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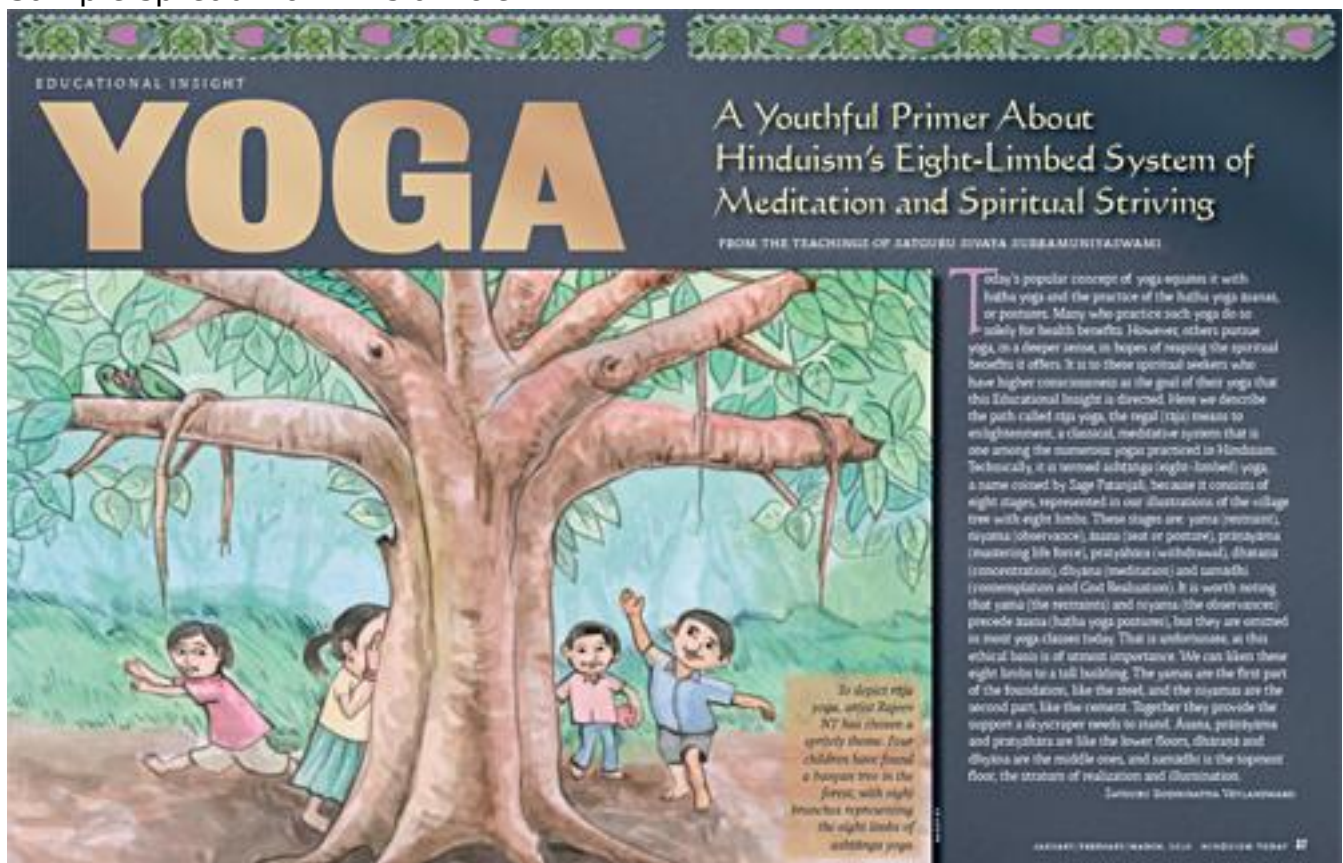
Educational Insight

Yoga

A Youthful Primer About Hinduism's Eight-Limbed System of Meditation and Spiritual Striving

From the teachings of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

Sample spread from this article



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Today's popular concept of yoga equates it with hatha yoga and the practice of the hatha yoga asanas, or postures. Many who practice such yoga do so solely for health benefits. However, others pursue yoga, in a deeper sense, in hopes of reaping the spiritual benefits it offers. It is to these spiritual seekers who have higher consciousness as the goal of their yoga that this Educational Insight is directed. Here we describe the path called raja yoga, the regal (raja) means to enlightenment, a classical, meditative system that is one among the numerous yogas practiced in Hinduism. Technically, it is termed ashtanga (eight-limbed) yoga, a name coined by Sage Patanjali, because it consists of eight stages, represented in our illustrations of the village tree with eight limbs. These stages are: yama (restraint), niyama (observance), asana (seat or posture), pranayama (mastering life force), pratyahara (withdrawal), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (contemplation and God Realization). It is worth noting that yama (the restraints) and niyama (the observances) precede asana (hatha yoga postures), but they are omitted in most yoga classes today. That is unfortunate, as this ethical basis is of utmost importance. We can liken these eight limbs to a tall building. The yamas are the first part of the foundation, like the steel; and the niyamas are the second part, like the cement. Together they provide the support a skyscraper needs to stand. Asana, pranayama and pratyahara are like the lower floors, dharana and dhyana are the middle ones, and samadhi is the topmost floor, the stratum of realization and illumination.

Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

Yama: