

DHARANA: the 5th of the eight limbs, is the beginning of what we generally call "meditation". Seeing as we always think of weird postures and movements and so on when we think about Yoga, I'd like to start focusing more on the later limbs to put the earlier stuff in context. Everyone has some idea the Yoga has something to do with meditation, but generally people have only vague ideas about what meditation is, how to do it, where to start, and what it actually has to do with the more spectacular practices of Asana, Pranayama, etc.

The word "Dharana" is apparently derived from the Sanskrit root "dhri" which means "to hold, carry, or maintain". The Yogasutra says: "Deshah bandhah cittasya dharana" - "fixing the attention in one place is dharana". It is the act of repeatedly bringing the attention to a single point of focus, which is a skill that can be developed through practice, like any other skill. The point of focus can be anything: many Yoga traditions practice gazing at a candle flame or an image of a deity; some Tibetan lineages begin by focusing on a pebble; Theravada Buddhist traditions usually develop this skill by focusing on the breath, either in the abdomen or at the entrance to the nostrils.

Dharana develops the skills of concentration and "mindfulness": one's ability to notice where the attention is at any given moment, to consciously direct it, to notice when and where it has wandered when it inevitably wanders, and to bring it back to the chosen object. Like all skills (reaching, crawling, walking, talking, riding a bike) these abilities improve with practice as the neural pathways grow stronger: we gradually become better able to focus our attention, becoming less distracted, noticing more and more quickly when the attention has wandered, bringing it back more quickly, and able to perceive more details of the experience in the same amount of time: while initially we might notice the mind wandering after 10 seconds or so of attempting to focus on the breath, after some days or weeks of practice we find that we notice the attention flickering on and off the point of focus many times within a single second as we hear sounds, feel sensations from the body, experience subtle thoughts and memories, etc. So we can see that, as with all of the eight limbs and Yoga practice in general, the practice of Dharana or developing concentration simultaneously develops awareness of the nature of the mind itself.

Dharana can be viewed as the entry to meditation. It seems highly unlikely that any of us will suddenly, spontaneously acquire the ability to focus our mind upon any object of our choice and keep it there without any disturbance or distraction for as long as we choose (although there are stories of this happening to some people, this is certainly not how the Buddha described his own experience), so we need to go through the necessary training to gain access to this skill.

Anyone who has tried to meditate will know that the mind tends to become easily disturbed: by physical discomfort; external distractions from the senses; imagined interactions or conversations with friends or family; thoughts about the various mundane or important jobs we need to do; unresolved situations from the past, the present; or thoughts, fears or fantasies of the future...so we can see the logic in the organisation of the eight limbs: Yama to reduce complications in the life which tend to take up a lot of mental energy; Niyama to encourage more beneficial patterns of thought and behaviour; Asana to make the body progressively more stable and comfortable and free of tension; Pranayama to further reduce strong stimuli coming from the body and make the awareness more refined and sensitive to subtle fluctuations in the mind-body system, which then naturally leads into; Pratyahara the withdrawal of the senses from external objects, allowing the mind to become quiet and peaceful and better able to practice Dharana.

As Dharana (the skill of focusing the attention on the object of choice) improves it is obviously

going to improve one's ability to practice all of the other limbs: greater mental control makes it easier to follow the ethics (nonviolence, truthfulness, non-covetousness, etc) of Yama, and the greater awareness of mental activities coming from Dharana practice also makes the benefits of practicing Yama more obvious; better mental focus makes us more able to practice the beneficial actions (contentment, self-study, etc) of Niyama; the sharper focus and greater sensitivity developed through Dharana gives massive rewards in Asana practice, allowing us to feel what is happening inside our bodies in ever-greater detail, cultivating balance, stability and relaxation at more and more subtle levels; our ability to perform Pranayama with moment-to-moment focus on the subtle internal movements of the breath and their connections to the fluctuations of the mind becomes Dharana practice in itself: in fact all Yoga practice becomes Dharana once the skill of Dharana is understood, and so all of the limbs begin to feed into and improve each other, until eventually, through repeated practice and skillful efforts Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara and Dharana naturally merge into Dhyana: the ability to focus the attention upon the object of choice in an unbroken stream.