UNDERSTANDING Patañjali's Yogasutras

DEMYSTIFYING THE FOUNDATIONAL TEXT OF YOGA

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Introduction

Patañjali's Yogasūtras presents concise yet complete instructions for practicing Yoga, both on the mat and in daily life. It is widely valued as a 'user's manual' for living a satisfying and meaningful human life and is considered by many to be one of the most important texts of Yoga. The Yogasūtras explain how the different aspects of Yoga are interconnected pathways of a single, greater, path for daily living. An understanding of Patañjali's Yogasūtras is foundational in the practice and study of Yoga.

And yet in many cases, students find Patañjali's Yogasūtras extremely difficult to understand and even harder to apply in their modern day life. This is understandable as it was composed in Sanskrit over 1,700 years ago in a style that emphasizes brevity.

The intention of the Understanding Patañjali's Yogasūtras ebook is to serve as a companion guide to help understand the text, and unlock new depths in the practice and study of Yoga. It is best used in tandem with a reliable translation, like Mr. TKV Deśikachar's in his book **The Heart of Yoga**.

This ebook describes the general content of Pantanjali's Yogasūtra, and explains the flow of ideas through the different chapters. It shows how they relate to the practice of Yoga and to the process of spiritual growth. It is not a substitute for studying the text in-depth with an experienced teacher who can explain how each sūtra applies to you in your life and is integrated with every other sūtra. But it is a useful and reliable overview of the Yogasūtra's content that will help you to develop a new relationship with Yoga, discover how to practice it beyond the mat in your everyday life, and become increasingly, more authentically, you.

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THE CONTEXT OF Patañjali's Yogasūtras:

YOGA'S PATH TO LIBERATION Patañjali's Yogasūtra is the core text of the 'Yoga Darśana', which is also known as *raja* yoga. Raja yoga literally means 'royal Yoga' and is intended to emphasize its importance in the hierarchy of different Yogas. A *darśana* is a school, or a lineage of philosophy, whose main goal is understanding the cause of suffering and then describing how to be liberated from it. Each of the different *darśana* (there are six) describe a path to liberation. Patañjali's Yogasūtra is simply Yoga's description of how to find liberation.

In the Yogasūtras, the mind, and how the functioning of the mind affects our experience of life, is considered to be the cause of suffering. So Patañjali discusses everything related to the mind, including how it operates and how to influence it. In doing so, he offers lots of wisdom about life and living, and specifically provides instructions for managing our body, breath, mind and relationships.

It's also important to know that the text was composed in *sūtra* style, which means it is very brief and succinct. Indeed, it is only 195 sentences (called *sūtras*) in length! It's helpful to think of the Yogasūtras as more as a curriculum than a textbook. In a textbook, individual ideas are spelled out in great detail, while a curriculum seeks to cover the subject as a whole and leave the details of each idea to the teacher.

The Yogasūtra's concision of language, which is so rich in meaning and transformative life lessons, also means that an experienced guide is necessary for understanding its meanings and seeing how its advice applies in our lives. The text is nearly impossible to translate without first understanding it.

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PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF Patañjali's Yogasūtras IN YOUR LIFE

The Yogasūtras of Patañjali teach a way of living your life that results in increased satisfaction, more clarity of purpose and less suffering. Packed with valuable insights and practical instructions, it is truly a blueprint for living. To put it in 'professional terminology', it is Yoga's presentation of how the physical and psychological processes of personal transformation and empowerment works.

It's 195 sūtras (sentences) are organized into 4 chapters, and the flow of ideas in each chapter can be further divided into smaller sections as follows below. Seeing the flow of concepts within the Chapters is extremely useful in understanding and applying the sūtras to your everyday life.

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YOGASŪTRAS CHAPTER 1 Overview of yoga's path

In Chapter 1, Patañjali presents an overview of the process of Yoga. He begins by defining Yoga (I.2) and describing the results of practicing (YS I.3) verses not practicing (I.4). Then he describes how to achieve a state of Yoga (I.12-22) and gives practical suggestions for sustaining it during the pressures of real life situations (I.30-39). Finally, he describes how doing this results in meaningful personal transformation and the discovery of spirituality in everyday living (I.41-44 & I.47-50).

Chapter 1 is titled the *samādhi pāda*. The word *pāda* means 'chapter' and *samādhi* is a state of deep concentration, it is so deep that it defies the ability of language to describe it. Many practitioners hold *samādhi* to be the goal of Yoga, but actually it is better understood as a tool for the process of transformation.

Here is the specific flow of ideas in the chapter:

 Section 1 (sūtras I.1-22) defines Yoga as sustained attention (I.2), and says it results in clarity and authenticity (I.3). Since Yoga is so much about the mind, Patañjali gives a functional description of how our mind works (I.5-11). Then says, to achieve a state of Yoga requires both making efforts toward that goal (I.12-14) of sustained attention as well as relinquishing (I.12 & 15-16) whatever is getting in the way of those efforts.

Moreover, this movement toward a state of Yoga is actually the creating of a pattern that has several steps (I.17-19). Finally, Patañjali says belief or conviction is the engine of this process. The level or speed of success will be commensurate with the level of belief (I.20-22).

 Section 2 (sūtras I.23-40) is highly practical. It admits that life is full of difficulties and lists 9 that are unavoidable, like illness, doubt, aging, etc. (I.30). But crucially, it notes that difficulties only become obstacles for those who are agitated, i.e. those who are not in a balanced state.

So Patañjali then describes how to identify if you're out of balance (I.30), and gives 8 means for restoring balance (I.32-39), i.e. for returning to a state of Yoga. One additional way to establish equanimity is so powerful that it is presented before the discussion of life's difficulties with the statement that if you surrender to a higher power (I.23) then you'll never get stuck by life's difficulties (I.29). In this section Patañjali also describes the qualities of God (I.24-26) and how to relate to God (I.27-28).

- This **article** outlines the common obstacles, as well as some of the solutions available for returning to balance.
- Section 3 (sūtras I.41-51) explains how maintaining a balanced state throughout all of the ups and downs of life not only gradually results in increased clarity (I.42-44 & I.48-49) but also produces lasting personal transformation and empowerment (I.50).

Additionally, it facilitates the experiencing of spirit (I.47). Reflect for a moment about yourself. Are you the same person who first stepped onto your mat or began meditating? Most likely, you have grown and evolved as you use Yoga's tools in your life. This section walks you through how that process works.

YOGASŪTRAS CHAPTER 2 Developing A state of yoga

Generally speaking, the process Patañjali describes in developing a state of Yoga contains two steps. The first is attaining a general state of Yoga (the second step is described in Chapter 3) which is characterized by, among other things, the ability to return to equanimity again and again, and the ability to focus your attention for sustained periods of time. Chapter 2 contains instructions for how to develop a state of Yoga through both everyday life actions (called *kriyāyoga* II.1-16) and specific Yoga practices (called *aṣtāṅgayoga** II.28-55).

**note: aṣṭāṅgayoga* in this context should not be confused with the name of any particular school of Yoga.

From the perspective of Patañjali, it is all Yoga all the time, whether you're on the mat or off it. For example, a knife can be sharpened with a knife sharpener, which always happens separate from, and in preparation for, its use cutting or chopping things. This is like doing *āsana* or *prāņāyāma* on a mat, in that it happens separately from, and is a preparation for, your life. This is what is discussed in the section on *aṣṭāṅgayoga* (II.46-53)

Whereas a very skilled butcher may also sharpen the knife in the course of using it, for example scrapping the edge of the knife along a bone. The way the cut happens, not only makes the cut, but also sharpens the knife. This is what happens when implementing the different parts of *kriyāyoga* (II.1-16) as well as *yama* (II.30-31, 33-39) and *niyama* (II.32-34, 40-45) into your life. It is "sharpening" it while living your relationships.

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Chapter 2 is titled the *sādhana pāda*, which literally translates as the chapter (*pāda*) that leads straight to the goal (*sādhana*). *Sādhana* is often translated as practice, which is fine, as long as you remember that practice has purpose, that it happens in a context and is meant to achieve something specific. Here that means achieving the state of Yoga and its goals. This chapter articulates the principles underlying the practice of Yoga so that you can implement them in the way you practice, both on the mat and in daily life.

Here is the specific flow of ideas in the chapter:

Section 1 (*sūtras* II.1-16) describes how to practice Yoga in the course of living your life, it's called *kriyāyoga* (II.1) which means Yoga in action. It results in increased focus and clarity (II.2). Yoga in the course of your daily living involves becoming aware of the ways that your perspectives, attitudes and actions cause you problems (II.3-9).

Once you see what is causing you trouble, you then make efforts to change your behavior and act differently while also not controlling the results. Very easily described, but not so easily accomplished! Then Patañjali describes how to identify which behaviors are problematic and which are supportive (II.12-15) and what to do once you see that you're acting from the wrong place (II.10-11 & 16). Section 2 (sūtras II.17-27) describes the relationship between our spirit and our body and mind, including how the childhood developmental process leads to suffering (II.17), the different capabilities of spirit & matter (II.18-22) and how being in a body offers us the possibility of experiencing spirit (II.23).

Lastly, Patañjali states that learning to differentiate between spirit and matter is the goal of Yoga (II.24-26) and that the process has seven steps (II.27). It's important to note that this process is designed to happen in the course of your everyday life and, particularly, your relationships. It results in an expanded awareness of the patterns that play out in your life and learning how to effectively change them.

 Section 3 (sūtras II.28-55) is the most well known section of the Yogasūtra and the one most commonly studied in Yoga Teacher Training programs. It provides specific instructions for different Yoga practices including physical movements (āsana II.46-48), breathwork (prāņāyāma II.49-53) and sensory restriction (pratyāhāra II.54-55).

However, these practices are not intended to be the main part of the Yogic path. Rather, they are intended to support our living Yogically in our life and relationships. They work by changing how we feel and providing a balanced state from which to act from in our life. Importantly, the section begins with a large number of sūtras (16) highlighting the importance of ethical behavior and integrity in our relationships with others (*yama* II.29, 33-39) and with ourselves (*niyama* II.32-34, 40-45). The point being that ethics and integrity is the necessary foundational work that needs our attention prior to, and during our working on our bodies, breath and senses.

yogasūtras chapter 3 The Path

OF HEALING & TRANSFORMATION

Patañjali presents Yoga as a two-step process. The first step, which is the content of Chapters 1 & 2, is learning to develop equanimity and stable mental focus. The second step, which is the content of Chapter 3, is how to utilize the power of a stable attention to fully heal yourself, especially your mind. And then to develop the unrealized potentials you've discovered in the course of healing. It is essentially a map for the process of healing and actualizing the incredible possibilities for and within each of us.

Chapter 3 covers a lot of ground and begins by explaining the different aspects of meditation (III.1-15), especially as they relate to the process of perception and how you experience something. It then turns to listing different places to put your attention, ostensibly in meditation, and what happens when you do so (III.16-55). The vast majority of these meditative foci are locations within your mind and body.

The list of places can be generally divided into two sections which are both followed by important warnings (III.37 & 50-51) about how not to use the transformations that happen as a result of meditating. The overall result of moving through the first list (III.16-35) is that deeply-rooted patterns that no longer serve you are identified and replaced with supportive patterning that does serve you.

The result of moving through the second list (III.38-49) is that the place from which your actions and behaviors arise, changes completely. This is both very spiritual and completely transformative.

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Chapter 3 is called the vibhūti pāda which literally means the chapter (pāda) on extraordinary capacities (vibhūti) because the results described by meditating on each foci are frequently extraordinary, for example invisibility (III.21), levitation (III.39), the ability to move anywhere in space (III.42), etc. However, these results and the insights that arise from them are more usefully lives when daily thev understood applied in our are metaphorically than when they are understood literally. In other words, don't get fooled and misled by the extraordinary nature of what is described. Instead, see through them and understand what they mean for you in daily life!

• Section 1 (*sūtras* III.1-15) gives a detailed overview of many different aspects of meditation and perceptual experience. It begins by explaining that the depth of meditative experience may be shallow, deep or absolutely transcendent (III.1-3) and what the characteristics of each are.

This is followed by explaining how clarity is developed (III.4-5) through repetition appropriate to the person (III.6). Then the transformations you go through are described as the transformations of mental stability (III.9-10), deep experience (III.11) & deep insight (III.12).

Finally, Patañjali describes how to understand the actual changes that your mind and body go through (III.13-15). These are predictable based on your nature, the experiences that you go through, and the timing or stages of those experiences. Section 2 (*sūtras* III.16-55) lists different places to meditate on and the effects of meditating on them. The first list helps us identify our patterns (III.18-23), how to change them (III.24-26) and the general order in which the new capabilities should be developed (III.27-34).

The second list (III.38-49) revisits several of the same locations (III.38-40) in the body and mind that are listed in the first list, but results in deeper, more subtle transformations. Essentially, this deeper transformation is a spiritual awakening related to how you perceive and from where your actions, speech, thoughts, etc. arise in response to what you are perceiving.

YOGASŪTRAS CHAPTER 4 Explanations for the teacher

In the last chapter of Patañjali's Yogasūtra the focus shifts. It turns from explaining how to walk the Yogic path, i.e. from how to move through Yoga's process of self transformation, to explaining the mechanisms that underlie Yoga's process of self transformation.

For example, the first part of Chapter 4 explains the mechanisms underlying how transformation works (IV.1-6) and why some are successful but others are not (IV.7-11). Then the second part presents core philosophical principles regarding the nature of reality (IV.12-17) and the relationship between spirit and mind (IV.18-21). Finally, the last section describes the final stages of liberation, why it happens and what the obstacles are (IV.22-34).

These topics are all interesting and informative, but they are derivatives of the practice and not essential to the practice. So this chapter is useful for the teacher but not absolutely necessary for the student. Which is a reminder that the question "Why?" is wonderful to ask and incredibly interesting to reflect upon, but also often a distraction from the real work of changing our patterns. Of course for the teacher, understanding why produces insights that are very useful in guiding others through the process.

Chapter 4 is called the *kaivalya pāda*, which literally translates as the chapter (*pāda*) on independence or freedom (*kaivalya*). It is a reminder that the final goal of Yoga is not separation from the world, or removal from it, but the discovery and actualization of a new way of being in it.

- Section 1 (sūtras IV.1-12) explains the mechanisms of transformation (IV.1-6), specifically how transformation is a reordering of qualities already present (IV.2). And that this reordering can happen from the outside in (IV.2) or from the inside out (IV.4-5), but is not something that can be controlled. At best, it is only something that can be influenced (IV.3). In fact, it is stated that everyone's action will arise from either surrender (IV.7) or from whatever mood (IV.8) and pattern set is dominant at that moment (IV.9-11). In other words, if you're trying to control the process, the awakening of transformation, then it will never be a true transformation, but simply a new expression of the old order.
- Section 2 (*sūtras* IV.13-21) presents fundamental concepts about the world from a Yoga perspective. This section is very philosophical and answers some of the more difficult questions that arise from Section 1. For example, who is the real me (IV.12-13)? Is objective truth possible (IV.14-15)? What happens when something is not perceived (IV.16)? And, what determines whether something is perceived or not (IV.17)?

Then several *sūtras* answer questions about the relationship between spirit and mind (IV.18-21). For example, that spirit is the master of mind (IV.18), that mind cannot be both perceiver and perceived (IV.19-20), and that there is only one spirit for each mind (IV.21). Section 3 (*sūtras* I.22-34) describes the process of attaining the highest state. It begins with a particularly powerful experience (IV.22) resulting in the mind becoming directly influenced by spirit (IV.23-24). Then the characteristics of such a mind are described (IV.25-26) with the caveat that the practitioner can still fall (IV.27). So they are urged to continue practicing *kriyāyoga* (IV.28) from Chapter 2 until all the actions of the *kleśas* are ceased (IV.29-30). At that point, very little remains to be known (IV.31) and the relationship of a liberated person with the world is described (IV.32-34).

Understanding the flow of ideas in Patañjali's Yogasūtra from Chapter 1 through Chapter 4 is extremely helpful because it provides the context for understanding each individual *sūtra*. And that is extremely helpful when working to understand how each *sūtra* can be applied to our life.

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Don't just study the Yogasūtras, live them! Yoga is an embodied knowledge. Like music, dance and cooking, the proof of mastery resides not in information about how to act, but in the actions themselves.

It is not something that is simply learned, it is something that is digested, becomes part of you, and influences who you are and the way you act. Each time you come to the text, you're a slightly different person with different things happening in your life - and the same with your teacher. This means that the text will provide new insights each time you engage with it. It is truly lifelong learning.

And this is true for everybody, Mr. Desikachar often said that he had studied the Yogasūtras from first to last with his teacher and father, Śri Krishnamacharya, 7 different times!

To fully embody the Yogasūtras, it is necessary to put their teachings into action in your daily life. This means how you manage your body, your breathing, your mind, and especially how you interact with others.

This form of studying requires commitment and patience to fully integrate the lessons into your daily life and practice. But it is extremely rewarding. This is why, at the Yoga Well Institute, we offer ongoing weekly *sūtra* classes, because it takes regular contact with their ideas, over a long period of time, to truly digest and embody them.

STUDYING WITH AN Expert

Studying with an expert in the Yogasūtras is the most effective way to steep in its lessons.

We do not recommend reading the text on your own, and we especially recommend against buying a bunch of different translations and trying to compare and contrast translations of each sūtra. This will only lead to confusion!

The Yogasūtras were composed at least 1,700 years ago in an extremely condensed style, known as *sūtra*. There are only 195 sentences in the entire text, and each of the sentences are intended to be applied to different situations in different ways. In fact, the meaning of a word changes depending upon the situation to which it is applied. For example, Patañjali's famous definition of Yoga means something different when applied to beginning experiences than it does when applied to advanced experiences.

YS I.2 *yogaḥ citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ* = Yoga is the restraint of mental activities

In the beginning, the restraint of the mind means to keep the mind from wandering, or said another way, making efforts towards sustained attention. When applied to advanced practitioners, the restraint of the mind describes a containing of the mind which is experienced by the practitioner as a complete cessation or transcendence of the mind Each *sūtra* is literally filled with meanings that apply in similar but different ways to different situations. This makes studying the Yogasūtras a potentially very rich experience, if one studies with someone who can translate the meanings into everyday life.

Studying the Yogasūtras is most impactful with an experienced teacher who can guide you through the *sūtras*, word-by-word and can provide modern applications for the passages, and provide suggestions on how to apply the concepts and practices in your own life.

study the Yogasūtras

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