



Svaroopa® Vidya Ashram

January 2018 Teachings Article:

Spiritual Upliftment #1

Self-Effort & Grace

By Swami Nirmalananda & Vidyadevi Stillman

There are so many wonderful strategies for managing money, successful relationships, improving your health, etc. You do these things to attain happiness by improving your life. Yoga also improves your life and makes you happy, though yoga's true goal is spiritual upliftment. The ancient teachings speed you toward attaining the ultimate — the knowing of your own inherent Divinity. Yoga calls this your "Self."

A powerful yogic strategy is outlined in the "eight limbs" of yoga. Our 2018 teachings articles will explore each of these important practices and how they move you toward your Self.

Yama niyama asana pranayama pratyahara dharana dhyana
samadhayo'stav angani — Yoga Sutras 2.29

This is a "list sutra," meaning it lists the practices, while explaining more fully them in later sutras.

1. Yama: restraints, including
 - Ahimsa — non-harming
 - Satya — non-lying
 - Asteya — non-stealing
 - Brahmacharya — celibacy
 - Aparigraha — non-greed
2. Niyama: observances, including
 - Shauca — purity, purification
 - Samtoshha — contentment
 - Tapas — doing the hard stuff
 - Svadyaya — study of the texts on the Self
 - Ishvara-pranidhana — surrender to God
3. Asana: body positions, postures
4. Pranayama: working with your breath and the pauses between your breaths
5. Pratyahara: turning your attention inward
6. Dharana: focusing inward, contemplation
7. Dhyana: meditation
8. Samadhi: inner absorption

In Sanskrit, these eight limbs are called "ashtanga" (ashta means eight; anga means aspect, angle or limb). A modern yoga style is called Ashtanga Yoga because the founder, Pattabhi Jois, describes all eight limbs happening during their aerobic sequences. By contrast, Patanjali's description is ancient, from 2,000 or more years ago, and emphasizes the seated pose, specifically so you can comfortably sit still, for long and delicious meditations.

Anga does not mean hierarchical levels or rungs on a ladder. You don't have to do the limbs in order. It's more like a climbing tree: you can skip some limbs and still climb to the top. Thus, many Westerners begin with the third limb, yoga poses, or with the seventh limb, meditation.

Fortunately, when you skip limbs, like with yogis who begin at asana (poses), the limbs you skipped happen to you automatically. You may not understand what's happening because you didn't get the teachings about the earlier practices. It can be surprising when, after starting yoga classes, you find you're becoming a vegetarian (ahimsa – non-harming). Or you realize that you've lost interest in shopping (aparigraha — non-greediness). You may discover the bliss of chanting (ishvara-pranidhana) and begin studying yoga texts (svadyaya). Yoga is happening to you!

Vidyadevi reports, "A regular yoga therapy client complained that she didn't like drinking alcohol anymore because she didn't feel good the next day. Shauca (purity) was happening for her. She wasn't too happy about it." A yoga magazine published a charming article titled, "How Yoga Ruined My Life," another yogi's description of the process.

These are signs of spiritual progress. Yoga is cultivating an inner alignment with your own Divine Self by basically "cleaning up your act" This means "your act" has been getting in your way of your spiritual

upliftment. No matter the limb in which you start this process, you get the whole process. It's like walking into a room. No matter which doorway you enter through, you still get the whole room.

Yoga is an inner exploration, the discovery of your own spirituality. The eight limbs describe a process of interiorization, starting with outer processes and gradually expanding your awareness inward.

Yamas are about how you live in the world, yogically refraining from many things that most people indulge in.

Niyamas are more interior, how you deal with yourself while in the midst of life, holding yourself to a higher standard.

With asana, you work with your body. This is not about the external world anymore.

Pranayama is even more internal, exploring your breath and the pause between your breaths.

Pratyahara is the inward turning of your attention, forming the bridge between the external and internal limbs of yoga.

Now you gain the ability to steady your mind in an inward focus — dharana.

This makes you able to flow into meditation — dhyana.

As your meditation deepens, it melts into a profound inner absorption — samadhi. As a practitioner of the core opening practices of Svaroopa® yoga, you already know the early levels of samadhi, found so easily in the seated poses and twists, as well as in your many Shavasanas.

The Yoga Sutras are about your mind, not your body and not your life. Every practice is for the purpose of stilling your mind. Patanjali has you use sheer strength of will, directing and controlling your mind in order to get beyond your mind. Swami Nirmalananda explains, "When you get beyond your mind, you experience your own Self. The rest of the time, your mind's busy-ness hides your Divinity like clouds hide the sky. Patanjali teaches you how to dissolve the clouds. By contrast, my Guru simply gave me the sky. This is the majesty of Shaktipat, the inner awakening that is the specialty of Svaroopa® yoga."

Your Svaroopa® yoga practices may have already given you spontaneous shaktipat or you can take a Shaktipat Retreat with Swami Nirmalananda for a deeper experience. She awakens Kundalini, your own transformative spiritual energy that climbs your spine from tail to top. This is the shortcut to yoga's goal of Self-knowingness, revealing your own Divinity to you. It is called Guru's Grace. You receive the gift of the Self from one who lives in the Self.

Yet your mind will try to sabotage you, so you must work on your mind. This makes Patanjali's practices useful even though you are not embarking on the arduous mind-control process he describes. Instead, you are conditioning your mind to consciousness by immersing yourself in your inner Divinity, again and again. You accomplish this by doing core opening poses, or by chanting, mantra, meditation and the other Svaroopa® Sciences.

We are studying the eight limbs this year because they help you understand what is happening to you organically, once you receive shaktipat. The eight limbs also give you a way to apply yourself to the process, which is called self-effort. You need both self-effort and Grace. Like the two wings of a bird, they enable you to fly all the way to God.

You muster up the resolve, the courage, the self-control, make a realistic assessment of your condition and needs, and you put some effort into improving yourself. Your self-effort makes Grace flow even more powerfully, guaranteed by our lineage of shaktipat masters. As one who knows the Self, Swami Nirmalananda has been empowered to share the Self through Shaktipat. Her gift of Guru's Grace must be matched by your own Disciple's Grace, the self-effort you put forth.

You clean up your act with the yamas & niyamas. Your poses open your spine and make you able to sit, because Patanjali's whole focus is on meditation. Asana sets you up for pranayama, pratyahara and dharana, into dhyana and samadhi. With Grace, it's a waterfall into the depths of your own being. Do more Svaroopa® yoga.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON "SPIRITUAL UPLIFTMENT," OUR THEME FOR 2018, CO-AUTHORED BY SWAMI NIRMALANANDA SARASWATI, VIDYADEVI STILLMAN & RUKMINI ABBRUZZI.

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