

Introduction:

When you experience yourself in stillness and feel the peace within you, you will come upon a new awareness of who you are. This new awareness will convince you that you are part of a greater whole. Waves are separate energies. They are unique, one of a kind but they do not exist apart from the ocean. You are much like a single wave on the ocean and are, at the same time, a specific expression of that ocean. Ego is when the wave - you or me - mistakenly believes that it stands alone....

Extracted from the teachings of Eric Schiffman

An essay I wrote during the course of my teacher training

For me, the outlining of Sage Patanjali's yoga sutras is a good way to explain what yoga is. The sutras consist of four books – the first of which instructs us, put simply, in how to concentrate, the second book in how to practice yoga. Within the first two books of sutras, the first five of the eight limbs or facets of yoga cited by Patanjali are introduced. The first two limbs are termed yamas (things we must *not do* if we are to become enlightened spiritually) and niyamas (things we *should do* in order to become enlightened); all these are similar to the Ten commandments e.g. not being violent, not lying, not stealing, sexual moderation/moderation in all things and not being greedy; and purity, contentment, discipline, study and devotion (yamas and niyamas resp.). The third limb is asana - physical training used to iron out contractions and stiffness in the body in order that the practitioner becomes able to sit with a straight spine in order to practice meditation) and the fourth is pranayama (expansion of the life-force through breath control – this doesn't mean control in a negative way but to enhance one's normal breathing pattern and to combat poor patterns of breathing caused by stress; indeed, truly conscious breathing will bring into play cellular breathing so that every cell of the body pulsates with life). The fifth limb of yoga is described at the end of book two, namely, pratyahara – withdrawal of the senses – where if turned inward, the senses will see the purity of the mind; Patanjali tells us that mastery over the senses will help us to find peace and joy.

The third book of Patanjali's sutras is about making progress and accomplishments in practice and this is the point when the final three, more intricate, limbs of yoga are mentioned, namely, dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and Samadhi (Absorption – the union of the soul with the divine). The fourth book is all about liberation and the bringing of the self to the infinite stillness of eternity. There are ways to concentrate, such as focusing on a candle flame; the recitation of mantras (sacred invocations). Along the journey to liberation, the niyama of Isvara Pranidhana, which concerns surrendering oneself to the Godhead/surrendering the ego, letting go of selfish desires and attaining 'non-attachment' is key in the practice of yoga. In the Upanishads, the word Isvara means 'a state of collective consciousness', which represents 'all of us'. (see Schiffman quotation above) Self-study (svadhyaha) and austerity (tapas) are also essential practices.

The Bhagavad Gita, the spiritual portion of the sacred Mahabharata, categorises yoga in the branches gnana yoga (knowledge and study); karma yoga (yoga of action), bhakti yoga (devotion and selfless love for others) and raja yoga (royal/highest form of yoga, an over-arch to the eight fold path of yoga).

The most ancient of the scriptures are the Vedas and these are the root of all subsequent teachings. The Upanishads, drawn from the Vedas, consists of poems and expositions exploring the nature of the universal soul.

To say that yoga is an esoteric subject is an understatement and as sutra no. 1.14 tells us “Practice becomes firmly grounded when well attended to for a long time, without break and in all earnestness”. Thousands and thousands of books have been and continue to be written about yoga.

In my own practice and being mindful of the non-competitive nature of yoga I, long ago, dispensed with the word ‘should’, so prevalent in the Western culture and this has impacted on my yoga practice. During times when I cannot practice the physical postures, I practice Gnana yoga by reading about the subject or I practice karma yoga by going about my activities in a measured and calm way. I have focused in this piece of writing on the yoga sutras because they make for the ultimate *toolkit* for the practice of yoga; but more importantly, a sort of “manual for life/living”. As they are written as sutras – short snippets of text - they are especially accessible. One person will be working on Book One, another will have practised yoga for many years and may be moving towards Book Four. What is refreshing is that the yoga texts are not dogmatic – it is simply a case of what you put in to your practice will determine what you will get out of it. But in my own practice I stay true to myself (Satya) and aim to tune into what my *being* needs at any particular time, as well as aiming to honour and follow the teachings. It is true that, today, there are many yoga practitioners purely looking for physical exercise but it is likely that, eventually, if they attend a reputable class they will find that there is lot more to yoga than simply the physical aspect! In fact, the first exposition of yoga was not about the poses – those came after Patanjali’s sutras had been circulated in the third century BC. As I have moved through my own life, I have found myself more open to learning about yoga – when I was young and restless I wanted to move about all the time, have new experiences. Looking *outside of* myself was the norm. As a result of the natural aging process, I am now calmer, more contented and I take pleasure in looking at a beautiful flower or surveying a beautiful scene – I have always felt in tune with nature but this feeling has become stronger, no doubt enhanced by the practice of yoga. And that simple action of one-pointed focus and concentration is but a small part of my journey along the path towards liberation.

