



## SŪTRA IN FOCUS: ATHA YOGA ANUŚĀSANAM (1.1)

We need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are.

—Joseph Campbell, 1988, 5

### SŪTRA 1.1: THE OCEAN OF YAUGIKA LINEAGE

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*Patañjali*

**I**n uttering the very first *sūtra* of Patañjali's great work—*atha yoga anuśāsanam*—we transport ourselves into a sacred realm beyond the confines of the known and the familiar, beyond the confines of conditioned time and space. *Atha* means both 'now' and 'then', indicating that these ancient wisdom teachings are timeless, relevant to countless seekers for generation upon generation. Stepping into this ocean of tradition, we are immersed in the spirit of the Yaugika lineage—a spirit that transcends place, time, and circumstance, uniting all sincere aspirants with the heart of Patañjali's teachings.

We are initiated into the *Yoga Sūtras* with *atha*, a word that is both a prayer and a wake-up call for the spiritual journey ahead. In these first *sūtras*, Patañjali introduces us to the possibility, through Yoga, of finding our way home—our way back to the Self, the *puruṣa*, the consciousness within (*sūtra* 1.3). Unfortunately, Patañjali also lets us know that if we do not find our way to the Self, then we will be restricted to living in and with our fluctuating mind and body (*sūtra* 1.4). In short, we are offered a choice between a course of life-long self-cultivation contra the ‘unexamined life’: a life lived without self-reflection. *Sūtra* 1.1 is a call to take up the Yogic journey, to follow in the footsteps of the great yogis (*anuśāsanam*) and, through the teachings and *sādhanās*, to become whole again.

## YOGA AS SEPARATION: PROCESS AND GOAL

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In studying *sūtra* 1.1, we are also presented with the idea of Yoga as separation and Yoga as *samādhi* (ecstasy, complete absorption). In fact, Patañjali is primarily concerned with the art and discipline of separating the Self, or *puruṣa*, from its coverings—the manifold fluctuations of nature (*prakṛti*). This discrimination—between Self and non-Self, permanent and impermanent, real and unreal—is at the core of Patañjali's teachings.

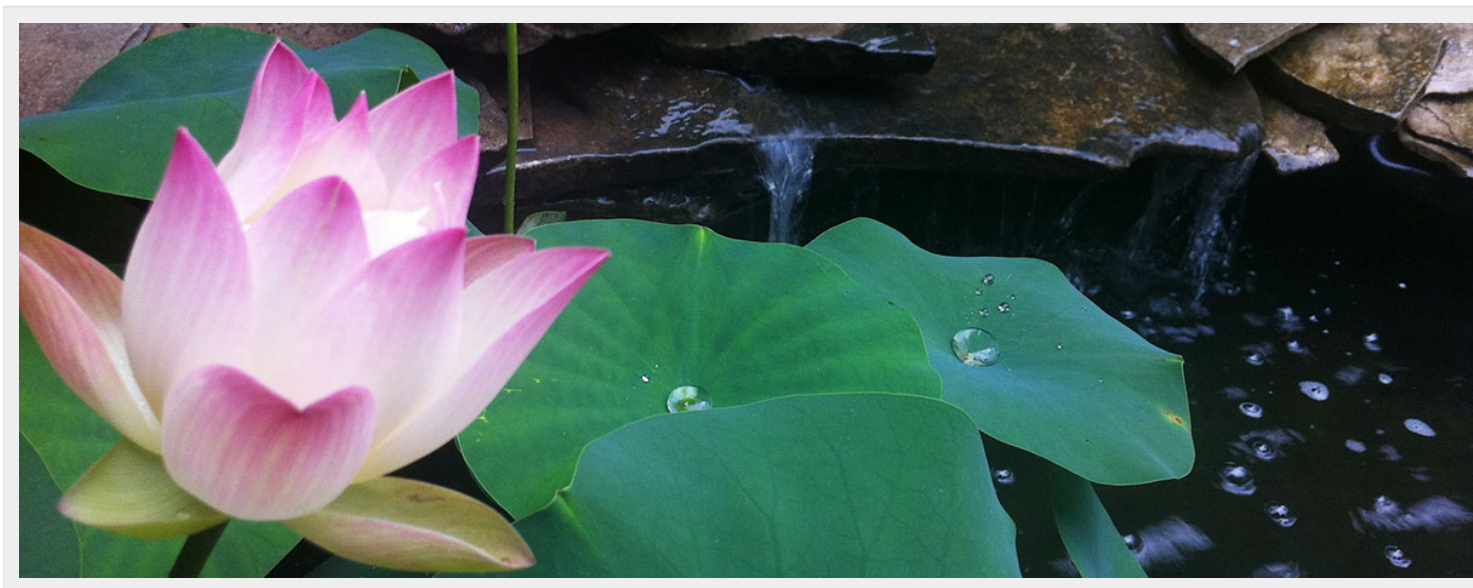
Yoga as separation encompasses both a profound methodology of practice and also the ultimate goal of Yoga as *samādhi*. In other words, classical Yoga is both a journey involving the methods and various stages of practice as well as a destination (*samādhi*).

According to Patañjali, this journey takes place in steps and stages: perfection in Yoga cannot be attained overnight. The teachings of Yoga call us to engage in a regular discipline that helps us to dismantle and discard those habits, patterns, and conditions of being that prevent us from reaching towards the abiding consciousness within, replacing them with more sustainable and Self-supportive ways of being. As a simple example, in *āsana* practice, we learn to lift the chest and the heart area instead of slouching and compressing all the organs of the torso, leading us to better health and a more uplifted frame of mind. Yoga is meant to impact and transform the ways that we use our body, breath, and mind in a progressive course of purification at all levels of being.

The path of practice is made of these many small and yet significant steps towards perfection, towards a genuine and ongoing connection to our higher Self. As Śri B.K.S. Iyengar expresses:

I am always happy with the smallest improvement. I do not try to reach Perfection but only the little perfection of every day.  
(Perez-Christiaens, 2012, 35)

It is this attempt to build a little bit of perfection every day that slowly forms the royal road to the Self.



## YOGA AS AN ARCHETYPAL JOURNEY TO THE SELF

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Peeling back the layers of *prakṛti* (nature; the body-mind complex), week by week, year by year and coming closer to the essence of our being—this is the practice of Yoga as separation, and it is the foundation for Patañjali's teachings. Yoga is portrayed as a sacred and mystical journey inward through the five sheaths (*kośas*) of our being from the physical body to the energetic one, from the mental-emotional layer to the wisdom mind, and beyond.

The great scholar and student of world mythology Joseph Campbell captures this aspect of spiritual practice in the following:

The function of Yoga is to release us from the time-space commitment, introduce us to the transcendent. Then comes the problem of bringing us back so that we can operate in both knowledges. (1990, 134)

By piercing all layers of the body-mind and, through yogic *sādhana*, coming to know our-Selves, we undertake an archetypal journey that has been explored, explained, and experienced in myriad religions and cultures throughout time. While Patañjali speaks of a point of no-return when all fluctuations of mind have ceased completely, most of us have an experience of 'touching' or visiting this place of peace only briefly. But what an experience! And it is through yogic *sādhana* that we strive to know and access this form of consciousness more regularly and for longer and longer periods of time.

Campbell speaks to our need as humans to touch and so know the transcendent, but he also recognizes the need and the reality, for many of us, to live in the world ("Then comes the problem of bringing us back"). If we stay too long in the sphere of the transcendent, it becomes quite difficult to live in the world. If on the other hand we recognize no higher purpose, dwelling only in the domain of the mundane, then our lives lose meaning and we lose heart.