

Eight Limbs of Yoga

**The Structure and Pacing
of
Self-Directed Spiritual Practice**

Yogani

From The AYP Enlightenment Series

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—

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of
Self-Directed Spiritual Practice

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“Through practice of the limbs of Yoga,
whereby impurities are eliminated,
there arises enlightenment...”

Yoga Sutras of Patanjali – 2:28

Introduction

Centuries ago, a short scripture called the *Yoga Sutras* was written by the Indian sage, *Patanjali*, outlining the essential practices and experiences leading to the rise of human enlightenment. This concise scripture contains the famous *Eight Limbs of Yoga*, reflecting the natural spiritual capabilities within each of us, and the means for unfolding them.

The center of all spiritual progress is found within each human nervous system. When time-tested methods for stimulating the process of human spiritual transformation are applied in an integrated way, remarkable progress can occur within any cultural or religious setting. Now, anyone who has the desire can build a *self-directed* daily practice routine for the long term, leading to the steady cultivation of enlightenment in everyday life. This book details the overall structure, integration and pacing of yoga practices that have been presented in the previous extensive *Advanced Yoga Practices* (AYP) instructional writings.

The AYP Enlightenment Series is an endeavor to present the most effective methods of spiritual practice in a series of easy-to-read books that anyone can use to gain practical results immediately and over the long term. For centuries, many of these powerful practices have been shrouded in secrecy, mainly in an effort to preserve them. Now we find ourselves in the *information age*, and able to preserve knowledge for

present and future generations like never before. The question remains: “How far can we go in effectively transmitting spiritual methods in writing?”

Since the beginning in 2003, the writings of AYP have been an experiment to see just how much can be conveyed, with much more detail included on practices than in the spiritual writings of the past. Can books provide us the specific means necessary to tread the path to enlightenment, or do we have to surrender at the feet of a *guru* to find our salvation? Well, clearly we must surrender to something, even if it is to our own innate potential to live a freer and happier life. If we are able to do that, and maintain regular practice, then books like this one can come alive and instruct us in the ways of human spiritual transformation. If the reader is ready and the book is worthy, amazing things can happen.

While one person’s name is given as the author of this book, it is actually a distillation of the efforts of thousands of practitioners over thousands of years. This is one person’s attempt to simplify and make practical the spiritual methods that many have demonstrated throughout history. All who have gone before have my deepest gratitude, as do the many I am privileged to be in touch with in the present who continue to practice with dedication and good results.

I hope you will find this book to be a useful resource as you travel along your chosen path.

Practice wisely, and enjoy!

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Chapter 1 – Eight Limbs of Yoga

Ever since our ancient ancestors gazed up to the heavens with a sense of wonder, there has been an intuitive knowing that we are something more than the physical mortal beings we appear to be.

But what? And how can we experience that in the fullest measure we are capable of?

This has been the riddle of humankind since our beginnings, and continues to be our greatest challenge in modern times. We have sailed the seas, traveled the skies, harnessed the atom, shrunk the world with instant communications, and flown into outer space. But have we realized the full inner potential of the human being? Not yet. Not on a mass scale.

Some may doubt that there is anything within us to realize. As the religious institutions of the world groan under the weight of ritual, superstition, politics and corruption, we may wonder if there is any truth to the idea that human beings are capable of the spiritual experiences and profound inner freedom promised in the world's scriptures since ancient times.

Yet, there have always been a few who have claimed from their own experience that human spiritual transformation is a fact, and attempted to show the way to it. Nearly everyone has sensed at one time or other the *something more* that lives within all of us. So we carry on with the quest for knowledge, and those who have seen through their inner door continue to teach the ways that are believed to facilitate such openings in all people.

While, for most of humankind, the world of spiritual endeavor has looked flat and foreboding for a long time, it is now becoming apparent to many that something wonderful lies just over the horizon. Those who have traveled there tell remarkable stories of abiding peace, ecstasy and outpouring divine love. There is even the prospect of finding the entire universe contained within ourselves. Indeed, the *final frontier* is within us!

While we may not be sure of all this, we can be sure of one thing. There is more that we can know, and we will know it in due course. The truth will set us free. Like knowledge in all fields of endeavor in this modern age of technology and information, spiritual knowledge is expanding rapidly. In the process, the ancient knowledge of spirit is finding application in new and efficient ways.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

Centuries ago, a short scripture was written by the Indian sage, *Patanjali*, systematizing a range of practices for stimulating the natural capabilities inherent within every human nervous system, for purification and opening leading to direct realization of the condition we call *enlightenment*.

Patanjali's scripture is called the *Yoga Sutras* (meaning "stitches of union"), and it provides one of the world's clearest summaries of the methods and experiences of human spiritual transformation.

The integrated practices described by Patanjali comprise the famous *Eight Limbs of Yoga*. This list is

so complete in its coverage of human spiritual capabilities, and the means for unfolding them, that it can serve as a check-list for assessing the completeness of literally any spiritual path.

Patanjali's Eight Limbs of Yoga include:

- **Yama** (*restraints* – non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, preservation and cultivation of sexual energy, and non-covetousness)
- **Niyama** (*observances* – purity, contentment, spiritual intensity, study of spiritual knowledge and *Self*, and active surrender to the divine)
- **Asana** (postures and physical maneuvers)
- **Pranayama** (breathing techniques)
- **Pratyahara** (introversion of the senses)
- **Dharana** (systematic attention on an object)
- **Dhyana** (meditation – systematic dissolving of the object in consciousness)
- **Samadhi** (absorption in pure bliss consciousness)

There is an additional category of practice in the *Yoga Sutras* called **Samyama**, which employs the last three limbs of yoga at the same time. Patanjali discusses the practice of samyama with a dramatic flair in the *Yoga Sutras*, employing the phrase *supernormal powers* to describe the results, referring to the *siddhis and miracles* that are the incidental effects of samyama. In fact, samyama is a systematic method for stimulating an outpouring of *divine love* in daily life, which is the rise of *stillness in action* – the ongoing ecstatic union of inner and outer life. It is

unending happiness, which is the greatest siddhi of them all.

Every system of yoga teaching has its own way of presenting the eight limbs of yoga. Sometimes, the limbs of yoga are taught in order, which is the traditional way – first learn the rules of conduct (yama and niyama), and then, if the student is considered worthy, the teacher may provide instruction for the more penetrating practices further down the list.

The eight limbs of yoga are so logical and easy to understand that virtually every teacher of yoga claims to be teaching them, which is true to one degree or another, because the eight limbs cover everything one can do in yoga. In this sense, they represent a complete road map, a blueprint and spiritual checklist of the various methods for opening the human nervous system to divine experience.

Taken together as an overall system, the eight limbs of yoga have been referred to as *ashtanga* (*eight-limbed*) *yoga* and *raja* (*royal*) *yoga*. But what is in a name? What we here call *Advanced Yoga Practices (AYP)* are the eight limbs too. So is any approach to human spiritual transformation, in whole or in part, including the systems of spiritual practice we find in the world's mainstream religions. If it has to do with human spiritual transformation, it is going to be found somewhere in the eight limbs. That is the beauty of the eight limbs. When we look at any spiritual teaching or religious tradition, using the eight limbs as a measuring rod, we see right away what is there, and what is not. The more enlightened

traditions will have more of the limbs covered, and the less enlightened ones will have fewer limbs covered. This is not a sectarian consideration. It is a matter of what works, regardless of the cultural or religious clothing spiritual practices might happen to be wearing. Spiritual practice is like mathematics – not dependent on time, place or culture. One plus one will equal two everywhere. It is cause and effect.

The eight limbs of yoga capture the whole of spiritual cause and effect with elegant simplicity.

As mentioned, traditionally, the eight limbs have been taken in sequence. The rationale has been that people have to learn to behave themselves and prepare through strict codes of conduct before they can begin doing more direct spiritual practices. Once they know how to behave rightly, they can begin with the body (asanas), and, later, work their way on through the breath (pranayama), and, finally, be ready for focused attention (dharana), meditation (dhyana), and pure bliss consciousness (samadhi). With a traditional approach like this it can be a long road to travel, especially if the teacher holds his or her students to the highest standards of performance each step along the way. Even Patanjali had this sequence of practice in mind when he wrote the yoga sutras.

That part of it (learning the eight limbs in sequence over a long period) doesn't work very well in modern times, where the emphasis is on optimizing causes and effects in the most efficient manner. It makes sense to streamline the methods of yoga in time, because we are all working with a limited life-span, with time being at a premium. Over the past

century, the urgency for more effective applications of practice has become widely recognized in the yoga community, and many innovations in teaching have occurred. In the time of Patanjali, perhaps it was not so easy to be jump-starting people with advanced practices like deep meditation and spinal breathing pranayama the way it is routinely done today. These changes represent progress.

Over the years, different teachers have jumped directly into the eight limbs in different places. Some start with asanas, and others with pranayama. Some focus first on devotion and then jump to meditation, or something else. Some jump straight into meditation, and then work their way back through the limbs. Interestingly, such “highest first” approaches lead to spiritual conduct (yama and niyama) rising as an effect of inner purification and opening, rather than being used as a primary cause through strict rules of conduct, which can be very inefficient.

The strategy in the *AYP writings* is along the lines of the latter *highest first* approach. Here we begin with deep meditation, and then move into pranayama, physical techniques, samyama, and so on, cultivating the primary engine of bhakti (spiritual desire) all the way through. In this book we will be discussing the overall process of building and managing our practice routine along these lines.

One thing everyone who does yoga for a while has found is that the limbs of yoga are connected. Meaning, if we start in one limb, the other limbs will be affected. As we purify and open from within, we will eventually be drawn into all of the limbs.

It is common for new meditators to become voracious spiritual readers (a *niyama* – study), lean toward a purer diet (a *niyama* – purity), and feel more sensitive about the wellbeing of others (a *yama* – non-harming).

In fact the best way to achieve progress in *yama* and *niyama* is by going straight to *samadhi* (pure bliss consciousness – inner silence) with deep meditation. Then harmonious behavior comes naturally from inside, rather than having to be enforced from outside. These results are indicators of the *connectedness of yoga*. It occurs on all levels of practice. Sometimes it is called *grace*, because spiritual blessings seem to come out of nowhere. In truth, such blessings are being telegraphed through us via spiritual conductivity rising in our nervous system from something we did somewhere on the eight-limbed tree of yoga.

Even the sincere heart-felt inquiry, “Is there something more than this?” is a powerful yoga practice. It is found in *niyama* – it is *bhakti*, active surrender to our chosen highest ideal.

As we advance in our yoga practices, this conductivity in the nervous system becomes ecstatic. Then we call it *ecstatic conductivity* (also referred to as *kundalini*). When the conductivity within us becomes ecstatic, we are really getting connected through the limbs of yoga – here, there, and everywhere.

If we engage in effective practices in multiple limbs, built up in a systematic step-by-step way, then our nervous system will be purifying and opening

most rapidly. This is an important principle that is at the core of the AYP approach – using a broad integrated system of effective practices, having the option of working through as many limbs as possible in a self-directed way, at our own speed.

In this way the focus of spiritual development moves naturally from external institutions and teachers to the place where the transformation and spiritual experience are actually occurring, within each person. This is the rightful destiny of all people, and it is time for each of us to claim it as our own. The sooner we do, the sooner we will be on our way.

It has long been thought that spiritual wisdom is most relevant when it is ancient, coming through mysterious preceptors, and somehow divorced from our present reality. The truth is that spiritual knowledge is totally ancient and totally modern – totally human in the here and now, and capable of coming alive within every one of us. This is why in the *AYP writings*, we often say, “The guru is in you.”

Yoga and the Human Nervous System

While yoga is a fascinating subject to read about, ponder and discuss, the real benefits come from direct application of its methods. Yoga is regarded to be a philosophy in India, and this is really a misnomer. It is much more than that. Yoga is a system of methods designed to promote the natural process of human spiritual transformation on the individual level.

In modern times, yoga is often thought to mean physical postures, *asanas*, which is but one of the

eight limbs. A quick review of the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* reveals that yoga covers a much broader field than postures, encompassing multiple tools that take advantage of multiple capabilities for transformation inherent within the human nervous system.

Yoga means *union* – union of the inner and outer qualities of life. This is more than a philosophy. It is a living reality, cultivated through a variety of methods applied systematically on a daily basis. All the limbs of yoga are connected within us.

In fact, all of yoga is a product of the human nervous system. Not the other way around, as we sometimes may tend to think. What has for so long been regarded to be an external knowledge is actually an internal knowledge that is far more accessible to us than is commonly believed. As soon as we understand that our spiritual possibilities are an internal process rather than an external one, then a profound shift in our development will begin to happen. On the individual level the shift can be quite rapid. And it can encompass an entire society as radiant energy goes out, leading to a rise in intuitive understanding and increased use of spiritual practices among the people. In this way, all of humankind can be uplifted.

It took a while for people to believe that the world is round instead of flat, and that the sun is the center of the solar system instead of the earth. It took some proof. Then almost everyone believed, and the rush was on to derive the benefits of the new knowledge, the new paradigm.

Now it is time for us to come to grips with the fact that the human nervous system is the center of all spiritual experience and of all divine bliss. That is your nervous system, the one you are sitting in right now. The doorway to the infinite is that close within us. The sooner we get used to the idea that each of us is a direct gateway to the divine, the better it will be for everyone. As with the acceptance of any knowledge, it takes some proof. In this case, the proof is in each of us. We don't have to rely on others for proof for very long. Open a few doors here and there by doing some effective yoga practices and we will soon see what we are. Then the rush will be on to open it all up. A new paradigm is born!

What are the benefits of the knowledge of yoga and its effective application? It is a natural transformation to a higher functioning of our nervous system that brings us more peace, creativity, energy and good health in daily living. We find ourselves to be more at *One* with the world, and more able to move within it in ways that benefit both ourselves and others. Fear and suffering become much less, no matter how much turmoil there may be in outer life. We become at *One* with the infinite ocean of life upon which all events in time and space are but waves upon the surface. The changes of life continue to come and go like the waves. Within, we remain steady, just as the depths of the ocean are. This is the fruit of yoga – not an idea, belief or philosophy, but a state of being, a living experience.

Nothing is new, you know. Our ancient ancestors heard of these things. Much of it was written down,

and there have always been wise people who taught methods for living the truth residing within everyone. But communications were poor, life was often perilous, and people lived in so much fear and superstition. It is different now. We can find almost any information we want. There are so many doors of knowledge opening to everyone. The old wisdom is becoming new again, and expanding in its practical utilization. The human nervous system has not changed over the centuries. It has been waiting patiently, like a treasure chest longing to be opened. It is time.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, written centuries ago, is one of the greatest scriptures of all time. Not only does it tell us what we are, but it also tells us how the doors of the nervous system can be opened. It clearly describes the relationships between the natural principles of purification and opening that exist within us.

In the *AYP Enlightenment Series*, we have been traveling through the eight limbs in an order that expedites human spiritual transformation in ways that also take into account the maintenance of comfort and safety. Keep in mind that Patanjali was describing the inner workings of the human nervous system. The nervous system is what it is, and no one defines how it works. We can only do our best to describe it, understand its underlying principles, find the control levers to open it, and use them to our best advantage in the times we live in.

Once we know the practices of yoga, and can apply them in an effective integrated way, the rest is

automatic. The primary purpose of intellectual understanding of spiritual matters (the dissection of processes into named elements/limbs) is to develop the means and confidence in what we are doing so we will be motivated to continue daily practices. Other than for that purpose, we don't need to know much about the inner workings. It is all going on out of sight. Like the engine in a car, it is under the hood. We just press on the gas pedal and away we go. It is that simple. So simple that many have missed it for thousands of years. It is time for everyone to be informed about what we all have – this human nervous system, this gateway to the divine that can be easily opened if we know where the simple controls are.

Yoga has been called a *science* before, often by traditionalists attempting to appeal to the modern mind as they promote inflexible by-rote methods. Yoga can be a real science if it becomes attuned to natural phenomena and the optimization of causes and effects in practice. This involves taking preserved knowledge, like the *Yoga Sutras*, and building on it with practical applications geared toward results rather than adherence to fixed approaches. The forward march of applied knowledge is a function of practices and the resulting experiences in the present, and making adjustments as necessary to achieve maximum progress with comfort and safety.

Real yoga science is interested in reliable results that anyone can produce using the most efficient methods, and is always looking for better ways to

utilize natural principles operating in the nervous system to open to the infinite within.

Let's now look more closely at our inherent spiritual capabilities, and how the practices of yoga can be systematically used to awaken them.

Chapter 2 – The Structure of Practices

Spiritual practices find their origin in the human neurobiology, the vehicle of all our experience. Practices act to stimulate natural principles operating within the human being, which to a degree are seen to be automatic once the processes of transformation are underway. To the extent the vehicle of experience (our body/mind) can be stimulated to purify and open to express the reality within, then this is the way to *enlightenment*. Because of the intimate connection between spiritual methods and the human organism, the field of yoga, which covers the broad range of all spiritual practices, can be said to be at least as complex as any of the modern sciences relating to human functioning.

But this does not imply the impossibility of applying simple means for taking practical advantage of the complex inner workings of nature. We see this occurring all around us – the mastery of unseen principles with easy-to-use methodologies, or *control levers*. Consider the examples of modern aviation, biotechnology, computers, telecommunications, and a host of other advanced applied sciences. We call these fields *advanced*. Yet, how difficult is it to operate a cell phone, a computer, or walk onto an airplane and travel across the continent in a few hours? These applications of complex principles in nature are *advanced* because they have been simplified for practical application.

This is what we mean when we say *advanced yoga practices*. The practices will only be advanced if they are easy to use while stimulating complex processes within us for the benefit of our spiritual evolution. If they do, then they are advanced. If they do not, or can be made even simpler and more effective, then we will continue to seek out better ways for promoting the process of human spiritual transformation. That is the never-ending forward march of applied knowledge. It is the same in yoga as in any other field.

But yoga has been around for thousands of years, and has been well documented. What then could there possibly be that can be improved upon? Well, for a number of reasons, yoga has not been applied to the point where the whole of humanity has been able to benefit, so the evolution in knowledge must go on in modern times. It is a matter of simplifying the methods further, while increasing effectiveness, and providing easy access for everyone who wants to open to spiritual realization within themselves.

Simplification does not mean ignoring the basic realities of human spiritual transformation. There is a tendency we all have to seek what has been called a *magic bullet* solution. Do this one thing and all things will be solved. This is going to the opposite extreme on the complexity scale – from too complicated and ineffective to too simple and ineffective. We cannot drive a car with only a steering wheel. We also need a gas pedal and a brake. On the other hand, we cannot drive a car if we have to manually fire the spark plugs, pump the oil and coolant, manage the electrical

system, and run all the other complex processes going on under the hood of the car. If the car is well-designed and built, the basic controls for steering, accelerating and braking are all we need. For those who are really into driving, then a manual gear shift and clutch can be added. That is pretty much the limit of what most of us can manage while driving a car.

Yoga is like this too. There are a number of key controls that address inner processes in the body/mind. If we attend to these efficiently, then there will be inner purification and opening, a gradual rise of spiritual experience, and steady progress toward enlightenment. If we fixate on a single yoga practice, we will find something lacking sooner or later. And if we try to do too many practices, we can become overwhelmed and likely experience confusing and unmanageable results.

So, what we are looking for here is a process of developing a balanced optimization of the main controls. We will begin with a review of our inner capabilities for making the journey of human spiritual transformation. Then we will lay out the most effective tools, found throughout the eight limbs of yoga. And finally we will apply the tools in a logical manner for best results, leaning toward neither the overly simplified approach nor the overly complex approach. For each of us the daily practice routine will be a bit different, depending on our spiritual desire and personal inclinations. But for most of us there is a range of practices that constitutes the center – the middle way. That is what we will aim for here, the middle way for each of us.

Further Reading and Support

Yogani is an American spiritual scientist who, for forty years, has been integrating ancient techniques from around the world which cultivate human spiritual transformation. The approach is non-sectarian, and open to all. His books include:

Advanced Yoga Practices – Easy Lessons for Ecstatic Living (Two Volumes)

Two large user-friendly textbooks providing over 400 detailed lessons on the AYP integrated system of practices.

The Secrets of Wilder – A Novel

The story of young Americans discovering and utilizing actual secret practices leading to human spiritual transformation.

The AYP Enlightenment Series

Easy-to-read instruction books on yoga practices, including:

- *Deep Meditation – Pathway to Personal Freedom*
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- *Asanas, Mudras and Bandhas – Awakening Ecstatic Kundalini*
- *Samyama – Cultivating Stillness in Action, Siddhis and Miracles*
- *Diet, Shatkarmas and Amaroli – Yogic Nutrition and Cleansing for Health and Spirit*
- *Self-Inquiry – Dawn of the Witness and the End of Suffering*
- *Bhakti and Karma Yoga – The Science of Devotion and Liberation Through Action*
- *Eight Limbs of Yoga – The Structure and Pacing of Self-Directed Spiritual Practice*
- *Retreats – Fast Track to Freedom – A Guide for Leaders and Practitioners*
- *Liberation – The Fruition of Yoga*

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