

RANJANA YOGA CLASS

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

A Beginner's Guide

The classical path in plain language, with a simple first step for each limb

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General education only. Not medical advice. Speak with your doctor before starting any new practice.

Contents

#	Section
1	What the eight limbs are
2	The eight limbs at a glance
3	Limbs one and two: yama and niyama
4	Limbs three and four: asana and pranayama
5	Limbs five to eight: the inner limbs
6	A simple way to start
7	Common misunderstandings
8	How the limbs fit together
9	A sample ten-minute practice that touches all the inner limbs
10	Where the framework comes from
11	Troubleshooting
12	Gentle reading and next steps
13	Questions people ask
14	Glossary
15	Practice log

1. What the eight limbs are

The eight limbs (ashtanga, meaning "eight-limbed") are a framework from the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. They describe yoga as more than poses: a path that includes ethics, self-care, posture, breath, attention and meditation.

Think of them as eight areas of a life with yoga in it, not eight steps you finish one after another. Most people work on several at once.

The short answer

The eight limbs are: yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana and samadhi. They move from outer conduct to inner stillness, and the physical poses are only one of the eight.

2. The eight limbs at a glance

#	Limb	Meaning	A simple first step
1	Yama	Ethical conduct toward others	Pick one: be truthful or non-harming for a day.
2	Niyama	Personal observances	Tidy your practice space; keep a small habit.
3	Asana	Posture	Ten minutes of gentle poses.
4	Pranayama	Breath practice	Five minutes of easy, even breathing.
5	Pratyahara	Turning attention inward	Sit quietly for two minutes, ignoring distractions.
6	Dharana	Focused attention	Rest attention on the breath for five minutes.
7	Dhyana	Sustained meditation	Let focus continue without effort. Short and relaxed.
8	Samadhi	Absorption, deep stillness	Not something to chase. It is traditionally seen as a result of the other limbs.

3. Limbs one and two: yama and niyama

The first two limbs are about ethics and self-discipline. They are the base on which the others rest. See our separate guide on the yamas and niyamas for detail.

4. Limbs three and four: asana and pranayama

These are the most visible parts of yoga today. Asana means "seat" in the original sense, and early texts mostly mean a steady, comfortable seated position. Pranayama is breathing practice. Beginners benefit from gentle versions of both.

Safety first

Check with your doctor before starting new physical or breathing practices if you are pregnant, have heart, blood pressure or lung conditions, a recent injury, or any health concern. Do not strain, and stop if you feel pain, dizziness or breathlessness.

5. Limbs five to eight: the inner limbs

- **Pratyahara:** drawing attention away from outside distractions. A quiet room and closed eyes are a start.
- **Dharana:** concentration. You pick one point of focus and gently return to it.
- **Dhyana:** meditation. Focus becomes steady, with less effort.
- **Samadhi:** a state of deep absorption described in the texts. Teachers disagree on how to describe it. Beginners need not aim for it.

6. A simple way to start

Week	Focus	Daily practice
1	Ethics	Choose one yama or niyama and reflect on it each evening.
2	Posture	Add 10 minutes of gentle poses.
3	Breath	Add 5 minutes of easy breathing.
4	Attention	Finish with 5 minutes of quiet sitting.

7. Common misunderstandings

Idea	A better view
"Yoga is poses"	Poses are one of eight limbs. Many traditions put ethics and meditation first.
"The limbs are a ladder"	They are better seen as parts of one practice that support each other.
"Samadhi is the goal I must reach"	The texts describe it as a result, not something to force.

8. How the limbs fit together

Patanjali presents the eight limbs as a sequence, but most teachers today see them as overlapping. You do not wait until your ethics are perfect before trying a pose, and you do not need to master breath control before sitting quietly. Each limb supports the others: a calmer breath makes it easier to focus, a focused mind makes ethical choices easier, and ethical living leaves less to worry about when you sit down to meditate.

This is why a short, daily practice that touches several limbs often works better than a long practice that covers only one. For example, ten minutes might include two minutes of reflection on a yama, four minutes of gentle poses, two minutes of easy breathing and two minutes of quiet sitting.

9. A sample ten-minute practice that touches all the inner limbs

Time	Practice	Limb
2 min	Choose one intention, such as being patient today	Yama / niyama
4 min	Gentle poses: cat and cow, forward fold, child's pose	Asana
2 min	Easy, even breathing, no breath holding	Pranayama
1 min	Close the eyes and let outside sounds fade	Pratyahara
1 min	Rest attention on the breath	Dharana

10. Where the framework comes from

The Yoga Sutras are a short text of about 195 verses. They are traditionally attributed to Patanjali, though scholars discuss when it was written and by whom. The eight limbs appear in the second and third chapters. They are one of several frameworks within Indian yoga traditions; others, such as Hatha yoga texts, describe different sets of practices. The eight limbs became especially well known in the modern world through twentieth-century teachers and translators.

Because translations differ, you may see the limbs described a little differently in different books. The core idea is the same: yoga is a whole-life practice, with ethics and attention as central as posture.

11. Troubleshooting

Situation	What to try
I only like poses and find the rest abstract	That is fine. Begin with poses and breath, and add one reflective habit slowly.
The Sanskrit is confusing	Use the plain-language names. The Sanskrit can come later.
I feel I should be further along	The limbs are not a progress chart. Return to the first practical step for each.
I want to go deeper	Find a qualified teacher and read a respected translation of the Sutras alongside a commentary.

12. Gentle reading and next steps

- Read about the yamas and niyamas, the first two limbs.
- Try the gentle pranayama and meditation guides in this library.
- If you wish to study the Yoga Sutras themselves, choose a translation with commentary and read a few verses at a time.

13. Questions people ask

Do I need to practise all eight limbs?

Not at once. You can begin with whichever is most natural, and let the others follow.

Is this a religious teaching?

It comes from a spiritual tradition, but the first steps are practical habits many people use without any particular belief.

Where does this come from?

The framework is attributed to Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras, a classical text. Scholars debate its date and authorship, so treat attributions with care.

14. Glossary

Term	Plain meaning
Ashtanga	Eight-limbed.
Asana	Posture or seat.
Pratyahara	Withdrawing the senses from distraction.
Dharana	Concentration.
Dhyana	Meditation.
Samadhi	Deep absorption.

Reminder

This guide is general education and not medical advice. It does not diagnose, treat or cure any condition. If you have a health concern, speak with your doctor before starting a new practice.

Practice log

Print this page and keep a short record. Notes help you see patterns over time.

Day	Minutes	Limb practised	How it felt	Notes
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				