

Welcome to Radical Practice for Difficult Times—an exploration of the Yoga Sutra. (Class I)

Welcome to all of you as we join for our first class in the great foundational text of the yoga tradition, the Aphorisms on Yoga of the Sage Patanjali. This is a fraught time, a time of extraordinary challenge, and also a time of immense creative possibility.

So I want to take a moment to acknowledge

the extraordinary circumstances behind this class. Pandemics are not new in the history of the world. There have been plagues and pestilence everywhere since humans first started living together, and they have always changed societies. The plague in Constantinople in the 13th century led to the takeover of the eastern roman empire by the Ottoman Turks. Smallpox pandemics brought by Spanish conquistadores and English settlers killed millions of indigenous people in Mexico, Peru, the Caribbean, and later in North America. We are in the midst of what many social commentators believe is a truly world changing crisis, which will have radical effects on society for a long time to come.

The Yoga Sutras, like the Upanishads, Vedanta, Taoism, mystical Judaism and Christianity, or original Buddhism arose out of societies where life was intensely precarious, where physical suffering was a condition that everyone faced over and over again in life. Buddha's famous wakeup call came when he saw for the first time an aged man, a person groaning from disease, and a corpse, and realized that even though he personally was leading a life of wealth and enjoyment and good health, that most people in the world were condemned to old age, sickness and death. Out of that came his search for a path that would release not just him but everyone from the pain of the human condition. Out of that came his ultimate awakening to the truth at the core of being. We are in the midst of such a wake-up call as a society. You and I, because we have had the privilege of practice, and because even those of us currently facing economic hardship are living in parts of the world where we have steady access to water and sanitation and fuel, are more equipped than most to see the transformative opportunity that's available to us to turn hard times into inspiration for inner change. That is what we are going to do in the next few weeks.

Part of our intention here is to make our inner work be of benefit to others. As we cultivate our internal yogic wisdom, and extend our hearts, we want to create around us mandalas of sanity and inner strength that will flow from each of us and through each of us to the parts of society that we touch. To accomplish this, we need to take very seriously the need to work with our own mind.

The Yoga Sutra is the most basic manual for inner practice, but it's also an incredibly subtle guide to the subtle states that determine the qualities of the human mind. In this first series, we're going to emphasize meditation and the various techniques for working with the mind both on and off the mat. One of the core realizations that the sages of the yoga tradition understood, which is that the skills we develop in meditation can be the basis for anything and everything we do in our off the mat lives.

Here's the 101, the bottom line, the nitty-gritty: when you follow these meditation protocols, your consciousness changes. And honestly, if you aren't willing to follow a practice path, that alchemical miracle just doesn't happen in the same way. The underlying wisdom—the intuitive capacity, which the yoga tradition calls *pratibha* comes online through yoga. And no matter how smart and accomplished you are, you don't get that wisdom without yoga. Unless you practice to calm your mind, unless you learn to focus your innate intelligence in a particular way, you don't have access to your inner wisdom. Even if intuition arises, you don't necessarily believe it unless you have cultivated the ability to go beneath your vrittis. And that's the deepest reason why it's so important to work with these instructions.

Following these meditative protocols works. They create in each of us a capacity for moving in the inner world that eventually bleeds into our outer lives, because the innate wisdom that we discover through yoga is not just ours. It's not just personal. It is actually the wisdom of the Atman, the wisdom of the divine self that lives inside every human being, which we liberate when we turn to these truths. Through this wisdom we discover the true nature of the inner and outer world. I can tell you this with full conviction because I've experienced it. I've watched myself and many of my people I know transformed from scattered, fearful, self-centered people into wise women and wise men, people who have immediate access, on nearly all occasions, to the subtle wisdom that is deeper than thought. When I began meditating, I literally couldn't hold my mind steady for 2 minutes at a time. Now, when I have a question about anything, I can turn inside and answers surface almost immediately. When we have access to and trust in that intuitive wisdom, we become able to act in the world as nodes of sanity, creativity, and light.

And by the way, we don't get to that intuitive wisdom without calling ourselves on our own bullshit about practice. One of the main characteristics of great texts is that they hold up a mirror in which we can see both our beauty and greatness, and our illusions. The Yoga Sutra is a kick-butt mirror which measures everything by our ability to hold the mind steady. As one of the great monastic commentators on this text says, **“The ability to stop at will the fluctuations or modifications of the mind which is acquired through constant practice in a spirit of renunciation is called yoga.”**

That's a high bar, for sure, and it takes a lot of practice to get there. But He goes on to say, "The two important features of yoga to be noted is that 1) there is suppression at will of the modifications of the mind, and 2) it is not casual, but has been developed into a habit through constant practice, not for personal gain. Sometimes, in states of deep relaxation or love, the mind will naturally become quiet. But that's not yoga, unless you actually can concentrate the mind and hold it steady.

As far as Patanjali is concerned, if you can't concentrate, you can't get out of the gate. The heart of the yoga sutras is essentially a training in concentration. So my hope is that as you study and practice with it, it will shake you out of complacency about your practice. Every time I read it, I see in the mirror of the sutras my own laziness, my willingness to settle for less than full awareness. And every time I read it; I am inspired to take my practice more seriously. That's the gift of a great text. The Shiva Sutras inspire us by showing us the expansive power of our own spirit. The yoga sutras inspire us by showing us that part of that expansion is possible only if we actually practice—and then giving us such a wealth of practices and state-changing tips that we feel empowered to practice not just when we're on the mat but all the time.

Most of these classes will be about practice, but out of respect for the tradition, I want to start with an overview. When you begin studying a text, the traditional method is to start with its context, its lineage, and then to give an overview of the goal and methodology. So we'll spend some time tonight doing that, because understanding the context is crucial to working with the book itself.

I've recommended a couple of translations and commentaries, and I am basing my initial reading of the sutras on a version translated by Pandit Rajmani Tiganait of the Himalayan Institute. One reason I like this version is because it has word by word translation and transliteration of the sanskrit, so a non-sanskritist is able to read it easily. Another reason I like it is because Rajmani is a tantrika from a South Indian Shri Vidya tradition, so his viewpoint is very much like ours. The conventional view of the classical yoga tradition of the Yoga Sutras is that it is dualistic, that it emphasizes a path in which the goal is to completely detach consciousness, the true self or inner witness, from any sort of entanglement with the mind, the senses, or the physical and social worlds. Fundamentalist classical yoga is based on the philosophy of Sankhya, which makes a hard distinction between pure consciousness which it calls the Purusha, and the world of forms and objects, including your own mind, which it considers impermanent and therefore false, and designates as Prakriti, a word that loosely translates as the matrix of nature. The goal in sankhya is to disentangle pure consciousness from everything else that the mind can identify with, including your body, your thoughts and sensations, so that we are able to identify ourselves solely with the radical freedom of awareness itself, consciousness free of objects. Fundamentalist Sankhya tends to dismiss the manifest world as essentially false and obstructive, unless we are using it as a dharma bell that

wakes us up to the truth. But to receive the insights of the yoga sutras, we don't have to deny the sacredness of our own bodies and the world. As the Bhagavad Gita, which is probably the most important of all the great Indian texts on yoga, points out, Sankhya is just one of the paths we can take on the road to truth.

In fact, the real power of this vision is not that it points to a rejection of our individuality and the world. It's that we can use these teachings to work with our own mind. By practicing with these sutras, we start to change the consciousness of the chitta, the mind field so that it becomes more like Teflon, capable of throwing off thoughts and impressions, instead of being Velcro, where everything we think and feel gets stuck in our minds and bodies.

In our normal state, which the yoga texts call bondage, we're mostly velcroid to our favorite emotions, opinions and ideas. We are so identified with our bodies and thoughts and feelings, that we define ourselves all the time according to what we are thinking and feeling. When you say, "I am tired" or "I am an artist" or "I just did something incredibly stupid." You are expressing that basic misperception of identity, literally confusing our real identity with a passing state in the body, or with our activities. Every time we do this, we're ensuring that we will continue to be limited by what we think we are, and therefore our future will be very much like our past. To identify the self as consciousness rather than the body allows us to recognize the incredible creative power we have access to in our own mind. It present with all the different states that arise in the body, to look into them, and to work with them skillfully. For this reason, I like to look at the teaching that separates the self from the emotions, physical sensations, and thoughts not as the ultimate truth, but as a powerful and indispensable methodology instruction for deconstructing your conditioned belief system.

It's much easier to practice with our own inner tendencies if we can step away from your deeply ingrained idea that the thoughts and opinions that arise in the mind are you. This is an utterly necessary aspect of sadhana, especially at the beginning, because most of us approach our meditative sadhana from a position of being completely identified with the personal self and the ego, which absolutely limits the extraordinary possibilities that are waiting to open up to us as we start to recognize what our mind can be.

If we understand that these sutras are essentially a methodology for discovering the true freedom of the mind, then we realize that these sutras can be adaptable to a host of metaphysical paradigms and philosophical positions. In fact, the language and concepts described here—concepts like Purusha, Prakriti, the 3 gunas, the divisions of the mind-field into mind, ego, intellect are part of the vocabulary of all the systems that were born in India, including tantra, Vedanta, Kashmir Shaivism, and even Buddhism.

Many of you here are yoga students, and quite a few of you are teachers of various forms of yoga, so you are familiar with this terminology, because all your studies in yoga have used them and asked you to contemplate them. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras are a truly foundational text for any yoga practice. They contain the basic practical infrastructure that helps us track our path, understand our experience, and make the choices that help us advance as souls taking the journey into truth. The beauty of this text is that it makes room for all aspects of yoga, and all approaches.

When I began studying Patanjali, I had been reading and practicing through the texts of Kashmir Shaivism, which were my first real experiences of the power of yogic texts. These scriptures are high, often abstract, yet profoundly consciousness expanding. But they didn't exactly give me the step by step. When I came to the Yoga Sutra, years later, I was struck by how granular and practical they are, how they characterized mental processes and states and showed me how to make distinctions between the mind and the self. I loved the fact that if you read them with the commentaries, they meet you where you are and explain yogic processes in precise usable ways. Non-Dual tantric Shaivism showed me what it means to see my human consciousness as divine, to understand what is possible in a human body, and to accept non-duality as the truth. The YS brought me down to earth, but in a very helpful way. They showed me that there's no point in talking about non-duality unless you can focus, unless you know how to bring your own mind into a concentrated state. And it tells you how, in a precise, step by step fashion, moving from recognizing the qualities of thought to outlining yogic ethics from the point of view of mind-training rather than religious morality, and helping me break down the stages of my meditation journey.

Yet though it contains sutras that are absolutely congruent with all mystical paths, including tantra and devotional practice, it is primarily the core text for Raja Yoga, the so-called royal path, where we aim for the highest goal of merging the mind in its source, pure consciousness. The heart of Raja Yoga is meditation practice—highly focused meditation practice. This path was created by hardcore yogis, people who really dedicated their life to practice, people who are on permanent retreat. Now, (*during the pandemic lockdown that was going on during the first class), many of us are actually in a position to be in retreat, right there at home, so many of you can replicate the experiment of the 2nd century yogis. You can actually sit for long enough to flow deeper and deeper into the depths of your own consciousness, and if you do, you'll discover that these meditation protocols, the inner protocols, actually work just the way the sage says they do.

But another piece of brilliance here is that meditation is not just what you do when you close your eyes. Even to successfully sit for meditation, you need to develop certain inner conditions and states. The sutras intend to help us understand and develop these conditions, and then to show us how to develop within a committed meditation

practice until we have fully matured and our minds have learned how to release over and over again into their source. And as we mature, I've found, we return to the sutra again and again because as we grow, so does our ability to understand what they are talking about in a deeper way. What that means is that even if you've studied the sutras, there is always a deeper insight every time you read them.

The YS is considered a darshan, literally a way of seeing reality. The word darshan means 'sight' or 'mirror.' A true Darshana holds up a mirror to the nature of reality and of a human being. In Indian tradition there are 6 orthodox darshanas, including the Yoga Sutras, which are based on the Vedas, the original sacred books which are considered the chief authority for truth. However, the yoga sutras are not primarily concerned with philosophy as such, but with the methods for realizing the truth that can only be found by inquiring into your Self, through practice, and by entering the wordless interior of your own being. The goal of the yoga sutra is to end the suffering of individuals. In that way, it has a lot in common with Buddhism. Like Buddhism, the Yoga Sutra doesn't tell us much about metaphysics. Instead, points us to examine our own mind, our own inner state, teasing apart the self from the constructed self we form when we identify with thoughts and inner states. Pat wants to show us how to look into the mind, to understand how the mind creates suffering once it has alienated itself from its source in pure Awareness. He very much strives to remind us that our highest self interest lies here, in the practices we can do to change the ordinary experience of human life—as he says in one of my favorite sequences, “Pain has been an inevitable part of life in a human body, but through yoga, the pain that is yet to come can and should be avoided.” That's exactly what this text wants us to do. Avoid the pain that is to come.

He wants us to learn the very subtle art of discerning those habits that cause pain, learning to stop them, and then how to explore the space that opens up when we've begun to transform those inner habits of identifying with what does not really belong to us.

The word sutra means thread, literally the thread you can follow to the Self. Sutras are pithy, as we know from studying the Shiva Sutras, so they actually demand explication and study to be understood. But to study the yoga sutras is not something we do just to understand these teachings intellectually, because they demand that we study your own mind in all its states, from total confusion to absolute scintillating clarity. which is what makes this such a perfect roadmap for us as we get to know both our lower mind and the ecstatic essence of ourselves. Because the mind is the truly distinguishing factor of a human being, the cause of both suffering and liberation, all systems of philosophy are essentially systems for curing the misperceptions of yourself that you carry in the mind. That's why you can study Patanjali as a tantrika, as a classical yogi, as a Buddhist or as a Christian, because it cuts to the essence, to the heart of all of it.

We don't know if Patanjali was an actual person or a name for a group of teachers. But in parts of the yogic community he is contemplated, invoked and worshipped as a kind of mythic being. In fact, Patanjali's name is itself a pointer to the nature of what this text claims for itself. One meaning of the syllables Pata means falling leaves, Anjali is the name for mudra of devotion and prayer, in which the hands are cupped over the heart. So the name Patanjali means one who reverently receives the wisdom that falls like leaves from the higher realms. This points to the claim that this book is not the work of a human mind, but that it was revealed, or channeled. This type of teaching is called shruti, which literally means 'heard' by a devoted practitioner listening to the teachings from the highest Guru, the teacher of teachers. The Shiva Sutras makes the same claim. In fact, the teacher of teachers in the yoga lineages is the same teacher as the one who revealed the Shiva Sutras—generally, the YS is said to have been revealed by Shiva.

Patanjali has an iconic form, which is described in another meaning of the first part of his name. Another meaning of Pata is serpent, specifically the divine snake Ananta, who is said to be the support of the world. Patanjali's iconic form is that of a man's torso with a serpent's tail. Vishnu, the sustaining aspect of the divine masculine, is said to sleep on a bed formed by Ananta's coils, floating on the ocean of consciousness. Patanjali is sometimes shown with 4 hands, two of them in Anjali Mudra, the third holding a chakra, the wheel that represents the cycle of life, and the other holding a conch, which stands for the infinite space from which sounds the sacred creative sound of OM.

The four chapters or Padas, are arranged according to the classical division of Indian texts. These teachings always start with the highest goal, the highest possibility. Then they describe your current state as a relatively confused human being—in other words, they show us what we can attain, and then explore the starting point, the basic place we begin. It gives us the step by step path from our current experience to the truth. And finally, it shows us what the ongoing experience of the realized yogi looks like, and what the yogic life will be like once we have matured in our cultivation of the different levels of Samadhi.

Book I, which is where we're starting, describes the highest truth of this path. It's called Samadhi Pada, which basically means the state of being fully absorbed in Consciousness itself. The word pada means stage, or state, or station, so each one of the books explores a particular station that we move through on the path. As the Shiva Sutras begins with the ultimate experience—Chaitanyam Atma—The Self is Consciousness—the first 3 sutras of YS are about the highest state of yoga, the state of chitta vritti nirodha, in which all mental movements cease, and the truth shines out as pure consciousness, which Patanjali calls 'the seer' or true witness. The rest of the book unpacks that insight both from the point of view of techniques for stilling the mind, and

also from the point of view of what prevents us from living in true mental clarity. I remember that when I first read these first sutras, they felt way past my paygrade. I related much more to the descriptions of the obstructions and causes of suffering than I did to the idea that my mind could ever be still! and to some extent it may feel like that to you. But the sages were very wise when they insisted on starting with the highest state, because by contemplating that state, we not only get inspired to practice, but we are able to recognize it when it emerges—which it will do over and over again in the course of our journey, even if that stillness doesn't always last. And by understanding the goal, they help us remember not to get sidetracked by the obstacles and gifts that emerge on the journey.

The second book, Sadhana Pada, describes the path itself, meaning the practical methods for getting to that state. Book two is sometimes called Kriya Yoga—kriya meaning activity, in other words, the stuff you actually do. This is where you find the famous sutras of Ashtanga Yoga, the eight-limbed path. The second book also describes the causes of suffering, the 5 Kleshas or qualities of ignorance that are the source of all our misunderstanding of ourselves and of life. And it contains the indispensable ethical and behavioral guidelines that a yogi needs to refresh over and over again on the journey.

It's the most practical chapter, and it's the one you are likely to have studied in your yoga teacher training.

Book III deals with the practical fruits of sadhana, and of the gifts you get access to as your practice matures. It's called, Vibhuti Pada, or the Book of Supernatural Powers and Yogic Skills. At the heart of this chapter is a description of a technique called samyama, a highly focused practice for concentrating on pretty much anything in order to master it or discover its essence. It's an absolute compendium of yogic processes and esoteric methods unfolding yogic superpowers. It gives instructions on how to conquer hunger and thirst, how to discover the truth about time and space, or getting to know the heart of another person. This chapter is the source of most of our applied yogic wisdom on using your mind to manifest your desires. It's been the basis of a lot of modern new thought practices.

Book 4, Kaivalya Pada, or the Book of Total Freedom, describes not only the experience of an enlightened yogi, but also explores the real essence of Karma, samskaras, and the play of the three gunas. It's the heart of the journey of the advanced yogi, and shows us how to live free within the play of life by continually letting go of limitations and attachments. This last chapter summarizes the life of a committed yogi, someone who realizes that spiritual life is a process of continual development, in which we keep growing and processing in deeper and deeper.

In this class (Part I, April-May 2020), we're going to concentrate on the practices in book I, sutras 33-39, which really are the essential practices for training yourself to move through the vrittis into states of wisdom. These are also the core techniques of Raja Yoga. They are key to the experience that alone can give you the

The first sutra states our intention. *Atha yogaa nushaasanam*. Now the instruction in yoga, which is called *nushaasanam*, commences. This sutra calls us to set our internal posture. *Atha* means now, but in a particular sense. It invokes the auspicious beginning of the most significant instruction we could ever receive. It indicates that we are stepping into sacred time and sacred space. In Pandit Rajmani's commentary, he points out that *ATHA* expresses the fact that we are now in the realm of sacred guidance from the inner guru who lives in the heart. *Atha* is the signal that we are being guided by Shakti, the power of consciousness. In the esoteric tantric tradition, in which sacred knowledge is given spontaneously by the awakened Kundalini Shakti, the word *ATHA* is associated with the Ajna chakra in the center of the head which is the center of intuitive sacred wisdom. Within this center is a triangle called the *a ka tha* triangle, represented by the letters *a*, *ka* and *tha*. The *A ka tha* triangle is the seat of the primordial inner guru, who has been guiding us through countless births, and who is the source of self-luminous radiance that alone can dissolve our ignorance, egoistic identification, judgement, craving and fear. The reason we practice is for this freedom from our inner bondage. There are many definitions of yoga, which literally means 'yoke' or that which holds things together. In From one point of view, yoga is the integrative wisdom that allows us to discover the patterns in life. It takes many forms—in common language, yoga exists wherever there is an integrated and fully reliable body of wisdom that can transform us and our life. The Bhagavad Gita defines yoga in several ways—as skill in action, as freedom from union with pain, to name two. But the ultimate meaning of yoga, for most of us, is union between the individual consciousness, the *jivatman*, and the supreme consciousness, the *Paramatman*, or supreme self, or absolute consciousness. That can happen spontaneously, as it has for many of you, as a result of grace. But a spontaneous opening into oneness is not yoga, according to Patanjali. It becomes yoga only through practice, because its only through practice that you can make it last. It becomes yoga only through practice, and not just any practice, but the practices that make it possible, as sutras 2 and 3 point out, to make the movements of the mind become quiet, so that the underlying natural awareness, which Vedanta and tantra call the *atman* or the inner Self, which Buddhism calls the natural mind, and which Patanjali calls the Seer, is revealed, and we take rest in what we really are.

Thus, Patanjali defines yoga as *chitta vritti nirodha*—the cessation or control of the *chitta vrittis*, the movements of the mind, meaning the thoughts, sensory impressions based on what we see and hear, memories, images, and all the other waves

that play across the surface of the mind. Yoga practice in all its complexity is for this—the entrance into stillness.

In the traditional commentary on Sutra 1, the sage Vyasa points out that there are several states of mind that we normally find ourselves in, and that only 2 of these are conducive to yoga. The first one is called restless, or *kshipta*. Most of us are extremely familiar with what it feels like to have a restless mind. When I think of *kshipta* mind, I think of walking down the street in New York or London city on a normal Tuesday afternoon, before social distancing. There is constant movement all around us, and we are continually being forced to avoid the passersby so absorbing in their cell phone that they don't notice us. We have to watch for traffic lights. We get attracted by the goods in shop windows. Of course we're on our phones, such that part of our attention is darting from physical reality to the world coming through the iPhone. A restless mind is one that cannot settle. I've noticed that a lot of people who are suffering with cabin fever during the lockdowns in New York and other places are suffering because their minds are so restless that the lack of distraction is literally crazy-making.

But the real reason the mind gets disturbed is because of the deeply lodged *samskaras* that we hold. Our intense desires and attachments, our fear, our anger, our confusion hold us hostage, and create an inner atmosphere that is the very quintessence of suffering. Normally, we can distract ourselves from the inner restlessness by activity. When we sit for meditation, or when we are lying awake with insomnia, or during the current shutdown and confinement of self-isolation, we come face to face with the intensity of our own mental restlessness. We are forced to confront it, and if we haven't done inner work, the experience is not pretty. In fact, for many of us, it's the recognition of our intense restlessness that compels us to start yoga. I heard once that when Yogi Bhanan started teaching in the west, he felt that westerners were so restless that quiet meditation was not suitable for them. That's why he created the movements and protocols of the brand he called kundalini yoga. The idea was that the repetitive movements, which are uncomfortable, would eventually tire the mind as well as the body, and give space for stillness. Osho too, taught a dynamic meditation where you dance and move intensely until you finally got so tired that the mind would become quiet enough to sit.

The second type of mind is called *mudha*, or stupefied. When we feel depressed, worried, grief stricken, or during illness, the mind becomes dulled. Some people doing chemotherapy, or some other strong medical protocol will often talk about how stupefied they feel, unable to do anything but watch reality shows on TV. But there's another kind of stupefaction that comes when we get obsessed with something we want, or deeply afraid of loss. A couple of my friends in New York City have been reporting feelings of paralysis and depression over what they are losing because of the virus. Or, like so many of us, you're constantly on Facebook, checking your Twitter feed, playing

games on your phone till 2 in the morning. This is what the text calls a stupefied mind. When your mind is in that state, you are at the mercy of whatever your obsession is, and even when you try to get still, you can't focus on the subtlety of meditation...it's just too boring, and to a stupefied or obsessed or restless mind, it takes major drama to engage us.

The third type of mind is called distracted. I'm personally very familiar with this, and it's the state most of us are in much of the time. We can get enthusiastic about practice, we can be optimistic and joyful, but because our samskaras of worry and fear and attachment also play in the mind, it's hard to stay fully focused. When we have a distracted mind, we can make the effort to focus, but focus is hard to sustain. You're repeating a mantra but every few minutes you find yourself wondering whether Janey still lives in Paris and if you can stay with her next summer. You fantasize about your ex-boyfriend. You wonder when the next season of *Billions* will drop. Recently a friend of mine in Miami told me that for two days, every time he meditates, he's been obsessing about what would happen if he gets sick. He said, "So, I have a friend here who's on the board of one of the big hospitals in Miami, and first I thought I could get him to score me a ventilator if I need one. But then I'm worried that if he gets me a ventilator it will mean taking it away from someone else, and that wouldn't be right. So I'm in a moral dilemma." I said, "But you don't have corona virus, right?" He said, "Well, no." "So why are you worrying?" I asked. "well," he said, "it's an ethical dilemma." That's what it means to have a distracted mind. it means you find yourself imagining worst case scenarios and creating ethical dilemmas that have no bearing on reality. And for a distracted mind, it's very hard to make real progress in deepening meditation, which means that your consciousness will not be able to realize its true potential. Of course, the biggest complaint we have when we sit for meditation is that we can't focus. we can't stay calm. We all have to work with distraction—that's a lot of what meditation practice is about. In fact, the true work of any interior practice is what you do when you're distracted. Mind training is basically about returning, returning, returning whenever you wander away.

The fourth state of mind, which is the state that really is the entrance point for deep meditation, is called *ekagraha*, or one pointed. Most of us have moments of one-pointedness in daily life, and when we do, these are often our most satisfying times. I can be very one-pointed when I'm writing, and that's one reason why writing can make me very happy. We can get one pointed when we're immersed in a book or a tv show, or taking a test, or trying to solve a problem. Athletes do it. Soldiers in battle do it. The capacity for one pointedness is something we train in in order to be successful at anything. And when we've done that with a job or learning a skill, it's not so hard to turn it towards meditation. my teacher used to say that his favorite yoga students were people who had learned to concentrate rigorously—doctors, professionals who knew

that losing focus means failure, because they know exactly how to make those skills work well in meditation.

The fifth state of mind is called arrested—*nirodha*. And that's the state that the yoga sutras consider the essence of yoga. This is the state where the *vrittis*, the thought waves of the mind, stop. When quiet emerges. And, as the famous fourth sutra in Book I tells us, "(When the mind is arrested), the seer stands in itself.

In Indian traditions like Vedanta and Non-Dual Kashmir Shaiva tantra, the state of the Seer resting in itself is called *Atman*, or true Self, and is described as the witness of the mind. . In Buddhism, it's called 'natural mind.' In western mystical traditions it's called Godhead, because the Self in its true nature is actually completely merged in the divine, the sacred, the *sat-chit-Ananda*, or limitless beingness, absolute awareness, and undisturbed joy that is the true nature of reality

But in his commentary on this sutra, the sage Vyasa, who is basically THE authoritative commentator on many of the major texts of India, including Vedanta, absolutely associates yoga with the state of that arises in *samadhi*. Here, *samadhi* means the clear pure, uncluttered state of the absolutely still mind. This is what Buddhists call 'original mind,' the natural mind.

In Non-dual Shaivism (NST), the mind is considered to be a limited form of Absolute Consciousness itself. Patanjali, like the sages of Kashmir Shaivism, uses the word *Chitta* for the mind. *Chitta* has the same root as the word *Chit* or *Chiti*, which means pure creative consciousness, the source of all. In other words, when the mind is in its innate state, it has all the powers of Pure Consciousness itself, though in a microcosmic form.

Remember, in all the philosophies of yoga, the ultimate reality, the Self, is described as *Sat chit Ananda*, or being, awareness/intelligence, and joy. It has the nature of eternal ever-present existence, eternal and ever active intelligence, and undying, independent joy. undying being, eternal existence, or being. It is real and existent everywhere, in all times, places and things. You and I as bodies are real only in this moment, in the physical place we are. We can only know certain things, and our intelligence is limited by time, place, and the state of our minds. And our joy is always dependent on conditions—events, our mood, and so much more. The ultimate is always alive, always true, always real. it is eternally knowing because its nature is intelligence. That reality is all-knowing, because it exists as intelligence in all times, in all places and in all things. And it has innate joy, joy that is not dependent on circumstances. *Chit* is the creative intelligence of the absolute, and the mind, the *chitta*, is its microcosmic form. In tantra, the Self is absolutely free awareness, while the limited individual is limited awareness. As individuals, we ARE the *chitta*. Our entire life experience, at every level, is determined by the state of the *chitta*. The *chitta* In the Shaiva tantra, we don't

just dissolve the individual chitta into its innate nature, which is pure, pristine and full of intuitive wisdom. We also learn how to eventually expand consciousness, so it develops all these innate powers at a higher and higher level. But it all starts with learning how to identify the underlying clarity of chitta, and dissolve it into its essence. That's the goal of the yoga sutra, described in this first book.

So as we start, let's see if we can begin to tease out the different components of the mind-field. We'll do it

Find your posture, and your breath. Let the breath be natural, but simply notice it passing in and out of the nostrils. Sense the breath as it flows through the bridge of the nose, and into the center of the head, then out. Notice that as the breath flows out there is a sense of opening and release. See if you can open to that flow of expansion with the exhalation. Begin to notice that if you allow the natural exhalation, without tightening or pushing, there might be a sense of stillness or release at the end of it. Continue like this for a moment or two.

As thoughts come up, notice them. Some of those thoughts will be so subtle that they won't even be acknowledgeable as thoughts...they are more like seeds of thought, or pre thought thoughts. What you may find however is that there are parts of this process where a kind of release happens, and for a second or two the mind is quiet. I often find this arising during the relaxed exhalation; at the moment the breath opens towards the end of the exhalation.

See if you can notice four parts of your inner experience. First, the movement of the breath. Second, the moment of stillness. Third, the thoughts. Fourth, the part of the mind that is aware of thinking. All these are going on simultaneously. The breath is always changing. Thoughts are always changing. The stillness, for most of us comes and goes. But as we commit ourselves to observing that, we notice that something knows that is all happening. That knowing is the inner witness, the knower. As you sit in meditation, especially over a period of time, the breath becomes more stable and regular. Thoughts may continue to arise, but they become less sticky. There are more moments of stillness. And the observer gets more apparent. Let's take a few moments to kindle our sense of the observer, the witness-consciousness. We'll do it by inquiry. What knows you're thinking? What knows you're hearing me? Where is that part of you that sees, that observes that is present even when your mind is clogged with thoughts?

That, hopefully is a glimpse of the seer, the dhrashta, in sanskrit. But what you probably notice is that the seer is quite hard to see. First because trying to see the seer is a bit like asking the eyeball to see itself. But secondly, because the other processes in the mind, the thinking, the distractions that inevitably toss you away from the meditation, even the movement of breath, literally cover the pure seer disguise it, hide it from itself. And that's when we are trying to be aware. Much of the time, we are so distracted that

we aren't aware of where we put our keys. The mind cannot see the seer in its normal state. So we practice yoga with the intention of quieting these movements. The sanskrit word 'nirodha' can mean suppress, quiet, control, or completely stop. Yoga 101—yogas chitta vritti nirodha. Sutra 3 Then the seer, the inner witness, the pure Self, becomes established in its essential nature, its svaroopā. Otherwise, as sutra 4 says, the seer identifies with the objects of experience, and the different faculties of the mind.

Our consciousness, the seer, is awareness itself. It is an infinite intelligence, ever existent, capable of knowing anything and everything, possessed of the same innate genius as the creative Shakti herself. But when it identifies with the samskaras and the body and the senses, these activities veil its radiance. Consciousness loses its clarity and its power to comprehend its real power. The seer can no longer see itself directly. It can only see what the mind shows it. The fear and anger and desires of the mind have become velcroid to the seer, so we think that when there is fear in the mind and body, that we ourselves are afraid. To disentangle consciousness from its identification with its coverings—thoughts, feelings, sensations—is necessary if we are to realize the extraordinary power that we have access to.

But when the seer is colored by the vrittis, the roaming tendencies of the mind, we can only see ourselves and the world through the filters of our samskaras. This is an incredibly important truth, and it's the reason why we're so confused about what is real. Our samskaras, the deeply conditioned ideas that we hold, and our emotional tendencies and our various wounds completely determine our life experience. We become these tendencies completely, so that our sense of self, and of other people, and of the world situation, is completely determined by how we think and feel. We define ourselves by our thoughts and feelings, and that means that pure Consciousness, the inner Self, is not a felt experience for most of us, but just an idea.

That's why the heart of yoga is the mastery of the chitta vrittis. Our vrittis have to be refined by the process of one-pointed focus on higher truths.

Meditation: Watch your mind without doing anything about it.

Notice that thoughts come up without our willing it. Yes, we do have the capacity to think in a structured and purposeful way. But when you really look at the mind, you'll notice that most of the thinking is random. There's a constant flow of words and images going through the mind, most of the time, and we can't really stop them. Most of you are familiar with the teachings on samskaras. Every thought we hold leaves traces in the permeable energy of the chitta. Charged thoughts and feelings make deeper traces, especially if we return to them again and again. The samskaras stick in the mind and dictate what we are capable of thinking. I have a history of chronic illness, and as a result I have a lot of samskaras that tell me I'm physically vulnerable and could get sick anytime. I also have a lot of samskaras that tell me how to be creative in taking care of

my health while working and being engaged in my life. Much of my daily life is determined by the interaction of these two sets of samskaras. The samskara of being sick has defined my life in many ways that limit me. The samskaras of self-care have given me a lot of expertise in enhancing wellness, which are quite positive, and which give me confidence about knowing how to protect myself and my immune system at a time like this.

This week, I'm going to ask you to notice the samskaric patterns that seem to define you, and realize what a mixed bag they really are. One set of samskaras tells you are strong and talented. Another tells you are basically unlovable. And all of these are based on a deeper set of samskaras that come from your conditioning a very real sense, the ups and downs of our life, our successes and failures, our tendencies and abilities depend on the movement between the thoughts and actions we do in the present, and the deeper samskaras that determine what we are capable of thinking and doing. This movement is called the vritti samskara chakra, the wheel of thoughts and deep impressions. Thoughts create emotions, which create charge, which get lodged in the subtle field of the mind, ready to emerge when circumstances trigger them. The samskaras determine our normal patterns of thoughts and emotions, and the thoughts and emotions deepen the samskara that inspired them. The wheel of vrittis and samskaras feeds each other, and most of our life is simply a dance between the two.

And it's immensely helpful to have some way of understanding the mind's movements so that we stop being deluded by them.

Sutra 6 offers a list of the five major mental functions. They fall into 5 categories. In fact, no matter what your thought, you'll find that it actually falls into one of these patterns. The most important thing to know about these categories is that some of them are painful, and some are not. The painful ones cause suffering, both now and in the future. The non-painful ones, which include necessary knowledge about the actions to take in daily life, are helpful. According to Patanjali, the only truly non-painful mental functions are the ones that lead to the recognition of who you really are.

The five mental categories are correct understanding, or real, objective information. 2) false understanding. 3) imagination 4) dreamless sleep and 5) memory.

Correct understanding includes true, factual objective information, based on realities that are demonstrable and proven, on the spiritual testimony of realized beings, on insights that arise from intuitive knowledge of Truth with a capital T. Right now, we're really getting a look at what correct knowledge looks like in regard to the pandemic. One aspect of correct understanding, by the way, is understanding what you don't know! During the early days of the pandemic, in the US, Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York became a hero to many people because he gave reliable, trustable updates on what was going on that have become must-watch TV for many of us. One of

the things that made him trustable was that he didn't hesitate to tell us what he didn't know, and he didn't make truth claims that he wasn't sure of. Angela Merkel's first broadcast a wonderful statement about Germany's response to the virus, which was even more fact based and trustable. Obviously, the more our minds are able to hold correct understanding, including being able to admit when we are clueless, the more competent and successful we are in everything. Correct understanding is what allows us to make medical breakthroughs, engineering feats, gain insight about human psychology, create healthy systems.

In the spiritual realm, it's the knowledge that points us to the truth, towards the realization that your real self is pure consciousness. Right knowledge in the spiritual realm also includes scriptures, the words of reliable teachers, and your own realization. And that knowledge can exist at different levels. When we have the right pointing out instructions, we're able to choose practices that actually help us expand consciousness, discipline the mind, behave ethically without being.

In the spiritual realm, correct understanding makes the difference between practicing skillfully and being all over the map with how we see our inner lives. It's tremendously important to learn to make distinctions between teachings, so we can discover which ones are actually correct. For most of you, and certainly for me, correct spiritual understanding is information that points you towards the realization that pure consciousness is your real nature, or to the recognition that there is one energy that fills everything in the world. But correct information can also be understanding about which practices are useful at particular times, about the daily attitudes we need to cultivate in order to keep our minds clear.

Then there is false understanding, which seems to be taking over the world. So many of the dilemmas of the 21st century come from wrong understanding. Every day we hear about a new conspiracy theory, a new outpouring of racism or, a new fake cure for diseases, a new alternative fact from the American president. Who knew that the great technological breakthrough of the internet would give so much power to fake news and false information! False understanding is probably the major mental illness of the 21st century.

The next category is Vikalpa, vrittis that have their roots entirely in the mind itself. Imagination is perhaps the most powerful expression of the creativity of the chitta. Because Chitta is actually the microcosmic form of the universal creative power, chit shakti, it really is the source of human creativity. And as we know, that creativity can be gorgeous, mind-expanding, and liberating, allowing us to create positive futures through the mind. It's also the faculty that powers many of the most transformative meditation practices, like deity meditation, or yoga nidra. And, obviously, imagination can get us completely detached from reality. Recently a friend of mine in Miami.

The fourth vritti is nidra, or sleep, the dark unconscious state we pass into for a few hours at night. Sleep is also a vritti, because it covers the experience of the Self. If you've ever gone unconscious in meditation, you know that sleep literally obscures our awareness, even though there may be no discernable thoughts at all.

And the fifth vritti is memory, smriti. Again, this is something you'll come across whenever you sit for meditation, because we soon discover that most of the thoughts that arise, including our thoughts about our identity and relationships are actually based on memories. Our memories are not just conscious. Memory is the repository of samskaras, and our collective pool of memories is actually the source of our personal psyche. Memory is lodged in the physical body as well as in the subtle body. That's why a physical practice like hatha yoga can trigger old traumas and emotions like anger and intense grief. It's also why it's so easy to go down the rabbit hole of our old stories. Until these accumulated samskaras are eliminated, they go on replaying over and over again, as though we could somehow resolve the hurts or reclaim the beauty of our past. For years, whenever I sat for meditation my mind would replay two memories. One was a story about a particularly glamorous period in New York in my 20s, when I was hanging around with a bunch of cool people. I could spend an entire meditation period going over what I said that was witty, or what someone said to me, or how it felt to dance with the guy I had a crush on. The other was a story about family heartbreak from my childhood, which I would continually try to analyze—as though I hadn't analyzed it a dozen times before. You probably have your own memory rabbit holes, which generally go on playing until we learn to treat them not as reality, but as vrittis, and to let them go.

These five types of thoughts, cleverly presenting themselves as worthy of attention, will keep surfacing and disturbing your concentration until you commit yourself to training the mind.

And the way to do this is the very heart of yoga practice, the real yoga 101. Enthusiastic practice—abhyasa-- , and a radical commitment to letting thoughts go—vairagya. We're going to use the sanskrit words because the English words practice and non-attachment don't convey the fullness of what these words mean to Patanjali.

Abhyasa doesn't mean just any form of effort. It means yogic effort, which in Patanjali's words is: "making an ardent effort to retain a peaceful flow of mind, free from roaming tendencies." Vairagya means 'cultivating a mind free from the coloring of deeply imbedded mental impressions.' The word for these deeply imbedded impressions is vasanas." The word vasana means fragrance, or coloring. Vasanas are the tendencies that are deeper than samskaras. They are what give your life the tone it has. It's your vasanas that make you a pessimist or an optimist, a liberal or a conservative, a generous

person or a tight ass. And it's the vasanas that keep you from being the self you know you can be.

For most of us the biggest problem in life is that we are constantly being compelled to act in ways we know are not helpful. We want to be positive and calm, but we can't stop the judgements and negative thoughts that come up at the slightest trigger. We know that replaying our mistakes and hating ourselves for something we've done or failed to do doesn't help anyone and only causes pain, but we can't let go of our guilt. We don't want to be so fearful, so insecure, so triggered by the people around us, but we can't help it. and that's because of the vasanas. The habits we create by our thoughts and feelings get lodged as samskaras in the fertile field of the chitta. The strongest habits become vasanas, and when they are really strong, they are very difficult to see. They become part of who we are.

All of you here are committed to working on yourselves. That means that most of us spend a lot of time trying to identify our vasanas, and eliminate them. But the catch 22 is that when the mind is totally colored by vasanas, we actually don't have the power to see clearly what our core issues are, much less eliminate them. As you probably know, trying to analyze your negative tendencies just gets you more entangled in mind-stuff. And the truth is, our vasanas give us a taste for negative or exciting mental states, so we will tend to keep revisiting them, even when we have a calm meditation. There's a Hasidic story about an old man on a train who is very thirsty, and is too feeble to get himself a drink. He keeps saying, 'Oi am I thirsty, oi am I toasty, until another passenger finally brings him a glass of water. He drinks it gratefully, and then he says, "Oi was I thirsty! Oi was I thirsty." This is how we often are with our own tendencies. You start feeling better, but you can't help recalling how bad you felt. Boy was I unhappy, and boy did that person hurt me. Boy was that relationship a mistake."

To complicate the problem, meditation itself brings up painful or difficult or exciting feelings, tempting us to go down one rabbit hole of memory or speculation after another!

This is why abhyasa needs to be maintained over a period of time, and why it needs to be combined with vairagya, the ability to let go of your samskaras as they arise. Basic abhyasa/vairagya is committing yourself to maintaining a stable flow of mind—by whatever means necessary, with enthusiasm, over and over again, without interruption. That means every day. The word Patanjali uses for the way we do practice is 'asevita.' Asevita means serving or nourishing. To serve your practice means to put your practice ahead of your own temporary inclinations. One of the great metaphors used in the Indian scriptures is the image of cultivating a garden. You plant the seeds, or the little sprouts, you water them, you fertilize them, you prune them, and you do it regularly and patiently for as long as it takes for the seed to sprout and grow into a plant. If you've

ever tried to cultivate a garden you know that if you want it to grow, you can't really give it a good watering once a month and neglect it the rest of the time. It is the same with your practice.

As many of you know, it's less important to meditate for a long time than it is to meditate every day, even if it's for a short time. My guru once wrote that the reason he was able to go so deep in meditation over the years of his active sadhana was that he did it every day, and he would decide how long he intended to sit in one session, and he would not get up before the time was up—no matter how restless he felt, no matter how bored he might get, and no matter how long it took to settle his mind. That one decision, I've found, makes a huge difference. And it's also important to do it without constantly checking to see if you are having an experience. Every meditation teacher in the world will tell you to practice without expectations. Obviously, no human being can really be without expectations. But what we can do—and this is part of the practice of *vairagya*—is to keep noticing when expectation is coloring our practice, when we find ourselves thinking “Nothing's happening so I should stop” or “Shouldn't my mind be peaceful already, since I've been sitting for ten minutes?”

The other word the sutra uses for how we should practice is *satkaara*, which means reverently. And that is actually a really big deal. Reverence means that we need to respect the privilege of being able to practice, and enter into it with a feeling that this is a special and sacred time, not some dreaded obligation that we are doing because we know it's good for us. One of the big deals in meditation practice is maintaining that attitude of reverence, especially for those of us who tend to be careless and cynical. There are some very practical ways to cultivate reverence. One is to keep your meditation space uncluttered. Even if you're meditating in a corner of the bedroom, set it up so that the space feels pristine and open. Another is to begin your practice with a chant or invocation or a prayer for grace, or a statement of gratitude. I often find that when I come to meditation feeling reluctant or bored or distracted, just remembering to be grateful that I have the ability to practice will often make the difference.

According to the sage Vyasa, the original commentator on the sutras, there are four practices that make meditation practice strong. We'll introduce them now, and go more deeply into them in subsequent classes.

The first practice we need is *tapas*. *Tapas* is usually translated as austerity, but what it literally means is heat, or ardor. The heat of *tapas* comes from using it to overcome your basic resistance to practice. We all have resistance to practice, which comes from our basic resistance to growth. No matter how much we believe we're committed to transformation, everyone of us will say at some point “Enough already, this is too hard, or I've done enough, I can just coast for a while.” *Tapas* is the effort we make to overcome that resistance, and basically move out of our comfort zone. *Tapas* is

what lets us maintain our edge. That doesn't mean we have to force ourselves to do more than our body can handle. But as you know if you do strength training or any kind of physical exercise, to build strength means being willing to go a little bit out of our comfort zone, and to do that again and again. That's what will eventually detoxify our body and mind. it's the heat of effort that burns the samskaras.

The second element is brahmacharya. Brahmacharya is often used to mean celibacy, but its broader meaning is the basic discipline to lead a balanced life, rather than being pulled by every stray impulse to eat junk food or hook up with someone on tinder. A lot of it has to do with very basic stuff like getting to bed early enough so you can get up for meditation, eating food that doesn't stress your digestive system or make you sleepy, exercising. And brahmacharya also has a subtle aspect, cultivating your own inner energy field, so that you actually have access to the deepest sources of your own stamina and will power. Again, this is something we'll get into in a later class.

The third element is knowledge, vidya. Some of that comes from study—which is why it's important to do what we are doing in this class. Some of the knowledge the sutra means is simply to have reliable guidance on how to practice, which techniques lead to the result you desire. But the knowledge we need is also a kind of meta understanding about why we practice. The three great questions that all the eastern traditions want us to answer are, “Why am I here? Who am I really? And what am I supposed to do to have a life that will fulfill my highest purpose. The more you can really consider the true purpose of life, the causes of suffering, the immense privilege of being able to practice, the more power and strength your practice has.

And the fourth element is shraddha, faith in the power of what you are doing. Shraddha involves a high level of basic trust: trust that what the teachers tell us is actually true, trust that we ourselves can actually succeed in awakening our connection to the Self, faith that we are supported by lineages of teachers and subtle beings who absolutely are committed to helping us wake up to the truth.

And we have to do this over and over again, just as we have to keep returning to our practice. The first line of abhyasa practice, in pretty much every tradition, is hooking the mind to the flow of breath, because the breath can actually act like pathway that the mind follows to lead us inward. By yoking attention to the breath you can aim your attention inward, perhaps towards one of the inner centers, the heart or the third eye center, or into the central channel which is where consciousness can really expand so that the mind can begin to merge into the self. And because behind your inhalation and exhalation is the mighty force known as prana shakti, the power of life itself, the more you attune to the breath, the more you cultivate the inner power itself, which will eventually dissolve the hidden vasanas that you can't see yourself. Stabilizing the breath stabilizes the mind, which eventually creates a new set of vasanas, vasanas of

peacefulness, inner joy, and discernment. In other words, our experiences of inwardness start to become habits, and along with them create a whole set of yogic habits that eventually take over the mind. that's when we discover that we have a natural ability to tell the difference between what actually makes us happy and what might seem pleasant but will eventually create more agitation. And that's how consciousness changes—by the steady attention to linking your attention to the inner prana that is the immediate access point to the liberating power of Shakti.

So that's what we'll do now. We've received some trustworthy vidya, yogic information straight from the heart of the tradition. We've been practicing the tapas of sitting, listening, contemplating, restraining our senses. So now we'll sit with a yogic practice that comes out of the tantras, which works with breath and mantra to open and align two of the most important inner centers, the heart center and the Ajna, the center in the head.