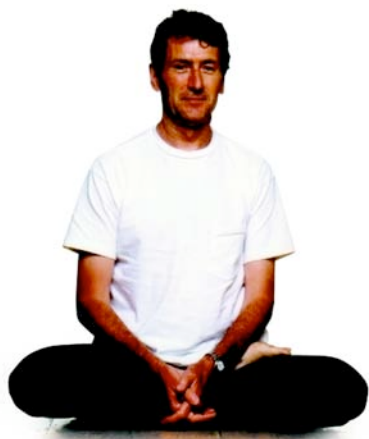


Learning from life

– The psychology of the Yoga Sutra for guiding the mind

Article 1 by Paul Harvey



Buried within the rich traditions of "on the mat" Yoga practice are many teachings with advice and reflections on how to live more creatively whilst off the mat so to speak.

According to the teachings of Yoga, the postural practices of asana, the breathing practices of pranayama, and other seated practices of meditation or dhyanam such as chant or japam (repetition of mantra) or reflecting on subtle aspects of attitudes or natural phenomena, sit within a framework of daily living and its constant dynamic of helpful actions and positive responses or unhelpful actions and negative re-actions.

Yoga Sutra I 5

The activities are fivefold and from them arise disturbance or composure.

"The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make heaven of Hell, and a hell of Heaven...."

John Milton

The starting point for these deeper teachings is that all actions, including re-actions, can be a point of learning and growth even if the

insight arises after the event. It is inevitable that our personal buttons, or old unhelpful and often repressed memories, will be pushed by ourselves, though we might project it onto others with such neat phrases as "look what you made me do!" Within this triggering process old patterns surface bringing with them unhelpful and defensive or aggressive attitudes which can leak into our responses. So rather than the ideal of foresight with skilful responses being in place and in readiness whatever the situation, we have the more realistic possibility of progressive levels of learning options starting with hindsight as our guide for insight.

Yoga Sutra I 12

By discipline and dispassion the mental activities are contained.

"Self-respect is the fruit of discipline; the sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to oneself...."

Abraham J Heschel

According to Yoga psychology the first awareness is the realisation after the action that we have not acted skilfully enough and seeing that the consequence had a negative hue which outweighed the positive. This leads the Yoga student, interested in looking into the past as a potential tool for anticipating future situations, to inquire into his or her action through examination of the symptoms arising from or around it.

This inquiry through symptoms can lead us towards the cause and knowing more of the cause can bring us to reflect on the means for more positive interactions in the future.

So what Yoga text is seen as the primary teaching in this area of skilful and unskilful actions? One teaching stands out like a beacon on a hillside as a light that, over many centuries, has been a constant companion and compendium for both teachers and students of Yoga.

This text is called the Yoga Sutra. The compiler of this collection of around 200 short pithy sutra or verses was known as Patanjali. The Yoga Sutra is often called Raja Yoga or the Royal or highest teaching on Yoga.

The verses are composed in a series of terse, interlocked aphorisms each linking to the next to form a continuous and developing dialogue, as if between teacher and student.

For example the first verse as the teacher would say:

"Now follow the teachings of Yoga." – C1 V1

The student would enquire:

"What is Yoga?"

The teacher would respond:

"Yoga is the containment of the mind's activities." – C1 V2

The student would then enquire:

"What arises out of this state of containment?"

The teacher would then respond"

"In that moment awareness is present." – C1 V3

The student then asks"

"What happens in other moments?"

The teacher responds:

"At other times the minds activities are presented." – C1 V4

The students then asks:

"What are the minds activities?"

The teacher then responds:

"The minds activities are fivefold and from them arise disturbance or composure." – C1 V5

The student then asks:

"What are the these five aspects of mind?"

The teacher responds:

"They are right perception, wrong perception, imagination, deep sleep and memory." – C1 V6

And so the dialogue goes on and according to the students question so the next response arises from the teacher. The root of the word sutra is siv which means to sew, hence the meaning of the word sutra as beads sewn together on a thread.

Patanjali was also said to be the compiler rather than the originator of this fascinating teaching and organised the collection of sutra into four chapters each with a primary focus

according to our state of mind and receptivity of attention.

The first chapter discusses the path of Yoga for the student with what is basically a steady mind which experiences only momentary lapses in awareness. Here the student is able to turn their mind towards the subtleties of cultivating attitudes and refining meditation with little impact from the distractions of thoughts that others might experience.

Yoga Sutra I 37

Or, the mind on an image or form free from attachment.

"The fewer facts you have in support of an opinion, the stronger your emotional attachment to that opinion."

Anonymous

The second chapter discusses the means in Yoga for the student with a distracted mind with momentary glimpses of awareness. As such this chapter is therefore focused on strategies such as changing our lifestyle and using exercise and breathing practices to steady the wandering mind and prepare it for the rigours and subtleties of more formal meditative practices.

Yoga Sutra I 39

Or, through meditation on what is desirable.

"Whatever you do, do with all your might."

Marcus Tullius Cicero

The third chapter of the Yoga Sutra discusses the fruits and possibilities for a steady mind and offers many non-denominational meditative foci for the student who has the potential to both be physically comfortable, still and alert whilst actively engaging in the deepening of the meditative process.

The fourth chapter develops the goal of Yoga from the wise words at the end of the third chapter in that practice is not an end in itself.

It is instead a means to test the steadiness of the student within the fluctuations of the minds thought processes. It discusses the goal of Yoga wherein we realise what it is to live within a state whereby the mind is a clear vessel for a deeper awareness to unfold as a wise and vibrant reference for skilful action.

Yoga Sutra I 47

On the maturity of pure union there is the clear vision of the seer.

"Vision is the art of seeing the invisible...."

Jonathan Swift

These four chapters offer the seeds for the ground that we carefully dig through our asana and pranayama practices. Without these seeds we can have a nicely dug soil but little fresh growth of new intentions which can bloom into those attitudes which are the roots for skilful responses within challenging situations.

In the next article we will start from the point we can often find ourselves in, namely what happened because we were not paying attention. Plus what the Yoga Sutra advises us to do from the moment we find we have not been vigilant and the consequent difficulties we experience.

This is the first of a series on the Yoga Psychology in the Yoga Sutra from Paul Harvey, a pupil of TKV Desikachar since 1979 and founder of aYs in the UK. He has been involved in the practice of Yoga since 1973 and has taught around the world including the US, Canada, Israel and Europe. Currently he directs a Yoga Centre in Bristol, teaches individuals in Bath and runs retreats in Gloucs. His book Yoga for Every Body was published in 2001 by Time Life and is currently available from Amazon Books.

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