

# **Studying the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali***

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## I. Introduction to the Study Guide

### A. Welcome!

This study guide offers a pathway into yoga studies, specifically through the study of the short, enigmatic verses of a classical text called the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*. The purpose of the study guide is to encourage the exploration of the *Yoga Sūtras*, knowing that the insights gained can be helpful, perhaps vital, components of your spiritual journey.

Many Westerners know the word yoga through classes in the physical postures, yet Patañjali only briefly mentions postures (*āsana*). Yoga postures are useful for many people and have a place, but they are not the chief or only practice of yoga. If you are a practitioner of postures, you may also have some knowledge of breathwork, ethics, and intent. Think of your practice up until now as a gateway into a more profound experience.

Written in Sanskrit roughly two thousand years ago, this text has been translated hundreds of times into English. Many translators are also commentators, explaining the deeper meanings of terse verses and demystifying obscure references. Yet, despite the spread of yoga throughout the world, modern students have difficulty seeing how this text applies to them.

An analogy might help explain this. Imagine arriving at college as a freshman and being assigned to a graduate seminar in statistics as your very first class. Goodness! You're not even sure what statistics is about. You don't know the rules of statistics or have a foundation for its study. The class is frustrating and alien, and the reading makes little sense.

Frankly, parts of the *Yoga Sūtras* can seem like that to students. Why? First, the text is a translation, and translations may or may not mirror the original. Second, yoga itself grew from a particular culture, at a particular time, with specific intentions that may not be familiar to a new student. There are unstated understandings and assumptions that, while somewhat familiar to Theosophists, are not familiar to all readers. As readers struggle to make sense of the text and follow its logic, it is hard to imagine how these pieces could ultimately prove to be transformative.

When Patañjali compiled the 196 short verses of the *Yoga Sūtras*, he wrote it for an advanced student, one with a substantial base of knowledge and practice. This student would already be devoted to a yogic path and understand the ethical constrictions and commitment required.

Few of us are so prepared these days or are so steadfast in this process. However, as Theosophists, we have declared our intention to search for Truth. We have an understanding of many of the key concepts of the *Yoga Sūtras*, and we have a deep spiritual longing that powers our search for Truth.

Studying the *Yoga Sūtras* can help a student discriminate between what is hype and what is of value. Long before the proliferation of writing about yoga on the Internet, Taimni (1961) urged students to look to the classics to avoid chaotic and misleading claims about yoga. At its

heart, yoga *is* experience and practice; it is about paying attention. It is about the intention to lay bare the errors of mind that keep us from clarity about our true nature. Guides or teachers instruct from their own experiences, whether they are the esteemed Patañjali, a distinguished commentator on yogic texts, or a teacher at a local yoga studio. When the teacher's experience is deep, mystical, transformational, or spiritual, they can inspire insight and longing in the student. They can keep students focused and safe from harm. However, teachers can also color their teaching with their own personal ego and confusion.

Practices such as *āsana* (poses) and meditation are known throughout the world, and we might say the practices are universal. Yet, yoga also has a cultural context. A reader can pick up an English copy with no background or preparation, but it is likely that the richness and logic of the text will be missed. To study the *Yoga Sūtras* in some depth is to understand how it rises from a certain culture and history, explains with precision human psychology, and provides guidance for practice throughout lifetimes. It can also inspire seekers on a spiritual and mystical path, giving them a sounding board for their experience and a glimpse of what is possible.

The *Yoga Sūtras* is not a long elucidation of a path of transformation. It is not the poetry of Blavatsky's *Voice of the Silence*, and it has few examples to make it more understandable. However, it is an incisive plan to save a serious student time and avoid mistakes of past yogis, and its advice for living a spiritual life is surprisingly practical. The *Yoga Sūtras* operates like a roadmap to translate the signposts along the way, although, like all maps, it is not the experience itself.

### ❖ ***Introduction to the Journal or Discussion Questions***

After many of the sections of this study guide, you will find discussion questions for groups and journal questions for individual reflection. I encourage all students to write regularly in a journal about your practice, your reading, and the questions posed in the study guide. The appendices contain suggestions for working in a group or for studying independently.

- Whether you are new to the *Yoga Sūtras* or have read them before, what draws you to this text now?
- How do you think of higher consciousness? What does that term mean to you?

