
Introducing the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

What is Yoga?

According to TKV Desikachar:

“There are many definitions of yoga:

- *yoga as the movement from one point to another, higher one*
- *yoga as the bringing together, the unifying of two things*
- *yoga as action with undivided, uninterrupted attention*

These definitions of yoga have one thing in common: the idea that something changes. This change must bring us to a point where we have never been before. That is to say that which was impossible becomes possible; that which was unattainable become attainable; that which was invisible can be seen. One of the basic reasons many people take up yoga is to change something about themselves: to be able to think more clearly, to feel better, and to be able to act better today than they did yesterday in all areas of life..... Everyone can begin, and the point at which we start is very personal and individual, depending on where we are at the time. T.K.V. Desikachar, The Heart of Yoga

One of the key texts describing the practice and purpose of yoga is the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. The exact date of this text is uncertain but is thought to be around 500 BC and 200 BCE.

The text is a practical guide on the path of Yoga, condensing and packaging explanations on the vast subject of yoga practice and philosophy into bite-sized sutras or threads. These sutras are offered to the student to be un-packed, studied and practiced - traditionally under the guidance of a guru or teacher. Sri Swami Satchidananda explains that the Sutras give us the aim, the practices, the obstacles (and how to remove them) and the results that may be obtained.

The text is divided into four chapters:

Chapter 1: Samadhi Pada - the purpose and path

Chapter 2: Sadhana Pada – the practice

Chapter 3: Vibhuti Pada - the fruits of practice

Chapter 4: Kaivalya Pada - the goal of yoga

Beginning your journey with the Sutras...

Sutra 1.1: Atha Yoganusasanam

Now begins the instructions on Yoga

This sutra welcomes us and sets the tone for the journey ahead. ‘Atha’ is a key word of importance in this sutra – it suggests an auspicious moment, and we can use this defining moment to acknowledge and commit to the beginnings of our practice. Inviting ourselves into

the 'now' – the present moment, so that we can be truly open to receive the teachings that will be offered to us.

Sutra 1.2: Yogas citta vrtti nirodhah

There are many varied interpretations of this sutra, and it is often translated as 'Yoga is stilling the fluctuations of the mind'. Yet stilling the mind can at the beginning seem like a daunting task! Another way that we can view this sutra is to recognise that yoga acts as the container for our thoughts and emotions – a way to help us prevent these ripples of the mind from spilling out of control.

Sutra 1.3: Tada drastuh svarupe'vasthanam

Then the Seer (Self) abides in its own nature

As we begin to contain the swirling activity of the mind, we are better able to connect to the calm, still space within and we begin to see things as they really are - seeing yourself as you truly are. You are not your random and uncontrollable thoughts, or layers of identity that have built up throughout your lifetime. Nor are we the belongings that we own or the labels that we or our society place upon us. Once all these veils have cleared, we realise the pure consciousness that rests within – that which is unchangeable and ever constant, and who we are at our very deepest level. We uncover the light that is already there, shining brightly within.

"Yoga is a light which once lit, will never dim. The better the practice, the brighter the flame"
BKS Iyengar

Sutra 1.4: Vrtti sarupyam itaratra

At other times [the Seer] identifies with the roaming tendencies of the mind

Without continued practice, we will continue to be led by the roaming mind, entangled in our thoughts – our true Self remaining behind the clouds and layers that obscure it from our awareness. Without the change and transformation that our practice generates, we will remain the same. So, can we decide to commit and take charge of our mind?

"And every day, the world will drag you by the hand, yelling, "This is important! And this is important! And this is important! You need to worry about this! And this! And this!" And each day, it's up to you to yank your hand back, put it on your heart and say, "No. This is what's important." Iain Thomas

Sutras 1.5 – 1.11: The Vrttis - what are the fluctuations that cloud the mind?

The vrttis are those thoughts and emotions that disturb and disrupt our heart and mind. We are said to have around 6,000 – 70,000 thoughts every day – how many of those do you think are helpful or unhelpful? And when we sit for meditation, how many thoughts bubble to the surface as we train our mind to stay connected to a point of focus and discover moments of stillness?

Simply noticing whether a thought is helpful or unhelpful can lead us to making informed and wise choices that are resonant with our heart and that bring us a step closer to re-connecting and remember our inner light of awareness.

The five vrttis are summarised below:

1.7: Pramana - Right Knowledge

Pramana is clarity, having a clear and correct view of things as they are – undistorted by our conditioning. There are 3 types of right knowledge: inference, reliable or scriptural testimony and direct perception.

Inference: You see someone meditating or doing yoga – they look calm, peaceful, serene. The mind infers that meditation makes you calm.

Reliable testimony: I provide reams of research papers from respected scientists that show evidence that meditation makes you calm – lowers the heart rate, reduces anxiety.

Direct knowledge: you sit in meditation and experience a sense of calm.

Which of these might reveal the greatest clarity on the subject?

1.8: Viparyaya – Misconception

Have you ever had a misunderstanding? Where you were convinced that you were right, until later evidence showed that you had misunderstood?

How about thoughts towards ourselves? Are they always correct? Are they helpful / unhelpful?

Can misunderstanding ever be helpful? Perhaps it can serve as a point for reflection and learning about ourselves? We learn to say sorry or might learn to change our behaviour.

1.9: Vikalpa - Imagination

We live our lives through imagination - turning our creative thoughts into actions and reality; the idea of making a nutritious dinner, embarking on a journey, sowing seeds in the garden, designing a project at work. This use of imagination can be helpful and supports us in navigating our day to day lives. Similarly, we can harness the power of imagination to support our wellbeing with the use of visualisations or affirmations. But imagination run amok can be unhelpful – manifesting as distraction, worry or fear.

1.10: Nidra – Sleep

When we experience deep sleep we are nourished. Physical activity ceases, and the mind settles – we move to a state of ‘no-mind’ where, for a while, we let go of the material objects of our lives. Yet too little or too much sleep is detrimental, causing us to feel depleted or sluggish. Let’s say you’ve established a regular morning meditation practice. If you’ve tossed and turned all night maybe you hit snooze too many times once the alarm goes off and miss your opportunity to practice that day, ending up rushed and later feeling frazzled and less able to manage the ups and downs of the day. Or perhaps you’ve had too much sleep and wake up feeling groggy and foggy headed, making your meditation difficult or even falling asleep. If you’ve slept well, you wake up feeling clear and focused, and happy to sit for your practice. The mind may wander but you are able to maintain an awareness and contain the wandering thoughts.

1.11: Smrtti – Memory

Memory is useful – without it we are unable to navigate and engage fully in the world. We get in our car and remember how to drive, we remember the route to work or the supermarket, we remember how to make a cup of tea. We also learn through applying our memory – how did I act in the past, do I need to change my actions for a better outcome next time.

Memory can also be unhelpful. It can keep us stuck (“It’s how we’ve always done things), and if we stay there too long it can manifest as depression, unprocessed grief, PTSD/trauma, or previous conditioning affecting our current reactions and behaviour. And

perhaps we've experienced moments of forgetfulness, wondering why on earth we've gone into a particular room, or forgetting important information in the middle of a job interview. How much of our time do our minds spend living in the past? When we're on the yoga mat or sitting for meditation are we truly present, or is the mind living in a past moment or memory? Throughout the day, where is your attention? Is the mind stuck in some other time or place, and does it need to be set free?

Patanjali's Sutras act as a guide, giving us the tools and practices to contain the swirling mind-stuff and find freedom. As you take a step further on your yoga journey perhaps begin simply by noticing these fluctuations of the mind at intervals throughout the day. Befriending what's there and noticing with tenderness and compassion what is helpful and what is unhelpful. These gentle steps on the path can lead towards true transformation.

Janice Procter, March 2022

References & Sources of Inspiration:

Many versions of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras

The Heart of Yoga, TKV Desikachar

And with gratitude and thanks to [Helena del Pino](#), a constant source of inspiration and wisdom