

The Practice of Yoga: Part 6

Raja Yoga

By Reverend Jaganath Carrera

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Raja Yoga means the Royal Yoga. Traditionally referred to as *Patanjali Yoga Darshana* (the Yoga philosophy of Patanjali), it earns its regal title since it is a complete, holistic approach that contains the essence of all the other branches of Yoga. Every facet of who we are is strengthened, refined and applied to attaining the ultimate goal of Yoga: enlightenment, the experience of oneness with all Creation, realization of our True Nature. Whatever name we give this goal, the results are the same: the end of ignorance and the suffering it brings through direct experience of the transcendent Self within.

Primarily based on the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, the classic text of Raja Yoga, the theory and practices of Raja Yoga are a straightforward guide for all students of Yoga. The teachings clearly speak on the inner workings of consciousness, the purpose of creation, and on suffering and the means to transcend it. The *Yoga Sutras* are a step-by-step manual for attaining the unshakable peace that is your True Nature.

The Core Teaching

The principle upon which Raja Yoga is based is:

Stillness, one-pointedness, and clarity of mind is Yoga.
(*Yoga Sutras, 1.2*)

Every practice in every branch of Yoga has this stillness of mind as its goal. But it's not stillness for its own sake. That would only give us a pleasant, but short-lived experience. It's what stillness brings that is the real goal.

Then the Seer rests in its True Nature
(*Yoga Sutras, 1.3*)

The Seer is us – it's who we are at our core. Our True Nature is pure, unbounded Consciousness; Absolute Peace and Joy.

All of our meditation, Hatha Yoga, selfless service, prayer, worship, study, and self-analysis are different ways to attain tranquility of mind. When the mind ceases its relentless chatter, egoism and ignorance loosen their hold on us. As the focus becomes steadier, and the stillness deeper, we transcend all thoughts, feelings, and images of who we are and what life is about in favor of direct experience of self and life. In other words, we rest in our True Nature.

How To Achieve Stillness

Have you ever tried to make your mind perfectly still and quiet? Have you ever wondered what it's like to be without any thought whatsoever, not even, "I'm sitting here with no thoughts in my mind?" Who *are* you when every conscious and subconscious notion of who you are has left? Yogis say that we are pure consciousness, existence itself: unborn, unchanging, eternal; free from any limitation of any kind.

Stilling the mind is no easy task. Our attention has the ingrained habit of wandering. What we usually assume are logical sequential thoughts, are in reality, a mad

scramble of thoughts, images, and emotions all vying for our attention. Fortunately, the teachings of Raja Yoga offer us a clear path to attaining perfect stillness of mind. For many, stilling the mind conjures images of long, arduous commitments to heroic struggles or forceful practices. Not only does this sound unappealing, it is not true to the spirit of Raja Yoga. There is no suppression of thoughts, no forceful effort to wrestle the mind into submission. That approach would only bring tension and disappointment. Instead, we learn a powerful multi-dimensional approach based on a profound understanding of the human condition. Awareness is redirected within, more a matter of *re-training* the mind than *restraining* it.

In the *Yoga Sutras* the main principle given for stilling is presented:

*The mind is made still by practice and nonattachment.
(Yoga Sutras 1.12)*

Practice is anything we do with the intent of quieting the mind. It becomes a stable, light-bearing, and enjoyable part of our lives when our practice is regular over a period of time, and when we approach it with enthusiasm, optimism, and a sense of adventure.

Nonattachment is the cultivation of the proper relationship to objects, attainments, and events in our lives. It is about letting go of unrealistic expectations of life by realizing that no possession, relationship, or comfort lasts, and therefore cannot bring us the happiness we seek. We can and should enjoy all the beauty that life offers, but without *depending* on those things to be permanent sources of peace. How we respond to what happens to us, and the decisions we make, change when we discover that the happiness we seek is within.

The Self (*Purusha, or atman*) is the only stable, unchanging reality. The source of all peace, joy, love, and light doesn't come or go. We are not separate from the Self. *It is who we are*. It can't be lost, only forgotten. In that sense, we can say that all of Yoga is about remembering who we already are.

A bit later in the *Yoga Sutras*, we come across a more fleshed-out presentation of what makes up Yoga practice: The Eight Limbs of Raja Yoga. It is here that we will clearly see how the mind, intellect, heart, and hand all join forces to deliver us to enlightenment.

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

The eight limbs are central to understanding the practice of Raja Yoga. They expand on the basic description of what Yoga practice entails.

Yama

- *Ahimsa* - loving compassion; nonviolence
- *Satya* - truthfulness
- *Asteya* - nonstealing
- *Brahmacharya* – continence (focusing our energy toward the goal of Yoga)
- *Aparigraha* - nongreed

Niyama

- *Saucha* – purity of body and mind

- *Santoshā* – contentment
- *Tapas* – self-discipline, accepting pain as a help or purification
- *Svādhyāya* – study (of self, Nature, sacred wisdom)
- *Ishwara Pranidhāna* – surrender to the Supreme Being

Asana - attaining a comfortable steady posture for meditation

Pranayama - regulation of the life force through breathing practices

Pratyahara - redirection of the senses

Dharana – practice of focused attention

Dhyana – meditation

Samadhi – absorption, super conscious state

Part of the greatness of this approach is that Yoga ceases to be only a set of practices and becomes a way of living. It means that all that we do can add momentum toward the goal. Every facet of our human nature is engaged in the practices of Raja Yoga. Our physical side, our active side, that part of us that enjoys asserting our will, our inquisitive side, and that part of us that knows the transformative power of devotion and love. The exact mix and emphasis of our practice is determined by our temperament.

What Blocks Our Way

Nothing great was ever easy to achieve, or came quickly. Self-realization is the highest of goals. Even though we already are that which we seek, we still have to overcome a tricky obstacle: ignorance (*avidya*).

Ignorance is defined as:

*Regarding the impermanent as permanent, the impure as pure, the painful as pleasant,
and the non-Self as the Self
(Yoga Sutras 2.5)*

If we compare the mind to a mirror and the Self to our face, then enlightenment could be described as having a mirror that is without smudges or distortions. In such a mirror, our face will reflect completely and accurately. Ignorance is the cause of all the smudges and distortions that obscure that pure reflection. The entire body of Yoga theory and practice is designed to clean and straighten the mirror/mind.

The bad news is that Nature itself, although created for the purpose of teaching and leading the soul to freedom, is also perfectly designed to keep the mind distracted from its goal and the path that leads to enlightenment.

The good news is that regular practice of the eight limbs invariably and without doubt, lead to overcoming ignorance. Yoga is a science. If you follow its teachings, you will one day transcend suffering.

How To Practice Raja Yoga

Recall that Yoga practice is defined as anything we do to steady the mind. Properly understood, this means that Yoga is not limited to the teachings that have come from India and that are labeled as Yoga. You can engage in any practices like if they are uplifting to you. Chant, practice Hatha Yoga, attend Mass, study the Torah, face Mecca

and pray, repeat a mantra, practice Buddhist vipasana meditation, serve selflessly, analyze your motivations – all this and more, correctly understood, can be considered Yoga practice.

Take It Easy, but Not Lazy

This was a favorite saying of my master, Gurudev Swami Satchidananda. There should be challenge in your practice, but not strain. Zeal is great, but don't let it lead you to overdoing it.

In Yoga, evolution is better than revolution. There should be a challenge in what you do, but no strain. For example, don't try to overcome all bad habits all at once. Try picking one yama or niyama a week and dedicate that week to developing it. Maybe setting a goal of meditating an hour a day three times a day is too much. Start with twenty minutes twice a day. Spend ten minutes a day studying sacred wisdom, chant and pray a little each day, do some asanas and pranayama for your health, and let loving kindness guide your actions and reactions every day. Include what I sometimes call, The Holy Trio, in your daily life. Do something every day for:

- Your health
- Your peace of mind
- The welfare of others

These small, simple steps lead to enlightenment and make the world a little better place to live.