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NEWSLETTER ARTICLE #1

Ashtanga Yoga

In Sanskrit, the ancient language in which Yoga is written, ashta=eight and anga=limb, so Ashtanga Yoga is describing the *Eight Limbs of Yoga*. These are guidelines for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline that all yogis aspire to follow. You can visualize the limbs like the branches of a tree. They are aspects that support each other and create a whole; all equally important. The first four are outward disciplines: *Yama*- ethical disciplines, *Niyama*- individual discipline, *Asana*- posture, *Pranayama*- breath control. The next four are inward actions: *Pratyahara*- withdrawal of the senses, *Dharana*- single-pointed concentration, *Dhyana*- prolonged concentration/meditation, and *Samadhi*- the bliss state.

1-Yama is translated as 'universal principles' or 'inner discipline'. But one can also look at **yama** as an attitude to how we conduct ourselves in the world. It reminds us of our responsibilities as social beings to behave with consideration and attention to others. There are 5 **yamas**:

ahimsa- non-violence; *a*=not *himsa*=violence, killing

The obvious definition is not to inflict pain on anyone or anything. This includes not killing animals for food, and also not saying a harsh word to someone else or to ourselves. This practice allows one to replace negative, destructive thoughts and actions with positive, constructive ones. With this comes respect for all things.

satya- truthfulness

This is the highest rule of conduct or morality. To establish truth is to have a pure heart. This means no lying, cheating, dishonesty or deception. The exception is when the truth may cause harm to someone else, because then one must practice *ahimsa*. The situation needs to be taken into account as to how the truth will affect others. Mahatma Gandhi's entire life was based on the vows of *ahimsa* and *satya*.

asteya- non-stealing; *a*=not *steya*=stealing

This can also be translated as not-coveting. From covetousness springs the desire to steal, possession and envy. *Asteya* also includes not taking advantage of a confidence, or using something for other than the intended purpose.

brahmacharya-self-restraint; *brahma*=truth *car*=to move

Often, this is described as abstinence, or celibacy, but it is also referring to continence of the body, speech and mind. Then one can develop vitality, energy, a courageous mind and a powerful intellect.

aparigraha- non-hoarding; *parigraha*=possession

A facet of *asteya* (not stealing), this also means freedom from desire. The idea is to keep only what is necessary for the maintenance of the body. Don't take anything that you haven't worked for, don't take advantage of certain situations, don't receive gifts that may have a "string" attached.

2- Niyama are rules of conduct for the individual. It refers to the attitude towards oneself and gives shape to the inner desire to follow the yogic path. There are also 5 *niyamas*.

sauca- cleanliness/purity

Not only do we want outer cleanliness but inner cleanliness. Internal cleansing brings radiance and joy. Eat pure food that is simple and nourishing. Avoid foods that are stale, tasteless, heavy and unclean. Cleanse the mind of disturbing and negative emotions like hatred, anger, lust, delusion and pride. *Asana* and *Pranayama* are essential as a means to *sauca*.

*santosh*a- contentment

Live as you are without going to outside things for happiness. It helps curb desire and greed; cultivates modesty and acceptance. It is about ourselves- how we feel about what the universe has given us.

tapas- austerity; *tap*=to blaze, burn or consume by heat

This is the self-discipline and devotion to purify the body, senses and mind. You burn out the rubbish in the body to be fit and well-functioning. Life without *tapas* is like a heart without love. Practicing helps one gain wisdom, courage, and integrity. *Brahmacharya* and *ahimsa* are *tapas* of the body.

svadhyaya- self-study, study of scripture; *sva*=self, *adhyaya*=inquiry, examination

It encompasses all learning, reflection, and the study of oneself, including the body, mind, intellect, and ego. Yoga is the science of religions. When the *sadhaka* (aspirant) absorbs things in other faiths it enables him to appreciate his own faith better.

isvara pranidhana- dedication of one's actions and will to the Lord

The 'Lord' is nothing but your own true self, the world is God. Yogis offer the fruit of their actions to God. By total surrender, *samadhi* is achieved. Whatever you do can be translated into worship by your attitude. It is sufficient to know you have done your best (*santosh*a), and leave the rest to a higher power.

3-Asana- posture

Yoga Sutra II-46 says *sthira sukham asanam*= steady comfortable posture. This is the physical exercise of Yoga to create a fit vehicle for the spirit. The postures reduce fatigue and exercise every muscle, nerve and gland in the body. They create agility, balance, and endurance. The names of *asanas* are significant and illustrate the principle of evolution. They are named after vegetation, insects, animals, legendary heroes, sages and Hindu gods. The turning point in *asana* practice is when the body, mind and self unite.

4- *Pranayama*- expansion of the life force; breath and its control; *prana*=breath, life, vitality, "that which is infinitely everywhere", *ayama*=length, stretching, restraint

Prana is part of the cosmic breath of the Universal Spirit, it's like electricity that radiates light through a bulb. Its practice allows the practitioner to become one with the Universe. The deliberate regulation of breathing checks emotional excitement, soothes the nervous system and reduces craving. The link between the mind and breath is significant, whatever happens in the mind influences the breath. The aim is to prepare the mind for the stillness of meditation.

5- *Pratyahara*- withdrawal of the senses; *ahara*=nourishment

This is a practice that turns the mind inward and sets it free from the tyranny of the senses. It is another way of controlling the mind. We cannot make it happen, we can only practice the means by which it may happen. It will happen automatically in meditation.

6- *Dharana*- concentration; *dhr*=to hold

This sixth stage is achieved when there is deep contemplation and reflection on a single point. You create conditions for the mind to focus the attention in one direction instead of whirling around all over the place. Concentration is the beginning of meditation; meditation is the culmination of concentration.

7- *Dhyana*- meditation

This must be preceded by *dharana* and occurs when the flow of concentration is uninterrupted. It frees an individual from attachment and results in indifference to the joys of pleasure or the sorrows of pain. You will experience peace and a balanced, serene mind.

8- *Samadhi*- the bliss state: *sama*=level or alike, *adhi*=over and above

Ultimately, *samadhi* is the fruit of the discipline of *Astanga Yoga*. Achieved at the peak of meditation, it is at the end of the *sadhaka*'s quest. It can only be experienced at the level of the heart.

Pratyahara, *Dharana*, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi* cannot be practiced. They must occur naturally after practicing *Asana* and *Pranayama* to create favorable conditions. By the practice of the limbs of Yoga, impurities dwindle away and there dawns the light of wisdom leading to discriminative discernment.