

Week 1: Contemplation & Study Questions

Overview

This guide is 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.

I strongly suggest that you set aside a couple of half-hour sessions during the week when you read through this guide and work with one or two of the sutras, using the questions and exercises, or making up your own. This can also be a guide for partner discussion, if you're working with a partner.

You can spend as short or as long time on this part of the process as you like. For many of you, just spending a few minutes reading a sutra before or after meditation will be very fruitful. Others might want to devote more time to looking at the words and considering how they may be true for you. 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 Book I Sutras 2-5 and 12-14.

All these sutras are available on the Student Page (under the Resources section), in the *Handout: Book I Sutras* and include Pandit Rajmani's translation and transliteration, with full definitions of the Sanskrit, in case you didn't or couldn't purchase the book *Secret of the Yoga Sutra*. I'll include the transliterations of the first five sutras in this document and suggest that you refer to the handout for reference on the remaining sutras discussed.

My study guide (the present document!) contains questions and exercises for studying the sutras we looked at during the first class, along with a word-by-word translation of *Book I Sutras 2-5 and 12-14*. For each of these, I give a series of suggestions for contemplating them. You may not have the time or the inclination to work in depth with them all, because there is a lot here! But do practice with at least one or two of them. Sutras 2-4 give us the goal of the practice.

Sutras 12-14 offer the meta-principles for freeing yourself from the confusion of the ordinary mind.

My suggestion is that you read through the whole document, then pick a few of the sutras and focus your contemplation on them. Since the core of the teaching is in Sutras 2-4, I've offered the most commentary on these, and 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 12-14, start by re-listening to the last 40 minutes of the first class' audio, and if possible, read the section on Mastering the Mind of *The Secret of the Yoga Sutra*.

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. 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 the ones 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. 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 experience come up. This should be considered an insight from the deeper mind, the intuitive faculty (*pratibha*) that we discussed in class.

We'll look at Sutras 2-4 together, since they contain the basic teaching about the goal of yoga according to Patanjali.

I-2: Yogas chitta-vritti nirodha—Yoga is the mastery of the ripples (movements, fluctuations) of the mind.

Yogah: Union or balance

Chitta: Mind

Vritti: the movements (thoughts, images, impression of what you are seeing or hearing, feelings—anything that creates movement in the mind)

Nirodhah: Cessation, arrest (as in, stopping) or mastery

I-3: Tadaa drashtuh svaroope'vasthaanam—Then the seer becomes established in its essential nature.

Tadaa: then

Drashtuh: of the Seer (the witness, knower, awareness that is present to all experience yet untouched by it)

Svaroope: One's own form, one's own essential nature

Avasthaanam: established in, residing in

I-4: Vrittisaaroopyamitaratra—Otherwise, (the Seer) conforms to the roaming tendencies of the mind.

Vritti: mental fluctuations

Saaroopa: takes the form of

Itaratra: elsewhere (when the mind is not still)

Contemplation on Sutra 2

“Complete mastery over the roaming tendencies of the mind is Yoga.”

Say the sutra over and over to yourself for a few minutes.

Now consider how you understand it, by considering each word.

1. What do you understand about *chitta*? What do you understand to be the meaning of *vrittis*?
2. Read the points from the commentaries (and any other commentaries you are drawn to)
3. Read the questions interspersed between the commentaries and use them to examine your own experience of *chitta* and its power and nature.

Here are some points from the commentaries:

Chitta refers to the field of the human mind, the individual psyche, or consciousness, through which we experience life. The word is derived from the same root as the sanskrit word *Chit*, which means totally free consciousness, the creative intelligence of the source.

This implies that the limited consciousness we call “mind” is creative and powerful (though limited) because it is made of the same stuff as the absolute Consciousness. This is a major point of tantra, which helps explain the power that the mind has to create suffering or joy, depending on what is being projected within it.

The *vrittis* are the movements, like waves, that move through the mind field. Some of them are the result of what we see, hear, taste, etc. Others are simply spontaneous movements within the mind, caused by reactions to these sensory stimuli, or by memory, or just arising randomly, out of habit. The *vrittis* are related to the three major functions of *Chitta*: *Manas* (sense mind), *Buddhi* (discriminating intelligence), and *Ahamkara* (egoic identification with parts of our experience)

1. **The sense-mind or *Manas***, gathers information from the senses—what we see, hear, etc. *Manas* is the faculty that we use to connect to the world around us. It’s also the part of the mind that thinks and reacts to thinking. Many of the thoughts and feelings we experience are generated by the *Manas*, and many of these are random.
2. **The ego or *Ahamkara*** (literally, the I-maker), sorts our perceptions into “me” and “not-me”. It connects the experiences that come in through the senses to what our (limited) self. The *Ahamkara* is what identifies with thoughts and perceptions. For instance, the *Manas* is able to perceive the presence of an arm with a hand at the end of it. The *Ahamkara* tells us, “This arm is mine” or “That arm belongs to my husband, and just happen to be resting on ‘my’ shoulder.” *Ahamkara* allows us to create boundaries and navigate the world as a separate self. It also creates our sense of separation, with its accompanying fears, desires, sorrows, and feelings of gain and loss.
3. **The *Buddhi*** (intellect or discriminatory faculty) is the part of the mind that can observe reality as well as itself, discriminate between what is important and what is not, and guide the mind to make decisions. It can understand who and what it is, observe the play of life, and make decisions. It also has the power to turn back on itself and merge into its essence, which is pure and pristine. The *Buddhi* is the main instrument for yogic practice.

Here's the bottom line, from Pandit Rajmani:

"When the mind is clear and peaceful, we see the world as bright and peaceful. When the mind is convoluted, our understanding of the world and our relationship to it become equally convoluted." (that's why so many of us tend to make our lives more complicated than necessary!) Our concepts of good and bad, right and wrong, depend on the quality of our mind. The quality of our mind, in turn, shapes our thoughts, speech and actions."

QUESTION/INQUIRY: Using the self-observing faculty, the *Buddhi*, notice what the state of your mind is right now. What has been the state of your mind today? How does reading the news affect that state? Can you notice the qualities of an agitated or cluttered mind? Can you notice the difference after you've meditated, or done yoga, or taken a walk? See if you can observe the qualities of your own mind in different states.

Below, from the traditional commentary on *Book I Sutra 1*, is the yoga tradition's list of the states of mind that all humans experience. I like to use this as a pointer to help me recognize what is going on.

These states are called Agitation, Stupefaction, Distraction, One-Pointedness, and Arrested (Under the control of a practiced meditator).

The mind is *kshipta* (agitated) when thoughts and feelings connected to fear, anger, and intense desire are dominant. In other words, when you're stressed by an upcoming challenge or demand, or by the sheer weight of life. Or when you're feeling scared or hoping desperately for something in your life to change. What is that state like for you? What brings it on?

The mind is *mudha* (stupefied) when it is dull or depressed or too tired to uplift itself. Being sick or taking strong medication can trigger this. It can also happen when you are obsessed with a person or a situation and can't get your mind to move off it. Or when you've surrendered to watching hours of bad TV.

The mind is called *vikshipta* (distracted) when you can feel some enthusiasm, commitment, joy, and focus, but these are constantly being interrupted by worry, fear, intrusive memories, or thoughts of what you want to do in the future. In other words, traces of agitation and stupefaction are still active in your *chitta* and make it hard to fully stay present to the positive or peaceful or dynamic qualities of the mind. This is often the state we find ourselves in when we first sit to practice, and which many of our practices intend to combat!

The mind is called *ekagrata* (one-pointed) when you are committed to staying focused, when you are able to hold onto positive ideas and aim your mind in a specific direction, or simply stay in the present moment. This is the state we cultivate when we're engrossed in a project, an engaging activity, or meditation. Yogic practice, of course, is training in one-pointedness. One pointedness carries with it a sense of peace and clarity, which makes us happy.

The mind is called *niruddha* (arrested) when we can control it at will, and stay fully immersed in the present moment, in a task, or in our practice.

QUESTION/INQUIRY: See if you can spend half an hour noticing these states of mind as they arise. You don't have to be in meditation to do this but can do it as you move through your day. Notice also what helps you move OUT of agitated or stupefied or distracted states. When your mind is agitated, what helps calm it? When your mind is stupefied, how do you bring it more awake? What antidote do you find to distraction?

When have you experienced *chitta vritti nirodha*, a still mind?

Often, these moments are peak moments in a life, but they can happen through our life...in nature—staring at the ocean, or a star-spangled sky, or at the first sight of the Grand Canyon or some other awesome natural phenomenon, after a run or a brisk walk, when arrested by beauty or shock, when absorbed in a piece of music.

You probably have memories of major moments of stillness. And maybe it happens regularly. Recall some of these and write down how they feel. Ad you know, these are pointers to the experience of yoga!

Contemplation on Sutra 3

“Then the Seer becomes established in its essential nature.”

Obviously, this is the core truth of the path Patanjali is laying out. It's actually the core truth behind many Eastern traditions, though they call it by different names. The seer (*dhrashta* in Sanskrit, from the term *dhrishti*, which means “vision”)—is what the Vedantic and tantric traditions call the Self (*aatmaan*)—pure awareness, unconditioned by any ideas or objects of perception. It was described by a Western scientist, Fred Allen Wolfe, as “consciousness without an object, awareness aware of itself.”

Patanjali calls the Seer “*Purusha*”—meaning “the being who resides in the body.” Here, I want to give you the understanding of *Purusha* from the Shaiva Tantra, which, when the supreme, all powerful all-knowing Self—pure *Chidananda*—descends

through the process of self-contraction through which *Shakti* manifests as the world—it loses all its powers and potencies. It becomes *Purusha*, pure consciousness but with no capacity to act. *Shakti*—the creative power of the Absolute—becomes *Prakriti*, the matrix through which all forms arise. All our abilities to act and know in our limited way are then “given” by *Prakriti*. *Prakriti* is what we call “Mother Nature”—the source of whatever arises in the natural world, of which we humans are a part. The forms that arise within it, and the abilities they have, operate on the stage of the manifest world without knowing their source. The limited mind, though creative and self-reflective, is unable to realize the presence of pure Consciousness (*Purusha*) because the activities of the body/mind are essentially mechanical, determined by the movements within *Prakriti*.

Rajmani:

“Our core Being, though all pervading, omniscient and beyond want and need, can move only with the help of the body, perceive only with the help of the senses and cognize only with the help of the mind.”

It becomes covered by the contents of the mind, and so cannot perceive itself except in the distorted form, because the perceptions, thoughts, and memories—the *samskaras* and *vasanas*—form a veil that keeps Consciousness from seeing itself.

Our goal is to get glimpses of the freedom of the Self through practice and inquiry, and then to learn to identify ourselves AS that.

The method in the *Yoga Sutra-s* is deepening concentration on “objects” that turn the mind away from its distraction and towards the Self. This allows awareness to begin to recognize itself, and when it does, more and more of the veils—the *vruttis* (thoughts and impressions), *samskaras* (accumulated impressions that create our habitual ways of thinking and behaving), and *vasanas*, (the deep seated tendencies, based on *samskaras* accumulated over lifetimes)—get dissolved. It is the contact with pure Awareness that dissolves *vruttis*, which is why one of the important techniques for freeing yourself from a particular negative pattern is to hold it in awareness. As we’ll see later, the *Yoga Sutra-s* also offers specific practices for counter-acting negative thoughts, emotions, and tendencies. But these, though effective, don’t permanently remove the roots of the *samskaras* and *vruttis*, which arise out of our ignorance of our true nature as consciousness. Thus, giving the Seer glimpses of itself.

We are using a process from Vedanta, *Atma Vichara*, or contemplation of the Self, to begin to “see” our own consciousness. We did it a bit in class, and I have found that its tremendously helpful in giving us preliminary glimpses of the *Atman*.

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 because 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 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. ("Is that it?" "How can I be sure I'm really experiencing the Seer?" "Ok, this must be it. Whoops, it slipped away!" etc.) 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 the 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.
- 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.

Contemplation on Sutra 4

“Elsewhere [the Seer] conforms to the roaming tendencies of the mind.”

Spend one minute letting the mind simply be as it is. Notice what engages it. Notice how the mind moves and begin to notice what catches the mind’s attention, or what thoughts and feelings to which it tends to default. Notice how much random thinking happens. Begin to notice which thoughts tend to bring charge and send your mind into a deeper thought-train.

Contemplation on Sutra 5

“The tendencies that cause the mind to rotate are fivefold. They are either afflicting or non-afflicting.”

Patanjali categorizes the five kinds of *vruttis* as

- 1) Correct understanding, either based on mundane facts or genuine spiritual insight.
- 2) False knowledge based on counter-factual information or off-base spiritual ideas.
- 3) Imagination, which covers everything from a fantasy about getting something you want to an imaginary worst-case-scenario created in the mind, to a beautiful use of visualization in a guided meditation, to a manifestation practice in which you use your imagination to project a good outcome, as with the athlete or musician who visualizes herself performing perfectly.
- 4) Sleep, which is a state of darkness that covers the light of the Self.
- 5) Memory—a huge category of *vruttis* that connects us to the backpack of *samskaras* and *vasanas*, the deep-seated impressions that create our habitual mental patterns and ultimately our character tendencies.

Any one of these can create pain and suffering—or not.

Understanding these types of *vruttis* is interesting in that it can help you recognize the repetitive and mechanical nature of most thoughts, and help you identify the experience of a painful thought.

QUESTION/INQUIRY: Can you think of an instance where one of these types of *vruttis* has caused you pain? For instance, the true knowledge that your child didn't get into the college of his choice, or that a friend has died creates pain when you hold it in your mind. A lie causes pain by creating false security or unwarranted suspicion or by causing you to act in deluded ways. Imagination causes pain when the realities you create in your mind are hurtful—as we know very well from experience! Sleep causes pain when it creates dullness or when it is disturbed by underlying agitation in the system. Memory causes pain through recollection of painful events, but even more when buried memories turn into painful tendencies, unwanted emotions that surface from within, or physical disease that result from somatizing old traumas—the body remembers.

EXERCISE: Let's look at memory as the repository of the buried tendencies (*samskaras* and *vasanas*) that are the cause of our very deep suffering, character “flaws” and emotional tendencies.

QUESTION/INQUIRY: As you observe your moods and actions this week, see if you can notice and journal about some of the *samskaras*—habitual thinking patterns—that come up again and again as you confront the global pandemic and its effects on your life—that you notice surfacing during our current global crisis? What do you feel are the major *samskaras* that affect your life in general? How do they affect the way you are handling your life during the pandemic?

QUESTION/INQUIRY: Recognizing that not all forms of *samskara* are impediments to practice, notice which *vruttis* connected with memory are helpful to your practice. What are the *samskaras* that actually work to deepen your capacity to meditate, practice kindness and compassion, see larger patterns in events, etc.?

For *Book I* Sutras 6-11 translations see the handout on the Course Page.

Contemplation on Sutras 12-13

“That can be controlled through practice and non-attachment.”

“Ardent effort to retain the peaceful flow of mind free of roaming tendencies is abhyasa.”

These two sutras introduce us to the heart of what this text is going to reveal: the practices that actually work to clear the mind of obstructions, afflictions, and painful *vruttis* by clearing out the *samskaric* backpack.

Note that Patanjali's instructions do not tell you how to create an experience of the Self, or how to “attain” enlightenment. It assumes that the Self, the enlightened state, is already present, and that your practice is meant to thin out the *samskaras* lodged in your subtle field of memory, so that what is already there can be revealed.

His point is that we are firmly and completely blocked from a steady experience of our own truth by the backpack of *samskaras* and *vasanas*. We can't eliminate these just by wanting to.

If you are going to take time to contemplate just a few sutras, these are a group you should work with! There are questions at the end of this section to help you do this,

and I strongly recommend applying the five-part contemplation/study process I included in the early part of this document.

I suggest that you listen again to the last 40 minutes of my first call for a commentary on these sutras. You might also like to read the commentaries in *Secret of the Yoga Sutras*, section on Mastering the Mind.

We will work more with vairagya next week.

Contemplation on Sutras 14-15

“That becomes firm only when done for a long period of time, with no interruption, and with reverence.”

Non-attachment, known as *vashikara samjna*, belongs to the one who is free from the craving for sense objects and objects mentioned in the scriptures.

QUESTION/INQUIRY: Why are *abhyasa* (practice) and *vairagya* (non-attachment) both necessary for successfully freeing the *chitta* of the thoughts, habit patterns, and tendencies that block Consciousness from recognizing itself?

Look at your own experience to see how these two work together in your on-the-mat yogic practices, as well as in the greater sphere of yogic practice, your daily life?

QUESTION/INQUIRY: What helps you create an atmosphere of reverence around your practice? What is the difference between practice done with reverence and practice that is mechanical or dutiful? What do you do when your practice feels mechanical?

Journal about this.