages to each asana: coming into the pose, holding it, and finally releasing it, however, you should come into the pose as one fluid motion. Try to maintain stillness while you are holding the pose breathing slowly while concentrating your mind. Always release the pose with as much fluidity as you came into the posture.

Asanas work on all the various systems of the body, creating suppleness in the spine and joints and toning the muscles, glands, and internal organs. Initially the practice of Asanas will be a physical experience. As you progress, you will become more aware of the flow of prana, the vital energy of breath. Don't become discouraged if your practice seems slow – the practice of Asana is just that – a practice. Picture yourself performing each asana perfectly, even if you have not yet mastered it. By approaching each Asana positively and using the power of visualization, you will speed up your progress considerably.

Above all, never, ever risk injury by forcing your body into a position or straining to go further than you are able. It is only when your muscles are relaxed that they will stretch and allow you to advance in your execution of a pose.





## 4. PRANAYAMA

Breath (Prana) is life! We can live for days without food or water, but if we become deprived of breath we will die within minutes. It is astonishing how little attention we pay to the importance of breathing correctly. To a yogi, there are two main functions of proper breathing – to bring more oxygen to the blood and therefore the brain - and to control prana, or vital energy leading to control of the mind. Pranayama is the science of breath control and consists of a series of exercises intended to meet these needs and to keep the body healthy.

There are three basic types of breathing – clavicular (shallow), intercostal (middle) and abdominal breathing (deep). A full yogic breath combines all three, beginning with deep breath and continuing the inhalation the intercostal and clavicular areas. Most people have forgotten how to breathe properly; they breathe shallowly, through the mouth and make little or no use of the diaphragm. In this way only a small amount of oxygen is taken in with only the top of the lungs being used which results in a lack of vitality and a lower resistance to disease.

The practice of yoga demands that you reverse these habits. Breathing correctly means breathing through the nose, keeping the mouth closed, and involves a full inhalation and exhalation which bring the entirety of your lungs into play. When you exhale, the abdomen contracts and the diaphragm moves upward massaging the heart. When you inhale, the abdomen expands and the diaphragm moves down, massaging the abdominal organs. People often think of inhalation as the most essential stage of breathing but in fact, it is the exhalation that is the most important. The more stale air you exhale, the larger amount of fresh air you can inhale. Pranayama exercises put special emphasis on a prolonged retention of breath and a complete exhalation.

Pranayama teaches you how to control prana and thereby to control the mind because the two are interdependent. Since your state of mind is reflected in the way you breathe, it makes perfect sense that by controlling the breath you can learn to control your state of mind. By regulating your breathing, you are not only increasing your intake of oxygen and prana but also preparing yourself for the practice of concentration and meditation.

*“When the breath wanders, the mind is unsteady, but when the breath is still, so is the mind still”* Hatha Yoga Pradipika




## 5. PRATYAHARA – Drawing the Senses Inward to Still the Mind

Pratyahara, the fifth limb, is easily described as a bridge between the external and internal yoga. Pratyahara moves the yogi toward the subtle art of concentration into the next limb of yoga. The practice of Pratyahara is a practice of withdrawing ourselves from all outside information so we can hear the sounds within ourselves. Our five natural senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch are constantly sending us information. In today's digital age, we are all bombarded by a flow of stimuli that can be overwhelming. Our senses can take over and then we tend to go from one impulsive reaction to the next forgetting our higher goals in life. Although our senses are necessary for daily life the practice of Pratyahara takes our focus from the external stimuli and creates a peaceful and positive impression within.


We can begin practicing Pratyahara by withdrawing from the things in our lives that work against us such as unhealthy food, toxic relationships, and the media. Think about the stimuli you feed yourself through television and social media. Is it inspiring or is it alarming? You can change your diet, you can end toxic relationships and you certainly can spend time each day without being connected to media both social and news by switching off the phone, television, computer to turn your thoughts and focus inward.

Our minds can only absorb a limited amount of sensory input. Remember energy flows where the mind goes. We use this knowledge in Pratyahara by intentionally directing our minds inward and away from external stimuli. When the mind is controlled, so are the senses.

Begin by directing your mind to one sense only, let us say hearing. The next time you are in a resting peaceful pose, allow your mind to focus on all the different sounds around both near and far. Do not judge or label the sounds, simply listen. Once you become accustomed to unnamed sounds, you will naturally focus more on what is inside. Remember yoga is a process of discovery and growth. Just as Asana practice takes time so does practicing the mind. Be patient, practice, and take every day as it arrives.







*The last three limbs of Yoga, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi are referred to as sanyam, which means "control." In the Sutras, Patanjali states the last three limbs of Yoga should be considered together, as they are considered the progressive stages of concentration.*

## 6. DHARANA – Concentration

Dharana is the practice of developing the ability to bring the mind into focus and to hold that focus and concentration on a single point or object. Once this is achieved all bodily consciousness and restless thoughts will not exist, we simply are able to focus on the object of meditation without any distraction. Simply stated, Dharana is the practice of concentrating on a subject without distraction.

To practice, you should choose a calm and peaceful spot either indoors or outdoors and sit in a comfortable position. This position can be on the floor or in a chair, it truly does not matter. The purpose is to be comfortable so that you can concentrate without the distraction of discomfort. You may close your eyes and focus on a chakra, mantra, or the breath if that is comfortable for you. Or you may keep your eyes open while focusing on an object within your sight. A lighted candle is wonderful to focus upon.

Yoga and the practice of Dharana can help you master the art of concentration because it involves focusing on your breath, body, mantra, or object. Regular practice will enhance your Asana practice by helping to improve your ability to remain focused, Dharana trains the mind to remain calm as it increases your mental strength.



## 7. DHYANA - Meditation

In our practice of Dhyana we are attempting to go beyond Dharana, we are lost in the reality of something beyond the mind. Dhyana is the absorption or union of our mind with the supreme, as described by Patanjali it is concentration on the higher aspects of reality.

This reality is not relative but is an absolute reality. There aren't words to describe this experience since it is beyond the mind. The ancient texts say, "He who knows does not talk." Dhyana cures the inner conflicts we experience and when you are completely focused, you cannot be of two minds about anything.

Dhyana is the ability to merge with the object of your concentration. As an example, a person who has achieved to 6<sup>th</sup> Yoga limb of Dharana would say they are able to focus completely on something during meditation. A person who has achieved Dhyana would say they seemed to become the object of their meditation, as if they had merged with it.

## 8. SAMADHI – Super Consciousness

Samadhi is the eighth and final limb of Yoga. Patanjali explains the Samadhi is a state of meditative absorption which is attained by the practice of Dharana and Dhyana when the true essential nature is known without distortion of the mind. It is the final goal of your meditation process.

Samadhi is the mind in its most concentrated state; the awareness of you as the meditator, the process of meditation, and the object of your meditation have all merged into one. From knowledge, you have become knowingness. Your mind in the state of Samadhi possesses powers a normal mind does not. Samadhi is beyond the normal mind and intelligence, with that being said, it is quite difficult to describe. It can only be completely appreciated by experiencing this state. Once you reach this state, your mind will become the main tool true Yogis use to achieve the end goal of Yoga which is the joining of the individual self with the Universal Absolute.

***Sat Chit Ananda – Truth Consciousness Bliss***