

Learning from life

– The psychology of the Yoga Sutra for guiding the mind

Article 2 by Paul Harvey



In the last article we introduced a teaching that stands as the highest in Yoga in that its message encompasses all aspects of Yoga practice and living.

It is the Yoga Sutra and was written by a person called Patanjali. As he himself tells us in the first verse he is not the author merely the compiler of existing teachings and practices. These teachings, having come from an authentic source, are merely being represented to support and guide the student and teacher of Yoga. The Yoga Sutra are a companion for all practitioners whether ancient or modern in time or attitude.

Patanjali himself is a figure shrouded in mythology rather than history and arose from a time when people were troubled and prayed for help. The myth goes on to tell us that people had problems with their health, their mental state and the quality of their communication and prayed to a higher force for help in finding a way forward.

This prayer was answered and Patanjali appeared, Pata – to fall, and anjali – into praying hands. He was said to

have composed three sacred texts for the benefit of society, one for the body, one for the speech and one for the mind. An Ayurvedic text on health, a Sanskrit grammar text for speech on proper communication and a Yoga text on the relationship between mind's actions and the source of action, awareness.

A myth that re-minds us of the timeless nature of life's challenges and our need to look at how we can better work with them.

Here it is the teaching on Yoga that is our focus and amongst all the approaches to Yoga such as Karma, Bhakti or Hatha, this particular teaching is known as Raja Yoga or the royal or highest teaching.

Its nearly 200 verses are arranged in a linked developmental structure over four chapters and look at the mind and its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats within a skilful or unskilful life. Its opening chapter looks at the question of knowing the mind and acknowledging it as something we can harness to work for us towards a deeper relationship with the source of our being, that essential essence known as awareness.

The second chapter approaches the routes to start to refine a mind that is problematic and unharnessed in its potential. This is through looking at our life and our habits and introducing lifestyle shifts and personal practices which allow us to gather more skilfully the helpful aspects of the mind and be less caught in its unhelpful patterns.

The third chapter tells us that a mind that has been refined through better food and lifestyle, plus establishing an asana and pranayama practice can be further refined and directed to subtler aspects of itself and life around us through the practice of meditation. Within the chapter are many meditational possibilities for such a mind to further refine its unhelpful patterns so that it works more for us and we less for it.

The fourth chapter again takes us a step further by re-minding us that the goal of Yoga is to go beyond the habits and patterns of the mind whether helpful or unhelpful. Whilst also emphasising that it is the mind itself, once refined, that is the primary tool for bringing about this shift within our relationship with our inner power or Self-resources.

This journey from the mind as the major source of influence within our life and actions towards an equality between the mind and our deeper resources and potentials, that of the awareness that arises at the heart of our heart, is the goal of Yoga.

The mind is a powerful tool as John Milton re-minds us with a quote that mirrors the teachings in the beginning of the first chapter of the Yoga Sutra:

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

How to rest in our essential being, the ocean of awareness and function fully as an individual unhampered by our history and yet with a healthy I-identity is the final goal of Yoga.

However this path toward awareness is beset, as with any journey towards our roots, with many obstacles and, even more subtle, many illusions. As a student once remarked, the capacity of the mind to create apparent awareness out of illusion is endless.

Yoga Sutra I 13

Discipline is the effort to remain there.

"To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also."

Igor Stravinsky

For example we think or presume things are going well and we suddenly, and often without much warning, find out that they are not.

So what to do? We need to have a reference point for reflection and self-examination.

As students of Yoga we could refer to the fourth chapter and its advice, for when things are going well, we find ourselves suddenly exposed to the harsh reality that we were deluding ourselves. In chapter four verse 27 we are told:

"Even in those where clarity is dominant there will be breaches in the new ways of responding and old patterns will creep in."

In other words a small leak can let in a lot of water. So what to do?

The next verse, 28, tells us:

"Go back to near the beginning and look at Chapter two verse one."

This is the chapter on Yoga for the distracted or disturbed mind and the starting point is what is described as Kriya Yoga or the Yoga of practice.

The analogy here is to the board game of Snakes and Ladders

This is an ancient game that originated in India based on the laws of Karma and skilful living. It could well be a subject of an article in itself. Basically each ladder marks a merit for an action born from awareness and each snake marks a de-merit or fall from awareness for an action born out of illusion about ourselves or others, or as is so often the case, both.

The original model has a distinctive action of merit or demerit for each ladder and snake and the higher you go with your actions born out of awareness, the further you fall. Within

the Yoga Sutra this is marked with the return from the apparent heights of Self-awareness to the very basics of practice in chapter two.

So as in snakes and ladders we go back to very near the starting point of our journey to re-examine the basics of our lifestyle to check what has contributed to our confused and unskilful actions. Here we go to the Yoga Sutra chapter two verse one and the fundamental practice of Kriya Yoga and reflect on our actions through:

Firstly through food and how we discipline our eating habits. It is a starting point for self work. Our mind and our system are affected by what we eat and what we eat is affected by our system and our mind. 'Our Mind is like our food; Our food is like our mind'. It means to discipline our eating habits."

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

Secondly self reflection and examining our motives. Or that self study that helps us to inquire into our own background and its strengths, its weaknesses, its opportunities and its tangled relationships. From this we can know more clearly where we are and how to move forward, however we can often need a mirror that is held by another rather than ourselves.

Thirdly, what is our relationship with the sacred or divine aspect of existence? How are we cultivating aspects of this in our lives and how do we live with the provocations that push us to re-act? The expression of this can be seen as patience, that true patience not the one that says "I have

been waiting patiently". But the one that shows its face in the midst of provocation and allows us to remain more in our centre and respond with a little more love than the more usual anger, resentment or fear of loss.

Yoga Sutra I 27

Its expression is sacred.

"Your sacred space is where you can find yourself again and again...."

Joseph Campbell

These three aspects of Kriya Yoga offer a foundation for the student at any level of practice for re-building our base for beginning a re-examination of our sadhana or spiritual practice from the bottom up, as in snakes and ladders.

Yoga Sutra I 14

Discipline becomes solid when cared for over a long time, without interruption, with respect and enthusiasm.

"You got to be careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there...."

Yogi Berra

Discipline, attention and patience support our efforts to transform the unhelpful tendencies that surprise and catch us and lead to confusion. They create a starting point for the next step and the journey towards our roots by laying a foundation for right practice. Being able to do any asana does not guarantee in any way an ability to overcome our indiscipline around food, our refusal to own our patterns and our inability to cope with provocation. Yet sometimes in spite of our best efforts in these areas old problems still arise; what to do? The inquiry needs

to go deeper still and the next article we will start from this point.

This is the second in 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.

For further information or details of his Workshops and Retreats visit

<http://www.processYoga.org>

or phone: 0870 130 2785

or email info@processyoga.org

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