

The Second *Pada* – Part 3

Intro to *Astanga Yoga* – the eight-limbed path of yoga

I. Introduction.

Tonight we get into what some might consider the real “meat and potatoes” of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras: the eight-limbed path of yoga, often referred to as *Astanga* or *Ashtanga Yoga*. With the eight-limbed path of yoga, Patanjali “spells out for us ‘the’ spiritual path, the practices we must employ to create the ultimate life experience.”¹ With this path, Patanjali shows us the way to creating a life well lived.

When I started doing yoga, I never thought of yoga as a pathway to a life of well-being. Instead, I thought of yoga solely as the stretching poses I learned in gym class or see in magazine photos.

The poses, called *Asana*, are certainly part of yoga. However, from these Midline Talks it is obvious that I eventually figured out that performing poses is only a part of yoga. Yoga is a pathway to creating a life of well-being, a life of connection: connection to the God of our own particular spiritual belief; connection to our own inner self, including our hopes and dreams; as well as connection to our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and community. Really, yoga is about connection with virtually everyone and everything.²

It is through these connections that we create a life well lived. Such a life includes ongoing experiences of positive emotion, engagement, meaningful activities, accomplishment, and nurturing relationships.³

We understand that people already proficient in serious yoga practice; i.e., holding focus in meditation, have developed the capacity for fashioning such a life. How, though, do the rest of us accomplish this? B.K.S. Iyengar says that when we still the restlessness of the mind, intellect, and self through the practice of yoga, we free ourselves from pain and sorrow, and find fulfillment.⁴ He writes that when this happens we are like a musician becoming one with his music; we become

¹ Dorigan, William (2013). *Finding the Midline*. Winter Park, CO: LuHen Publications, LLC, at 259; citing Iyengar, B.K.S. (2002). *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. Hammersmith, London, England: Thorsons, at 140-142.

² See, e.g., the posted outline for the talk in this series: *Yoga as a Path to a Life Well Lived*. Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html

³ See, e.g., the posted outline for the talk in this series: *What is Success?* Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html

⁴ Iyengar, B.K.S. (1979 ed). *Light on Yoga*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, at 19.

connected with our own heart and soul, as well as the world around us.⁵

A. From our discussion so far we know that developing the ability to make these connections isn't easy. It takes practice and focus. Fortunately, Patanjali, starting with Yoga Sutra 2.28, introduces us to the information we need to direct our focus, our mindfulness. He does this through the eight-limbed path of yoga, *Ashtanga (Astanga) Yoga*. These eight limbs are: *Yama* (rules of behavior for how we treat others), *Niyama* (rules for how we treat ourselves), *Asana* (Postures), *Pranayama* (breath control), *Pratyahara* (drawing our senses inward), *Dharana* (focus), *Dhyana* (meditation), and *Samadhi* (total absorption in the true self).

B. Collectively, proficiency in these eight limbs allow us to develop the coordinated functioning of our body, senses, mind, reason, and soul required to create success in yoga, which, in turn, results in success in life.⁶ Tonight we begin our study of these eight limbs.

II. A brief review.

We've covered quite a bit of territory so far in these Midline Talks. In our first talk I offered a definition of a life of success, a life of well-being, consisting of positive emotion, engagement, meaning, accomplishment, and nurturing relationships.⁷ In all the subsequent talks we have focused on how mindful application of yoga philosophy and practices can lead us to that life.

Now we arrive at Patanjali's teachings regarding the eight-limbed path of yoga. Here Patanjali teaches us how we develop the capacity to hold the steady focus needed to make connection.

In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras connection pertains to total absorption in *Purusha*. In these talks we honor that teaching but also talk about total absorption in the moments that make up our days.

We can consider the idea of total absorption in a number of ways, including these two:

A. First, we can look at total absorption in *Purusha* or God from a non-dualist Tantric point of view. That viewpoint considers the entire world as a manifestation of God. God didn't just create the world; God dwells in the world and experiences the world in each diverse form, including us.

⁵ *Light on Yoga*, at 22.

⁶ Iyenger, B.K.S. (1979 ed). *Light on Yoga*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, at 30.

⁷ See, e.g., the posted outline for the talk in this series: *What is Success?* Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html; citing Seligman, Dr. Martin (2011). *Flourish*. New York, NY: Free Press, at 24.

Therefore, to be totally absorbed in God requires that we connect with the diverse forms of the world. Every such experience of connection offers us a chance to know God and, by doing so, be informed and inspired as to how we can choose to fashion our life.

B. Second, we can consider total absorption from the perspective of creating a life well lived. We seek absorption in our world in order to more fully experience the positive emotions that can arise from that connection. These emotions include: joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love.⁸

When we connect with our world we increase our engagement in that world, whether in our job, with our family and friends, or perhaps through volunteering or other service. We more frequently find ourselves in “flow” with whatever we are doing. Such connection brings meaning to our life. Connection also helps us identify and pursue avenues toward satisfying accomplishment. Through connection we can deepen our existing relationships while developing new ones that nurture us. All of these bring us more positive emotion.

What have we learned so far about what it takes to make these connections?

1. In our discussion of the first chapter, or *Pada*, called *Samadhi Pada* (Meditative Absorption⁹), of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* we learned how to fully connect with our soul. In Yoga Sutra 1.12 and 1.14 of the first *Pada*, Patanjali tells us that achieving such connection involves repeated practice (*Abhyasa*), uninterrupted (*Nairantarya*) over a long period of time (*Dirgha-Kala*), as well as detachment or dispassion (*Vairagya*) from life’s temptations.¹⁰
2. We then discussed how we could use the lessons of the first *Pada* to enhance our ability to connect with the world.¹¹ We considered how we can practice focusing on each other and what is happening in each moment. This focus greatly enhances our ability to connect to others and fully experience what is happening around us. This ability, in turn, increases our ability to create a life well lived. We do this through a dedicated, continual and long-term practice of paying attention to our

⁸ See, the posted outline for the talk in this series: *What is Success?* Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html

⁹ Bryant, Dr. Edwin (2009). *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. New York, NY: North Point Press, at 195.

¹⁰ See, generally, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 47-57; see also, Iyengar, B.K.S. (2002). *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. Hammersmith, London, England: Thorsons, at 61-65.

¹¹ See, generally, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* at 47-57; see also, Iyengar, B.K.S. (2002). *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. Hammersmith, London, England: Thorsons, at 61-65.

family, friends, workmates, strangers, and life in general. This focus leads us to richer life experience regardless of our spiritual beliefs.¹²

3. We discussed how the second *Pada* called *Sadhana* (Practice) *Pada*, appears to be directed to those of us who have yet to learn how to hold the single pointed focus required to attain the levels of *Samadhi* identified in the first *Pada*. For those of us in that situation Patanjali tells us starting in Yoga Sutra 2.1 about the yoga of action, *Kriya-Yoga*. He identifies this yoga of action as a means for developing the type of yoga practice required to attain the connections outlined in the first *Pada*. We must: 1) approach our yoga practice with zealous self-discipline (*Tapas*); 2) engage in serious self-study and study of scripture and other enlightening material (*Svadyaya*); and 3) devote our practice to God or a greater purpose than just our own self-interest (*Isvara Pranidhanani*).¹³
4. We next discussed Patanjali's lessons about the need to live mindfully and with discrimination so as to identify what is important. We need to remain focused on our ultimate objectives of connection to God, community, family, and friends, as part of creating a life of well-being.¹⁴

We now turn our discussion to the subject of the eight-limbed path of yoga known as *Ashtanga*, or *Astanga, Yoga*.

III. *Ashtanga Yoga* – the eight-limbed path.

Astanga, or *Ashtanga Yoga*, translates as “eight limbs of yoga” as described by Patanjali in the second *Pada*. *Ashtanga Yoga* also refers to a particular system of vigorous sequenced poses taught by the late Indian yoga teacher K. Pattabhi Jois, who studied with Krishnamacharaya in Mysore, India beginning around 1927.¹⁵ Krishnamacharaya was also B.K.S. Iyengar's teacher. Today when we do power yoga or vinyasa flow yoga, we are likely engaging in some version of the flowing *Asana* practice rooted in the *Ashtanga Yoga Asana* system developed by Pattabhi Jois.

¹² See the posted outline for the talk in this series: *The First Pada: Part 3 Practices*. Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html

¹³ See the posted outline for the talk in this series: *The Second Pada – Part 1 Kriya-Yoga, the yoga of action, and the Kleshas – five impediments to a life well lived*. Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html

¹⁴ See, generally, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 195-236; see also, the posted outline for the talk in this series: *The Second Pada – Part 2 Karma, frustration, and freedom*. Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html

¹⁵ Yoga Journal. *Spotlight on Ashtanga Yoga*. Retrieved from www.yogajournal.com/basics/1366.

Patanjali introduces the eight-limbed path of yoga in Yoga Sutra 2.28, which provides that the practice of yoga can destroy those things that make us spiritually ignorant, those thoughts and behaviors that impede our ability to make connections.

In his commentary on this sutra Dr. Edwin Bryant points out that Patanjali makes it clear that in order to remove spiritual ignorance, the “frustrations” with life, we must develop discrimination.¹⁶ The “means” for developing this discriminative discernment (*Viveka*), is the eight-limbed path of yoga introduced by Patanjali.¹⁷

The word Patanjali uses in Yoga Sutra 2.28 to identify the eight-limbed path of yoga as the means to develop discernment is *Yoganganusthanad*, meaning: *Yoga* (to join or unite); *Anga* (limbs or components); and *Anusthanat* (practice).¹⁸ Mr. Iyengar points out that “practice” as used in this context with the word *Anusthanat* refers to a dedicated practice conducted with religious fervor, a practice with dignity and spiritual commitment, resulting in maturity and intelligence.¹⁹

A. Whether our goal is connection to God or creation of a life well lived, or both, we must bring this serious level of commitment to our every moment if we wish to be successful. It isn’t enough to work hard and be consistent. We may practice with great effort and regularity, but nonetheless that practice can be of little value or even be harmful if done incorrectly.

For example, we can practice a yoga pose with improper alignment and, with enough steady, consistent practice, create a serious, injurious imbalance in our body. At work we might think we are doing a great job of treating others well when, because we haven’t done any serious self-study, we in reality frequently cause hurt, anger, and pain in the way we interact.

B. The type of intelligent practice Patanjali talks about here requires deep personal self-study and humility, among other traits, in order for our practice to be truly effective. This is the kind of dedicated, mature and intelligent practice referenced by Mr. Iyengar.

Following is a very brief overview of the eight limbs.

C. Yoga Sutra 2.29 lists the eight limbs of yoga. As noted above, these limbs are:

1. *Yama*. The *Yamas*, listed in Yoga Sutra 2.30 are rules of behavior for how we treat others and behave within society. There are five: wishing no harm in thought, word, or action (*Ahimsa*); truthfulness (*Satya*);

¹⁶ *The Yoga Sutras of Patanaji*, at 240.

¹⁷ *The Yoga Sutras of Patanaji*, at 240.

¹⁸ *The Yoga Sutras of Patanaji*, at 240; see also *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 139-140.

¹⁹ *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 140.

refraining from stealing (*Asteya*); sexual restraint (*Brahacarya*); and renunciation of unnecessary possessions (*Aparigraha*).²⁰ Patanjali discusses each in more detail in Yoga Sutras 2.31, and 2.33 through 2.39.

2. *Niyama*. Niyamas, listed in Yoga Sutra 2.32, are rules for how we treat ourselves, practices to help build our individual character. There are five: cleanliness and purity (*Sauca*); contentment (*Santosa*); fervor or burning desire (*Tapas*); study leading to knowledge of the self (*Svadhyaya*); and surrender to God (*Isvara Pranidhanani*). Patanjali discusses each in more detail in Yoga Sutras 2.33, and 2.40 through 2.45.²¹
3. *Asana*. *Asana*, discussed in Yoga Sutras 2.47 through 2.48, is posture or poses.
4. *Pranayama*. *Pranayama* is the practice of controlling the breath. It is discussed in Yoga Sutras 2.49 through 2.53.
5. *Pratyahara*. *Pratyahara* is the withdrawal of the senses from the objects of the senses; i.e., the external world, as we draw our attention inward. It is discussed in Yoga Sutra. 2.54 and 2.55.

The final three of the eight limbs of yoga are discussed in the third chapter, or *Pada* of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

The final three limbs of *Ashtanga Yoga* are:

6. *Dharana*. *Dharana* is discussed in Yoga Sutra 3.1 and refers to focus, fixing the attention on one point.
7. *Dhyana*. *Dhyana*, discussed in Yoga Sutra 3.2, involves holding the focus on one point for a period of time, constituting meditation.
8. *Samadhi*. *Samadhi* is described in Yoga Sutra 3.3 as a state in which the object of the meditation engulfs or takes over the meditator, so that all self-awareness is lost. The meditator becomes lost in the object of the meditation, losing all sense of self through this absorption.²²

D. From my experience and study, these limbs build upon one another. Each lays

²⁰ *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 142-143; *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 243.

²¹ *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 144.

²² *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 180-181.

a foundation for the next limb. However, these limbs also combine in their power to help lead us to success in yoga and life.²³ We can't ignore one or more of the limbs; we need to develop proficiency in each limb in order to create a life well lived, a life of connection. Even after we develop proficiency in each limb, we must tend to each limb in order to avoid backsliding into old patterns of thought and behavior.

IV. Conclusion.

In order to maximize our ability to make those connections necessary to create a life of well-being, it is helpful to have such a clearly defined pathway as provided to us by Patanjali in his eight-limbed path of yoga.

We further our exploration in our next talk, focusing on *Yama*.

²³ Feuerstein, Dr. Georg (1989). *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, at 79.