

# Introduction to Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (YSP)

For most people the word “yoga” brings to mind the image of a yoga model that appears on the cover of a yoga magazine in a pose that is almost impossible to get into for an average practitioner. Yoga is commonly practiced as a routine which helps in improving physical fitness and sometimes as a means to stress management. There is growing awareness that yoga can be effectively used as therapy in treating a variety of ailments, including hypertension, diabetes, heart conditions etc. In India, Baba Ramdev, whose daily TV show is hugely popular, has been very successful in promoting yoga as a therapeutic practice. Those who have been practicing yoga for a while can attest to the physical and physiological benefits that the practice brings.

While all the above mentioned benefits of yoga are certainly desirable, most people are ignorant about the true meaning and purpose of yoga which is “the ability to control the fluctuations of the mind”. This brief and succinct definition was provided to us by Sage Patanjali, more than three thousand years ago, in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali has provided a very scientific and practical exposition of the philosophy and practice of yoga. One very important section of the book describes what is commonly called “ashtanga yoga” or the Eight Limbs of Yoga which provides practical guidelines for achieving the goal of yoga, i.e., controlling the mind.

Most of the yoga as it is practiced today, called Hatha Yoga, includes physical postures (asanas) and some breathing techniques (pranayama). As you can notice from the eight limbs which are listed below, asana and pranayama are only two of these eight limbs and help establish a strong foundation toward achieving the objectives of yoga. However, to develop a fully integrated practice of yoga and achieve the final objectives of yoga, one needs to include in their routine all the eight limbs of yoga in some form.

## Invocation to Sage Patanjali

Whenever we study the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, we begin with an invocation to Sage Patanjali. In this invocation, Patanjali is credited with three areas of knowledge – science of Ayurveda to purify the body, the commentary on Sanskrit grammar to purify the speech and the science of Yoga (Yoga Sutras) to purify the mind.

योगेन चित्तस्य पदेन वाचां । मलं शरीरस्य च वैद्यकेन ॥योऽपाकरोत्तं प्रवरं मुनीनां । पतञ्जलिं प्राञ्जलिरानतोऽस्मि

yogena cittasya padena vācāṃ । malaṃ śarīrasya ca vaidyakena llyo'pākarottam pravaram munīnām । patañjalim prāñjalirānato'smi

"I respectfully bow down with folded hands and offer my salutations to Sage Patanjali, the highest among the Munis (sages), who has presented the remedies for removing the impurities of the body through his treatise on Ayurveda, of language through his treatise on grammar (Patanjala Mahabhashya) and the impurities of the Chitta (mind field) through his treatise on Yoga (Yoga Sutras of Patanjali)"

## Overview of Yoga Sutras

Even though yoga has been mentioned in various ancient texts, including the Vedas, Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita etc, the credit for putting together a formal, cohesive philosophy of yoga goes to Sage Patanjali. In his Yoga Sutras, Patanjali has provided the very essence of the philosophy and teachings of yoga in a highly scientific and systematic exposition. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (YSP) are one of the six darshanas of Hindu schools of philosophy and a very important milestone in the history of Yoga. The book is a set of 195 aphorisms (sutras), which are short, terse phrases designed to be easy to memorize. Though brief, the Yoga Sutras is an enormously influential work that is just as relevant for yoga philosophy and practice today as it was when it was written. The sutras are divided into four chapters (pada) as follows:

1. **Samadhi Pada:** The first chapter provides a definition and the purpose of yoga. Various approaches that can be used to achieve the objectives of yoga are provided.
2. **Sadhana Pada:** The second chapter contains the practical approach to achieving the goals of yoga. In this chapter the author gives a description of the eight limbs of yoga called Ashtanga Yoga, which is how the yoga sutras are sometimes referred to.
3. **Vibhuti Pada:** The third chapter focuses on some of the supernatural powers that an adept yogi may be able to attain.
4. **Kaivalya Pada:** In the fourth chapter the nature of the mind and mental perceptions, desire, bondage and liberation and what follows it are discussed.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are also sometimes referred to as "Raja Yoga" or the "Royal Yoga".

## Definition of Yoga

In sutra 2 of the first chapter, Patanjali has defined yoga as

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥२॥ “yogascitta vritti nirodhah” (Sanskrit)

"Yoga is the restraint of the modifications of the mind-stuff"

– translation by Swami Vivekananda

In subsequent sutras, Patanjali explains that once the mind is properly restrained, then the “seer” or the “soul, the true self” can rest in its own true nature. Further, as long as the mind is not under control, it continues to assume the form of the “vrittis” or the perturbations in the mind and these vrittis become the cause of human suffering. In simpler terms, what this definition tells us is that we can be peaceful and happy when we can control the mind; else, the mind continues to control us and we stay in a state of suffering.

## Ashtanga Yoga (Eight limbs of Yoga)

The eight limbs of yoga as defined in the second chapter are as follows:

1. **Yamas** (self restraints): The yamas are guidelines for how to interact with the outside world at a social level. The five yamas are: Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truthfulness), Asteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (abstinence), Aparigraha (non-hoarding).
2. **Niyamas** (observances): The niyamas represent guidelines for self-discipline. The five niyamas are: shoucha (cleanliness), santosha (contentment), tapas (austerity), swadhyaya (study of the scriptures and self-study), and Ishwara pranidhana (surrender to God). Together, yamas and niyamas provide an ethical and moral code to be followed so the aspiring yogi can establish an adequate moral foundation for his/her spiritual journey.
3. **Asana** (posture): Asana refers to the seated posture which should be steady and comfortable so the yogi can sit and meditate for long periods of time.
4. **Pranayama** (breath control): Pranayama, which literally means stretching or expansion of prana, the vital life force, involves breath control and helps train and prepare the mind for dharana (concentration).
5. **Pratyahara** (sense withdrawal): Through pratyahara one gains the ability to withdraw the senses from their objects thus achieving perfect control over the senses.
6. **Dharana** (concentration/focus): Dharana involves focusing the mind on a single object of concentration for long periods of time.
7. **Dhyana** (meditation): When there is an uninterrupted flow of the mind toward the object of focus, the yogi enters the state of meditation.
8. **Samadhi** (total absorption): Finally when even the self-awareness of the mind disappears and only the object of meditation shines through, it is called the state of samadhi. It is only in the highest stage of “Samadhi”, called the “nirbeeja Samadhi” (seedless Samadhi) when the mind is fully under control and brings the yogi to a state of perpetual peace and tranquility.

The main focus of Patanjali is controlling the mind and subduing the fluctuations of the mind, called ‘chitta vrittis’. Once the mind is calm and peaceful, one gets established in his own true nature.

For an English translation of all the 195 sutras by eight different authors, please visit [here](#). In addition, the original text in the Devanagari script (the script of the Sanskrit language), English transliteration as well as an audio rendition of each sutra is also available.

## YSP Workshop Slides

As many of you are aware, I have been offering workshops on various topics in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali in the triangle area. Below are the slides that I have used for these presentations. I invite your feedback on the material presented.

- [Yoga defined](#)
- [Ashtanga yoga \(eight limbs\)](#)
- [Kriya, Klesha, Karma](#)
- [Concept of Ishwara](#)
- [Dharana, dhyana, samadhi \(samyama-1\)](#)
- [Dharana, dhyana, samadhi \(samyama-2\)](#)