

Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi

Dharana, dhyana and samadhi are the final three of the Eight Limbs of Yoga – and the beginning of our exploration of Chapter 3 of the Sutras. While all the limbs may be practised simultaneously, the first 5 limbs prepare us for progression to these final three. It is said by some that these are not practices as such, but that they are experiential – evolving effortlessly from our practice.

Dharana: Concentration

Sutra 3.1: Dharana is the collecting of the mind onto a particular object
(Charlotte Bell)

Gathering consciousness and focussing it within is dharana
(Nischala Joy Devi)

The sixth limb is dharana, often defined as concentration or “keeping the attention on a single place” (Nicolai Bachman). Dharana can be thought of as a practice that trains the mind and leads us into meditation.

In dharana we select an object on which to rest our attention, keep our awareness there and let go of everything else. Objects could include:

- The breath
- A mantra (repeated word or phrase e.g. Om, Peace, Love)
- A yantra (e.g. the visual symbols of the chakras)
- A simple object e.g. a pebble, a leaf, a candle flame
- An idea or concept e.g. compassion
- A place e.g. the heart centre, tip of the nose

Sutras 1.34 to 1.39 give us some suggestions on where we can place our attention:

- 1.34: Slow, easeful exhalations can be used to restore and preserve balance *
- 1.35: Or engage the focus on an inspiring object * (related to the senses)
- 1.36: Or by concentrating on the supreme, ever blissful Light within **
- 1.37: Or the ability to retain the peaceful flow of mind comes by focussing on someone who is free from all desire ***
- 1.38: Or reflect on a peaceful feeling from an experience, a dream, or deep sleep *
- 1.39: Or dedicate yourself to anything that elevates and embraces your heart *

Nischala Joy Devi suggests that we should choose an object of concentration that truly resonates with us – something that we feel completely in harmony with. When we make that heart-felt choice she says that we should then stick with it – if we continually chop and change our point of focus in each practice it’s like digging lots of shallow wells in search of water. It’s much more effective to continue digging your first well, patiently and lovingly exploring deeper and deeper until you find the well-spring – your “true centre”.

In dharana it is important to practice with detachment to the object, observe the mind when it inevitably drifts and each time the mind wanders gently rest your awareness back on the object. Initially the mind will sneak off undetected, and suddenly we discover that we are in the midst of a whirlwind of thoughts (remember the Vrttis) – we find ourselves replaying the events of the day, planning what to have for dinner, mulling over something that’s bothered us or lost in a daydream. This doesn’t mean that we have ‘failed’ in our practice or that we can’t meditate – instead this noticing and gently refocussing on the object of concentration IS the practice. If all you have done is keep bringing your attention back then you have done well, and over time you will have trained your mind – it will wander less frequently, and you will eventually find more spaciousness between the thoughts, greater clarity and stillness.

“Even brief concentration is success...each moment of positive experience leaves its positive trace in the depth of the mind field. It may seem invisible at first, but those moments add up over time, as concentration eventually begins to become meditation which in turn sets the stage for glimpses of samadhi” Swami Jnaneshvara

Our practice of dharana can be deepened by bringing focussed attention into our everyday life – selecting on one thing at a time and giving it our full attention;

- Be present - listening to a friend and communicating with our undivided attention
- On your yoga mat, remain focussed on your breath and movement – notice when the mind wanders. Use a drishti (gaze point) to anchor your awareness.
- At work, avoid the trap of multi-tasking – do one thing at a time. Create dedicated time and space if you need to complete particularly involved or complex tasks. ([Read this brief article here](#))
- When you go for a walk, remember that you don’t have to respond immediately to every email or text notification. Turn the phone to silent and enjoy the walk.
- Mindful mealtimes – when you eat, just eat.
- When doing something you love, switch off your phone to avoid distractions. Let others in the home know that you are having some me-time. Fully immerse yourself in the activity.
- When you’re focussing on a task, notice when your mind wanders and takes you elsewhere. Bring your attention back to the task (or take a break – the wandering mind might be telling you that you need to pause and rest).
- When you read a book give it your full attention. Have you ever got to the end of the page and had to re-read it as you hadn’t taken it in?
- Throughout the day, bring yourself into the experience of the present moment; take 3 breaths - release all that has gone before you, let go of all that’s yet to come and fully arrive in the present moment.

*“If we concentrate exclusively on one thing at a time,
we increase both our creative efficiency and our loving presence”*

Jennie Lee



Dhyana: Meditation

The focussed attention that we cultivate in dharana paves the way for dhyana, the seventh limb - translated as meditation.

Sutra 3.2: Dhyana is the continuous flow of cognition toward that object
(Sri Swami Satchidananda)

The continuous inward flow of consciousness is dhyana
(Nischala Joy Devi)

What we often refer to as meditation (e.g. sitting to focus our attention on the breath) is actually concentration – dharana.

However, in the Yoga Sutras meditation (dhyana) refers to the state of continuous, uninterrupted awareness. Our concentration deepens and our stream of awareness towards the object begins to flow continuously and effortlessly – the mind links with the object. Our attention is fully focussed, distractions slip away, and our thoughts disperse – we reside in the stillness within and re-discover “a place beyond thought” (Rolf Gates). In dhyana we are no longer ‘doing’ but simply ‘being’.

As you progress in your practice you may begin to notice that your days flow with greater ease, you are less reactive to situations, your intuitive voice becomes more noticeable and you feel more connected to life.

“Right below the surface of life is an ocean of spirit. Dharana penetrates everyday life and brings us into direct contact with this ocean. Whether we are sitting in meditation or working intently in a flowerbed, the experience of sustained attention is peace”. Rolf Gates

Samadhi: Absorption

Sutra 1.41: As a naturally pure crystal appears to take the colour of everything around it yet remains unchanged, the yogi's heart remains pure and unaffected by its surroundings while attaining a state of oneness with all. This is Samadhi. (Nischala Joy Devi)

Samadhi is commonly referred to as absorption. In dhyana, awareness of the self remains, yet in samadhi there is no awareness of the self – this dissolves and the ego/identity/sense of 'I-ness' is suspended. Rolf Gates describes this beautifully as “self-forgetting” – momentarily releasing the constructs of the roles, labels and responsibilities that define us throughout our days and instead remembering the true Self. There is realisation of unity and one-ness, of who you truly are - your true nature.

“Samadhi is the state of being settled in pure, unbounded awareness. Going beyond time and space, beyond past and future, beyond individuality, samadhi is tasting the realm of eternity and infinity. This is your essential nature... This is the goal of yoga, to know yourself as a spiritual being...” Deepak Chopra

Samadhi is difficult to describe – it is beyond the normal thinking mind and therefore beyond words and description – it is something that is to be experienced. Imagine trying to describe the taste of a strawberry to someone who had never eaten the fruit – you can try to use words like sweet or tangy, but until that person actually takes a bite and tastes the strawberry it is impossible for them to truly know the experience. This is how it is with samadhi – it is something that unfurls and develops. Perhaps we will eventually experience brief glimpses of samadhi, and perhaps eventually the state will deepen and be sustained throughout each moment of our everyday life.

“Whether you touch the bliss of samadhi momentarily or become a master of enlightenment in this lifetime, from here on in it is simply joy” Jennie Lee

Sutra 1.21: Samadhi is near for those whose aspiration is steadfast
Pandit Rajmani Tigunait

To the dedicated and devoted, Divine Truth is revealed
Nischala Joy Devi

Reflections...

Are there moments in life when you experience the flow of states from complete awareness, to stillness, to complete absorption? Where time and space appear to recede and dissolve?

Does a regular yoga practice help to encourage this flow towards stillness and bliss?

Reflect back on Sutra 1.3: “Then the (Self) resides in it's own True Nature” – we – we experience the True Self. Can you see how the journey through the 8 Limbs leads us towards this goal of Yoga?

“Dharana develops concentrated focus into a devotional awareness in which we feel inner peace and enter meditative stillness (Dhyana). With regular and consistent practice, concentration and stillness create the space for mergence with Universal Consciousness (Samadhi). Then we live, move, and breathe in a state of inner tranquillity and joy”

Jennie Lee

- * Sutra translations from Nischala Joy Devi
- ** Sutra translations from Sri Swami Satchidananda
- *** Sutra translations from Pandit Rajmani Tigunait

Sources of Inspiration:

Helena Del Pino, [YogaHome](#)

Nischala Joy Devi

Rolf Gates

Pandit Rajmani Tigunait

Jennie Lee

And many other teachers and commentators on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali