

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

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Classical yoga practice in the West is based on the writings of Patañjali in *The Yoga Sutra*, an ancient text dating back to the 5th century BC. These sutras are a series of 195 aphorisms — terse sayings, expressing a general truth, principle, or astute observation. It is interesting to note that in the *The Yoga Sutra* ideas are presented to consider, rather than religious directives to practice, much like modern day psychotherapy. *The Yoga Sutra* is divided into four chapters (theory, practice, internal discipline, and emancipation from worldly desires or constraints). Patañjali describes eight limbs (aṣṭāṅga in Sanskrit) of yoga in the second chapter. (Iyengar BKS, 1979, 2001, 2005; Thomas T & Thomas B, 2008).

1. **Yama.** Five social ethical principles related to respecting others: Nonviolence (Ahimsa), truthfulness (Satya), no stealing (Asteya), No lust (Bramacharya), and no coveting (Aparigraha).

It is interesting to note that the Yamas are very similar to the last six commandments of the Christian Bible: Thou shall not kill, Thou shall not commit adultery, Thou shall not steal, Thou shall not lie, Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's house, and Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's wife.

2. **Niyama.** Five ethical principles related to respecting your self: Cleanliness (Saucha), Contentment (Santosa), sustained practice (Tapas), self examination (Svadyaya), surrender to higher power (Isvara Pranidhana).

It is interesting to note that the niyamas are very similar to the first four commandments of the Christian Bible: Thou shall have no other Gods before me. Thou shall not take the Lord's name in vain. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. Honor thy father and thy mother.

3. **Asana** (āsana). The physical practice of the yoga postures to help you to be comfortable, stable and in harmony with your body.
4. **Pranayama** (prāṇāyāma). The practice of regulating life essence through the breath to create harmony with your vital energy.
5. **Pratyahara** (pratyāhāra). The psychological level where outside senses are withdrawn in order to tune into inner awareness for a sense of harmony with emotions.
6. **Dharana** (dhāraṇā). Concentration, sustained focus and harmony with your thoughts.
7. **Dhyana** (dhyāna). Meditation and contemplation through a single focus of mind.
8. **Samadhi.** Bliss, ecstasy, enlightenment and transcendent states merging your true self with nature and the universe.

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