

Vitarka vicara ananda asmitarupa anugamat samprajnatah

In order to reach a state of complete understanding, we must go through a process that progresses from a superficial understanding to increasingly greater refinement and subtlety of comprehension, until our understanding becomes fully integrated and total.

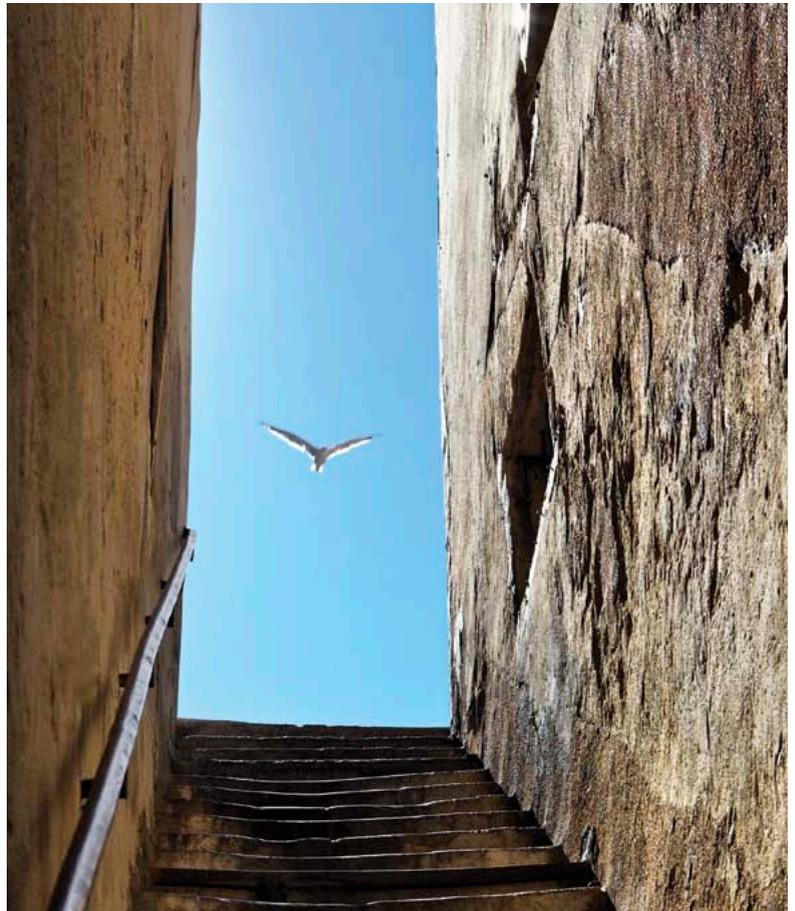
Yoga Sutra I.17

A few weeks ago, a colleague and I were working on a grant proposal. We emailed it to a third person for review, who returned it to me in a format I didn't know how to work with. The next day, I apologized to my colleague for not making the suggested changes. "I'm so sorry; I'm not technologically competent enough to work with this program," I said.

She calmly looked at me and asked, "Has anyone ever taught you how to use this program?" I admitted that I'd never encountered it before. "Well, then, how could you be expected to know how to work with it?" she asked reasonably.

A light bulb went on for me—how many times had I felt bad about myself or apologized for something I couldn't do, when I simply had not gone through the process of learning how to do it? I immediately thought of Yoga Sutra I.17, which says that before you can know something, you first have to learn it; that understanding is necessarily a process of steps; and that this process takes time.

Patanjali explains that to learn anything, whether it's the practice of yoga, fluency in a language, or proficiency at a craft, everyone has to progress through certain **stages of understanding**. These stages are perhaps most easily understood when you apply them at the most practical level. When you start learning to play the piano or knit, for example, you begin at a very gross level (*vitarka*). Your efforts are clumsy and awkward, and you make many mistakes. As you practice and progress to a more refined level of understanding (*vicara*), your fingering or your stitches become smoother and more



stepping up

*There are no shortcuts to true knowing,
so relax and take it one step at a time.*

even, and you can move a little more quickly and even get into a rhythm as you become more and more comfortable. As you continue to practice, eventually you come to a place of joy in the work (*ananda*)—you are so pleased with the results of your efforts that all you want to do is play the piano or knit.

With continued practice and effort over time, playing or knitting becomes so ingrained (*asmitarupa*) that you are able to play complicated pieces by heart or have a conversation while knitting absent-mindedly. Eventually, through continued practice and effort—if the dedication and the innate capability are there—you progress to a level of understanding and knowledge so



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Almond Strawberry Tart

1 package (3 oz.) cream cheese, softened
½ cup Once Again Creamy Almond Butter
½ cup powdered sugar
½ teaspoon almond extract
1 cup heavy cream, whipped
1 crunchy almond pastry shell
1 pint strawberries, sliced
⅓ cup red currant jelly

Cream together cream cheese, almond butter, powdered sugar and almond extract. Fold in whipped cream. Spoon into cooled Crunchy Almond Pastry Shell. Arrange strawberries over top. Chill. Meanwhile, boil currant jelly, stirring constantly until thick. Brush glaze over strawberries and chill. Allow to stand 10 minutes at room temperature before serving.

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living yoga

deeply ingrained that it almost becomes a part of you (*samprajnatah*).

One of this sutra's primary lessons lies in the idea that the amount of time the process takes varies, depending on both the person and the undertaking. One person picks up knitting or a new computer program quickly and seems to go straight to the *asmitarupa* level, while another person seems stuck forever at the clumsy beginning stage. Depending on the task at hand, your innate ability, and the level of effort you are inclined to put into it, the process can be swift and easeful, or it can be a long, hard struggle. Regardless, Patanjali makes it clear that you must progress through each of these stages in order to come to a place of total and complete understanding.

THE LONG ROAD TO THE SELF

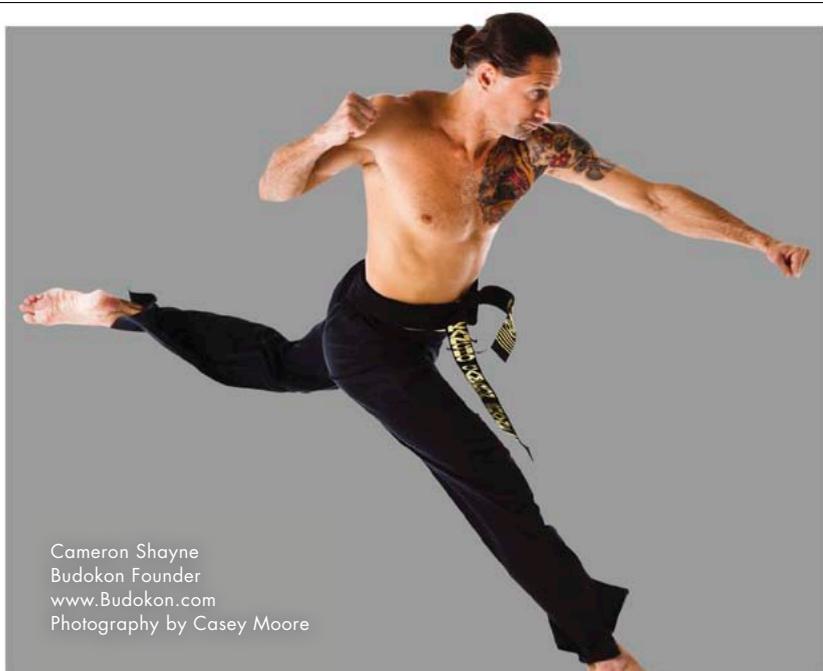
Of course, while it can be helpful to apply this sutra to just about anything you undertake in your life, from improving your communication skills to learning to play an instrument, what Patanjali is

ultimately talking about here is the process of refining the mind as you progress to higher states of yoga.

We know that yoga is about refining the mind and cultivating clear perception so that we can connect with, and act from, the place of the true Self. An important step in this process is changing our habits: replacing old ways of acting and reacting with new habits that serve us better.

Patanjali reminds us that this process of personal growth and development, of refining the mind and changing our habits, is something that happens gradually, over a long period of time. And, unlike learning to knit, it's a process of fits and starts. There is a flash of clarity, followed by a period of nonclarity. Then you might have another flash of clarity, followed by another period of nonclarity. Even as the flashes of clarity get more frequent, you can still feel as though you're taking one step back for every two steps forward.

As you work with the mind and begin to notice your habits, you start to notice yourself responding to situations



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living yoga

practice PATIENCE and COMPASSION

ONE OF THE IMPORTANT LESSONS in Yoga Sutra I.17 is that you are not supposed to be able to master everything immediately—and no one else is, either! Shift a pattern of being critical of yourself or others by noticing when that judgmental voice starts to pop up and immediately countering it with a true and positive thought. If you find yourself getting impatient at the checkout line because the cashier is slow, focus on the fact that she is thorough and careful. If you're feeling critical of your child's teacher for not responding to emails in a timely manner, think about how great she is in the classroom. And if you're frustrated with yourself because you're having difficulty with something, remind yourself of your other valuable skills.

You can also try this more formal practice: Sit comfortably and take a few relaxed breaths. As you continue breathing comfortably, allow the mind to settle on one person or area where you are feeling impatience, criticism, or judgment.

Over the course of the next few breaths, acknowledge this situation or person "as is" and then try to look at the seeming deficiency from a more positive angle. If it is a quality in yourself you are unhappy with, examine

your choices. Instead of feeling down about yourself, do you want to put in the effort to change? (Take a class to improve your computer skills? Spend time practicing your Spanish?) Or can you be content with the skill level you have and be free of self-criticism?

If you're frustrated by the lack of progress in your yoga practice or in any other endeavor, cultivate patience and self-compassion by reminding yourself that insights

and change will come in their own time with continued diligence.

This practice, whether you do it formally or simply reflect on it periodically as you go about your day, can help to counteract the perfectionism, impatience, and high expectations that keep you from being patient and compassionate with yourself and others. Ultimately it can lead you to greater peace of mind in the midst of all your pursuits.

differently. You have some success—responding to a tense situation from a place of calm rather than reactivity, perhaps. Maybe you even pat yourself on the back for how far you've come. And then comes a setback—you lose your temper, or fall back into an old pattern of playing the victim, or revert to some other habit that isn't serving you.

Patanjali's lesson is to be patient—with yourself and with others. For most of us, there is no rushing the process of refining the mind, no skipping ahead to the next stage, no quick fix. It takes faith, strength, and steadfastness to achieve higher levels of proficiency, refinement, and understanding. And by definition, your process cannot be compared with anyone else's.

Understanding this sutra can help you remember to respect your own process and timeline, to be gentle with yourself

on the path of your own personal growth. It's also a good reminder not to compare yourself with others who have skills different from your own, or who find themselves at a different stage in their own process. And it can help you extend this same patience and compassion to others, whether they're your co-workers, family members, friends, or children.

In this way, you can move away from an attitude of judgment and comparison to one of appreciation for your efforts and the efforts of others. You can feel empowered by the knowledge that you are enough. And you can find spaciousness in the feeling that so much is possible with determination and patience. ❖

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