It was after 8:30 at night. My husband was out, two of our three kids were sick with colds, and I’d been trying to get everyone to sleep for the past hour and a half. I had an important work deadline the next morning and so had several hours of computer time ahead of me, but every time the kids got quiet, one of the dogs would start barking at something and rouse everyone again. I changed the baby’s diaper, leaving the soiled one wrapped up on the floor for a moment while I responded to the call of my older child. When I came back, I saw to my dismay that one of the dogs had shredded the dirty diaper all over the room. And I do mean all over. At that last-straw moment, I knew I had two choices. I could either freak out—yell at the dogs, yell at the kids, curse my husband for being out, and stomp around the house wondering why all these things had to happen at once—using up energy and making myself miserable in the process. Or I could draw on the tools Patanjali provides in the Yoga Sutra to accept the situation with as much grace as I could, and figure out, step by step, how to get through it with as little suffering as possible. So I laughed a little, put the dogs outside, cleaned up the mess, and within 15 minutes, the house was at peace.

Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra illumines pathways to knowing your true essence, and to experiencing more peace and joy in daily life.
One of the greatest things I’ve learned from my teacher, T. K. V. Desikachar, is that the true value of yoga is found when you apply it to your daily life. The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, widely regarded as the authoritative text on yoga, is not just for contemplating. The sutras are meant to be put to the test in your everyday life—not just reflected on in your yoga practice, but practiced in your work; in your leisure time; and in your role as parent, partner, and friend.

The Yoga Sutra is traditionally presented as a guide for refining the mind so one can reach the highest states of concentration and focus. This focus is a means to an end: It leads to a clearer perception and the ability to know the Self, which ultimately results in independence from suffering. The 195 short verses are believed to have been compiled sometime around 350 CE by Patanjali, whom scholars also credit with writing texts on Ayurvedic medicine and Sanskrit grammar. Very little is known about the man Patanjali (or indeed whether Patanjali was an individual or simply a name created to represent several people). Few authors of this period took credit for their work; the emphasis tended to be on the importance of the teachings themselves, rather than the teacher. So while factual details about Patanjali are scant, the Yoga Sutra and its lessons have endured.

The 195 sutras are divided into four books, or padas, which cover four broad topics: what yoga is (samadhi pada); how to attain a state of yoga (sadbana pada); the benefits of yoga practice (vibhuti pada); and the freedom from suffering (kaivalya pada). The word sutra comes from the same root as “suture,” or thread—each concept is compact and discrete, but it can be woven together with others to present a full tapestry of meaning.

Though composed of few words, each verse is rich with meaning and depth, so that the most advanced student can continue to gain new insights even after years of study. Each carefully chosen word has clear meanings and connotations, which is why the sutras are best learned from an acarya, or “one who travels the path”—an experienced teacher who can help you appreciate the layers of complexity in the text and apply their meaning to your life.

While Patanjali is concerned primarily with calming, focusing, and refining the mind, the ultimate goal of doing this work is to reduce suffering. The result is that you feel better at every level of your human system, and the potential impact of this on your day-to-day life is practically limitless. When your mind is less agitated, you experience less anxiety and sleep better. When you have clearer perception, your confidence increases as you make fewer mistakes. Your relationships become more fulfilling as you take more emotional risks and connect with others from a place of knowing more deeply. When you are more connected with your own needs and tendencies, you can take better care of yourself, whether that means eating more healthfully, finding a new job, or getting enough rest.

Here, I’ve chosen eight sutras that, together, will give you a brief introduction to the transformative power that Patanjali’s simple but fundamental principles can have in your daily life. These tools for reducing suffering are designed to be so universal in their approach and applicability that everyone can benefit from them, regardless of their background, experience, or beliefs.

Yoga is here to meet you wherever you are. The introductory ideas you grasp when the sutras are new to you can become profound lessons as you deepen your engagement with them over time. If you’ve never contemplated the Yoga Sutra, think of these eight verses as an entryway for accessing the support Patanjali has to offer you in your own life. Perhaps they’ll serve as an invitation to learn more.

**solid ground**

I.14 sa tu dirgha-kala-nairantaryasa
takara-adara-asevito drdha-bbumih

To achieve a strong foundation in our practice, we must practice over a long time, without interruption, believing in it and looking forward to it, with an attitude of service.

Whenever you undertake anything new, whether it’s a relationship, a job, or a course of study, Patanjali advises you to recognize that there is going to be some effort involved. You must consciously create the foundation you hope to build on, not just to attain a successful outcome but also to feel good in the process. Becoming a parent, starting a business, studying piano, taking up rock climbing—whatever your undertaking, if you approach it with the attitudes described by this sutra, you will experience more joy in the activity itself and you’ll create a solid foundation on which to build for the future.

The first guideline Patanjali offers is dirgha-kala or “long time.” This means recognizing that what you are undertaking cannot be perfected overnight, that you have to commit over time to get lasting results that you are happy with. In other words, there’s no such thing as lasting instant gratification! Nairantarya, the next guideline, translates continued on page 111
it's all about attitude

I.33 maitri-karuna-muditopeksanam
sukha-dubhka-punya-punya-visaya-
nam bhavanatab-citta-prasadanam

An attitude of friendliness toward
those who are happy, compassion
toward those who are suffering,
pleasure and delight at those who
are doing good deeds in the world,
and an attitude of nonjudgmental
watchfulness toward those who do
harmful deeds will help us to attain
a peaceful and balanced mind.

Recognizing that you can change your
mood by shifting your attitude is an
important step toward easing suffering.
But implementing the attitudes Patan-
jali suggests is not always easy. Patanjali
says you should feel friendliness (ma-
tri) toward those who are happy (suh-
ka). This seems like obvious advice, but how often,
when others are happy, do we find our-
selves feeling jealous, or bad about our-
selves, with thoughts like “Why didn’t
I get that raise? Why didn’t I win the lot-
tery? Maybe that person cheated! They
don’t deserve it!”

Likewise, Patanjali says you should have compassion (ka-
runa) for those who are suffering (dubhka). But instead of
compassion, you might feel responsible for saving them, guilty about their mis-
fortune, or fearful that what happened to
them could happen to you.

When others are doing good deeds in
the world (punya), instead of feeling joy
(mudita), you might feel jealous, critical
of yourself for not doing the same, or even suspicious about their motives or integ-
rity. Perhaps most difficult of all, Patanjali
counsels that you should try to maintain
an attitude of nonjudgmental watchful-
ness or observance (upeksa) toward those
people who are doing harmful deeds in
the world (apunya). This can be extremely
challenging. How often do you jump in
and place blame, taking sides without
knowing the full picture?

Patanjali uses the word upeka inten-
tionally: He’s not telling you to hide your
head in the sand or to live in denial, but
to observe from a safe distance and with
nonjudgment. If you can adopt these
attitudes, you will receive the blessings of a calm, peaceful, and balanced mind (citta-prasadanam). And through this, the best choice of action will become clear.

The Yoga Sutra is a guide to feeling better in daily life, not to becoming a saint, and sometimes the choice of action that serves you best isn’t the most heroic one. I once got between two dogs that were fighting because I wanted to break up the fight. Without thinking, I tried to pull the dogs apart and ended up getting a bad bite. Had I not reacted so quickly, I might have thought of a better solution, like using a stick to separate them, or asking for help from someone more experienced. Similarly, if you witness an injustice on the street and get in the middle of it, you’re putting yourself in a position of conflict, and could become injured. But if you observe, trying not to pass judgment, you will be able to respond more clearly and act effectively while preserving your peace of mind and your personal well-being. One of the tools that can help you cultivate this attitude of upeksa is the principle pratipaksabhavana, as Patanjali describes in verses II.33 and II.34.

in your shoes

II.33 vitarka-badbane pratipaksabhavanam

II.34 vitarka bimadayabh kRTa-karita-anumodita lobha-krodha-moha-purvaka mrdu-madhyadvimatadubhajnana ananta-phalab iti pratipaksabhavanam

To avoid hasty actions that may be hurtful, we must practice trying to imagine or visualize the opposite of our first instinctual reaction. We must see things from a different point of view and weigh the potential consequences.

Often, Patanjali’s most powerful advice broadens your view, shifting your frame of reference or offering a new vantage point from which to see things. These shifts might seem simple, but they can have a profound impact on your experience, no matter what you are doing. One of the

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most powerful ideas presented in the Yoga Sutra is the advice given in verses II.33 and II.34: to see things from another perspective (pratipaksa-bhavana). Patanjali advises that to avoid doing harm by acting hastily, you must try to “visualize the opposite side.” This is something along the lines of the old adage “Put yourself in someone else’s shoes.”

Patanjali is quite specific in these sutras, explaining that hasty actions that cause harm to others can happen in three ways. You hurt someone directly (kṛta: I am angry, so I kick someone); you hurt someone by way of someone else (karita: I ask my friend to kick another on my behalf); or you approve, encourage, or feel glad about the harm done to another person (anumodita). Patanjali explains some reasons that people harm others, including greed (lobha), anger (krodha), and delusion or infatuation (moha). He then warns that, whether you harm someone a little bit (mṛdu), an average amount (madhya), or a great deal (adhimatra), the result for you is the same: endless suffering (dukkha) and a lack of clarity (ajnana). To avoid this, practice pratipaksa-bhavana.

Patanjali is a realist. He is not saying that you should not have legitimate feelings, or that you should judge yourself for feeling the way you do. He is reminding you that if you think badly of another, that person doesn’t suffer—you do. If you actually harm another person, you will likely suffer as much as, if not more than, the person you harm.

Patanjali offers this advice not so that you can become the citizen of the year, but so you can be happier and more fulfilled. It might sound selfish, but the most supportive thing you can do for the world is to focus on your own personal growth and transformation, and then act from that place in the world.

One way to implement this sutra in your life is to simply give yourself the space and opportunity to think before you act, rather than react. For example, if I am so angry with someone that I want to shout, instead of reacting immediately, I might imagine doing the opposite, such as giving that person a warm hug. The result is usually that I neither shout nor hug, but often, with this pause, I can come to some middle ground that reduces my suffering greatly by ensuring that I don’t respond in a way I will later regret. Since bhavana means to visualize your goal, set your intention, or adopt a certain attitude, Patanjali is suggesting only that you imagine doing the opposite of your first impulse, not necessarily that you have to do the opposite. So even if you do end up shouting at someone, for example, at least you are acting consciously. It might seem like a fine distinction, but acting consciously makes your feelings about your actions different from the feelings you have if you simply react without thinking.

mistakes are opportunities II.17 drastr-drsyayob samyojyo beha-betub
The cause of our suffering is the inability to distinguish between what is the truth (what perceives) and what appears to be the truth (what is perceived).

II.23 sva-svami-saktyoh
The inability to discern between the temporary, fluctuating mind and our own true Self, which is eternal, is the cause of our suffering, yet this suffering provides us with the opportunity to make this distinction and to learn and grow from it, by understanding the true nature of each.

Patanjali says that the cause of suffering (beha-betu) is the inability to distinguish (samyoja) between two entities—the Self, or seer (drastr), and the mind (drisyam), which includes your thoughts and emotions. Distinguishing between the two closely related entities—and understanding the role of each and the relationship between them—is a central goal of yoga and the key to your happiness and peace. Imagine that a personal assistant who works closely with his boss and functions as her representative in public starts to feel and act as if he himself is the boss, eventually forgetting to consult or even
recognize the boss, and you will get some idea of the problems that can occur when this distinction is blurred. But if you can think of the Self, or seer, as the boss and the mind as the boss’s instrument or assistant—and recognize the distinct role each one plays—that’s when you will acquire clearer perception.

Patanjali recognizes the value of both entities. It’s not that the mind is bad or that the Self, or seer, is better. You need your mind, emotions, and identity in order to live in the world, just as you need your inner compass, or true Self.

What’s crucial is discerning the role of each and making sure that each entity is acting according to its proper role. The good news is that while the difficulty of distinguishing these two entities can be frustrating, and can even cause you a great deal of discomfort and pain, Patanjali says that the suffering that results when you mistake one for the other actually helps set you on your road to greater clarity.

The mistakes you make, and the pain you feel as a result, serve to guide you toward a greater understanding (upalabdhi, literally “to obtain or go near”) of both the true nature (svarupa) of the mind and the true nature of the Self, or seer: “the external that is seen and the internal that sees,” as T. K. V. Desikachar describes them. It is only through this increased understanding of the nature of each and the relationship between them that you are able to differentiate between the two, and hence, prevent future suffering.

Instead of being too critical of yourself when you make a mistake, the message here is that you can let go of self-blame, regret, and criticism. By holding on to those thoughts, you are only making yourself more miserable, adding suffering on top of the suffering, so to speak. Patanjali is concerned with the present: You are here now, so it’s irrelevant how you got here, whose fault it was, or how badly you messed up. The important thing is that your mistakes give you a chance to learn something about yourself and to potentially do things differently the next time.

**core strength**

I.20 sraddha-virya-smrti-samadhi-prajna-purvakab itaresam

For those of us who were not born into states of higher consciousness or knowing, we must cultivate self-confidence and conviction to help us maintain our persistence and strength, and to remember our direction so that we may attain our goal of a focused mind and clear perception.

Often translated as “faith,” sraddha is more appropriately translated as “self-esteem,” “personal conviction,” “self-confidence,” or “determination.” If you are consciously making an effort to achieve greater clarity (itaresam), your conviction (sraddha) will be followed by (purvaka) the strength and persistence (virya) to remember your direction (smrti) and to reach your goal of total and clear understanding (samadhi-prajna).

Practically speaking, sraddha is your inner strength; when you’re lost in the woods and it’s getting dark, sraddha is your deep inner trust that you will find a way to make a fire, get warm, and find something to eat. It’s the guiding force inside that urges you to keep putting one foot in front of the other until you come out of the woods. This resource is one of your greatest assets—a way to help you connect to your own true Self or the place of quiet light within.

Later, in sutra I.22, Patanjali indicates that sraddha is apt to wane and fluctuate. We all have days when we feel more confident and self-assured, and days when we doubt ourselves. Sraddha is unique to each person: You might have just a little bit, or you might have a lot. The potential to cultivate sraddha is within you, though you might not be aware of that potential, or use it to your advantage. The right support (a good teacher, friend, partner, 

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**Within you is the strength that can carry you through the hardest of times.**

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journey to the light

or mentor) can help you cultivate and strengthen sraddha.

Most daily challenges aren’t as dramatic as being lost in the woods. But if you’re facing a stressful time at work or dealing with an illness or a difficult relationship, it helps to remember that within you is the strength that can carry you through the hardest of times. Even if things become so difficult that you forget your inner strength, it is still there.

make the connection

I.29 tatah pratyak-cetana
adbhigama’py antarayabhavas ca

Those who have a meaningful connection with something greater than themselves will come to know their own true Selves and experience a reduction in those obstacles that may deter them from reaching their goal.

Knowing the Self, and finding a greater peace and ease through that connection, is one of the fundamental teachings of the Yoga Sutra. In this verse, Patanjali says that once you are linked with something beyond your own identity, two things happen. First, the inner consciousness (pratyak-cetana) is revealed (adhigamah), allowing you to know the Self. Second, the obstacles that deter you on your path (antaraya) are reduced and eventually extinguished (abhava).

The goal of yoga is to come to a place of independence from the agitations of the mind, and to a deeper connection with your own inner compass—that quiet, peaceful place within. When you are connected to this inner compass, you are better able to handle the twists and turns of life. You don’t take things so personally. Your mood generally remains more stable. You see things more clearly, and so you are able to make choices that serve you better. As Patanjali says, it is almost as though you become independent of the effects of whatever is occurring around you.

When an unpleasant or difficult circumstance arises—a fight with a friend, a job loss, the diagnosis of a serious illness—you can experience it without absorbing it or identifying with it. You
have the distance and perspective to see that what you’re experiencing is not who you are, but rather something that’s happening to you, and you can therefore move through it with greater ease.

Soon after a friend’s wife died, he started shouting at me one evening, in front of a group of other people. Somehow, without effort, I understood that he was not really angry at me. I recognized that he was in fact extremely sad about his wife’s death, and, even though he was saying terrible things to me, my ego did not step up and feel humiliated that others were hearing these terrible things. Nor did I get defensive and retaliate by saying terrible things back to him that I would later regret.

I had an awareness that extended beyond my own immediate experience, which, while it certainly was not pleasant, was not devastating or even hurtful because I was clear that it was not about me. I did not feel anger, embarrassment, or any of the other things I might have felt if I had been acting from my ego or emotions. Instead, I felt deep compassion and understanding for my friend. I knew he did not want to hurt me, and I knew how much he was hurting.

The results of putting the principles of the Yoga Sutra into practice show up in moments like this, when you least expect them, with gifts of clarity and compassion. It is here, in your relationships with others, in your moods, in your reactions to life’s situations, that you know your yoga practice is working, helping you to stay anchored, calm, and stable.

In these moments, you are able to respond from a place of love and trust, of compassion and nonjudgment. You shine from your center as a result of being connected to something deep within you as well as beyond you. When you are connected to your core and acting from that place within, you will find that you can handle almost any situation with much greater ease and clarity.

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