

highlights

# Dhyaana

by Paul J. J. Alix  
Photograph by Lew Laitin

**W**e should always understand that Sanskrit words are not easily understood through simple English translation. Words in Sanskrit are multicolored and multidimensional and require our vast imagination in order to approach the meaning. At the same time, we need to consider the context and culture in which they were written. Looking at meditation in context, because we practice yoga, our understanding is deeper and, therefore, closer than for someone who doesn't. Culturally, our understanding of the Yoga Sutras is somewhat lost in antiquity, because we cannot directly experience what was happening in a society some 2000+ years ago. However, we have built our own culture around the practices of yoga and, therefore, can expect increased sensitivity to the understanding of Sanskrit terms revolving around yoga practices.

Contextually, we also understand that dhyaana is the 7th limb of yoga, as per Pataanjali's 8 limbs. Most importantly, we should realize the relationship of the last 3 limbs—dhaaranaa, dhyaana, and samaadhi—to one another. Then we should contemplate their relationship among the 8 limbs.

The best word to use to translate dhyaana would be "meditation." We could then define the 6th limb as concentration and the 8th as absorption or meditative absorption. What is important is how these limbs relate to each other in the context of a yoga practitioner.

The interesting thing that has occurred in our culture is that the word "yoga" has come to mean "posture" or "asana," but when we actually look at Pataanjali's definitions, we find that "meditation" is more appropriately synonymous with the word "yoga."

When we get down to the last 3 limbs of yoga, we are involving ourselves with what Pataanjali calls the "inner practices." They have a very close relationship that we should study and reflect on, which is somewhat different from the relationship among the others. Limb #6, when sustained for some time, becomes limb #7,

which, when sustained longer, becomes limb #8. That is, concentration becomes meditation, which later becomes absorption. In other words, dhaaranaa becomes dhyaana, which, in turn, becomes samaadhi. This close relationship is why these terms, in English, are often used interchangeably, where one is used to really mean the other. It's analogous to defining terms in a legal document. We must define "meditation" in the same terms as Pataanjali defines dhyaana. Our preconceived ideas must be placed aside. Remember when, during his trial, President Clinton (paraphrased) very wisely said, "It depends on what the definition of 'is' is." The legal definition of 'is' might differ from the dictionary definition.

What is the relationship among the inner practices? Dhaaranaa is the ability to stick to something no matter what the distractions may be. We all have this experience when we are so interested in doing something that nothing else can distract us from it. Perhaps a project is due tomorrow. So the night before, maybe even under pressure, you go to work on it, and if your friend calls, you politely tell him or her that you are busy. When someone offers you food, you probably decline because you're not willing to stop, even if you are feeling hungry. Your mind is intent on the project at hand, and, although you see other possibilities of action, you decline because you have a goal in mind. Distraction is allowed but never entertained.

This ability to avoid distractions is pratyahaara: limb #5. Without pratyahaara, dhaaranaa is impossible. In order to maintain your attention on your project, the relentless reversal of the mind inward, away from the distractions, is essential.

Dhyaana is when your concentration has deepened to the point where you do not put energy into the distractions. You are so involved with your project that when your friend calls, you may not even answer the phone. Your mind cannot be stopped from its flow in your work. When food is offered, the cook discovers that your appetite can't be aroused.

Although you may still recognize that food is there, you have no attraction to it. Your mind is so involved with your project that there exists no attraction to the other possibilities of action. The flow of the mind is unbroken.

Samaadhi is the subject of the next issue. Briefly, this is when the mind is so absorbed in the project that nothing is noticed outside of you and the project itself. You don't even give recognition to the other possibilities of action. Your mind is so powerfully channeled in your work that you do not notice the phone ringing or the dinner being offered to you.

Dhaaranaa would be like water dripping into a pond, such as rain—intermittent but persistent. Dhyaana would then be a continuous flow of water, like a stream into the pond. This flow is essential, if we are to later move into samaadhi—the complete merging of the water into the pond itself.

From Pataanjali's view, we first find mention of dhyaana in YS I.39. Here it is offered as a means of overcoming the nine obstacles to yoga. He is clear that the object of meditation is not of concern but rather the state of mind that is reached through the practice. Therefore, we could assume that there is no inferior or superior meditative technique in and of itself, but rather a qualitative state of mind we reach or do not reach through any technique.

Jumping over to YS II.11, Pataanjali offers dhyaana as a method for overcoming the active kleshas. The kleshas are the troubles of life, which Pataanjali lists as being 5 in number. He recommends that we step back from the troubles in which we find ourselves and take a moment to reflect, using our more powerful state of meditation, in order to help us to lessen the effect of these troubles.

Sutra means thread. So the idea of meditation is constantly woven throughout the text. Dhyaana is not mentioned again until the 8 limbs are listed in the second half of chapter II. Meditation cannot be practiced without the other 7 limbs. Although some would say that they only practice meditation, it cannot be so. One of the 8 limbs

cannot be practiced alone. For dhyana to be practiced successfully, it needs dhaaranaa (as we have already discussed above). Without pratyahaara there can be no dhaaranaa, because the mind must be able to disengage from its attractions in order to allow it to concentrate on something else. Praanayaama (mastery of the breath) is essential for enabling the mind to move into another state. If the breath remains erratic then the mind will also remain so. Because the breath runs through the body, we need to open the rivers of energy in the physical body through the practice of asana. Without the niyamas, how would we make any effort to change the direction of the mind? After all, tapas is a purification that we must endure in order to maintain the mind in one place. Without tapas, the mind will continue to run (or rerun) in its acquired habitude.

The yamas, such as ahimsa, ask that we refrain from hurting others. How can we meditate, if we are wishing harm to the world?

It's one thing to "think" that we are meditating, but we can be fooled. Therefore, all the yamas are there for us as a check on our behavior to the outside world. If we think we have reached perfection, we only need to see the reaction of the people around us to verify our conclusion. War and our reaction to the world at large have everything to do with this practice.

In fact, it is in meditation that we begin to see the hurtfulness that we bring to the world. Without meditation we could be hurting our children, our parents, our lover, or even a stranger who is simply walking by, without the sensitiv-

ity to know it. When our meditation is effective, we begin to see the more subtle ways in which we hurt people close to us, or the dishonesty that we didn't even know that we had begins to become apparent. Our hurtful attitude could be subliminal, where one is not aware of it, and it is only when we meditate that we are sensitive enough to notice it. Even while reading the evening paper, our subtle and quiet approval of hatred, anger, or greed in the form of war, etc., will indicate our weakness in this practice. We might say that we are against the invasion of Iraq but subliminally approve, because we

believe the war might help maintain our standard of living. We may not even be aware of this subliminal approval.

So our evening meditation may seem grandiose, but our true rating will be to see the effect our practice has on our daily life. The way we relate to the people close to us, as well as to those further away, or no longer living, will ultimately rate our success. If we can see the subtle destructiveness of our behavior, we are well on our way. When we find that love persistently shines through, by throwing light on all of our destructive behavior, we are established in the practice of dhyana.

Paul J.J. Alix, Director; YOGA for ALL: Any Body. Any Condition. At Any Age. Paul teaches in the tradition of Krishnamacharya and Desikachar and is a highly recommended yoga educator by Gary Kraftsow of Viniyoga America. A personal practice of 30 years is integrated into his teaching. He is available throughout the country and visits Florida for TT programs and student workshops on various principles of practice, including Vedic Chanting, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, Sanskrit for Chanting, and Breath-Influenced Asana Principles. <http://YOGAforALL.org>, 212.472.YOGA.



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