

SEM 2

YOGA PHILOSOPHY

Yoga philosophy, often simply referred to as yoga, is one of the six main *darshans*, or the orthodox schools of Hinduism. The origins of this philosophy are unclear, but first references can be found in the *Upanishads* from the 1st millennium B.C.E.

Yoga is a dualist philosophy, working with two fundamental realities: *purusha*, meaning "pure consciousness," and *prakriti*, meaning "matter." Every living being is a form of connection of these two realities and every living being is considered a union of body and mind. The path of yoga is guided by ethical principles, *yamas* and *niyamas*, and should ultimately result in *moksha* (spiritual liberation).

Yoga philosophy is closely related to one of the other six schools of Hinduism, *Samkhya*, but unlike Samkhya, yoga accepts the concept of God, described by Patanjali as Ishvara. Some scholars describe yoga philosophy as "Samkhya with God." While Samkhya states that knowledge is the only path to moksha, yoga says that it should be combined with systematic practice, or personal experimentation.

Yoga philosophy accepts Samkhya's theory of the three *gunas* - *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* - present in every living being. Sattva represents harmony and kindness; rajas represents passion and activity; and tamas represents darkness, destruction and chaos. Although present in every living being, the three gunas are found in different proportions. The theory of the three gunas is a base for yoga philosophy of the mind. Yoga philosophy believes that purusha is sattva and prakriti is tamas.

From the ethical principles of yamas and niyamas, yamas describe the values that should be avoided, such as stealing, lying or violence, while niyamas outline the values that should be followed, such as purity, self-study and contemplation of God.

Yoga philosophy is well described in "The Yoga *Sutras* of Patanjali," where he outlines the eight limbs, or stages, that one should follow to reach moksha. The eight limbs include the yamas and niyamas, asanas (physical practice), *pranayama* (breathing exercises), *pratyahara* (withdrawal), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (union with God)

Patanjali's Eightfold Path of Yoga

The heart of Patanjali's teachings is the eightfold path of yoga. It is also called the eight limbs of Patanjali, because they intertwine like the branches of a tree in the forest. These aren't commandments (although they sometimes sound like them), laws, or hard and fast rules. These are Patanjali's suggestions for living a better life through yoga. Here are the eight limbs of Patanjali.

Yama

Yama is social behavior, how you treat others and the world around you. These are moral principles. Sometimes they are called the don'ts or the thou shalt nots. There are five yamas:

- **Nonviolence** (*ahimsa*). Do no harm to any creature in thought or deed. In his book *Autobiography of a Yogi*, ParamahansaYogananda asks Mahatma Gandhi the definition of ahimsa. Gandhi said, “The avoidance of harm to any living creature in thought or deed.” Yogananda asked if one could kill a cobra to protect a child. Gandhi maintained he would still hold to his vow of ahimsa, but added, “I must confess that I could not serenely carry on this conversation were I faced by a cobra.”
- **Truth and honesty** (*satya*). Tell no lies. Cheating on your income taxes falls into this category.
- **Nonstealing** (*asteya*). Do not steal material objects (a car) or intangibles such as the center of attention or your child’s chance to learn responsibility or independence by doing something on his own.
- **Nonlust** (*brahmacharya*). Don’t worry; this is not a call to celibacy. Many yogis of old were married and had families of their own. The person who practices brahmacharya avoids me-me-me or self-absorption. To practice this yama is to dwell in vastness (“Brahman literally means the vastness,” according to Ravi Ravindra, a scholar and translator of the *Yoga Sutra*). It is, as the well-known teacher B.K.S. Iyengar puts it, to see “divinity in all.”
- **Nonpossessiveness** (*aparigraha*). Free yourself from greed, hoarding, and collecting. Do you really need more shoes, another car, or to hog the conversation every time you see your friends? Make your life as simple as possible. Learn to share—your toys, your time, your space, your silence.

Niyama

Niyama is inner discipline and responsibility, how we treat ourselves. These are sometimes called observances, the do’s, or the thou shalt. There are five niyamas:

- **Purity** (*shauca*). Purity is achieved through the practice of the five yamas, which help clear away the negative physical and mental states of being. Keep yourself, your clothing, and your surroundings clean. Eat fresh and healthy food. The next time you joke about treating your body like a temple, think of this niyama.
- **Contentment** (*santosha*). Cultivate contentment and tranquility by finding happiness with what you have and who you are. Seek happiness in the moment, take responsibility for where you are, and choose to grow from there.
- **Austerity** (*tapas*). Show discipline in body, speech, and mind. The purpose of developing self-discipline is not to become ascetic, but to control and direct the mind and body for higher spiritual aims or purposes.
- **Study of the sacred text** (*svadhyaya*). Study sacred texts, which are whatever books are relevant to you and inspire and teach you. Education changes a person’s outlook on life. As Iyengar says, a person starts “to realize that all creation is meant for *bhakti* (adoration) rather than

for *bhoga* (enjoyment), that all creation is divine, that there is divinity within himself and that the energy which moves him is the same that moves the entire universe.”

- **Living with an awareness of the Divine** (*ishvara-pranidhana*). Be devoted to God, Buddha, or whatever you consider divine.

Asana

“The posture of yoga is steady and easy,” Patanjali says. Patanjali compares this to resting like the cosmic serpent on the waters of infinity. Although Westerners often consider the practice of asana or postures as an exercise regimen or a way to stay fit, Patanjali and other ancient yogis used asana to prepare the body for meditation. To sit for a lengthy time in contemplation required a supple and cooperative body. If you are free of physical distractions — such as your foot going to sleep — and can control the body, you can free the mind. Patanjali said, “Posture is mastered by freeing the body and mind from tension and restlessness and meditating on the infinite.”

Pranayama

Prana is the life force or energy that exists everywhere and flows through each of us through the breath. *Pranayama* is the control of breath. The basic movements of pranayama are inhalation, retention of breath, and exhalation. “The yogi’s life is not measured by the number of days but by the number of his breaths,” says Iyengar. “Therefore, he follows the proper rhythmic patterns of slow, deep breathing.” The practice of pranayama purifies and removes distractions from the mind making it easier to concentrate and meditate.

Pratyahara

Pratyahara is withdrawal of the senses. Pratyahara occurs during meditation, breathing exercises, or the practice of yoga postures — any time when you are directing your attention inward. Concentration, in the yoga room, at your writing desk, or the boardroom, is a battle with distracting senses. When you master pratyahara, you are able to focus because you no longer feel the itch on your big toe or hear the mosquito buzzing by your ear or smell the popcorn popping in the microwave.

Dharana

Concentration or *dharana* involves teaching the mind to focus on one point or image. “Concentration is binding thought in one place,” says Patanjali. The goal is to still the mind — gently pushing away superfluous thoughts — by fixing your mind on some object such as a candle flame, a flower, or a mantra. In dharana, concentration is effortless. You know the mind is concentrating when there is no sense of time passing.

Dhyana

Uninterrupted meditation without an object is called *dhyana*. Concentration (*dharana*) leads to the state of meditation. The goal of meditation is not unconsciousness or nothingness. It is heightened awareness and oneness with the universe. How do you tell the difference between concentration and meditation? If there is awareness of distraction, you are only concentrating and not meditating. The calm achieved in meditation spills over into all aspects of your life — during a hectic day at work, shopping for groceries, coordinating the Halloween party at your child’s school.

Samadhi

The ultimate goal of the eightfold path to yoga is *samadhi* or absolute bliss. This is pure contemplation, superconsciousness, in which you and the universe are one. Those who have achieved samadhi are enlightened. Paramahansa Yogananda called it the state of God-Union. The eight limbs work together: The first five steps — yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, and pratyahara — are the preliminaries of yoga and build the foundation for spiritual life. They are concerned with the body and the brain. The last three, which would not be possible without the

previous steps, are concerned with reconditioning the mind. They help the yogi to attain enlightenment or the full realization of oneness with Spirit. Enlightenment lasts forever, while a flat tummy can disappear with a week of binging.