

Week 1: Study Guide & Additional Contemplation Exercises

Overview

This guide has a lot of material, including commentaries, contemplation questions like the ones we worked with during class, and study suggestions for those of you who want to use this class as an opportunity to go deeper into your personal exploration of the sutras through study. All of these questions and exercises can be done alone and are also powerful to do with a partner.

It would be great to spend a couple of half-hour sessions during the week reading through this guide and working with one or two of the sutras, using the questions and exercises, or making up your own.

If you're doing it alone, and feel very busy, know that just spending a few minutes reading a sutra before or after meditation will be very fruitful. If you have more time, you might want to devote more time to looking at the words and considering how to apply them right now. (This especially applies to the Kriya Yoga sutra we are practicing with this week!)

For those who have the time, we've included additional contemplation exercises and questions that work with the meaning behind these sutras and let you apply them. The more time you spend on this kind of study, the more it can surprise you, change the nature of your inner dialogue, and give depth to your self-cultivation. As many of you know, study of a text like this is one of the time-honored methods for "curing" the painful tendencies of the mind.

So, I would ask each of you to read through this document and look at how working with one or more of these contemplations can add more depth to your practice of meditation and your comprehension of the lectures.

What's Up for This Week

This week, we're exploring Sutras III-1, III-2, and III-3, as well as some related practices. After reading through the sutras and the commentaries, there are one or two exercises to practice.

A handout with all these sutras is available on the Student Page under Resources, which includes several translations and transliterations, (My own commentaries are in the Class recording itself and are also included below as part of the study guide.) I'll include the first group of sutras' transliterations and suggest that you refer to the Student Page document for reference.

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My study guide (the present document!) contains questions and exercises for studying the sutras, including those we looked at during our first class, along with a word-by-word translation of the first two sutras. For each of these, I give a series of questions and exercises for contemplating them.

My suggestion is to read through the whole document, then pick a sutra and focus your contemplation on it. I also invite you to create your own commentaries based on your contemplation and discussion (if you're working with a partner).

In working with sutras, start by re-listening to the class lecture's audio.

Meta-Process for Studying a Sutra

Here is a five-part process for working with a question, which is particularly useful for sutra study:

1. As you begin your study of each sutra, say it in Sanskrit three or four times. (We have included a couple of videos on the Student Page that you can listen to the spoken sutras if you like.) Then say it in English. This allows the energy within the sutra (and there is a lot of energy in each one!) to penetrate your mind and helps you experience it from a deeper, energetically transformative level.
2. Now, consider the meaning of each term or concept and/or of the sutra as a whole. How do you understand it? Read the commentaries you have on it, including those I offer in this document or in the books we've recommended. Some of you might also want to consult other commentaries, such as Georg Feuerstein's in *The Yoga Tradition*, I.K. Taimni's in *The Science of Yoga*, or some of the commentaries by contemporary teachers.
3. Then, consider how you apply the sutra to your own experience. (There are questions below to help you with this!) These are very experience-oriented teachings. How is the sutra true for you (or not true!) How have you understood this idea, and how does your experience reflect that? Write down your thoughts in your journal if so inclined, or discuss them with your partner if you're working with a partner.
4. Finally, close your eyes and spend a couple of minutes following the breath. Ask for grace to give you any deeper understanding.
5. Then open your eyes and write without censoring whatever phrases, insights, images, or experiences come up. This should be considered an insight from the deeper mind, the intuitive faculty (Prajna) discussed in our previous classes.

The Sutras

Sutra III.1

देशबन्धश्चित्तस्य धारणा ॥१॥

deśa-bandhaḥ cittasya dhāraṇā ॥1॥

Dharana is the mind's (chitta's) fixation on a particular point in space

deśa: place or space

bandhaḥ: binding or confining

cittasya: pertaining to the mind-stuff

dhāraṇā: focus

Say the sutra over to yourself several times, feeling the energy in it and its resonance.

In dharana, you choose an object and focus there, bringing the mind back again and again. This active engagement with focus is a core practice of yoga and develops the ability to stay present (incredibly useful in life!).

The practice of dharana trains attention and is thus very useful in other aspects of life! Some studies in the 1970s revealed that people usually feel happier when their minds are focused or absorbed rather than scattered.

For meditation, the object should be one that carries shakti, energy that can draw the mind inwards. Thus, Vyasa, the classical commentator, recommends certain bodily centers, mainly the chakras, especially the Ajna and the Heart. He also suggests the tip of the nose, the tip, middle or root of the tongue, the soft palate as vortices within the body that connect the physical body to deeper states of awareness. In addition, certain external foci, like a yantra, the moon, the form of a deity or a great sage, a candle flame, a mantra, or certain inner experiences like subtle sounds (which arise inwardly and are called Nada or 'unstruck sound') and radiance, such as the inner luminosity in the heart or the Ajna or the forms seen in other chakras.

However, fixity of attention doesn't mean complete stoppage. It means that the attention can move within this limited field, becoming aware of the different aspects of the object (such as feelings that arise, visual impressions, words that deepen your concentration). What does matter is that you are not distracted by other thoughts, so keep bringing attention back to the original object.

At a certain point, the object stops being a separate structure in the mind. As you keep returning to the vritti over and over again, it colors the mind until it becomes the sole contents of your chitta. This is usually the point at which the natural meditation current,

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which is the true agent of your practice, starts to kick in, and a series of subtle shifts take place as the object you're focusing upon eliminates the other vrittis until the object alone fills the mind completely. This is dhyana, edging into samadhi. In dharana, attention can remain on the object for around 12 seconds before another vritti intrudes. In dhyana, the mind may still be moving, but it is able to remain confined to the focal point for longer and longer times.

The skill and art of meditation practice is the skill of learning how to keep attention softly on the object, with the awareness that when the object is being held in awareness, it is no other than the mind. In short, one of the arts of meditation is the ability to identify intimately with the object rather than considering it a 'thing' that you are focusing on. Because all objects are experienced through the mind, true meditative focus involves an increasingly intimate connection with the object. As the intimacy of the connection deepens, the spontaneous arising of dhyana occurs.

Questions for contemplation, journaling, and/or discussion with your partner:

- What do I find easy about focusing? How and in what circumstances is it difficult? (For instance, it might be easier to focus when you are doing asana practice than in meditation or when engaged in a task).
- Which focal points do you find most powerful in your current practice?
- What is your experience of the quality of your focus? Does intense focus create tension? How do you resolve that? What is your experience as you experiment with Buddha's great instruction—"Not too tight, not too loose?" How does a tight, hard focus affect your practice? How does a soft, relaxed focus affect it?
- How long generally do you have to sit before dharana begins to move into dhyana?
- How can you cultivate your ability to focus?

Open Eyed Practice: Exercises for Deepening your Ability to Focus

Throughout the day, whenever you remember, stop and bring your entire awareness into the body, feeling the body in space and feeling held and embraced by the space around the body. Then, experiment with focusing in different ways, such as:

- When you are walking, choose a physical focal point, such as the soles of the feet, and try to absorb yourself in it.

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- Keep returning your attention to the soft palate, sensing the movement of the breath through the nasal passages and absorbing in the soft palate. (Don't do this while driving!)
- Bring your attention to the inside of the mouth and focus on the sensations there, such as the wetness in your mouth or the feeling of the tongue against your teeth.
- Choose a part of the body that feels tense and focus on the sensations there—not naming them, but noticing the quality of sensation. See how long you can stay focused. Do you notice the quality of the tension or discomfort shifting?
- When you are speaking with someone, focus intensely on them and on what they are saying. Notice the distractions that arise, and let them go.
- Make a point of returning your attention to the touch of the breath on your nostrils. Do this over and over again, whenever you remember.

Journal about this and discuss it with your study partner.

Sutra III.2

तत्र प्रत्ययैकतानता ध्यानम् ॥२॥

tatra pratyaya-ikatānatā dhyānam ॥2॥

In that (dharana), the continuous flow of similar mental modification is called dhyana or meditation.

tatra: in that (place)

Pratyaya: mental content

Ekataanataa: extending continuously

Dhyana is a state that arises spontaneously as you keep returning the mind to the object of focus. Over the course of a meditation session, the mind 'settles,' thoughts gradually dissolve, and the focal point gradually takes over the interior of the mind as the pratyaya becomes filled with the meditative content. So dhyana is not a separate state but a transformation that arises naturally when one focuses for a period of time.

The skill and art of meditation practice is to remain softly present, bringing your self-sense more and more into alignment with the object. In other words, let yourself 'enter' fully into the sensation of the breath. Consider a mantra to be an expression of your own nature, rather than an alien sound. To use your kinetic senses to feel into the sensual contact of an object with mind and body.

The arising of dhyana is sometimes said to be a shift in which the underlying awareness that is usually hidden by words begins to move into the foreground of the mind. This sense of a shift into a deeper presence is the main signal that you are in dhyana. It is not so much a question of thoughts going away as it is of tuning into the space within which thoughts arise.

Study Questions for Dhyana

Consider and journal about a moment in meditation when dhyana arose. How does it feel to you? What is the difference (if any) between dhyana and trance-y spacing out? What is the feeling when you come out of meditation after having been in dhyana?

Can you become aware of the energetic pull of the ‘meditation current’? Do you ever notice that you are being pulled into meditation while doing some waking state activity? Under what circumstances? What do you do when this happens?

Sutra III.3

तदेवार्थमात्रनिर्भासं स्वरूपशून्यमिव समाधिः ॥ ३ ॥

tadeva-artha-mātra-nirbhāsaṁ svarūpa-śūnyam-iva-samādhiḥ ॥ 3 ॥

When the object of meditation only shines forth in the mind, as though devoid of the thought of even the self (who is meditation) that state is called samadhi or concentration.

tadeva: the same

artha: the object itself as a direct experience

nirbhāsaṁ: shining alone without other objects

svarūpa: true form (in this case, the experience of the separate self)

śūnyam: void

iva: as if

samādhiḥ: full absorption

Samadhi is a deepening of dharana and dhyana rather than a separate state. In short, samadhi is the natural expansion that occurs as you sit for meditation when your sense of yourself as separate from the object dissolves. Sutra I-41 describes the process: “Just as the pure crystal takes color from the object which is nearest to it, the mind (dhi), when cleared of thought waves, achieves sameness (sama) or identity with the object of its concentration. This might be a concrete object (such as the soft palate or a mantra as

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long as there is the feeling that the mantra is a separate object), or a subtle object (such as the felt-space within the Ajna, the central channel, the inner prana that rises during breath practice, the light in the heart, the inner feeling that arises when mantra begins to merge with the mind.)”

In the deep meditation states of samadhi, we lose the self-consciousness that keeps us identified with our limited perspective; we forget to identify ourselves as the body/mind. We lose ourselves in the object. If it’s a mantra, we identify with the mantra with no sense of having a separate existence. If it’s the awareness, the atman, or deep sense of being, we recognize that what ‘I’ really am is free of the body and personal history and is only awareness.

In other words, the mind’s egoic function, the part of the psyche that ceaselessly defines itself as a ‘me’ softens to the point where it is no longer obstructing your clarity of perception and your ability to become immersed in the object.

It’s at this point that you begin to enter into a deep intimacy, even identity, with what you are meditating on.

In other words, you come into a non-dual awareness of the relationship between the knower, the process of knowing, and what is known. The part of yourself that identifies as the knower of the object stops feeling separate from the object, and you are conscious only of the process of experiencing the object. At this point, the subtle energy behind whatever you are meditating on begins to reveal itself.

For instance, if you are meditating with a mantra, you start to experience the essential energetic resonance within the mantra. It stops being a word with a meaning and begins to be experienced as a feeling state. If you are devotional and are working with a deity mantra, this can be described as an experience of the mantra as not different than the deity and of yourself as being not different than the mantra. If you are meditating on the upper palate or on one of the chakras, the experience can feel like a kind of portal opening into expansive spaciousness and skylike luminosity that extends far beyond your body and actually changes your understanding of what and who you are. For some people, that opening includes visionary forms. The deities and animal forms we see in chakra paintings are what we might call icons, visual representations of the essential energy that we experience when the center opens. For me and for many of you, the opening will be experienced purely energetically. For instance, as the heart center opens, the experience is often of a subtle, expansive swell of energy, which has a quality of tenderness or love about it. When the head center opens, you can experience a kind of skylike light presence, a luminosity that in sanskrit is called ‘jyotishmati’ –the subtle light that is the energetic substratum of the upper regions of the head. As these subtle

objects appear. Then, by meditating on this subtle light, your chitta will dissolve into that light, and that light will reveal itself as the actual substratum of reality itself.

It's this dissolution or melting that really is the heart of this process. We're not meant to stay fixed on the object. We're meant to use the object as the resting place that eventually becomes a kind of trap door dissolving into and opening us deeper and deeper into the essential field of our own consciousness. That's what samadhi really is—it's the experience of your own innate subtlety, the substratum of your mind, which starts to emerge as first the ordinary vrittis, and then your object of focus starts to dissolve into the deeper field of the mind.

Levels of Samadhi: (from Yoga Sutra 1:41-1:47)

Level 1: Samprajnata Samadhi, also known as sabija—absorption in which there are content and cognition, meaning consciousness of the object

Samprajnata samadhi leaves samskaras, which help guide you back into meditation in the future and which are also the vrittis that change your consciousness by replacing the distracting and materially oriented vrittis. However, as long as there is still vrittis present, the process is not complete.

Level 2: Asamprajnata Samadhi, also known as nirbija (seedless)—absorption with no awareness of objects or vrittis. This is the level of samadhi that can fully destroy the traces of karmas.

The process of absorption in the first level of samadhi is described as a succession of states in which your focus is absorbed in different objects. As your meditation deepens, your experience of the object will shift in the following ways: Vitarka anughata samadhi: Absorption in a concrete object such as the soft palate, a yantra, the tip of your nostrils.

- 1) **Vitarka anughata samadhi**: absorption in a concrete object such as the soft palate, the process of breathing, a chakra, a mantra when the mantra is still being experienced as a separate word. As Vitarka Samadhi deepens, the object disappears, and you experience a state of stillness known as nirvitarka samadhi.

Sages in states of Vitarka Samadhi were able to channel wisdom about the material world and its subtle causes. Jyotisha (Vedic astrology) and Ayurveda (Vedic medicine) supposedly arose in Vitarka Samadhi, when the sage in question was focused on healing the body or understanding a person's destiny, asked the right questions, and let themselves go into a meditation about the topic. Scientific and philosophical insights are often discovered when someone has become so

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focused that they fall into a state of full absorption. We'll discuss this more fully in the section on samyama next week.

- 2) **Vichara anughata samadhi:** Absorption in a subtle object, like the feeling space within the Ajna, or the luminosity in the heart, or the subtle currents of breath, or the inner feeling that arises as the mantra melts into the mind. As Vichara Samadhi deepens, there may be morphing into the feelings of peace and bliss (Ananda) or a contentless state of stillness (known as nirvichara, vichara with no content)
- 3) **Ananda anughata samadhi:** Absorption in the state of pure peace and bliss that may arise on its own or while you are immersed in one of the first two samadhi states. When these pure feelings arise, you can meditate on the feelings themselves, and they will deepen your absorption. In tantra, a meditation on Ananda is a form of meditation on pure Shakti. In the Yoga Sutra approach, absorption in Ananda carries you as far as the highest reaches of prakriti and can result in a total expansion of consciousness such that you are able to identify with the entire field of awareness.
- 4) **Asmita anughata samadhi:** Absorption in the pure feeling of I-ness or being itself, without identification with your personal body/mind. In Asmita Samadhi, the I-sense (ego) expands such that you realize that it is identical with the pure consciousness (purusha) or in advanced states, with the divine itself (as in the felt experience of Shivo'ham, "I am Shiva"). You discover that the limited ego (this is mine, that is me) is just a thought, but that it is a thought that arises within the pure spirit and that when meditation deepens, your pure sense of being reveals itself as Spirit itself.

Questions for Journaling and Partner Discussion

Recall an experience of pure absorption, which may have happened in meditation or even while absorbed in a task. Can you recall some of its qualities? For example, did you:

- Lose track of time or experience time expanding?
- Forget who you are (as a separate self)?
- Lose track of where you are?
- Experience deep pleasure?
- Feel free and relaxed?

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- Feel guided, or as if you are being ‘carried’ through the task or the practice?
- Experience a merging of your sense of self with the environment?

Describe to your partner or journal about any experiences where intense focus or absorption led to one or more of these states.

What is the role of bliss in your meditation? Do you ever meditate on pure feeling? If so, how do you practice with it? What brings you out of it? How have you found that bliss and peace arise during the day?

Bonus Practice of Self-Inquiry

First introduced in the homework from Class I, based on Yoga Sutra I-2.

As we said above, in Vedanta, the Self is called the witness of the mind. The most immediate way to contact it is through the part of us that observes and is aware of our experience. So, to cultivate awareness of the Seer, it’s helpful to ask yourself targeted questions that direct awareness towards its source. Questions like:

- What is it that knows I’m thinking?
- What is it that knows I’m meditating?
- What is that aspect of “me” that is aware?

The reason we ask questions is that questioning our own experience is a proven prompt that can arouse Awareness’s capacity to turn back onto itself, rather than constantly engage with thoughts and feelings and sensory stimuli. When Awareness turns back on itself, it will eventually draw forth the deeper layers of itself, leading in many cases to a felt experience of the Seer, pure awareness. This entails a palpable shift of state, which is quite apparent when it happens! But even if the state-shift doesn’t come immediately, when you ask these questions, you are looking in the right place—inside rather than outside. You are asking to see beyond thoughts and cultivating your ability to discern the awareness behind thoughts.

EXERCISE: Be Aware of Awareness as we were doing in class, focus for a few minutes on the breath. Be aware of the sensations that arise, that you’re aware of in the body. Be aware of thoughts. Now ask yourself, “What is it that knows I’m thinking?” or “What is aware that I’m here?” and focus on the subtle feeling of suchness or being that arises. See if you can periodically ask yourself that question and begin to notice that there is a part of your inner experience that is unaffected by thoughts and perceptions, that simply is. This common or garden variety of awareness is the portal to the seer, and

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by turning towards it, we can start to get a felt experience of the underlying Consciousness.

The Seer, pure Consciousness, is elusive, of course, because even when you “get” a sighting, the *vruttis* come up immediately. (i.e., “Is that it?” “How can I be sure I’m really experiencing the Seer?” “Ok, this must be it. Whoops, it slipped away!”) Also, the mind tends to fixate on anything that feels like awareness and to try to make it an object. Awareness, however, can never be an object. To really discern it, you need to take a leap into it. You need to realize that you ARE awareness. The *Ahamkara* (personal ego) is ever on the alert to claim awareness as a part of the personal egoic self. So, to be in Awareness, we need to continually relax that grasping tendency of the ego.

I like to start, as I’m encouraging you to do here, by spending a little time at the end of meditation asking questions like “What knows I’m thinking?” or “What knows I’m breathing”, and noticing the subtle, wordless sense of knowing that can arise in the wake of the question. That “knowing” is awareness itself. It has no words; it is peaceful. Though we begin by finding it with closed eyes, we can eventually recognize that awareness is present when the eyes are open and that it can be ‘felt’ all around us as well as inside.

If you are working with a partner, it’s very helpful to do this practice together, asking the questions to each other, and then discuss what you find. Maintain an attitude of openness, of “not-knowing.” In other words, you don’t need to come up with a settled experience of what the Seer is but being willing to experiment with questioning and notice what the effect is. The inquiry itself loosens the grip of the *vruttis* and starts to help you realize how mechanical and ephemeral most thoughts and emotions really are.

Technically, the faculty you are using to practice this inquiry is the *Buddhi*, the objective discriminating quality of *Chitta*. It’s the *Buddhi* (not the egoic aspect of the mind, but the clear discriminative power in the mind) that makes a choice to turn inward and look past the *vruttis*. It’s the *Buddhi* that has the power to discern the difference between an idea about the Seer and the actual Presence that is the Seer itself.

Try it—either with a partner or with yourself!

I highly recommend that you journal about your experience, writing a) what you practiced, what questions you asked, and b) what you experienced in the wake of the questions, c) what insights or uncertainties came up as you did the practice, d) what the feeling in your psyche was as a result.