

Learning from Life – The Wisdom of the Yoga Sūtra Part 1 of 2

The Wisdom of the Yoga Sūtra in guiding the journey of the psyche.



Buried within the rich traditions of "on the mat" Yoga practice are many teachings with advice and reflections on how to live more creatively whilst off the mat so to speak.

According to the teachings of Yoga, the postural practices of [Āsana](#), the seated breathing practices of [Prāṇāyāma](#), and other seated practices of meditation, or [Dhyānam](#) on such as reflecting on subtle aspects of attitudes or natural phenomena, or seated practices such as Chanting, or [Japam](#) or repetition of [Mantra](#), all sit within a framework of daily living and its constant dynamic of helpful choices and positive responses or unhelpful choices and negative re-actions.

[Yoga Sūtra Chapter One verse 5](#)

"The movements are fivefold and they afflict or don't afflict."

"The mind is its own place, and in itself,
can make heaven of Hell, and a hell of Heaven...."

- John Milton

The starting point for these deeper teachings is that all actions, including re-actions, can be a point of learning and growth even if the insight arises after the event. It is inevitable that our personal buttons, or old unhelpful and often repressed memories, will be pushed by ourselves, though we might project it onto others with such neat phrases as "look what you made me do!"

Within this triggering process old patterns surface bringing with them unhelpful and defensive or aggressive attitudes which can leak into our responses. So rather than the ideal of foresight with skilful responses being in place and in readiness whatever the situation, we have the more realistic possibility of progressive levels of learning options starting with hindsight as our guide for insight.

[Yoga Sūtra Chapter One verse 12](#)

"By both practice and dispassion that contained."

"Self-respect is the fruit of discipline;
the sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to oneself...."

- Abraham J Heschel

According to Yoga psychology the first awareness is the realisation after the action that we have not acted skilfully enough and seeing that the consequence had a negative hue which outweighed the positive. This leads the Yoga student, interested in looking into the past as a potential tool for anticipating future situations, to inquire into his or her action through examination of the symptoms arising from or around it.

This inquiry through symptoms can lead us towards the cause and knowing more of the triggers that activate the cause can bring us to reflect on the means for more positive interactions in the future.

So what Yoga text is seen as the primary teaching in this area of skilful and unskilful actions? One teaching stands out like a beacon on a hillside as a light that, over many centuries, has been a constant companion and compendium for both teachers and students of Yoga.

This text is called the [Yoga Sūtra](#). The compiler of this collection of around 200 short pithy Sūtra or verses was known as [Patāñjali](#). The Yoga Sūtra is often associated with Rāja Yoga as the Royal or highest teaching on Yoga.

The verses are composed in a series of terse, interlocked aphorisms each linking to the next to form a continuous and developing dialogue, as if between teacher and student. For example:

The teacher would say ([Chapter One Verse 1](#)):

"Now follow the teachings of Yoga."

The student would ask:

"What is Yoga?"

The teacher would respond ([Chapter One Verse 2](#)):

"Yoga is the containment of movement in the [Citta](#)."

The student would then ask:

"What arises out of this state of containment?"

The teacher would respond ([Chapter One Verse 3](#)):

"Then the seer's own character abides."

The student then asks:

"What happens in other moments?"

The teacher would respond ([Chapter One Verse 4](#)):

"At other times conformity with the movements."

The students then asks:

"What are the movements in the [Citta](#)?"

The teacher would respond ([Chapter One Verse 5](#)):

"The movements are fivefold and they afflict or don't afflict."

The student then asks:

"What are these five aspects of [Citta](#)?"

The teacher would respond ([Chapter One Verse 6](#)):

"They are right perception, misconception, imagination, deep sleep and memory."

And so the dialogue goes on and according to the students question so the next response arises from the teacher. The root of the word Sūtra is siv which means to sew, hence the meaning of the word Sūtra as beads sewn together on a thread.

Patāñjali was also said to be the compiler rather than the originator of this fascinating teaching and through him arose this collation of Sūtra into four chapters, each with a primary focus according to our state of mind and receptivity of attention.

The [first chapter](#) discusses the path of Yoga for the student with what is basically a steady mind that experiences only momentary lapses in awareness. Here the student is able to turn their mind towards the subtleties of cultivating attitudes and refining [Dhyānam](#) with little impact from the distractions of thoughts that others might experience.

[Yoga Sūtra Chapter One verse 37](#)

"Or, as an object, a psyche free from attraction."

"The fewer facts you have in support of an opinion,
the stronger your emotional attachment to that opinion."

- Anonymous

The [second chapter](#) discusses the means in Yoga for the student with a distracted mind with momentary glimpses of awareness. As such this chapter is therefore focused on strategies such as changing our lifestyle and using postural and breathing practices to steady the wandering mind and prepare it for the rigours and subtleties of more formal meditative practices.

[Yoga Sūtra Chapter One verse 39](#)

"Or, from meditation on what is appropriate."

"Whatever you do, do with all your might."

- Marcus Tullius Cicero

The [third chapter](#) of the Yoga Sūtra discusses the fruits and possibilities for a steady mind and offers many non-denominational meditative foci for the student who has the potential to both be physically stable, energetically still and mentally alert whilst actively engaging in the deepening of the meditative process.

The [fourth chapter](#) develops the goal of Yoga from the wise words at the end of the third chapter in that practice is not an end in itself. It is instead a means to test the steadiness of the student within the fluctuations of the minds thought processes. It discusses the goal of Yoga wherein we realise what it is to live within a state whereby the mind is a clear vessel for a deeper awareness to unfold as a wise and vibrant reference for skilful action.

[Yoga Sūtra Chapter One verse 47](#)

"On the maturity of refined profound reflection the serenity is from the inner essence."

"Vision is the art of seeing the invisible...."

- Jonathan Swift

These four chapters offer the seeds for the ground that we carefully dig through our [Āsana](#) and [Prānāyāma](#) practices. However we can have freshly dug soil, but without planting new seeds we will have little growth of new intentions that can bloom into those attitudes which are the roots for skilful responses within challenging situations.

In the next article we will start from the point we can often find ourselves in, namely what happened because we were not paying attention. Plus what the Yoga Sūtra advises us to do from the moment we find we have not been vigilant and the consequent difficulties we experience.

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