

THE 8 RUNGS OF RAJA YOGA (THE ROYAL PATH)

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Raja yoga or the “Royal Path” is also known as Ashtanga yoga, which means “the yoga of eight limbs or rungs”. Another name by which it is known is ‘Integral yoga’. It is the vastest, most complete, and most comprehensive of all the yogas (such as Karma yoga, Bhakti yoga, Jnana yoga, Kundalini yoga, Mantra yoga, Laya yoga, Nada yoga, etc.). The eight rungs or ‘limbs’ of yoga as defined in Patanjali’s [Yoga Sutras](#) are as follows:

- *Yama*: the *yamas* constitute the ethical foundation in our lives. They regulate our relations with others. There are five of them:
 - *Ahimsa*: non violence, in action, speech and thought. Non violence with regard to others, but also regarding ourselves.
 - *Satya*: truthfulness, again in action, speech and thought.
 - *Asteya*: non-theft, which includes ‘subtle’ appropriation (like accepting credit for something you have not done).
 - *Aparigraha*: ‘non grabbingness’. It is a matter of not being possessed by your possessions, of reducing your attachment to the material world.
 - *Brahmacharya*: celibacy or moderation. When speaking of sexuality, the translation would be celibacy, but we want to moderate the outward movement of all the senses (so for instance also conquer gluttony), in order to always have our senses attuned to the presence of God. In fact, the literal meaning of the word is ‘walking with God’. Sexuality is the strongest of our urges and the most difficult to conquer, hence the interpretation as celibacy.
- *Niyama*: the *niyamas* are more of an internal code of conduct. They regulate our habits. Again, there are five of them:
 - *Shaucha*: purity. Striving for purity at the physical, mental and emotional levels.
 - *Santosha*: contentment. Our degree of contentment has nothing to do with how much we possess. The richest man on earth may be discontented and unhappy, while someone poor may be content and happy.
 - *Tapas*: effort. This word refers to all the practices we do to advance spiritually. The word is related to fire, so literally it means ‘that which heats us, burns us’.
 - *Svadhyaya*: self study, i.e. study of the scriptures, observing the self and doing japa (practice of mantra).
 - *Ishvara pranidhana*: surrender to the supreme force. As part of this practice, we try not to do our acts for personal ends but to offer our acts and their fruits to the supreme force. For this you may use the name of divinity of your own religious tradition. If you are an atheist, you may choose to use a moral concept.
- *Asana*: the postures. Patanjali’s definition of a yoga posture is that it is steady and comfortable. So here we are again invited to stay within our comfortable capacity. There are postures for sitting in meditation and cultural postures. The latter also help prepare us for meditation (which is the goal of Hatha Yoga: to prepare for Raja Yoga).

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- *Pranayama*: expansion of energy. Prana is the vital energy, which can be mastered and increased through practices with the breath. But these techniques and practices are not pranayama itself, which takes place at a more subtle level.
- *Pratyahara*: withdrawing the senses and turning the mind inwards. Through the preceding practices, we gradually develop the capacity to withdraw our senses at will, and turn our attention inwards. Once we master pratyahara, we will not be disturbed anymore by sounds, for instance during meditation, because we can just ‘switch off’ our ears.
- *Dharana*: concentration. This is a superior phase in this turning inward of our attention, where we manage to focus our attention on an object of our choice (like our breath, or a word, or a mental state).
- *Dhyana*: meditation. When our concentration reaches a certain level and we can maintain it over a longer period of time, it becomes meditation.
- *Samadhi*: a state superior to meditation, in which the identification of our true nature commences, leading to Self realization and absolute peace.

The 8 aspects of Raja yoga can be pictured like a ladder, on which we progress from one rung to the next. We do not wait until we have mastered one rung until moving on the next, but progress in the higher rungs is possible only if there is progress in the lower rungs. In other words, the flexibility of our bodies and the depth of meditation we attain depend - among other things - on our practice of the *yamas* and *niyamas*.

Samadhi (State of consciousness leading to identification with our true nature)
Dharana (Meditation)
Dhyana (Concentration)
Pratyahara (Withdrawal of the senses)
Pranayama (Control and expansion of prana)
Asana (Postures)
Niyama (Observances – regulating our habits)
Yama (Restraints – regulating our relations with others)

Hatha Yoga consists of the first four (some people say five) rungs, which are also referred to as the ‘external rungs’. The upper three rungs are also referred to as Raja yoga, which stresses the fact that this is a meditative path.