

Self-Restraint : the taming of the Mind

Self-Restraint (*Yama*) in *yoga* practice is not only a moral or ethical injunction, as in a religious context, but serves very practical and important functions in enabling the goal of spiritual evolution towards self-realization. By the *yogic* practice of Self-restraint, the practitioner's mind is tamed and becomes a conduit for the unfettered experience of higher consciousness, from the Divine, the True Self. Taming of the mind leads to purity of the mind, and only with a pure mind, can one practice and attain to the state of Yoga:

Yoga is the cessation [of identifying with] the fluctuations [arising within] consciousness. Then the seer abides in his own true nature.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras: 1.2-1.3

This is also elaborated more from a mental and emotional perspective by divine Krishna to his disciple Arjuna:

A person whose mind is unperturbed by sorrow, who does not crave pleasures, and who is free from attachment, fear and anger; such a person is a sage of steady wisdom.

Bhagavad Gita: 2.56

Patanjali, one of the perfected Masters of Yoga or *Siddhas*, wrote very concisely about the integrated science of Yoga. In his *sutras*, he divided the path of *Raja Yoga* or the "Royal Yoga" into eight limbs, referred to as *Ashtanga Yoga*. In these eight limbs he has given us a template to explore the deeper dimensions of Yoga. They are the both the pathways and the unified goal of self-realization. Just as Yoga "is" both the path or means of self-realization, as well as the unified state of super-consciousness that results from the practice, so these eight limbs or *anga* are not only practices, but also states of accomplishment, or perfection.

Yoga of Purification and Transformation

It is important not to confuse the eight limbs, with ‘steps’, which can be practiced consecutively and in isolation. Yoga is integration and wholeness – it is the eight limbs practiced together which constitute yoga. However, it is also important to understand that there is a progressive continuity between these limbs, and it is at best futile and at worst spiritually dangerous to try to practice the upper limbs, without first practicing the lower limbs or at least practicing them at the same time. We will explore further their interconnectedness in a later section.

The eight limbs of Yoga are:

1. *yama*: self-restraints through ethical and moral perspective
2. *niyama*: self-discipline through observation of self-realized behavior
3. *asana*: steady posture
4. *pranayama*: control and expansion of the life-energy through the breath
5. *pratyahara*: mind withdrawal from the senses
6. *dharana*: concentration
7. *dhyana*: meditation
8. *samadhi*: super-consciousness or union with the Divine

It is important to “keep in mind”, that meditation without the practice of self-restraint or *yama* would not be considered an effective practice of *Ashtanga Yoga*, or *Kriya Yoga*, which is using the *Ashtanga* model. Merely shifting emphasis from one limb to the other does not make one more essential than the other.

The restraints are nonviolence, truthfulness, non-stealing, chastity, and greedlessness.

Yoga Sutras: 2.30

Another immortal *Siddha*, Tirumoolar, advises a greater number of restraints:

*He does not kill, he does not lie, he does not steal,
Of marked virtue he is; good, meek and just;
He shares his joys, he knows no blemish;
Neither drinks nor lusts.*

Tirumundirum: 554

We will focus our attention on the five Self-Restraints mentioned by Patanjali. It is important to understand that the *yamas* are interrelated with one another, and also with the *niyamas*, or disciplined observances. For example, the *niyama* contentment [*santoshā*] will protect one from stealing. Besides, meaning ‘restraint’, *yama* is also the name of the King of Death, which calls to mind that there must be a dying to ignorance, which is the source of egoism, attachment and repulsion.

To help us understand and appreciate the Path of Purification and Transformation, it is necessary that we can broaden our perception and learn that we are not just this body which we can see, touch, taste, smell, and hear. Besides the physical body which we are familiar with, we also possess additional subtle bodies. The particular *yogic* model which I like working with assumes that we all possess five bodies.

In addition to the physical body, which we can experience with our five senses, we also have an energy body, which functions with our energy interfaces and stores our basic life-force. Analogous to the physical body with its blood vessels and organs, the energy body has energy channels called *nadis*, and energy centers called *chakras*. A third body is where we store our emotional patterns and the potential energy which function in this mode of our manifestation. The fourth body is the mental body where our mind functions, and is the storage for our mental patterns and associations, as well as for our mental energies. The fifth body is the causal body which is the seat of our soul and repository of our *karmic* patterns from the cause and effect relationships which we have set into play. When

we die, only the causal body survives and can be reincarnated into a new physical body.

There are some yogic systems which give more or less bodies and use slightly different names for them, but the basic underlying agreement is that we have more than just the visible body of flesh and blood, or an amorphous mind that is somehow associated with the brain, and that we need to purify and transform all of them.

The *chakras* or energy centers are not on the physical plane, and cannot be discovered by dissecting the physical body. There are seven major *chakras* that are emphasized in the evolutionary path of Yoga. They exist on the other bodies, and their locations can be correlated with various places on our physical body, which is useful for visualization purposes. These *chakras* vibrate at different rates and have an optimum relationship with each other. When they become out of synchronization with each other or with the Universal Life force, then disease of the body and mind can occur.

Situated in the 1st energy center or *Muladahara Chakra*, is the massive potential or nascent life-force energy called *kundalini*, which plays an important role in the process of Self Realization and achievement of higher states of consciousness. Normally, the life-force energy that is available to the energy body is called *prana*. This *prana* is expended during our daily activities and replenished through the air, sun, water, earth and food. Only with intense yogic practice and purification of the physical and subtle bodies will the *kundalini* energy be available.

By practicing the self-restraints, the subtle energy body, with its energy channels are purified, enabling more energy and life-force to flow through them. This also eases the upward movement of the *kundalini* through the *chakras*. Therefore any kind of *Hatha*, *Kundalini*, and *Kriya Yogas*, which works directly with life-force energy, whether in the form of *prana* or *kundalini*, must incorporate the practice of the *yamas*.