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Hanish Guretia

PGT Physical Education,
The British School SEC-44 B.
Chandigarh, Punjab, India

Significance of Astanga Yoga (Eight Limbs) in yoga culture

Hanish Guretia

Abstract

The practice of yoga is an art and science dedicated to created union between body, mind and spirit. Its objective is to assist the practitioner in using breathe and body to foster an awareness of ourselves as individualized beings intimately connected to the unified whole of creation. In short it is about making balance and creating equanimity so as to live in peace, good health and harmony with the greater whole. This art of right living was perfected and practiced in India thousands of years ago and the foundations of yoga philosophy were written down in the yoga sutra of Patanjali, approximately 200 AD.

Keywords: awareness, philosophy, Patanjali

1. Introduction

The core of Patanjali's yoga sutra is an eight limbed path that forms the structural framework for yoga practice. Upon practicing all eight limbs of the path it becomes self-evident that no one element is elevated over another in a hierarchical order. Each is part of a holistic focus which eventually brings completeness to the individuals as they find their connectivity to the divine. Because we all are uniquely independent a person can emphasize one branch and then move on to another as they round out their understanding. In brief the eight limbs, or steps to yoga, are as follows:

1. **Yama:** Universal morality
2. **Niyama:** Personal observance
3. **Asana:** Body postures
4. **Pranayama:** Breathing exercises and control of Prana
5. **Pratyahara:** Control of the senses
6. **Dharana:** Concentration and cultivating inner perceptual awareness
7. **Dhyana:** Devotion, Meditation on the divine
8. **Samadhi:** Union with the divine

The first two limbs that patanjali describes are the fundamental ethical precepts called yamas, and the niyamas. These can also be looked at as universal morality and personal observance. Yama and Niyama are the suggestions given on how we should deal with people around us and our attitude towards ourselves. The Yama is broken down into five 'wise characteristics', Rather than that a list of do's and don'ts, they tell us that our fundamental nature is compassionate, generous, honest and peaceful. They are as follows:

2. Yama (Universal morality)

I. Ahimsa (Compassion for all living things)

The word ahimsa literally means not to injure or show cruelty to any person in any way whatsoever. Ahimsa is however more than just lack of violence as adapted in yoga. It means kindness, friendliness, and thoughtful consideration of other people and things. It also has to do with our duties and responsibilities too. Ahimsa implies that in every situation we should adopt a considerate attitude and do no harm.

II. Satya (commitment to truthfulness)

Satya means "to speak the truth", yet it is not always desirable to speak the truth on all occasions,

Correspondence

Hanish Guretia

PGT Physical Education,
The British School SEC-44 B.
Chandigarh, Punjab, India

for it could harm someone unnecessarily. We have to consider what we say, how we say it, and in what way it could affect others. If speaking the truth has negative consequences for another, then it is better to say nothing. Satya should never come into conflict with our efforts to behave with Ahimsa. This percept is based on the understanding that honest communication and action from the bedrock of any healthy relationship, community, or government, and that deliberate deception, exaggerations and mistruths harm others.

III. Asteya- Non stealing

Asteya means “to steal” asteya is the opposite to take nothing that does not belong of us. This also means that if we are in situation where someone entrusts something to us or confides in us, we do not take advantage of him or her. Non stealing includes not only taking what belongs to another without permission, but also using something for a different purpose to that intended, or beyond the time permitted by its owner. The practice of asteya implies not taking anything that has not been freely given.

IV. Brahmacharya- Sense control

Brahmacharya is used mostly in the sense of abstinence, particular in relationship to sexual activity. Brahmacharya suggests that we should form relationships that foster our understanding of the highest truths. Brahmacharya does not necessarily imply celibacy. Rather, it means responsible behaviour with respect to our goal of moving towards the truth. Practicing Brahmacharya means that we use our sexual energy to regenerate our connection to our spiritual self. It also means that we don't use this energy in any way that might harm others.

V. Aparigraha-Neutralising the desire to acquired and hoard wealth

Aparigraha means to take only what is necessary, and not to take advantage of a situation or act greedy. We should only take what we have earned; if we take more, we are exploiting someone else. The yogi feels that the collection or hoarding of things implies a lack of faith in God and in him to provide for his future. Aparigraha also implies letting go of our attachments to things and an understanding that impermanence and change are the only constants.

3. Niyama (Personal observance)

Niyama means “rules” or “laws”. These are the rules prescribed for personal observance. They represent far more than an attitude compared with yamas, the niyamas are more intimate and personal. They refer to the attitude we adopt towards ourselves as we create a code for living soulfully.

I. Sauca-Purity

The first niyama is saucha, meaning purity and cleanliness. Sauca has both an inner and an outer aspect. Outer cleanliness has as much to do with the healthy, free functioning of our bodily organs as with the clarity of our mind. Practicing asana or pranayama are essentials means for attending to this inner saucha.

II. Santosa-Contentment

Another niyama is santosa, modesty and the feeling of being content with what we have. To be at peace within and content with one's lifestyle finding contentment even while experiencing life's difficulties for life becomes a process of growth through all kinds of circumstances. It means being

happy with what we have rather than being unhappy about what we don't have.

III. Tapas- Disciplined use of our energy

Tapas refer to the activity of keeping the body fit or to confront and handle the inner urges without outer show. Literally it means to heat the body and, by so doing, to cleanse it. Behind the notion of tapas lies the idea we can direct our energy to enthusiastically engage life and achieve our ultimate goal of creating union with the divine. Tapas helps us burn up all the desires that stand in our way of this goal. Another form of tapas is paying attention to what we eat. Attention to body posture, attention to eating habits, attention to breathing patterns-these are all tapas.

IV. Svadhyā- Self study

The fourth niyama is Svadhyā. Sva means “self” Adhyaya means “inquiry” or “examination”. Any activity that cultivates self-reflective consciousness can be considered svadhyaya. It means to intentionally find self-awareness in all our activities and efforts, even to the point of welcoming and accepting and efforts, even to the point of welcoming and accepting our limitations.

V. Iṣvara-praṇidhāna- Celebration of the spiritual

It means “to lay all your actions at the feet of God. It is the contemplation on God (Iṣvara) in order to become attuned to God and God's will. It is the recognition that the spiritual suffuses everything and through our attention and care we can attune ourselves with our role as part of the creator. The practice requires that we set aside some time each day to recognize that there is some omnipresent force larger than ourselves that is guiding and directing the course of our lives.

4. Asana (Body posture)

Asana is the practice of physical postures. It is the most commonly known aspect of yoga for those unfamiliar with the other seven limbs of patanjali yoga sutra. The practice of moving the body into postures has widespread benefits; of these the most underlying are improved health, strength, balance and flexibility. On a deeper level the practice of asana which means “staying” or “abiding” in Sanskrit, is used as a tool to calm the mind and move into the inner essence of being. The challenge of poses offers the practitioner the opportunity to explore and control all aspects of their emotions, concentration, intent, faith, and unity between the physical and the ethereal body. Indeed, using asana to challenge and open the physical body acts as a binding agent to bring one in harmony with all the unseen elements of their being, the forces that shape our lives through our response to the physical world. Asana then becomes a way of exploring our mental attitudes and strengthening our will as we learn to release and move into the state of grace that comes from creating balance between our material world and spiritual experience.

5. Pranayama (Breath control)

Pranayama is the measuring, control, and the directing of breathe. Pranayama controls the energy within the organism, in order to restore and maintain health and to promote evolution. When the in-flowing breathe is neutralised or joined with the out-flowing breathe, then perfect relaxation and balance of the body activities are realized. In yoga, we are concerned with balancing the flows of vital forces, then directing them inward to the chakra system and upward to the

crown chakra. Pranayama is very important technique in yoga. It goes hand in hand with the asana or pose. In this yoga sutra, the practices of pranayama and asana are considered to be the highest form of purification and self-discipline for the mind and the body, respectively. The practice produces the actual physical sensation of heat, called Tapas, or the inner fire of purification. It is taught that this heat is part of process of purifying the nadis, or subtle nerve channels of the body. This allows more healthful state to be experienced and allows the mind to become calmer.

6. Pratyahara (Control of the senses)

Pratyahara means drawing back or retreat. The word ahara means “nourishment”; Pratyahara translates as “to withdraw oneself from that which nourishes the sense.” In yoga, the term pratyahara implies withdrawal of the senses from attachment to external objects. It can then be seen as a practice of non-attachment to sensorial distraction as we constantly return to the path of self-realization and achievement of internal peace. It means our senses stop living off the things that stimulate; the senses no longer depend on these stimulants and are not fed by them anymore. Pratyahara occurs almost automatically when we meditate because we are so absorbed in the object of meditation. Precisely because the mind is so focused, the senses follow it; it is not happening the other way around. No longer functioning in their usual manner, the senses become extraordinary sharp. Under normal circumstances the senses become our masters than our servants. The senses entice us to develop cravings for all sorts of things. In pratyahara the opposite occurs when we have to eat we eat, but not because we have a craving for food. In pratyahara we try to put the senses in their proper place, but not cut them out of our actions entirely.

7. Dharna (Concentration and cultivating inner perceptual awareness)

Dharna means “immovable concentration of the mind”. The essential idea is to hold the concentration or focus of attention in one direction. “When one body has been tempered by asana, when the mind has been refined by the fire of pranayama and when the senses have been brought under control by pratyahara, the sadhak reaches the sixth stage, dharna. Here he is concentrated wholly on a single point or on a task in which he is completely engrossed. The mind has to be stilled in order to achieve this state of complete absorption. The objective in dharna is to steady the mind by focusing its attention upon some stable entity. The particular object selected has nothing to do with the general purpose. Which is to stop the mind from wandering through memories, dreams, or reflective thought-by deliberately holding it single minded upon some apparently static object. When the mind has become purified by yoga practices, it becomes able to focus efficiently on one subject or point of experience. Now we can unleash the great potential for inner healing.

8. Dhyana (Devotion, Meditation on the divine)

Dhyana means worship, or profound and abstract religious meditation. It is perfect contemplation upon a point of focus with the intention of knowing the truth about it. The concept holds that when one focuses their mind in concentration on an object, the mind is transformed into the shape of the object. Hence, when one focuses on the divine they become more reflective of it and they know their true nature. “His body, breathe, senses, mind, ego are all integrated the object of his contemplation the universal spirit. During dhyana, the

consciousness is further unified by combining clear sights into distinctions between objects and between the subtle layers of perception. “We learn to differentiate between the minds of the perceiver the means of perception and the objects perceived between words, their meanings, ideas, and between all the levels of evolution of nature.

9. Samadhi (Union with the divine)

The final step in the eight-fold path of yoga is the attainment of Samadhi. Samadhi means “to bring together to merge”. In the state of Samadhi the body and senses are at rest, as if asleep, yet the faculty of mind and reason are alert, as if we awake; one goes beyond consciousness. During Samadhi, we realize what it is to be an identity without differences, and how a liberated soul can enjoy pure awareness of this pure identity. The conscious mind drops back into that unconscious oblivion from which it first emerged. Thus, Samadhi refers to union or true yoga. There is an ending to the separation that is created by the “I” and “Mine” of our illusory perceptions of reality. The mind does not distinguish between self and non-self, or between the object contemplated and the process of contemplation. The mind and the intellect have stopped and there is only the experience of consciousness, truth and unutterable joy.

10. Conclusion

The conclusion of this study was that yoga plays a very important role in our life and it has many positive effects on our body. These eight steps of yoga indicate a logical pathway that leads to the attainment of physical, ethical, emotional, and psycho-spiritual health. The players who can do yoga in the morning it will help them in improving their game and skills. It is very helpful for the individuals who are not related to games and sports also.

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