

# An Overview of the Yoga Sutras



*In this article Yogacharya Dr. Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani gives us an overview of the four chapters of The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali—the foundational text for the*

*classical Yoga (Ashtanga/Raja) system. This system is neatly unpacked by Dr. Ananda, who gives us key points to guide our understanding of this seminal text of Yoga philosophy and practice.*

The *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* must have been composed and then transmitted by the oral tradition since, at least, 1500-1000 BC but came into the written form much later, in around 500 BC–300 AD. The *sutras* were always kept short, as they were intended to be learned, memorized and chanted with reverence and understanding in order to facilitate the development of a deep sense of quiet, inner contemplation. There are 195 or 196 *sutras*, depending on the version. Two versions are available today that differ on the addition of a *sutra* at 3.22, which is actually an expansion of the idea presented in the previous *sutra*. They are arranged in a logical form and placed into four chapters.

## Chapter 1: *Samadhi Pada*

*Sutras* 1.1-1.4 deal with the definition of Yoga as a process of mental purification. The classical definition of Yoga as a discipline to control the whirlpools of the subconscious or unconscious mind (*yogah chitavritti nirodha*, 1.2) is given along with the understanding of the process of oneness with the *vrittis*, which occurs in the absence of the control.

Maharishi Patanjali stresses the importance of *abhyasa* and *vairagya* in *sutra* 1.12 when he says that the *vrittis* will cease on their own accord once one has perfected these twin keys. He defines *abhyasa* as the uninterrupted, disciplined and dedicated practice done with divine aspiration (1.14). The nature of *vairagya* as a cultivated nature of dispassionate objectivity, so essential for every scientist, be they either the experimental modern ones or the experiential ancient sages, is dealt with in *sutras* 1.15-1.16.

In *sutras* 1.17–1.18, Patanjali deals with the concept of *samadhi*, classifying it into numerous levels and sublevels. *Sutras* 1.19–1.22 address the importance of qualities such as *shraddha* (faithful devotion), *veeraya* (strength of body and mind), *smriti* (ability to remember and learn from previous experiences) and *samadhi prajna* (mental competence for the higher states) that are essential for spiritual success. He also classifies the seekers as *mridu* (dull and incompetent ones), *madhya* (the average ones) and *adimatra* (the excellent ones) but then tells us that for the extremely motivated and energetic ones who don't give up, the attainment is much easier (1.21).

The concept of the Divine is addressed in *sutras* 1.24-1.26 where Patanjali also stresses the importance of the *pranava* (OM) and its repetition. The *pranava* consists of the three sacred sounds (*akara*, *ukara* and *makara nada*) that may represent creation, sustenance and dissolution. Patanjali further states that *pranava japa* (1.28) can eradicate all obstacles on the path toward attaining realized oneness with the Divine (1.29).

In *sutras* 1.24-26, Patanjali defines the Divine Self (*Ishvara*) as a special soul (*Visheshha Purusha*) who is beyond the *kleshas* (inherent psychological afflictions) and karma. He also describes *Ishvara* as the eternal teacher (1.26) who is beyond time itself and is the seed of all wisdom (1.25).

Patanjali is blessed with foresight, and cautions seekers that there are many obstacles on the Yogic path to *kaivalya* (liberation) and offers the solutions to these. In 1.30–1.32 he describes the nine obstacles faced in one's *sadhana* and enumerates them (1.30). He also details the fourfold external manifestations of these internal obstacles (1.31). Patanjali then goes on to suggest different methods to stabilize and clear the mind

in *sutras* 1.32–1.39. Focused practice of one principle (1.32) is stated to be the best method to prevent and deal with the obstacles and their manifestations.

He advocates the adoption of positive attitudes (1.33) such as *maitri* (friendliness towards those who are at ease with themselves), *karuna* (compassion towards the suffering), *mudita* (cheerfulness towards the virtuous) and *upekshanam* (avoidance and indifference towards the non-virtuous). Single-minded concentration on the *prana* (1.34), the sensory experiences (1.35) and the inner light (1.36) is also mentioned, while he recommends a detached attitude (1.37) with deepening of one's knowledge through an understanding of dream (1.38) and meditative states (1.39).

Once we stabilize the restless mind, it attains the highest clarity and becomes crystal-like in its ability to truthfully transmit the highest experiences (1.41). This clarity is attained through different stages of *samadhi*, which he describes in 1.40–1.51.

## Chapter 2: *Sadhana Pada*

Chapter 2 begins with an exploration of the *kleshas* and the methods of their removal. Kriya Yoga, the potent combination of *tapas*, *svadhyaya* and *Ishvara Pranidhana* (2.1), is prescribed as the method to facilitate attainment of *samadhi* through the elimination of the *kleshas* (2.2).

In *sutras* 2.12–2.25 Patanjali describes the process of this gradual disengagement from the karmic bondage. According to sage Vasishtha, *Atma Jnana* (knowledge of the Self) is the only way we can escape from the clutches of the never-ending cycle of births. Patanjali echoes this when he says that it is only the wise one endowed with *viveka* (discerning intellect), who can see clearly that all worldly experiences are ultimately nothing but suffering and pain (2.15). It is only the highest state of *kaivalya* that is the real bliss and anything less is pain according to Patanjali. This is similar in many ways to the core of the Buddhist philosophy that views all life as suffering.

Patanjali advises us to prevent those miseries that are yet to occur (2.16), a vital clue about the importance of preventive action in avoiding future sorrow. In *sutra* 2.17 he further states that the cause of pain is the union between the seer and the seen. This unyielding bondage that causes all suffering is, in fact, ultimately due to *avidya*, ignorance of the reality (2.24).

The real purpose of Yoga *sadhana* is expressed in *sutra* 2.28 when he states that the sustained practice of the various limbs of Yoga is meant for the destruction of the impurities, thus enabling one to cultivate the highest wisdom of enlightenment. To this end he enumerates the eightfold royal path of Ashtanga Yoga in 2.29. Patanjali describes *yama* and *niyama* as great vows (2.31).

He further advises us to cultivate *pratipaksha bhavana*, the contrary view when one is faced with negative thoughts that cause suffering (2.33). Even if we cannot replace negative thoughts with emotion-laden positive reinforcements, we must at least make an attempt to stop them in their troublesome track! I have personally found that a strong "STOP" statement works wonders in helping block out the negative thoughts that otherwise lead us into the quicksand of deeper trouble.

In *sutra* 2.46, Patanjali defines *asana* as a state that radiates stability and ease. Such a state may be attained only through regular, disciplined and determined practice. The key to attaining this state is given in 2.47, where he advises us to practice *asana* with a relaxation of effort and contemplation on the infinite. Through the practice of *asana*, one attains the state of balanced equanimity (described in the *Bhagavad Gita* as *samatvam*) that enables one to overcome the dualities that normally torment us into imbalance (2.48).

Patanjali defines *pranayama* as the "cessation of the processes of inhalation and exhalation" (2.49). Such a state of going beyond the breath is another example of Patanjali's genius in explaining the higher concepts with simplicity. When faced with something that amazes us, we say, "It took my breath away!" Imagine then, the state of our breath, when we are face-to-face with the divine experience itself! Having described *pranayama* as a bridge between the external and internal worlds, he goes on to define *pratyahara* in 2.54 and 2.55 as the "withdrawing of the mind from the sensory engagements." Just as a tortoise withdraws its limbs into its shell, the senses cease to function as soon as the mind (the main energy source for sensory function) starts the journey inwards.

## Chapter 3: *Vibhuti Pada*

Now ready for the onward, inner journey, Patanjali starts the third *Pada*, giving definitions of the three internal aspects (*antaranga*) of Yoga, namely *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*. He defines *dharana* as the process of binding consciousness to a point, place, region or object (3.1) and *dhyana* as the state in which there is a steady and continuous flow of attention and concentration to a point, place, region or object (3.2).

The state of absorptive super-consciousness (*samadhi*) is an omnipresent state in which the mind loses itself and the object alone shines without differentiation (3.3). These three internal limbs are known together as *samyama* (flowing together seamlessly, 3.4). He describes in 3.17-3.37 and 3.39-3.49 the special experiences and powers (*siddhis*) that result from performing *samyama* on various gross and subtle objects. It is important to note that in *sutra* 3.38 he warns us that the *siddhis* are both an attainment as well as an obstacle to spiritual progress.

The detached attitude toward the manifest world is very important in Yoga *sadhana*, but we are taught by Patanjali that it's only through the process of renunciation that the ultimate state of *kaivalya* may be attained (3.50). He strongly tells us that we must give up even the desire for that highest state, if that state is to occur (*para vairagya*, dispassionate objectivity). The importance of this *para vairagya* that destroys the very seed of the impurities, thus blessing us with liberation, is described in 3.51. He concludes the *Vibhuti Pada* by telling us that it is only the equality between *buddhi* and *Purusha* that brings about liberation (3.56). Purity of thought, word and deed is of paramount importance if we are to become the purest vehicles of Divine Grace.

## Chapter 4: Kaivalya Pada

Chapter 4 has a mere 34 verses, but Patanjali gives us an insight into that highest state of liberation known as *kaivalya*. He explains how *siddhis*, which are mere milestones of progress, may be obtained by different methods (4.1). He examines the concept of karma and describes the relationship between action and reaction (4.7-4.8). He discusses the concept of reincarnation in *sutra* 4.9 when he states that the deep habit patterns (*samskaras*) have an unbroken continuity and play out from lifetime to lifetime by giving rise to the different types of incarnations, locations and time frames.

He gives us an excellent concept of the threefold nature of time when he says that the past and future both exist in the present reality but appear different only because of their different characteristics and forms. This implies that, by knowing the present reality, one can also gain the knowledge of the past and future (4.12).

Patanjali helps us understand the *gunas* by explaining that they are the backbone of all that manifests as well as that which is at subtle planes of existence (4.13). He tells us how the same object may be perceived differently by the different minds because the minds themselves manifest differently (4.15-4.17). No wonder everyone seems to have his or her own view of the world.

Once we realize this truth, we are able to understand others better and make the world a better place for we realize there cannot be just one view. He says, "No object depends upon only one mind" (4.16). This is a clear-cut message from the great sage that the universe can do quite well, even if we are not there!

As we gradually grow into the higher states, there occurs the dawning of higher discrimination (*vivekanimnam*). When this occurs, the mind begins to gravitate toward absolute liberation from all experiences that otherwise result because of the interaction between the seer and the seen (4.26). It is as if we are pulled into that highest state once we get close to it through our self-efforts!

Just when we seem to develop a sense of complacency, Patanjali warns us that even at this highest level we must be very careful for, if not, *samskaras* of the deep unconscious nature will come into the equation and stall our spiritual progress once more (4.27). These deep residual impressions need to be dealt with again by *OM japa*, *prana dharana* and other practices used earlier to remove the *kleshas* (4.28).

With the final frontier being conquered, *dharma megha samadhi* can finally manifest thus removing the *kleshas* and karma once and for all (4.30). *Dharma megha* refers to the potent rain cloud of virtue that has the potential to bless us with eternal freedom. The torrential rainfall from this rain cloud of the highest nature washes away all the arrogant, ignorant impurities that were keeping us away from our attaining to the highest state of ultimate realization. It is at this point (4.30), Maharishi Patanjali implies, that we become the Divine itself in the state of *kaivalya*. We lose our sense of individuality in order to gain the sense of absolute universality.

Once this state occurs, the *gunas* automatically recede back into their essence, having fulfilled their purpose (2.18) of giving us the enjoyment (*bhoga*) as well as having stimulated us towards the attainment of emancipation (*apavarga*). We actually even go beyond time itself at this point. There are no more ramifications of the past or the future, for they disappear completely. At this point we finally exist totally only in the enlightened now (4.33).

Patanjali concludes the *Kaivalya Pada* by saying that, once we reach this point in our spiritual journey, the pure consciousness becomes established in its own true nature (4.34). With the attainment of this absolute and most dynamic state of being, our evolutionary journey ends, as we have reached the pinnacle by attaining our true essence, where a division of any kind ceases to exist anymore. Indian philosophical thought tells us over and over again that our essential, true nature is *Sat-Chit-Anandam* (absolute reality-consciousness and bliss).