Eight Limbs

The basic tenets of yoga are described in the form of "eight limbs" or "steps" described by the sage, Patanjali. These are aphorisms, explaining the codes of ethical behavior which will ultimately lead to self-realization.

The sage Patanjali reflected on the nature of man and the norms of society during his time. Then, he expressed his observations very systematically in the form of aphorisms, which deal with the entire span of life, beginning with a code of conduct and ending with the ultimate goal, emancipation and freedom. These aphorisms outline the fundamental tenets of yoga, known as the eight limbs or astanga.

Asthanga yoga
The eight steps are yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratayahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi. These are sequential stages in an individual’s life journey through yoga. Each step must be understood and followed to attain the ultimate goal of Asthanga yoga, that of emancipation of the self. Yama, or general ethical principles, and niyama, or self-restraint, prescribe a code of conduct that molds individual morality and behavior. Asanas, or yogic poses, and pranayama, or breath control, discipline the body and the mind by basic practices conducive to physical, physiological, psychological, and mental health. Pranayama controls the mind, taming baser instincts, while pratayahara, or detachment from the external world, stems the outgoing flow of the senses, withdrawing those of perception and the organs of action from worldly pleasures. Dharana, or concentration, guides the consciousness to focus attention rigorously on one point. Dhyana, or prolonged concentration, saturates the mind until it permeates to the source of existence, and the intellectual and conscious energy dissolves in the seat of the soul. It is then that samadhi, when you lose the sense of your separate existence, is attained. Nothing else remains except the core of one's being: the soul.

Yama
Yama and niyama require tremendous inner discipline. Yama explains the codes of ethical behavior to be observed and followed in everyday life, reminding us of our responsibilities as social beings. Yama has 5 principles. These are: ahimsa or nonviolence, satya or truthfulness, asteya or freedom from avarice, brahmacharya or chastity, and aparigraha or freedom from desire. Ahimsa needs introspection to replace negative, destructive thoughts and actions by positive, constructive ones. Anger, cruelty, or harassment of others are facets of the violence latent in all of us.

These contradict the principles of ahimsa, while lying, cheating, dishonesty, and deception break the principles of satya. Brahmacharya does not mean total abstinence, but denotes a disciplined sexual life, promoting contentment and moral strength from within. Parigraha means "possession" or "covetousness," the instinct within all of us that traps us in the karmic cycle of reincarnation after death. However, while you may be able to give up...
material possessiveness, what about emotional or intellectual possessiveness? This is where Astanga yoga helps to discipline the mind, freeing it from the desire to possess, bringing it into a state of aparigraha, freedom from desire, as well as asteya, or freedom from greed.

Niyama

Niyama is the positive current that brings discipline, removes inertia, and gives shape to the inner desire to follow the yogic path. The principles of niyama are saucia, or cleanliness, santosa, or contentment, tapas, or austerity, svadhyaya, or the study of one's own self, which includes the body, mind, intellect, and ego. The final principle of niyama is isvara pranidhana or devotion to God. Contentment or santosa helps to curb desire, anger, ambition, and greed, while tapas or austerity involves self-discipline and the desire to purify the body, senses, and mind. The study and practice of yoga with devotional attention to the self and God is tapas.

Asanas, pranayama, and pratyahara

According to the Gheranda Samhita, a text dating to the 15th century, written by the yogic sage, Gheranda: “The body soon decays like unbaked earthen pots thrown in water. Strengthen and purify the body by baking it in the fire of yoga.” Performing an asana helps create and generate energy. Staying in an asana organizes and distributes this energy, while coming out of the pose protects the energy, preventing it from dissipating. In Yoga Sutra 111.47, Patanjali explains the effects of an asana as “Rupa lavanya bala vajra samhunanatvani kayasampat.” This means that a perfected body has beauty, grace, and strength which is comparable to the hardness and brilliance of a diamond. While practicing an asana, one must focus attention on the inner body, drawing the mind inward to sharpen the intelligence.

Then, the asana becomes effortless as the blemishes on both the gross and the subtle body are washed off. This is the turning point in the practice of asanas, when the body, mind, and self unite. From this state begins the isvara pranidhana, or devotion to God. Asanas and pranayama are interrelated and interwoven. Patanjali clearly specifies that pranayama should be attempted only after the asanas are mastered. Prana is “vital energy,” which includes will power and ambition, while ayama means “stretch, expansion and extension.” Pranayama can be described as the “expansion and extension of energy or life-force.” Patanjali begins pranayama with the simple movement of breathing, leading us deeper and deeper into ourselves by teaching us to observe the very act of respiration. Pranayama has three movements—prolonged inhalation, deep exhalation, and prolonged, stable retention, all of which have to be performed with precision. Pranayama is the actual process of directing energy inward, making the mind fit for pratyahara or the detachment of the senses, which evolves from pranayama. When the senses withdraw from objects of desire, the mind is released from the power of the senses, which in turn become passive. Then the mind turns inward and is set free from the tyranny of the senses. This is pratyahara.

Samyama—toward the liberation of the self

Patanjali groups dharaana, dhyana, and samadhi under the term samyama—the integration of the body, breath, mind, intellect, and self. It is not easy to explain the last three aspects of yoga as separate entities. The controlled mind that is gained in pratyahara is made to intensify its attention on a single thought in dharana. When this concentration is prolonged, it becomes dhyana. In dhyana, release, expansion, quietness, and peace are experienced. This prolonged state of quietness frees a person from attachment, resulting in indifference to the joys of pleasure or the sorrows of pain. The experience of samadhi is achieved when the knower, the knowable, and the known become one. When the object of meditation engulfs the meditator and becomes the subject, self-awareness is lost. This is samadhi—a state of total absorption. Sama means “level” or “alike,” while adhi means “over” and “above.” It also denotes the maintenance of the intelligence in a balanced state. Though samadhi can be explained at the intellectual level, it can only be experienced at the level of the heart. Ultimately, it is samadhi that is the fruit of the discipline of Astanga yoga.