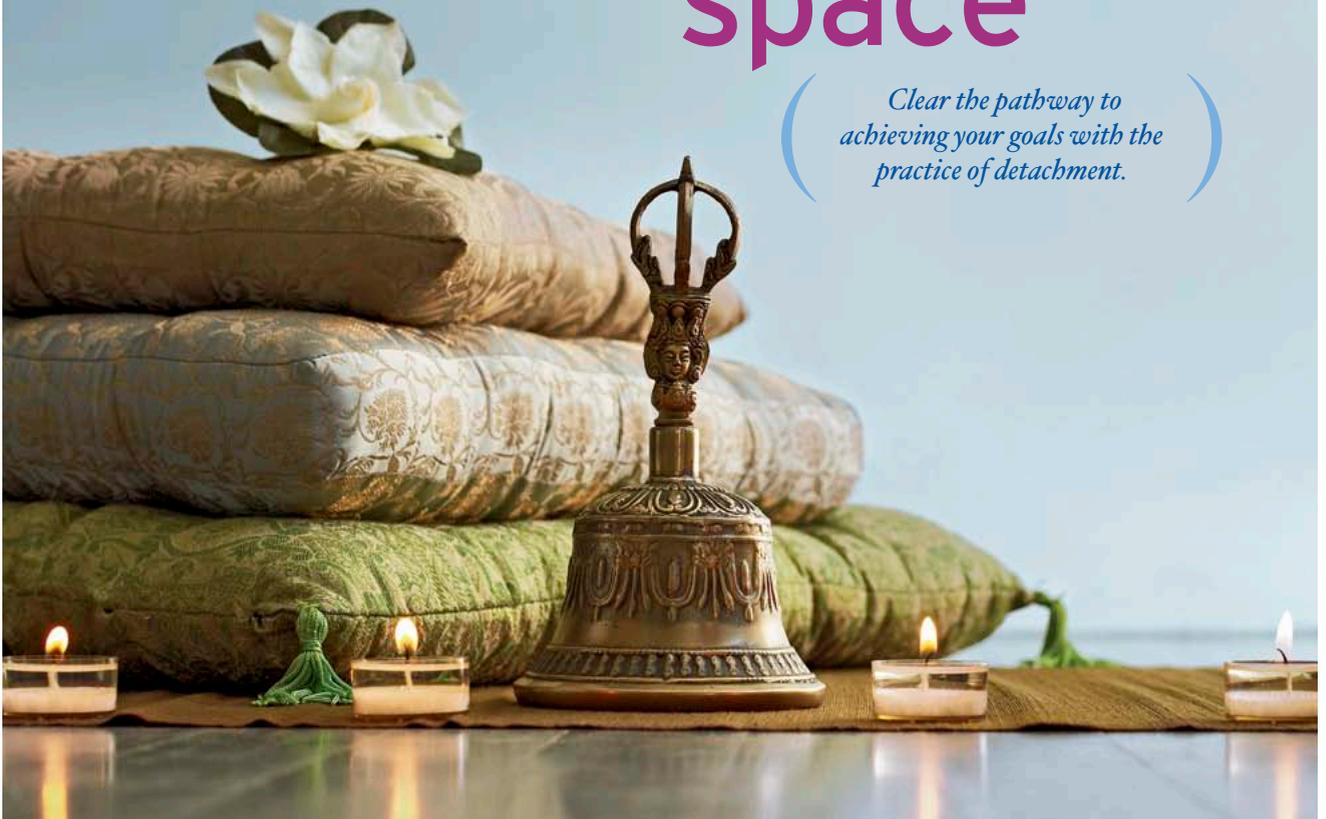


making space

Clear the pathway to achieving your goals with the practice of detachment.



Abhyasavairagyabhyam tannirodha

In order to achieve a state of yoga, one must develop both practice and detachment.

Yoga Sutra I.12

Last year, the San Francisco Giants were in the World Series. My family are huge Giants fans, and for a time our home was struck by Giants fever. I became passionately involved with the games and found myself staying up late watching replays online, sometimes until 1 a.m.! Before long, I began to notice the unfortunate effects of my enthusiasm: Because I'd wake up groggy in the morning, I'd end up skimping on my asana practice and would feel short-tempered throughout the day. Once I realized that my burgeoning obsession with Giants replays was compromising my practice, my mood, and my ability to be focused and present, I gratefully reaffirmed my commitment to practice and to my goal of a more focused, present, and easeful state of being. Then, I was able to limit my late nights on the computer.

In Yoga Sutra I.12, Patanjali explains that to achieve a state of yoga, or focused concentration, one must cultivate both practice

(*abhyasa*) and detachment (*vairagyam*). Practice and detachment are two of the very first tools Patanjali offers to help us in this process of refining the mind toward clearer perception and a deeper connection with the Self.

Patanjali deliberately does not define practice as asana or meditation because your practice can be anything that helps you to quiet your mind and focus your attention, bringing you closer to this goal. Walking, chanting, knitting, rock climbing, and asana can all be forms of practice. From a broader perspective, you can think of practice as anything that brings you closer to whatever goal you have, whether it's improving your health, learning a new skill or trade, or being a better listener.

A friend of mine is a doctor who sees a lot of complicated cases. He is also a world-class

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surfer, and he considers his surfing to be a practice that helps him serve his patients. Out in the water, where his mind is free from distractions, he gains his most useful insights about his patients and how best to proceed with their treatment.

CLEARING THE PATH

The other half of the relationship described in Yoga Sutra I.12 is vairagyam, or detachment, which is best understood in this sutra as a letting go of any habit or tendency that impedes you from reaching your goal. Practice is mentioned before detachment, which indicates that there has to be some movement toward practice first. But in the sutra, the Sanskrit words abhyasa and vairagyam share a single ending, *bhyam*, indicating that the two concepts are equally important. Like the two wings of a bird, they work together—neither can serve its purpose without the other. In other words, practice alone is never enough to get you to your goal; you

must also cultivate the discipline of letting go of the habits or impediments that are standing in your way.

If you want to develop a regular asana practice, for example, you have to make the effort and the time to actually do it (abhyasa), which may mean giving up an extra hour of sleep in the morning or late nights drinking wine or watching Giants replays (vairagyam). If your goal is to spend quality time with your partner in the evenings after work, you have to

Note that Patanjali isn't saying that you have to give up wine or your iPhone.

make the effort to be present and perhaps give up playing games on your iPhone or checking your email. Vairagyam applies not just to tangible habits and behaviors like checking your email or drinking wine, but also to mental obstacles such as

negative thinking, worry, fear, or any other mental pattern that's tripping you up.

Note that Patanjali isn't saying that you have to give up wine or your iPhone. Vairagyam refers specifically to the habits, practices, and attitudes that impede your progress toward whatever goal you have set for yourself—and these are different for everyone. For one person, it might be coffee or wine; for another, it might be a defeatist mindset.

You can think of abhyasa and vairagyam as two sides of the same coin—the first is moving toward the goal; the second is clearing your path of obstacles. The important thing to know about vairagyam is that, when you are strongly and positively focused on your goal, giving up what's getting in your way will, ideally, not feel like an enormous struggle. The more dedicated you become to your early morning asana practice, for example, and the more you can see the positive changes that happen in your life as a result of that dedication, the easier it will become to forgo staying up late indulging in wine or surfing the

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Internet. Likewise, the clearer you are about wanting to spend quality time with your partner, the easier it will be to set aside your phone for the evening.

A GREATER LETTING GO

This meaning of vairagya is part of a broader understanding of the idea of detachment in the Yoga Sutra. In the first sutra of the second chapter, Patanjali talks about *Isvara pranidhana*, which in this sutra (but not in the first chapter, where he uses it to mean “total surrender”) is also translated as “detachment.”

Detachment in this sense refers to the idea that you make the best effort you can, but that you're not attached to the results or outcome of your actions. Whether you reach your goal or not, whether you win or lose, whether you're healthy or sick, you practice for the sake of the action itself rather than for a particular result.

Vairagya and Isvara pranidhana are both translated as “detachment,” and they're related in that both are about this relationship between effort and letting

in and out

Your breath is the link to your quiet inner source of strength, insight, and peace.



THIS SIMPLE visualization with the breath is helpful for cultivating that which supports you and letting go of that which does not. It requires no preparation and can be done almost anywhere. If you are in a public place and don't want to draw attention to yourself, simply lower your gaze and focus on the floor as you breathe.

In a comfortable position, with eyes closed, take a few conscious, relaxed breaths. Once the breath is smooth

and comfortable, begin adding this simple visualization with the breath: On the inhalation, imagine bringing into your system whatever is most supportive of your goal—it might be strength, confidence, or healthy cells.

On the exhalation, imagine letting go of what no longer supports you. This could be something like fear, doubt, or negative thinking. It is important not to focus on the negative quality. Instead, focus on what you are bringing in; then, through the exhalation, imagine relinquishing or gently releasing whatever feels like an obstacle—but without giving it too much power.

After 8 to 12 breaths, or even several minutes, gently return the focus to the breath, without the visualization. When you feel ready, gradually expand your attention once more to your body and your surroundings, remembering that your inner resource of the Self is always there within.

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go. While vairagya is a letting go of obstacles, Isvara pranidhana is a letting go of the result of your efforts or practice. In both cases, you're letting go of an attachment that causes you agitation.

When I began studying the Yoga Sutra more than 20 years ago with my teacher, T. K. V. Desikachar, I remember raising an eyebrow at the word "detachment." It made me think of the well-intentioned New Age types who walk around claiming, "It's all good." I knew from experience that "it" is most certainly not "all good" and that tragedies happen to undeserving people all the time. I would never be detached, I argued, because feelings and passion are key ingredients for positive change in the world. I would never give up caring and turn into an unfeeling zombie or, worse, someone with an inauthentic "It's all good" mindset that doesn't leave room for real feelings and for connecting over authentic experience.

CONNECTION WITH THE SELF

My years of teaching have shown me that I'm not the only one to have had this misconception. But neither understanding of detachment implies a lack of feeling or caring. You can feel disappointment, anger, or grief but move through those feelings and then move on rather than holding on to them and allowing them to negatively impact your day, your relationships, or your life. In the face of loss, injustice, or anything else you feel passionately about, detachment means that you strive toward your goal, but if things don't go the way you want them to, your sense of Self is not shattered. You remain connected to your deeper essence. This has the effect of keeping you in the present moment of your action or practice rather than being distracted by thinking about the outcome. And it teaches you to differentiate between your current experience and who you really are, helping you cultivate a greater connection with your Self and ultimately leading to a happier, more peaceful, and more fulfilling life. ❖

Kate Holcombe is the founder and president of the nonprofit Healing Yoga Foundation in San Francisco (healingyoga.org).