

8 Limbs of the Yoga Sutras

-The 8 Limbs of the Yoga Sutras are the philosophies of yoga that a yogi can choose to live by in order to reach their highest good... spiritual liberation, union with God, or Highest Self.

The first limb is represented by the **Yamas**. These are the ethical guidelines on how we relate to the world: sometimes referred to as “restraints.” They guide us through our relationships with others, with society and with nature and the environment... but they’re also guidelines on how we relate to ourselves. The yamas are actually a five-pack of guidelines within this first limb. The descriptions below are my best understanding of them, so they’re definitely open for interpretation on how you would apply them to your life and practice.

- **Ahimsa (non-harming)** – We practice non-harming through our actions, thoughts and words. In our daily lives, this looks like non-violence, avoiding hurtful words, not thinking the worst of people. And as I mentioned, this includes how we talk to ourselves and how we treat ourselves. In yoga class, as a teacher, I do my best to guide you carefully through postures and offer options. As a student, non-harming might look like listening to your body and choosing options that are safe for you in that moment.
- **Satya (truthfulness)** – We practice truth in thought and word. In thinking about truthfulness in word, we’re taught that being honest is important but we’re also asked to tie this into non-harming by speaking in a thoughtful way. In thinking about truthfulness in thought, it makes me think how easy it is for us to make up stories about others in our minds. These stories are often not based on the truth but on our judgements. Turning this loving honesty and lack of judgement on ourselves is important too. On the mat, truthfulness can again tie into non-harming. We want to be honest with ourselves about where we are in our practice and move with integrity.
- **Asteya (non-stealing)** – We practice not taking things that don’t belong to us. And to bring this a step further, we practice not coveting or desiring things (or people) that don’t belong to us. This one is a little tricky to think about how it relates to us on the mat but I might tie it in again with the first two yamas of non-harming and truthfulness. Maybe we check in with ourselves that we’re not desiring to do a pose just like another student. And maybe it means, in general, that we avoid comparing our lives or journeys to others’.
- **Brahmacharya (self-control)** – Many people translate this as sexual responsibility but I tend to think of it on broader terms as self-control or moral responsibility, as well as following a life of moderation and not excess. On the mat, moral responsibility might look like not ogling the hot butt in front of you in class. :) Or as another idea for self-control on the mat, we can once again tie it in to non-harming by not pushing our body’s limits too far, and knowing when to pause.
- **Aparigraha (non-attachment)** – We practice not being attached to, or possessive of anything; our belongings, other people, ideas, expected outcomes. On the mat I would say this can translate to just flowing. Not being attached to sticking the standing bow or the idea that you’re never going to fall out of posture. Same with life.

The second limb is represented by the **Niyamas** – These are the guidelines that help us develop a more meaningful relationship with our inner-self on our personal or spiritual journey. Like the first limb, the Niyamas are also offered as a five-pack of guidelines and are sometimes referred to as “observances.”

- **Saucha (purity)** – Here we practice cleanliness of body, mind and speech. Honor yourself by having good hygiene, don’t clutter your mind with negative thoughts and remember to speak beautiful words (maybe slow down on the swears too). On the mat, continue to think positively about your own, unique yoga experience.
- **Santosa (contentment)** – Here we practice satisfaction with what we have. To me, this can easily translate to practicing gratitude. On the mat, perhaps it looks like pausing a moment to be content with what’s in front of you... the room you’re in, your well-loved mat, your own body, with your version of the pose... things like that. And of course, this line of thinking can come beautifully right off the mat and into our days.
- **Tapas (heat, self-discipline)** – This is about the “observance of body discipline to obtain mental control.” I have a hard time understanding this one perfectly but have seen it interpreted as the “burning off” of impurities. Perhaps we’re sweating off toxins in posture while also ridding our minds, hearts and bodies of emotional negativity. And another important way that we rid our bodies of things that don’t serve us is through change. As we go through the discomfort of discipline and transformation, we learn and grow.

- Svadyaya (self-study) – This is simply the study of scripture and raising our understanding of what our personal or spiritual journey entails. On and off the mat, this can look like what we’re doing right now, by learning about the 8 limbs and bringing our process inward.
- Ishvara Pranidhana (surrender to God) – If you’re not so sure about God, you can translate this into wording that fits with your beliefs; surrender to the Universe, Light, Love, Positive energy... To me, this one is just about trusting. Trusting that your journey can be beautiful by surrendering to Love and releasing fear. On the mat, trust your intuition and what’s right for you. Off the mat, trust your intuition and what’s right for you.

The third limb brings us to the Asanas – These are the physical postures that we practice throughout class. We discipline the body in asana in order to keep disease-free and to preserve our prana (which is understood to be the life-sustaining, universal energy that flows through us and around us.) You may have noticed that the postures often have the word “asana” right in their names; Tadasana (Standing Mountain), Uttanasana (Forward Fold)...

The fourth limb brings us to Pranayama which is our breathing practice. We control the breath to steady the body, enhance concentration and keep us in the present. I know that many of you are very familiar with the idea that in our culture, we sometimes have the habit of keeping ourselves in a perpetual state of problem solving and stress throughout any given day, and that this has the potential to keep our nervous system in its sympathetic “fight or flight,” state for extended periods of time. The effect on our bodies is that it leaves our immune systems and digestive systems functioning at less than optimal levels. When we slow the breath, we start to activate the parasympathetic nervous system for “rest and digest,” which slows down our heartbeat, calms the body and stabilizes our immune and digestive systems for better health. What this means is that with yoga, we can actually bring our bodies deep into that state of calm and healing by controlling our breath and movement. This is why you feel so good after a nice yoga class... and it’s why I love to give the reminder of the importance of bringing this breath and presence with you into your daily lives.

The fifth limb is Pratyahara – The wording for this one, as it was taught to me, is “withdrawal of the senses from external objects.” What I’ve come to understand this to mean is that we release the idea of separateness and find unity with our surroundings. Maybe on the mat when you’re really flowing or feeling centered, or in life when you’re really in the zone, you might notice a connection with your breath and movement and with the air around you and even with the other people and energy moving through the room. We all seem to be separate, but this practice would be the letting-in of the idea, and the knowing, that we’re actually connected with everyone and everything.

The sixth limb is Dharana – This is about concentration: the focusing of the mind on one object. This can be the breath, a mantra, a sound, your drishti gaze, an actual object...

The seventh limb is Dhyana – This is meditation. An undisturbed flow of thought around the object of concentration.

And finally we come to Samadhi – This is the final stage of our yogic path. This is where we reach spiritual awakening and union with Divine Consciousness... our Highest Self.

Summary by Marie Nordeng