

## **The Ten Most Important Sutras** **by Judith Hanson Lasater**

As a child, my experience of summer was that of an endless progression of days filled with infinite time to pursue whatever seemed interesting to me and the gang of kids who gathered each morning on our street. Some days it was swimming; others it was the creation of some elaborate business selling lemonade or perhaps building a fort. But the most unrealistic and romantic project was the attempt to dig a very big hole, the classic “dig to China” scenario that all kids seem to try at some point.

The present task I have set myself is just as impossible and shows the same type of naiveté. The 156 verses of the Yoga Sutras create an exquisitely sophisticated map of mind and consciousness, and to attempt to separate ten that are the most important is as foolish as digging to China. However, I will attempt to discuss ten of the sutras which I find definitive for the study of yoga.

### **History**

It is generally accepted that the Sutras were written in approximately 200 years BCE, although some scholars believe that they may have been written as recently as 200 AD (1) Interestingly, the vocabulary of the Sutras are somewhat similar to that of Mahayana Buddhism which helps date the writing at the earlier date. (2) In addition to the mystery surrounding the date the Sutras, the author of the Yoga Sutras is also shrouded in mystery. There is some debate as to whether “Patanjali” was a single writer, a fictitious name, or the work of a combination of several writers.

Nevertheless, if we accept his existence, Patanjali is usually considered to have been a Sanskrit scholar, teacher and physician who codified the extant wisdom of yoga into a book of four chapters or padas which were written in sutra form. The English word “suture” is related to the Sanskrit word “sutra” and underscores the concept that the verses were strung together like beads on a string. Sutras are terse sentences and were meant to be chanted or sung. Some sects did indeed chant the entire 195 sutras before each meal.

The fact that the information is found in sutra form tells us that they had evolved in a time when oral teaching was important; written teachings were rare. And the brevity of the Sutras underscores the fact that a teacher/interpreter was considered essential for the student to understand the depth of the wisdom presented by this basic text of yoga.

The most important thing however is not information about the author of the Sutras, or even the form in which they are presented, but rather what they teach us about ourselves and how we function as human beings. Below are presented ten of the most important and well-known sutras. Hopefully this brief introduction will inspire the reader to study the entire text in the depth it both requires and deserves.

### **Definition and Heart of Yoga**

#### **1. Atha yoga anushasam (Chapter 1, v.1)**

##### **Now the discipline of yoga (is being presented)**

Far from being a mere introduction along the lines of “Once upon a time”, this is an important verse. Especially important is the use of the word “now” to begin the sutra. This “now” implies several things.

First, it implies that now the student is ready to hear and now the teacher is available and willing to teach. It implies additionally that the student has learned a great deal on his/her own before this point and is now willing to undertake the difficult and sometimes very demanding teaching of classical yoga. Finally it implies that the understanding of now is the most important thing that can be learned from the

study of yoga. In its most simple and pure form, yoga brings one deeply into the present, into the now. This is at the heart of the teachings of yoga and its profound significance can be found in the very first word of the Yoga Sutras.

The word “anusasanam” is an interesting one. It is variously translated as “exposition” of “discipline”. It concludes the verse as “now yoga is explained” or “now the discipline of yoga is presented”. The important point here is to remember that yoga is considered a coherent discipline which requires focus and determination. Therefore Patanjali states clearly in verse one that progress in yoga does not come by accident.

## **2. Yoga citta vritti nirodhah (Chapter 1, v. 2)**

**Yoga is the resolution of the agitations of the mind.**

This is the most famous verse in the entire Yoga Sutras, and rightly so, for it is the definition of yoga upon which the entire text turns.

“Citta” or “cittam” is usually translated as “mind-stuff”; I prefer to think of it in broad terms. To me it is the entire sphere of consciousness, as we ordinarily understand that term. This citta, according to Patanjali and others, is by its very nature expressed in “vritti” form. These “vrittis” are agitations which are continual, both conscious and unconscious, and are the root of our avidya, or lack of understanding about both who we really are and what reality is. According to the text, our consciousness is in constant fluctuation and agitation.

“Nirodhah” is sometimes translated as suppression. I prefer the use of the term resolution to describe the state of yoga. Thus the verse translates as “Yoga is the state in which the agitations of consciousness are resolved.”

## **3. Tada drastuh svarupe vasthanam (Chapter 1, v.3)**

**Then the seer abides in its own nature**

This is one of the most important verses in the entire book. It is based upon the fundamental concepts of purusa and prakrti. Purusa is universal consciousness, immutable and untouchable; prakrti is “that which uses matter as its bed”. It is the constantly unfolding, evolving and changing aspects of the universe. Together purusa and prakrti are the yin and yang of yoga philosophy. They are expressed in the universe and in the individual as spirit and matter.

“Tada” translates as “then”, meaning when one is in the state of yoga, then the seer, “drastuh”, abides, “vasthanam” in its own, “sva”, form, “rupe”. Thus when one is living in the state of yoga, the seer or purusa which already exists within us, shines out. It is no longer hidden by the agitations of prakrti which have been resolved.

A simple example can explain this verse. In order to create a statue, a sculptor merely removes all the stone that is not the statue; nothing is added to the stone. Likewise, the practice of yoga is not about adding anything to the individual. Instead, as this verse explains, the state of yoga is that state in which everything which is not equanimity is removed from the citta and thus purusa is free to shine out unabated.

## How to Change Your Mind

### 4. abhyasa vairagyabhyam tan nirodhah (Chapter 1, v. 12)

**By practice and detachment these can be stopped.**

Patanjali presents one of his most practical verses here. The author is referring to methods for calming the citta and thus allowing the practitioner to enter the state of yoga. “Abhyasa” is translated as determined action or practice, and “vairagyabhyam” as surrender or supreme detachment. All the practices of yoga can be subsumed under one of these techniques.

Determined action is discipline, focus, one-pointedness. The practitioner of yoga is required to apply him/herself in order to still the agitations of the mind. But letting go of one’s attachment to the achievement of the goal of enlightenment is also considered an important part of the formula. Vairagyabhyam therefore can be considered an expression of strength: the strength to allow, to receive, to be.

The metaphor of a river can make these concepts more clear. In order for a river to exist, there must be two things, banks and water. If there are only banks with no water, there is a dry gulch. If there is water but no banks to give direction and shape to the water, there is only a swamp. But with the banks of abhyasa to give shape and the water of vairagyabhyam to give flow and release, there is a river of awareness.

### 5. maitri karuna mudita upeksanam sukha dukkha punya apunya visayanam bhavanatas citta prasadanam (Chapter 1, v. 33).

**Mind becomes purified by cultivation of feelings of amity, compassion, goodwill and indifference respectively towards happy, miserable, virtuous and sinful creatures.**

This verse is important not just for what it says but also for what it implies. Obviously the verse is discussing ways that the mind can enter the state of yoga in which the vrittis are pacified. But what is more intriguing about this verse is that it is one of the few which overtly discusses the yoga practitioner’s relationship with others as an elemental part of practice. This verse makes clear that Patanjali considers relationships important and relevant to spiritual evolution.

Patanjali suggest that we cultivate friendship toward the happy, compassion toward the miserable, goodwill toward the virtuous and indifference toward those who are sinful. The choice of his words is deliberate. By cultivating friendship toward the happy we learn what it is to be happy and content with what is. By cultivating compassion toward the miserable we can see our own miserableness. Practicing goodwill toward the virtuous can help us to overcome our natural tendency toward jealousy. Indifference toward the sinful keeps us from judging and hating others. It seems clear that Patanjali expects the practice of yoga to be carried far beyond the meditation cushion.

### 6. yatha abhimata dhyanaadva (Chapter 1, v. 39)

**Or by contemplating on whatsoever thing one may like (the mind becomes stabilized)**

In this section of Chapter I, Patanjali lists a number of ways that the mind can become stabilized. The final entry in the list is verse 39 which is a very powerful one. After all the discipline that is presented in the Yoga Sutras, one could become discouraged. But this verse gives hope. Patanjali states that it is possible to for the mind to become stable by the process of focus on whatsoever thing that it pleases.

This verse is important because it underscores that it is the process of focus and meditation which makes something yoga practice, not the specific practice itself.

Sometimes yoga students become more and more narrow in their definition of yoga. They feel that their approach and/or the approach of their teacher is the best and only way. Patanjali makes it clear in verse 39 that one can practice from the heart and let the natural attraction each of us has toward an aspect of life draw us into deeper practice.

## **Living Your Yoga: Yoga in Action**

**While there is no doubt that the teachings of yoga are about liberation, there is also teaching in the Sutras about how to live well.**

### **7. Tapas svadhyaya isvara pranidana kriya yoga (Chapter II, v. I)**

**Self-discipline, self-study and devotion are yoga in the form of action.**

Yoga is not just a state of being but also the practices which are associated with that state. The second chapter is concerned with those practices. "Tapas" comes from the Sanskrit word "tap" which means "to burn". Tapas is therefore translated usually to mean austerity or discipline. I prefer to translate it as "consistency". To me, there is no greater tapas than consistency. This consistency means we practice the postures, breathing and meditation of yoga regularly regardless of whether we want to, whether it is exciting, or whether we have a teacher at that time of life. Tapas means continuing to practice regardless of the external circumstances.

"Svadyaya" is self-study; self-study means being aware of the inner dialogue, the words we speak, the thoughts we have. Self-study can be practiced all the time, even eventually during dreams. Self-study is not hard to practice. Rather, remembering to practice svadyaya is the difficult part. We get lost in the swirling currents of ego.

Isvara pranidana is the surrender of all the fruits of practice to one's chosen deity. This deity can be whatever it is that one conceives to be a greater power beyond one's self. The choice of deity is not important; what is important is that one learns to let go of all the benefits and failures alike that are related to practice. This letting go focuses the practitioner on the process of practice rather than on the goals of practice.

### **8. Avidya asmita raga dvesa abhinivesah panca klesah (Chapter 11, v. 3)**

**Ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion and fear of death and the five afflictions.**

Living with clarity is prevented by the active interference of the five klesas or afflictions, of which the first is the most important. "Avidya" comes from "a" which is a negating prefix, "vid" which means to see from the inner eye, and "ya" which is an activating suffix. "Avidya" translates then as "actively being in the state of not seeing the true nature of reality". This is not the ignorance of just not knowing a fact, but rather a very deep vritti which keeps us from knowing the Self. In Vedanta philosophy, the equivalent term to avidya is "maya", the great illusion. Avidya is the root of all the other klesas. In the state of yoga, the veil parts and one directly comprehends reality as it is, purely, without any intervening thought, abstraction or judgment.

The next klesa is asmita or egoism. Patanjali makes another of his important distinctions here. Many beginning students of yoga think that the point of spiritual practice is to destroy the ego. The destruction of the ego is a state of mental illness, not enlightenment. Patanjali uses two distinct words, one is "ahamkara" which is ego and "asmita" which is egoism. The distinction is that one can have an

functioning ego and still be a totally present being. But with the klesa or affliction is asmita, or egoism. This is the attachment to the ego and its understanding. Having a functioning healthy ego is not the problem; unexamined attachment to the products of ego is the problem according to Patanjali.

The next two klesas are deeply related. The first is “raga” which is strong desire and the second is “dvesa” which is strong aversion. Both are actually a form of attachment; one is a positive attachment and the other is a negative attachment. An anorexic and an obese person are both attached to food. One is attached to avoiding food and one is attached to acquiring it. Both think about food all the time. The important point is that both are attached. It is this strong attachment, whether positive or negative, that Patanjali warns the practitioner about in this verse. Pay attention to the strong swing of your emotional pendulum because you are likely to be drawn away from the practice of yoga at those times.

The fear of death or the clinging to life can interfere with our ability to remain in the present. For this reason Patanjali reminds us to be vigilant about this klesa. If we make decisions out of fear and attachment, we will not live the life we are given right now in this moment. Paradoxically, when we are actually faced with a life and death situation, we usually become clear and calm and respond appropriately for the situation. The rest of the time we may become either fiercely attached to life as we want it to be or fearful that that life will be taken away. Both thoughts keep us from the moment to moment practice of yoga.

## **9. Yama niyama asana pranayama pratyahara dharana dhyana samadhyo’ stavangani (Chapter 11, v. 29)**

**The practice of restraint, observances, posture, breath control, withdrawal from the senses, concentration, meditation and samadhi are the eight-fold path of yoga.**

The astanga or eight-fold path of yoga is at the heart of the practices presented by Patanjali. Interestingly enough, some scholars believe that this verse may have been added later to the Sutras. (3) Whether or not this is true, this verse does bear a striking resemblance to the Noble Truths of Buddhism.

The first limb is yama; the yamas are considered the foundation of the house of yoga and begin with the most important teaching of “ahimsa”. Ahimsa is nonviolence, or in the Buddhist tradition, non-harming. Upon examination it is clear that harming others or self can come as easily from thoughts as from deeds.

The next yama is “satya” or truth, which is followed by “asteya”, non-stealing, “brahmacharya”, clarity in sexual relationships, and finally by “aparigraha” or non-greed. Patanjali tells us that without these yamas all other attempts at the practice of yoga will fail eventually. It is sad that most Western yoga classes make no mention of these yamas.

The second limb is “niyama” or the observances. Three of the niyamas, tapas, svadhyaya, and isvara pranidhanah have been discussed previously as kriya yoga in verse 1 of Chapter II. The other two niyamas are sauca, purity, and samtosa, which is contentment. The yogin/yogini is taught to actively to practice these two virtues before he/she can begin the third limb, asana.

Most familiar to Westerners as “yoga”, the practice of asana or posture is the first of a subset of limbs which also includes pranayama and pratyahara. Pranayama is the restraint or “yama” of prana, the energy associated with breath. While pranayama is most commonly considered to be just breath control, it is actually the restraint of the energy of breath, not just holding the actual physical breath. The yogin/yogini is attempting to learn to channel and contain this energy so that it will be available for self-study and transformation.

Pratyahara is the conscious movement of the energy away from the senses. In the state of pratyahara one still experiences the input from the senses but importantly, this input no longer agitates the mind as it

does normally. This fifth limb of the eight-fold path is the bridge to the so-called “spiritual” limbs of dharana and dhyana.

Dharana is the practice of focused attention. The vrittis are still active but are now flowing in one direction. In contradistinction, in dhyana this focus has become awareness which can be said to be the paradox of focus without a focal point. All spiritual practices are basically either about focus or about awareness. In dharana and dhyana one can see how the transformation is made from focusing “on” something like a mantra, the breath, or a chosen deity, to focusing “with” something so that the residue is simple awareness.

I have not translated from the Sanskrit the final step of the eight-fold path: samadhi. This is a state of oneness which has a number of levels or graduated states. It can be variously a state of pure clarity, pure bliss or pure oneness with all that is. The difference between dhyana, meditation, and samadhi is the difference between a sense of the union of two into one, dhyana, and a unitary consciousness existing with no distinctions between self and all else, samadhi. If these concepts seem confusing and arcane, it is because they are. They are not written about well by any author and like all the important things in life, defy description. As all the great teachers tell us, they are best understood by experience not by words.

## **10. samtoshad anuttamah sukhlabhah (Chapter II, v. 42)**

### **From contentment unsurpassed happiness is obtained**

An even bigger problem than how to choose the ten most important Sutras, was how to end the list. I have chosen one of my favorite verses because I think it gives hope and joy.

This verse states several important things. First, that happiness is indeed obtainable. This is a very hopeful statement to anyone past babyhood. Secondly, the way to happiness is to follow the path of contentment. Contentment is not a sissy concept. In order to be content, one must have won and lost, gained and given up, been up and been down. In order to be content, one must have lived fully.

What this verse means to me is that contentment is the willingness to live in this present moment. Contentment is the willingness to accept the failure and success of this very minute. In order to do this we must become a wider container so that we can hold all of this moment. Contentment is letting go of greed, letting go of the desire to change anything, including one’s self. In order to be content one must embrace perfection and imperfection equally as part of the great panoramic of life. Most of the time, we just want “it” to be different, whether that “it” is one’s body, mind, relationship, job or an unpleasant task.

Samtoshā is the ability to remain present with, and in fact remain happy with, the circumstances of just this moment. What an important attitude with which to live! This may be, in fact, the secret to life --- simply be content with hard work or no work, riches or not, difficulty or ease. If one lives with samtoshā as Patanjali suggests, then one can live in joy regardless of what happens next. What a delightful concept; what a delightful way to live.

### **Footnotes**

(1) Georg Fuerstein. Personal communication. October 6, 1996. San Francisco, CA. [back](#)

(2) *ibid.* [back](#)

(3) *ibid.* [back](#)

## Suggested Reading

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