

**VEDANTA CENTER OF ATLANTA**  
**Swami Vivekananda's Raja Yoga**

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November is a month for study of Raja Yoga, a spiritual path often called the yoga of meditation. A raja yogi uses ancient, proven spiritual techniques to quiet the mind and gain control of her or his attention. Regular daily practice of concentration may lead to meditation, which can reveal God and liberate you from the cycle of rebirth and death.

**Swami Vivekananda's Raja Yoga**

Swami Vivekananda (**Swamiji**) wrote a book to help his English and American followers understand and practice *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras*. Title *Raja Yoga*, it was published in 1896 and immediately became a best-seller. It was credited with having a major influence on the spiritual and intellectual thought currents of in the English-speaking world.

In the book's Preface, Swamiji wrote:

*“Raja-Yoga declares that each man is only a conduit for the infinite ocean of knowledge and power that lies behind mankind. It teaches that desires and wants are in man, that the power of supply is also in man; and that wherever and whenever a desire, a want, a prayer has been fulfilled, it was out of this infinite magazine that the supply came, and not from any supernatural being ...*

*There is no supernatural, says the Yogi, (instead) there are in nature gross manifestations and subtle manifestations. The subtle are the causes, the gross the effects. The gross can be easily perceived by the senses; not so the subtle. The practice of Raja-Yoga will lead to the acquisition of the more subtle perceptions.”*

That last sentence is a big promise, with even bigger implications: Once subtle causes are understood, their effects may be restrained. This can yield relief from life’s suffering and misery, since our thoughts and actions are the effects of subtle causes. These ideas are rooted in the Samkhya philosophical system, on which Patanjali’s Raja Yoga, and Yoga Psychology, are based.

This morning we will explore and discuss six of Patanjali’s “limbs” of yoga. Our emphasis will be on the step-by-step personal and spiritual growth that can come from the persistent practice of Raja Yoga. Here is part of a summary of Raja-Yoga, which Swami Vivekananda said he “freely translated” from one of the Puranas:

*“The fire of Yoga burns the cage of (ignorance and error) that is around a man. Knowledge becomes purified and Nirvana is directly obtained. From Yoga comes knowledge; knowledge again helps the Yogi.*

***Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi are the steps in Raja-Yoga, of which non-injury, truthfulness, non-covetousness, chastity, not receiving anything from another are called Yama. This purifies the mind, the Chitta. ” EOQ***

Many people who practice hatha yoga know about *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras* — it's usually a sourcebook for their instructors. Students are taught *asanas* (postures or poses) and other techniques to strengthen the body and quiet the mind. Patanali claims these exercises lead to greater psychological and physical poise, heightened mental alertness, and increased psychic power.

Yet, serious students find these are just the first rewards for regular practice of Raja Yoga. Over time, they develop a much stronger ability to concentrate; this one-pointedness of mind may lead to meditation.

From Patanjali's point of view, that is the deeper purpose of perfecting the asanas and other techniques: They allow the body to sit perfectly still, comfortably, for long enough to turn a trained and calm mind within.

According to Swamiji, most of Patanjali's methodology — six of the “eight limbs” of his yoga — is devoted to achieving this ability to meditate.

Patanjali defines concentration as the ability to hold or repeat the same thought, mantra, prayer, or other practice without interruption for 12 seconds.

Meditation begins when the object of concentration can be held continuously for two minutes 24 seconds. Sound easy? It is not.

Concentration and mediation are difficult because random perceptions, feelings, and other thoughts divert the student's attention away from an unbroken flow of awareness. These diversions arise from likes or dislikes, fears or worries, good or bad memories, immediate desires or fantasies of future pleasures, or simply stimulation from the five senses.

Yet, without the ability to concentrate and practice mediation we are likely to live as most people do — distracted, bored, fearful, even miserable! Patanjali promises that a sincere student of yoga can be free of all that.

As Swamiji wrote, when you can sink deep into the silence of meditation, you will not be afraid — of life or of death — and will no longer be a slave to empty desires. **WHY?** Swamiji says that in meditation:

*“Man will find that he never dies, and then he will have no more fear of death. When he knows that he is perfect, he will have no more vain desires, and both causes being absent, there will be no more misery — there will be perfect bliss, even while in this body.”*

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras prescribe **six methods** to move us toward this freedom and bliss. **Practiced together**, they help create a calm mind, a strong, poised body, and a tranquil way of life:

1. **Yama** means the restraint of tendencies that keep a student “at odds” with the world. When a person is habitually harmful to others or the environment, deceitful, greedy or selfish, immoderately sensual, or covetous, calmness of mind is utterly impossible.

2. **Niyama**: These practices broaden Yama to include the student's internal world of body, mind and spirit. Yogis make daily, determined efforts to eliminate all forms of inner and outer impurity; to be content with the circumstances of their lives; to prefer the good over the pleasant; to learn from sacred texts and from their own weaknesses and mistakes; and to offer the results of their practice of yoga to the Divine Presence.

3. **Asana** means “seat” — specifically, a seat for meditation. Hatha yoga's use of that word is an extension of the term to include many other yogic exercises. These poses, done regularly with proper guidance, can result in a poised, flexible, healthy body. Such a body allows a yogi to sit still comfortably for an hour or even longer, practicing concentration and meditation.

4. **Pranayama:** Yama, as noted above, means restraint. Prana, often translated as “breath,” is actually the subtle life force that causes the lungs to breathe (and all of the body’s other organs to function). Therefore, pranayama is the regulation of a yogi’s life force — consciously or as a spontaneous outcome of other exercises. For instance, while practicing meditation a student’s breathing will slow and may even stop for a time. This natural pranayama happens because breathing is energetically tied to thinking, and fewer thoughts arise during meditation.

5. **Pratyahara** means “withdrawal of the senses.” The senses are naturally outreaching, so it’s easy to become addicted to pleasant experiences of the outside world — and get stuck there, like a fly to flypaper! Students of yoga are taught to witness these sensations as just one level of existence. They learn to turn their attention away from sensory stimulation and explore the universe within themselves. Skill in pratyahara is required, to successfully practice the next step.

6. **Dharana:** Patanjali gives special emphasis to the ability to concentrate (dharana); it will determine a yogi’s level of achievement.

As Vivekananda wrote in his introduction to Raja Yoga, *“How has all the knowledge in the world been gained but by the concentration of the powers of the mind? ... There is no limit to the power of the human mind. The more concentrated it is, the more power is brought to bear on one point; that is the secret.”*

To perform an asana elegantly, to watch the breath or chant a mantra without interruption, to distinguish the real from the unreal, requires this one-pointed control of one’s attention. Patanjali says it is the gateway to freedom.

Beyond that gate, the student of yoga experiences daily life and its miseries very differently:

**As Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita*,  
“Yoga is the breaking of contact with pain!”**

**Conversation/Commentary and  
Regular Closing prayer**