Year Long Meditation Book Club
The Secret of the Yoga Sutra
STUDY GUIDE
In these first sutras, Patanjali lays out clearly and succinctly what constitutes yoga. He also describes the building blocks of mind. We learn that our mind’s intrinsic nature is self-luminous, filled with joy and clarity. And yet, due to the mind’s acquired conditions, we often find ourselves consumed by doubt, anger, fear, and anxiety. As the sages tell us, it does not have to be this way. Samadhi is our natural state, and it is our birthright to experience this state. Yoga offers us a systematic method for mastering our mind and experiencing our true essence.

“Samadhi is the mind’s natural attribute. Our intrinsically radiant mind is a conduit for enlightenment.”

—Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, The Secret of the Yoga Sutra

Key Terms
- vritti
- chitta
- samskara
- karma chakra
- kshipta
- mudha
- vikshipta
- ekagra
- niruddha

Self Study Questions

1. Our mind is intrinsically self-luminous and filled with joy. Yet we tend not to experience these qualities all the time in our day-to-day lives. What keeps us from our self-luminous, joyful, positive mind? In other words, do we need to gain, lose, or change in order to experience this pristine mind? Where do we start our journey?

2. Any mental activity keeps the mind restless. A mind that is always moving—jumping from one focus to the next—or brooding on one object incessantly cannot be at peace. Patanjali uses the language of “turning,” “rotating,” and “spinning” for these mental operations, calling them vrittis. His concise definition of yoga consists of only four words: “mastery over the roaming tendencies of the mind” (yogaś-citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ, 1:2).

Describe, in your own words, what it means to have this kind of mastery. How does such a person act, think, and relate to others? When have you experienced a churning mind, and what tools have you used to try to quiet your mind?
3. In your own language, explain the notion of *vritti samskara chakra*, also called *karma chakra* or the wheel of karma (1:2, 1:4, 1:5). How do samskaras keep us entrapped in a vicious cycle? Give an example of how vritti samskara chakra is operating in your life today, or of how it operated in your life before you made some positive changes.

4. In his commentary on the first sutra, Vyasa identifies five states of mind, each of which causes the mind to function differently, affecting our experience of ourselves and the world. These are:

1. disturbed (*kshipta*)
2. stupefied (*mudha*)
3. distracted (*vikshipta*)
4. one-pointed (*ekagra*)
5. absolutely controlled and still (*niruddha*)

We are always in one of these five states. Our goal is to become established in the fifth state; at this point, we are equivalent to Pure Consciousness, the seeing power of the Seer (1:3). On a practical level, it means our mind is completely under our control; it is at our disposal to use as we wish. How do we experience these states? Use examples from daily life to illustrate the first four states.

5. A one-pointed mind is the key that gives us mastery over our mind. How can a one-pointed mind help us in our day-to-day activities, as well as in our meditation practice? Give a few examples.

6. In sutras 1:7–1:11, Patanjali delineates the five mental operations which keep us disturbed, distracted, or stupefied. These are *pramana* (correct understanding), *viparyaya* (false understanding), *vikalpa* (imagination), *nidra* (dreamless sleep), and *smriti* (memory). Pick one of these and identify a time that it has interfered with your meditation.

Now that you know about these five vritti-creating operations, form a plan for how you will attempt to arrest the one you mentioned above so that your mind will be *ekagra*—or even *niruddha*—during your next practice.

*Om•work*

Read sutras 1:12–1:16, *The Secret of the Yoga Sutra*, pp. 37–75. If time is an issue, focus on 1:12–1:14.
Session 2
Reclaiming Our Luminous Self (Sutras 1:12–1:16)

In the last set of readings, we learned about our mind’s pristine nature as well as the acquired tendencies that keep us from experiencing its full brilliance. Now we will turn to the tools and techniques that help us reclaim our pristine mind. Yoga sadhana rests on the twin cornerstones of abhyasa (practice) and vairagya (non-attachment). In fact, sutra 1:12 tells us that these two are the keys to mastery over our mind. The methods Patanjali delineates in these sutras—when done with dedication, the right attitude, and increased refinement—will lead us all the way to samadhi. This is the promise of yoga.

Key Terms
- abhyasa
- vairagya
- viveka
- yatna
- sthiti
- tapas
- shraddha
- vasana
- yamamana
- vyatireka
- ekendriya
- vashikara samjna
- apurva

Self Study Questions
1. First let’s look at abhyasa—the practice. What separates ordinary mental or physical exercise from true abhyasa? In other words, what does abhyasa look like when it’s put into action? What are the “keys” to abhyasa (1:13)?
2. Imagine that you’re giving advice to Paul, a friend of yours who is just starting a daily meditation practice. Give a few tips to Paul on how he can infuse his new practice with abhyasa. [Hint: you might want to go to sutra 1:14 for some tips.]
3. Vairagya, often translated as “non-attachment,” literally means “de-coloring.” What are these “colors,” and how have they come to cloud the purity of our mind?
4. Sketch out the four stages of lower vairagya, as described in Panditji’s commentary on sutra 1:15. Then choose any one of these stages and briefly tell how you might apply it to your current daily life or yoga/meditation practice.
5. Now let’s put these together, which takes us back to sutra 1:12. Explain how the combined forces of abhyasa and vairagya give us the freedom to create a new reality of our choice, which is known as *apurva*.

*Om-work*

Read sutras 1:17–1:22, *The Secret of the Yoga Sutra*, pp. 77–108. Skim or read 1:17 and 1:18, and focus on sutras 1:19–1:22 for the next session (we will come back to 1:17 and 1:18 later on).
Session 3
5 Principles for Self-Mastery (Sutras 1:17–1:22)

In this next set of sutras, Patanjali introduces us to samadhi, which is the heart of yoga. Samadhi is not out of reach for any of us—in fact, it is our natural state. As human beings, we are equipped with all of the tools and means needed for rediscovering our natural state. With study and (especially) practice, we can shed the parts of ourselves that keep us from realizing our pure luminosity. A few rare individuals are born as high-caliber yogis and appear to have complete mastery of their mind effortlessly. For the rest of us, our progress is a journey with ups and downs. In these sutras, we learn about 5 ingredients for our practice that will help us make real progress on our path toward achieving life’s purpose.

“Meditation is the practice that leads us to ever deeper levels of mental absorption until we reach the highest samadhi.”

— Pandit Rajmani Tigunait,
The Secret of the Yoga Sutra Master Course

Key Terms

- samprajnata samadhi (sabija samadhi)
- asamprajnata samadhi (nirbija samadhi)
- videha
- prakritilaya
- upaya
- shraddha
- virya
- smriti
- prajna

Discussion Questions

1. What does Panditji mean when he says, “Samadhi is a state as well as a process leading to that state”? If we divide samadhi into two main categories (lower and higher), which is the process and which is the state? What can we expect once we reach the highest state?

2. Sutra 1:19 tells how yogis of extraordinary caliber ascend to the highest rungs of samadhi with seemingly effortless ease. They resume their spiritual quest exactly where they left off in a previous life; they were born this way (bhava pratyaya). But most of us do not fall in that class. We need tools or means (upaya) in order to achieve our spiritual goals.
What five ingredients, or upayas, does Patanjali say must be present for the rest of us “yogis in the making” who wish to experience the highest samadhi (1:20)? How can we start to cultivate these qualities?

3. Using examples from your own life and practice, what are two or three ways you can begin to cultivate shraddha?

4. Sutra 1:21 is a rally cry, calling us to practice with renewed enthusiasm and dedication: “Samadhi is near for those whose aspiration is steadfast.” Just after, in sutra 1:22, we learn that there are different classes of aspirants depending on whether a seeker’s aspiration is mild, intermediate, or intense.

Sketch out a description of each of these classes of seekers. What qualities does a seeker with mild aspiration have? One with medium aspiration? One with supreme, intense aspiration? In what category did you begin your journey as a seeker, where are you today, and where do you hope to be as you continue deepening your practice? Have you progressed or noticed any “backsliding” in your journey?

OmworK
Read sutras 1:23–1:29, The Secret of the Yoga Sutra, pp. 109–143. Collectively, these are known as the “Ishvara sutras” and are crucial to understanding the full promise of yoga.
Session 4
Ishvara: Our Eternal Guide (Sutras 1:23–1:29)

Until this point, Patanjali’s focus has been on our mind’s qualities—innate as well as acquired. We have seen how, by guiding our mind to shed its acquired characteristics, we can attain the heights of samadhi. Meditation on a carefully chosen object while cultivating the right attitudes and understanding (abhyasa), along with non-attachment to the fruits of our practice (vairagya), propel us to samadhi. In sutra 1:23, and for the next several sutras, the focus shifts to another sure method to samadhi: trustful surrender to Ishvara, who is our eternal protector and guide.

Key Terms
- Ishvara pranidhana
- Purusha vishesha
- advaita
- api guru
- bhakti
- sankalpa
- bhoga
- apavarga
- pranava
- japa
- parampara
- alambana
- spanda

Self Study Questions

1. What is Ishvara pranidhana (sutra 1:23)? How might we misunderstand the notion of “surrender,” and what does “surrender” mean in this context? Why does the tradition say that this is the shortest way to achieving our spiritual goal?

2. What are the key attributes of Ishvara, as described in sutra 1:24? Why is Ishvara called Purusha vishesha, or a “special Purusha”? What is the difference between ordinary purushas (individual souls) and Ishvara?

3. Throughout the scriptures of yoga wisdom, Ishvara is said to be a unique being who has threefold characteristics: omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience. Why do you think Patanjali singles
out the last of these as chief among Ishvara’s attributes (1:25)? What does Ishvara’s omniscience tell us about ourselves as seekers of wisdom?

4. In what sense is Ishvara said to be our guru, or guide? What does it mean to have the Supreme Being as our teacher, and how do we connect with—and learn from—this being or force (1:26)? What bearing does our understanding of this guiding force have on our understanding of sacred texts, religion, and external teachers?

5. Immediately after several sutras on Ishvara, Patanjali introduces the idea of mantra. This is the first mention of mantra that we find in the Yoga Sutra (1:27). What does pranava mean? What is the relationship between Ishvara and mantra? How can doing japa of an awakened mantra lead us to the highest level of spiritual unfoldment?

Om·work
Now that we’ve seen how practice, non-attachment, and trustful surrender lead us to our highest goal, we have a road map of how to practice. But it’s not always so simple to put these ideas into action in our daily lives: we often find ourselves overcome by fear, self-doubt, inertia, or confusion—to name a few. These impediments slow our progress, and some seekers even give up their spiritual quest completely. But it does not have to be so grim. With the right tools and attitudes, we can learn to make quick progress on our path, and we can attend our practice with joy and fresh energy.

Patanjali speaks from the voice of experience, as someone who knows first-hand the promise of yoga as well as potential pitfalls along the way. He devotes the next few sutras to obstacles that we might encounter, along with a clear methodology of how to overcome them.

Key Terms
- antaraya
- duhkha
- purashcharana
- maitri
- karuna
- mudita
- upeksha
- talu chakra
- pracchardana vidharana pranayama
- agni sara

Self Study Questions

1. In sutra 1:30, Patanjali lists nine obstacles (antaraya) that slow or halt our spiritual journey. They are also called chitta vikshepa, which means “distractors of the mind”—and as we know, our goal is mastery over our mind’s roaming tendencies. Sketch out these nine obstacles. What emerges as your biggest obstacle? Give an example of how this obstacle has posed a problem for you.

2. How do the second and fifth obstacles (mental inertia and sloth) undermine the quality of our spiritual quest?

3. How is the sixth obstacle (inability to withdraw from sense cravings) incompatible with our meditation? How does it relate to vritti samskara chakra?

4. The nine obstacles listed in sutra 1:30 are direct causes of the six undesirable conditions of the body and mind that accompany the obstacles (1:31). Two of these focus on the breath: disturbed inhalation and disturbed exhalation. Why do disturbances in our breath seriously
undermine our spiritual practice as well as our bodily health? What can we do to ensure that our inhalation and exhalation are not disturbed?

5. Sutra 1:33 lays out four mental qualities that we need to cultivate in order to unveil our mind’s intrinsic luminosity and power. These are friendship (maitri), compassion (karuna), joyful mind (mudita), and practicing a non-judgmental, “live and let live” attitude (upeksha). Let’s focus on one of these: compassion. As Panditji tells us, “Practicing compassion involves more than serving the poor and sick ... The practice of compassion begins with discovering and acknowledging the injured person in us.”

Why is self-compassion such a crucial element in our spiritual journey? In what ways can we integrate self-compassion into our daily lives?

6. In sutras 1:34 and 1:35, Patanjali introduces a set of pranayama and concentration practices designed to unite our mind with our breath, which in turn will lead us to our own self-luminous core—the lotus of our heart. Drawing on the wisdom of Sri Vidya, Panditji further elaborates on this practice, telling the role it can play in leading us to the heights of human experience. Explain how practicing prachardana vidhara pranayama gives us access to a hidden part of ourselves, and tell how this can help us progress in our sadhana.

Om work
Read sutra 1:36, The Secret of the Yoga Sutra, pp. 187–208. This is the core of the text—the real “secret.”
According to the Sri Vidya tradition, sutra 1:36 is the heart of the *Yoga Sutra*. The practice it describes—meditation on the lotus of the heart—connects us to our own self–luminous core, where we are as bright as the Divine Being itself. As explained by Vyasa and Panditji, this sutra says that by meditating on the lotus of the heart, we experience the states of *vishoka* (sorrowless joy) and *jyotishmati* (inner luminosity). Panditji sheds light on what is meant by “the lotus of the heart” and how we can meditate on it. Once we are established in vishoka and jyotishmati, there is no possibility of ever falling backward. Here we fully realize our intrinsically divine nature as well as our full human potential—limitless freedom and unsurpassed fulfillment.

“Once we are established at the lotus of the heart, the trail of joy itself becomes our guiding force, leading us all the way to the core of our being. When that experience matures, it automatically ripens into the place of our true power and perfection: samadhi.”

—Pandit Rajmani Tigunait,
*Essence of the Yoga Sutra* Digital Workshop

Key Terms

- *vishoka*
- *jyotishmati*
- *bhava pratyaya yogi*
- *buddhi sattva*
- *ajna chakra*
- *chidakasha*

Self Study Questions

1. How have sutras 1:33–1:35 prepared us to meditate on the lotus of the heart?
2. What undesirable qualities do we lose when we are established in jyotishmati and vishoka? What desirable qualities do we gain?
3. What exactly is meant by the “lotus of the heart”? Is it in a particular part of our physical body? Is it the same as the organ that pumps our blood? Where do we focus in order to meditate here?
4. What is the relationship between the lotus of the heart and Ishvara?
5. What kind of yogi do we become once we are established in meditation at the lotus of the heart? What are the essential qualities of such an individual? Can you imagine yourself as this type of yogi? What does it mean for you in your meditation as well as your daily life?

*Om-work*

Last session, we delved in depth into meditation on the lotus of the heart, which is the cornerstone of yoga practice—both the goal and the method for reaching that goal. This time, we will look at how to purify our mind, which allows us to become absorbed in a meditative object of our choice. As Patanjali describes, each class of meditative objects, from gross to subtle, produces different results on a different timescale. We’ll discuss which of these objects will lead us to the highest samadhi and how this process occurs.

“Our responsibility is to keep refining lower samadhi until Divine Grace walks into our life and lifts us to higher samadhi, which is the responsibility of the Inner Divinity.”
—Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, The Secret of the Yoga Sutra Master Course

Self Study Questions

1. Sutra 1:37 tells us that we can meditate on an individual who is free from desire. What qualities should they embody, and are these qualities apparent when we see, hear, read, or interact with them? Is there a way to tell for sure who falls into this category, or are we better off selecting a different object of meditation? Is this a satisfactory alternative to the lotus of the heart meditation described in 1:36?

2. Patanjali makes what might be a surprising claim in sutra 1:38 when he says that wisdom received in dreams can be a viable object of meditation. According to Panditji’s commentary, what is the difference between “prophetic” and “ordinary” dreams? What qualities do you first need to cultivate in order to distinguish between these reliable guiding dreams versus those that are to be dismissed?
3. In sutra 1:39, Patanjali offers an interesting alternative for a meditative object: what seems to be a “catch-all” in the form of a well-considered choice (abhimata). But as Panditji emphasizes, the key here is that the object be spiritually grounded and worthy of our meditation.

Can we select objects of our meditation by reading a book or searching the internet? Do we go to a teacher for guidance? How do we know when we have chosen wisely?

4. In sutra 1:41, Patanjali introduces the concept of samapatti—complete mental absorption. What allows us to attain this state? What can we expect from this state of samapatti? How is this type of mind like a crystal? And how can we now reinterpret sutras 1:37 and 1:39 in light of sutra 1:41?

5. In sutra 1:42, Patanjali begins to delineate the progression (or maturation) of samapatti. How do we progress from one stage to the next? What qualities of mind are necessary to refine our samapatti, and how do we develop these qualities?

6. When we reach an increasingly subtle level of refinement, how does our practice change?

**Om•work**
Read sutras 1:45–1:51, *The Secret of the Yoga Sutra*, pp. 234–266. Also refresh your memory on sutras 1:17 and 1:18, since these give the background of samadhi.
Welcome to our final study session before our capstone Q&A! Last time, we examined how to purify and refine our level of mental absorption in our practice. We discussed the various types of meditative objects from gross to subtle, weighing the relative merits of each. Today, we’ll finally reach the summit of the first pada—samadhi itself. Samadhi is the uniquely self-lit space in each of us that is absolutely still and tranquil, full of joy, and free from any fear or doubt. The promise of samadhi is what keeps drawing us back to our practice. It is the heart and goal of yoga.

“Our responsibility is to keep refining lower samadhi until divine grace walks into our life and lifts us to higher samadhi, which is the responsibility of the inner divinity.”

— Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, *Secret of the Yoga Sutra* Master Course

**Key Terms**

- sabija samadhi
- samprajnata samadhi
- dharma megha samadhi
- nirbija samadhi
- asamprajnata samadhi
- buddhi sattva
- prajna/pratibha
- krama/akrama
- karya vimukti

**Self Study Questions**

1. Explain what constitutes lower (sabija or samprajnata) samadhi. What are its three major components? (You may want to refer to sutras 1:17 and 1:18)
2. What is the relationship between the two main types of samadhi (sabija and nirbija) and the cycle of karma (karma chakra)?
3. What is the subtlest of all meditative objects, and what do we gain by meditating on this?
4. What is the difference between ordinary knowledge and prajna? (1:48–1:49)
5. When we are established in prajna, how does the quality of our meditation change? What changes do we see in our day-to-day lives?
6. Nirbija samadhi is the summit of Yoga. In nirbija samadhi, we are established in our pure, unalloyed nature, where we experience the absolute joy and clarity that is reflective of higher Divinity.

How do we reach nirbija samadhi? What is the role of self-effort in reaching this state, and what other factors are at play? What keeps us from reaching this state of highest samadhi?

Can you imagine that there is anything at all undesirable about nirbija samadhi? What questions, desires, or concerns does it bring up for you?

How do you think someone who is established in nirbija samadhi will talk, act, feel, think, and interact with others? What are the clues to recognize in ourselves and in others that we are nearing the summit?

Om•work
Come up with final questions for our capstone Q&A session. Then put into practice all that you’ve learned in your study of The Secret of the Yoga Sutra during Year Long Meditation (and beyond!). Also, stay tuned for our upcoming study group for the second pada (The Practice of the Yoga Sutra: Sadhana Pada).