

Yoga as a Complete Path

by Elisabeth Michielsen Body Heart & Soul Yoga

Yoga is a complete path. The Map of Yoga is contained within the Yoga Sutras. The Yoga Sutras are like the bible of yoga. The first line of the Yoga Sutras can be interpreted as "Yoga is now." Yoga is this moment. Can we be here now fully present and aware in this moment?

The Map of Yoga is a guide for living that includes eight limbs. The first two of the eight limbs are the Yamas and the Niyamas, perhaps best understood as the "ethical" aspects of Yoga or guideline for living. The Yamas can be interpreted in a very simple way as guidelines for how to get along with other people. It is our contract with the world. The Niyamas are guidelines for taking care of self and is our contract with ourselves.

Asana is the third limb. "Asana" is the one most familiar and initially most accessible to North Americans. Asana refers to the physical postures performed in Yoga, all of which, regardless of the specific style, fall under the umbrella of Hatha Yoga. Yoga postures keep us grounded and healthy physically and emotionally. They begin the process of reclaiming our body from emotional imprinting.

Pranayama, the fourth limb, means to harmonize the breath and come into relationship with it. This can start with simple breath awareness. Each one of us has our own unique breathing rhythm that will unfold as we tune in. Breathing techniques can be used to promote relaxation, to awaken the body and mind, and to improve a natural flow of energy in the body. The breath is the link between the body and mind.

The fifth limb is Pratyahara, which means to withdraw into one's center. There are a number of techniques in yoga that facilitate that process. This returns us into our body in a feeling way and helps us trust the wisdom of our body.

The last three limbs in the map of yoga are different levels of meditation and progress through stages. It includes the following: being absorbed in the practice; self-awareness; feelings of peace;

and a sense of feeling at one with everything. An essential key in these practices is the ability to just witness whatever arises. By surrendering to what arises it can help us release old conditioning and emotional holding patterns.

Someone recently asked me: “How long did it take you to become so peaceful.” I responded by saying: “When I was younger, maybe 35 or so, I thought that there would be a point when I felt like I had finally arrived and that I somehow would have it all together. But now that I am older in my 50’s I realize that life continues to unfold with it’s ups and downs and there is no point of arrival. It has become easier to be with the ups and downs and struggles and difficulties, but part of the reason is that I have stopped trying to fix it. I have learned to be more present with my life as it is.”

I don’t think that was quite what the person wanted to hear. People often want an answer to their struggles and pain. For me yoga and Buddhist teachings work very well together.

Pema Chodren a Buddhist nun says: “We might feel that somehow we should try to eradicate these feelings of pleasure and pain, loss and gain, praise and blame, fame and disgrace. A more practical approach would be to get to know them, see how they hook us, see how they color our perception of reality, see how they aren’t all that solid.”

One of the principals of Buddhist teachings is that in life there is suffering. The paradox is that in letting go of trying to fix it there is actually a shift that takes place where it becomes a little easier to be with what is. There is a basic acceptance that can start to happen. When we do yoga practices we do feel better, we feel more healthy and in balance. But the process is what’s important not the end result. In recent years more and more people are seeing the value in approaching life in a mindful way and yoga is the perfect path to practice mindfulness. I’m not concerned about accomplishing the perfect posture. I’m more concerned with how yoga helps me stay present in my life. Yoga techniques work to help us feel grounded, stronger, more open and flexible. But the thing that’s more important: Is it making us more kind, and tolerant and accepting.

In the book “The Inner Tradition of Yoga” Michael Stone says “When

we continually run away from experience, we plant seeds of repetition: the next time the same experience occurs, we will meet that experience with the conditioned response systems we have constructed and reinforced in mind, body, and nervous system. We create feedback loops in the *samskaras* (psychophysical grooves) and in the *nadies* (feeling and feedback pathways) that keep us running away from the pain. Or could it be possible that we could notice pain when it arises and ride it out to its dissolution?"

It is this willingness to stop running from pain that helps us walk through the fire of the struggles and be more open and accepting of life as it is. It is this kind of mindfulness that can be used in yoga practice to help make it a complete path.

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