

The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali

Yoga comes from the saṁskṛta word yuj meaning “to join, unite, harness, or fasten”. The English cognate "yoke" comes from this saṁskṛta root. Yoga is the spiritual science of uniting consciousness with its True nature which is Divine. Patañjali was a Shaiva (Shiva worshipping) Saint who lived around 200 BCE. He is famous for helping spread Shaivism to South India and authoring several books. His Yoga Sūtras, a text of 200 aphorisms defining the philosophical system of Yoga and delineating its practice, is the most famous of his works. Sūtra means aphorism. The sūtric style of writing condenses deeply profound spiritual subject matter into short aphorisms which are easy to memorize. These are intended to help the students to recall vast amounts of information. The sūtras do not elaborate upon the subjects they describe, but act more as an outline to help the student recall their meaning. For true understanding the transmission from a Guru is needed.

The Yoga Sūtra is revered as a scripture by many diverse sects of Hinduism, and studied for its deep mystical insight by Yoga students of all traditions. Most modern schools of Yoga are based upon Patañjali's Yoga philosophy elucidated by this famous text. Patañjali's system of yoga is revered as one of the ṣaḍ darśanam, six schools of Indian philosophy.

Patañjali defines Yoga in the first few aphorisms of the Yoga Sūtras.

*atha yogānu-śāsanam |
yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ |
tadā draṣṭuḥ svarūpe'vasthānam |
vṛtti-sārūpyam itaratra |*

"Now instruction on Union (Yoga).

Union is the restraint of the mental activity (vṛtti) natural to the mind.

Then the observer abides in his own nature.

Otherwise he is of the same form as the mental activity."

This is a simple and profound definition of Yoga which describes the entire path. It implies that due to the natural activities of the mind, people are separated from their True nature. According to this definition the purpose of Yoga practice is to be united with the True nature (which is Divine). This is done by retraining the body and mind to overcome its instinctive actions. In the system of Yoga the body and mind are not perceived as māya (a mystical veil preventing people from seeing reality as it is) or karma (the law of action and reaction), though they are admitted to be generated and limited by these and less than the ultimate. For a Yogi the body and mind are the greatest gift, because they are tools for realization, when they are conditioned and directed toward the goal of realization. The Yogi worships his body and mind as a Temple of God, and through this practice he consecrates and anoints his body with the Divine qualities as he comes to the Realization of God within his own form. For the practitioner of Yoga, the cause of all suffering is avidyā (or ignorance). Avidyā (also described as āṇava paśa (limiting principal or delusion of finitude) by the Shaiva Siddhanta philosophy of Patañjali's lineage) is considered the root cause of māya and karma. Māya is revered by the Yogi as a blessing to protect him from realizations he is not prepared mentally or physically to sustain. The effect of māya on the Yogi naturally dissolves as his practice reduces his false identification with the body and mind etc. Karma is revered as a map and a key on the path to Realization. The effects of karma on the Yogi naturally reduce as he dissociates from the results of the actions done through him. The Yogi develops awareness of Divinity within himself and throughout the world, by observing himself and the world with compassionate, fearless, patient, loving, and dispassionate detachment. As the mind and body travel through the many various ups and downs of life his practice of dispassionate observation persists.

Through this practice, he transcends the body and mind, and he gains sovereignty over all natural phenomena. He becomes imbued with all the Divine qualities, like omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence etc. He becomes aware of his True self which is Divine and within all things. For him there is no other, because he experiences himself to be within all things.

aṣṭāṅga yoga (Eight branch practice for union with God).

Though Patañjali's system of Yoga is usually what is meant when people use the word Yoga, his system is sometimes referred to as aṣṭāṅga yoga in order to differentiate from other yogic schools of thought and practice. Patañjali's yoga is referred to as aṣṭāṅga yoga because it lays out eight basic practices for the spiritual seeker: yama (restraints), niyama (observances), āsana (posture), prāṇāyama (breath control), pratyāhara (sensory withdrawal), dhāraṇa (contemplation), dhyāna (concentration), and samādhi (union). More about these is described below in the outline of the text. This is a profound system for self realization which is rooted in deep mystical understanding of the nature of the mind, God, and the universe. According to Patañjali each of these practices is a necessary requisite for the others. Of these practices, there is great emphasis placed upon Yama and Niyama. The modern leaders of Patañjali's sampradāya (spiritual lineage) teach that it is important to institute the practice of Yama and Niyama before any spiritual benefits will be derived from the higher practices like āsana etc. Today many people are ignorantly practicing āsana, prāṇāyama, and dhyāna without the proper foundations of the preparatory practices of Yama and Niyama. They should know that this is not the tradition, and that such practice is very dangerous without the guidance of a qualified Guru. It may be possible to derive some physical and even mental benefits from such practice if there is knowledge of how to safely perform such practices. These practices will not lead toward spiritual realization, however, without the blessing and guidance of a qualified Guru and the preparatory steps of Yama and Niyama. The students of Yoga should be warned that the higher practices of Yoga (and particularly prāṇāyama and dhyānam) are extremely powerful. If they are not done with extreme care and proper guidance, they are a sure path to disease, the mental asylum, or death. The wise students of Yoga should prepare themselves for the grace of a teacher by practicing yama and niyama.

It will be interesting for the modern students of Yoga who do many āsanas and other Hatha Yoga practices (while largely ignoring each of the other limbs of the aṣṭāṅga Yoga system) to note that the Yoga Sutra contains one verse on āsana which says: “sthira sukham āsanam” or “Sit still in a comfortable posture.”

Necessity of a Guru

The Yoga Sutras teaches that for Yoga practice to begin, a Guru is necessary in the aphorism 1.26:

sa pūrveṣāṃ api guruḥ kālenā navacchedāt |

To attain knowledge of the ancient science of Yoga a Spiritual Master must be found. This is needed for the process of Yoga to begin.

The Sutras go on to say that the Yogi seeking a Guru with intense desire will practice the mantra om (a conjunction of the three letters A-U-M - pronounced individually) with proper knowledge of its three parts and their mystical significance. With the desire of preparing himself for the Guru, the Yogi is advised to practice this mantra. By this sacred mantra the Guru will be impelled toward the śiṣya (disciple). When the Guru's grace is attained, the Yogi becomes endowed with the wealth of knowledge that his Guru embodies. It is natural for the person who is bound by avidyā (ignorance) to require a Guru, because the instinctive nature is to preserve itself (that is to preserve ignorance). It is not possible for the ahaṅkāra (the ego self) to become free from its own trappings. For mokṣa (liberation) the grace of a Guru is required. People seek out qualified teachers for learning languages, mathematics, sciences, music, and arts, but these things are very easy to master. It is the most difficult thing for a person to do to realize the Self. This is why it is much more important to have a realized Guru (a teacher) for Yoga than for any other

study. The person who can not humble himself before the embodiment of Divine Realization (the Guru) is not truly seeking realization. He is bond by the instinctive patterns of the mind. He bows instead to his own ignorance. The patterns of his instinctive mind and his delusions of the world will lead him painfully to difficult lessons. His path to realization is slow and tedious. When the painful experiences have lead him to sufficient wisdom about the nature of the mind and actions, he too will bow before a Guru, and his practice will be empowered and enlivened by the light of Realization shining in the Guru. The Guru's very existence is a Light to spiritual seekers everywhere. May the grace of the Guru enliven the Divine spark within seekers everywhere.

The format of the Yoga sutras:

The Yoga sutras is divided into four paadas (sections):

- 1) samādhi-pādaḥ (on union)
- 2) sādhana-pādaḥ (on spiritual practices)
- 3) vibhūti-pādaḥ (on mystical powers)
- 4) kaivalya-pādaḥ (on perfection)

These four sections are outlined bellow:

1) samādhi-pādaḥ (on union).

This section defines Yoga (as described above) as the process of restraining the instinctive habits of the mind (vṛttis). It describes these mental patterns as five-fold: logical, illogical (that is faulty logic), imagination, sleep, and memory. Yoga is described as the process of retraining the mind from these instinctive habits so that direct perception of reality can be experienced. This is done by observing with detachment which is attained through practice. The necessity of a Guru is emphasized. Then the obstacles toward the Yogic conditioning of the mind are listed: these are disease, inaction, doubt, lack of motivation, laziness, mental distraction, wrong focus, instability, etc. The text is clear to state that once these obstacles are overcome that the mind becomes clear and becomes endowed with all the divine qualities. It is not limited by space or time and its desires are fulfilled effortlessly. This transcendent state of consciousness is contrasted with the normal logic processes. It is stated that this knowledge is not attained through logic, study, or from hearing testimony; it is a direct experience, which merges the seeker with the Divine.

2) sādhana-pādaḥ (on spiritual practices).

This section describes the practices for the Yoga practitioner. The disciplines of Yoga are described as austerity, study of the scriptures, and dedication of every action to the Lord. The main affliction which obstructs the Yogi in his practices is said to be ignorance (avidyā). Though ignorance is said to be the root of all afflictions, five subsequent afflictions are listed: ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and clinging to the life of the body. Ultimately these all can be traced back to the avidyā.

The aṣṭāṅga yoga (eight-fold Yoga) practices is given.

1) 5 yamas are described as five self restraints.

1a) ahimsā non violence - (Non-violence toward self and others in thought word and deed. This avoids vegetarian diet, and requires the practitioner to respect all life. The animals, plants and even the stones and inanimate objects should be treated with compassion. Lovingly protecting all who cannot protect themselves and protecting the environment is an important part of this practice.)

1b) satya - truth (being open and honest to oneself and others. Not entering into debt, not concealing or withholding information, and not misrepresenting oneself)

1c) asteya - non-stealing (Not stealing or coveting the property of others. This includes not entering into debts, and honest dealings in business).

1d) brahmacharya - Divine conduct (This means always loving and serving and giving; and never taking. This practice is often erroneously translated as celibacy, though celibacy is surely a part of this practice. It should be noted that strict abstinence is not necessarily the teaching. Sex is one of several needs of the physical body, like eating food. If a person is not capable of living without food, they should not expect that they will be capable of living a life of abstinence. Most people living in the world are not capable of a forced life of celibacy. This practice will hurt their bodies and move their consciousness away from God realization. They must reduce the guilt and shame etc. attached to their sexuality by facing their sexuality. Though the scriptures do not recommend dating, there is no moral judgment placed upon sexuality in any form. Marriage is the recommendation for happiness in life and spiritual progress. The man and wife are encouraged to continually trace the source of their unhappiness causing difficulties in the relationship to them selves. The wise know that if they do not face their own problems in the current relationship, the next will present the same unresolved difficulties. For the spiritual seeker, divorce is truly not an acceptable option. For those who are married, brahmacharya is the practice of maintaining monogamous relationship and focusing all the sexual thoughts and attention on the spouse.)

1e) aparigrahā - non-covetousness (This requires developing the attitude that all things are Gods. When people accept and use items, they should maintain the mental attitude that all things are temporarily entrusted to them by the Lord for the purpose of fulfilling his mission for them (this is how the Yogi views even the body and mind). They should absolutely avoid vanity, extravagance and excesses of all kinds. They should offer all gifts and praises offered to them immediately to their Guru and to the Lord.)

2) **5 niyamas** are described as five observances.

2a) śauca - purity (Avoiding impurity in body mind and speech)

2b) satoṣa - contentment (Seeking joy and acceptance in life. The disposition should be steady and balanced throughout the pains and pleasures of life.)

2c) tapas - austerities (Performing spiritual practice, austerities, sacrifice, and observing religious vows. Intense austerities should only be conducted under the guidance of a realized Guru.)

2d) svadhyāya - self-reflection / scriptural study (Observing the inner state and reaction (intellectual and emotional) to experiences and other people. People should contemplate their inner nature. They should study the scriptures and meditate constantly on their meaning and how they apply to their lives).

2e) īśvara-praṇidhāna - worship / reflection on the Lord (They should remain mindful of the Lord within all things. This is achieved through pūjā (rituals), prayer, and worship. This may include cleaning the Temple, serving the Guru, making flower garlands for Svāmīs, Gurus and the Deities in the Temple and the bhakti Yoga (devotional) practices like bhajana (devotional songs.)

3) āsana (posture), This is the practice of sitting still and comfortably for meditation. The many postures of Hatha Yoga are used to gain control over the body so that it does not become a distraction to meditation. Yogis gain mastery over their bodies. They gain control over involuntary muscles and reflexes, can slow the heart rate to a stop, and can even levitate. Though these practices are not the aim of Yoga, they can help the Yogi to gain control over the body so that it will not be an impediment to their spiritual practice.

4) prāṇāyama (breath control), This is the practice of paying attention to the breath and calming the mind. Pāna is the life force, and it is the breath; but it is also the mind. When a Yogi gains control over the mind, he gains control over all natural forces throughout the universe. The breathing exercises of Hatha yoga are employed to gain mastery over the mind, so that it is not an impediment in meditation.

4) pratyāhara (sensory withdrawal), This is the practice of withdrawing the awareness from the sensory perceptions and internalizing it.

The last three limbs dhāraṇa, dhyāna, and samādhi are described in the next section.

3) vibhūti-padaH (on mystical powers),

Description of the eight limbed Yoga continues:

5) **dhāraṇa (contemplation)**, This is the practice of centering the awareness upon a set focus. This focus should be single-pointed upon the object of focus.

6) **dhyāna (concentration)**, When contemplation is single-pointedly focused upon one object for a moment, this is extended. This practice is called dhyāna or meditation.

7) **samādhi (union)**. When the meditation (single pointed awareness) is extended to the point that awareness of all other things disappears, the observer ceases to exist. He merges with the observed and the process of observation. Though he does not exist, awareness remains. This awareness is transcendental and blissfully peaceful. This state of self absorption is know as samādhi.

Then the state of samādhi is described, saying that it is transcendent. It is perfect, formless, but within all forms. This section lists many meditations and the mystical powers that they will give. It says meditation on the structure language (differentiating a word, the idea represented by the word, and the actual thing) will give knowledge of all languages (human and animal etc.). It says meditating on the markings on the body will give knowledge of past lives and how the body arises from the spiritual body. These descriptions are useful because they help the Yogi to become aware of the mystical law that the body is a microcosm of the macrocosm of the universe. Many other mystical powers are mentioned like levitation, the power to become as small as an atom, large as the universe, to become invisible, to travel through space and time and to be in various places at the same time. It is certain that the Yogi who gains mastery over his body and mind has mastery over all powers in the universe. He is not bound by any natural laws, and the objects of his desire are fulfilled spontaneously and effortlessly (because he has humbled his will and it has merged with the will of God). Certainly many saints have displayed these powers. It is stated that the perfect Yogi is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent (the qualities attributed to the Lord). This is because he has realized his oneness with the Lord. The Yoga students are warned against seeking these powers which are always a pitfall in the quest for God realization. If a person practices austerities duty to some humbleness, wisdom, or spiritual dispassion he must be very careful to avoid the alluring powers and realizations that will come from his practice. These are temptations which will lead back to the world of attachment, pain, and ignorance. Using such knowledge and powers toward selfish or worldly means will increase attachments and this will cause the Yogi to loose any realizations or powers gained. Powers and mystical knowledge should be kept secret, and used only for further spiritual realization. With the guidance of a realized Guru powers and mystical awareness may be used for healing and for peace for all beings. This section ends by emphasizing the importance of humbleness and desirelessness. When asked if he believed in “mind over matter” one Guru said “Yes, if you don't mind; it doesn't matter.” This attitude must be maintained for the Yogi as his practice leads him to powers and mystical knowledge. If he desires to continue in his path, he must not become distracted or intrigued by the many beautiful visions and powers. He must continue the practice of focusing on the highest realization.

4) **kaivalya-pādaḥ (on perfection)**.

This section states that mystical powers may arise from birth, herbs, mantra, austerities, or deep meditative states. This sections states that the mind misunderstands itself and the objects it perceives, based upon its attachments to and judgments of those things. If an object is desired, feared, etc. the ability to view it clearly will be impaired. In actuality there is no distinction between the observer and the thing which is observed. It is stated that as the Yogi practices the release of its mental attachments to the objects of perception, they are perceived with increasing clarity based upon the level of detachment. As the judgments of the object being viewed lessen through the practice of Yoga, the differentiation dissolves. Then the viewer also dissolves into the transcendent awareness which is throughout the world, and beyond the world as its cause. This is the power of pure awareness. This is described as Truth and Freedom.

saṁskāra, vāsanā, and vṛtti

saṁskāra "Mental impression" The imprints left on the mind from experiences (from this life or from previous lives). It is the tendency of the mind to avoid facing those impressions which are judged to be painful, just as it is the instinct of the body to retract from pain. Without a thought, the body's reflexes will pull the hand from a burning fire. In the same way, the instinctive mind will retract from “painful” emotional states, by repressing the emotions and thoughts that arise from difficult experiences. The goal of Yoga is to restrain the mind from this instinctive pattern and to redirect it toward allowing the thoughts and

feelings to exist within consciousness without judgment, attachment, desire, or aversion. When people passively view the saṁskāras of the mind, they are released and their power to affect the person disappears. When people do not allow the mental impressions to be processed completely through Yoga, meditation or sādhana (spiritual practice), these saṁskāras remain in the subconscious mind, where they accumulate to form vāsanās and vṛttis.

An example would be the reaction a child may have to a teacher yelling at him and saying "You are stupid!" It is easy to imagine who a young child who has had this experience might be feeling. This is an example of a saṁskāra.

vāsanā "subconscious inclination" Vāsanās are the subconscious tendencies and habit patterns which are the result of saṁskāras. The effect peoples state of consciousness and determine future actions. When saṁskāras combine within the subconscious mind vāsanās are formed. Vāsanās create our tendencies toward certain dispositions, personality traits, beliefs and habits. They are not logical because they are based upon various unrelated saṁskāras. The characteristics and inclinations that influence a person's personality are created by these vāsnās.

An example would be if the same child was screamed at several times by various respected teachers, each time being told "You are stupid!" If the child was unable to process the thoughts and feelings arising from these experiences the unprocessed mental impressions would remain in the subconscious mind as saṁskāras. In the subconscious mind, the saṁskāras would combine to become vāsanās. For the child these vāsanās may be illogical and unrelated to his actual experience of the world. For example, though he may be quite intelligent, he may begin to believe himself to be stupid. In addition, he may have an illogical fear of teachers which could be so intense that it makes it painful for him to go to school. From this perspective, it is obvious, that his resistance is not to teachers, but to the subconscious feelings and thoughts. To help reduce the chances of ever recalling these "painful" memories, the instinctive mind may develop an aversion to school and teachers.

It is important to recall that at this point these vāsanās are not actions but inclinations.

vṛtti "Mental state" and the whirlpool-like fluctuations in the mind of perceptions and thoughts. Whereas saṁskāras and vāsanās are tendencies; vṛtti implies action. It is useful to note that in other contexts vṛtti could mean "rolling down, whirlpool, practice, working, or activity." The natural condition processes of the mind are called by Yoga as vṛttis and the goal of Yoga is to retrain the mind from these instinctive patterns." When the various saṁskāras and vāsanās intermingle and act within the subconscious mind conscious beliefs and instinctive actions called vṛttis are the result. vṛttis are actions, beliefs, habits of conduct, and state of mind. Because vṛttis result from the subconscious saṁskāras and vāsanās though there will be a certain unconscious (instinctive) nature to them. Though a person may be aware he is acting or believing a certain thing, he will not always be aware of the subconscious motivations for these actions and beliefs. When the unprocessed, unconscious saṁskāras and vāsanās lead to instinctive action, the result is vṛtti. The goal of Yoga, as described in the Yoga Sutras 1.2 is to restrain (nirodha) this mental activity (citta vṛtti).

An example of vṛtti would be if our school boy began to skip his classes and tell people he is stupid. He may act as if he is stupid. Though he is not stupid, it may be too difficult for him to try to gain the approval of his teachers because of the false perceptions in his mind. If one teacher who recognized his actual potential said to this boy, "You are very smart. You should study hard and become a doctor," this child will respond instinctively due to the saṁskāras and vāsanās influencing the belief that he is too stupid. If the child screams, "Shut up old man! I don't want to be a doctor!" this is a good example of a vṛtti. People should be careful to understand the motivation for such beliefs and actions. If there is understanding of the motivation for such actions, it will be easy to have love and compassion for all people. For this child, it is very difficult to even consider the possibility of becoming a doctor, because it would require a change of his beliefs about himself. In order to change these beliefs, it would be necessary for him to face the "painful" saṁskāras and vāsanās which have formed the belief. His nature instinctively protects him

from the “painful” experiences by attacking anything that threatens to reveal his repressed past. To release these patterns and to become capable of better things in life, this boy must develop the courage to face his emotions and thoughts (vāsanās). It is important for him to have love and support.

Love and Fear and saṁskāras

All of a person's actions can be traced back to the saṁskāras of the subconscious mind. The instinctive avoidance of these is like the instinct in wild animals. When an animal feels threatened, he will instinctively run away or attack. People instinctively act in the same way. When another person or a situation threatens to reveal to them the saṁskāras which they instinctively protect themselves from experiencing, the involuntary reaction will be avoidance or offense. Though people are not often conscious of such habits, they are bound to them by the saṁskāras in the mind. This is a fearful and painful way to live. Saints, Yogis, and Svāmījis do not live in this way. Because they have spent many hours facing the subconscious saṁskāras in the meditations and sādhana (spiritual practice), the power of the saṁskāras within their consciousness has begun to lose its grasp of them. Through facing and overcoming these subconscious thought patterns they gain power over the fearful and instinctive nature of the mind. Their actions are an expression of pure love.

Personality and vṛttis

Many people resist making personal efforts for Self-realization. In fact this is human nature. People protest the spiritual path saying that if they realize that there is really no duality and no separation between them and any other that they would lose individuality and that the world would become a boring place. They are being controlled by their fears as the vṛttis within their minds give them orders like a tyrannical dictator. They cling to their personality flaws with superstitious reverence and viciously attack all who would suggest that they are capable of a more fearless and successful existence. They are cowards, who are passively allowing the vṛttis to control and subjugate them toward illogical ends. They are associating falsely with a very limited and external aspect of who they are. They are denying themselves the opportunity to strive toward their full human potential. These people will eventually come to the path of self inquiry and Self realization. When the painful errors that the vṛttis cause for them have led them toward wisdom about the nature of the instinctive mind, they will begin their practice of Yoga. There are bound by their attachments to these vṛttis and prevented from happiness and the successes they desire in life by their fear to face these hidden motivators within. People have a very stupid thought that a Saint or a Yogi must live an austere life in seclusion, diligently avoiding all things which may make them happy. People vainly torment themselves in the name of religion, fasting, practicing celibacy and even performing mortification of the body. They should know that God is in all things, and that to realize God their minds must be at a state of perfect peace and acceptance of all the experiences which could cause saṁskāras and vṛttis. There are many Self-realized Saints living in the world today. They are all very different in their character and behavior. They are surely among the most unique individuals alive. Their actions are unexpected to the people and very powerful to lead the people toward the fulfillment of all they desire. They live life fully, without fears, delusions, or impediments. The Life flows through them unhindered. Their bliss is an example and an inspiration to the people. Their very existence is a catalyst for the material and spiritual success of the people.

Patañjali's Yoga is really not a "philosophy" or intellectual description of God, so much as it is a system of practice for the spiritual aspirant to gain firsthand experience of the Divine. The knowledge of God gained through the faithful practice of Yoga is an experiential Knowing called jñāna in saṁskṛta. jñāna is not a thought or belief but a higher Knowing that transcends the limited faculties of the mind. The practices of Yoga help the seeker to still the mind so he can differentiate himself from the thoughts and feelings. For a Yogi the mind is a tool to be used for overcoming his false attachments and Knowing his True Divine nature. Yoga does not present a Dogmatic philosophy, but instead gives the practical tools for the Realization of God, who is the ātma (True Divine Self). This realization is the actualization of the full human potential. It is the Divine purpose and eventual destiny for every soul. Patañjali describes the attributes of God very little, favoring the experiential approach of describing the deep inner states of

consciousness attained through the disciplined practice of Yoga. The descriptions of these superconscious states are derived from Patañjali's own deeply mystical experience. They represent the highest Knowledge of God, nature, and human potential as described by all the world's religious traditions. As such, Yoga transcends religion, race, culture, gender, and historical era. Its practice is useful for people throughout the world regardless of age, race, nationality, caste, gender, religion, or occupation. It is a simple path of knowing one's self which is eternal, formless, and without limitation.