

the sun always rises

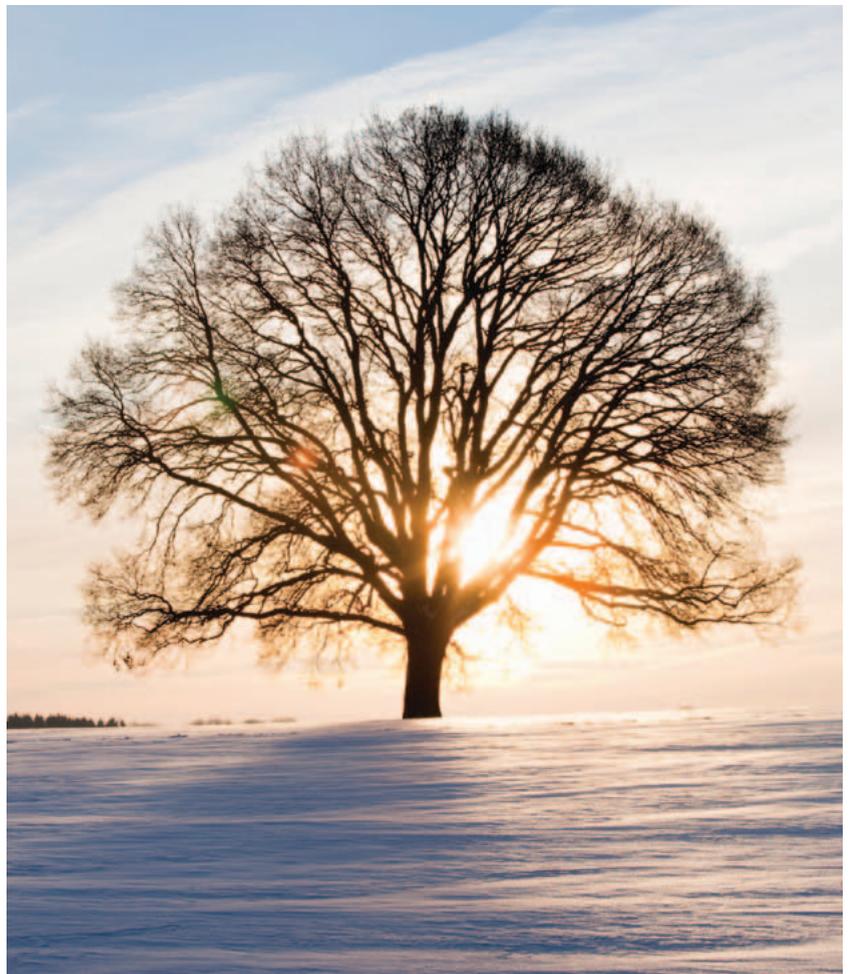
*In moments of disappointment,
trust in the divine order of
the universe and find true peace.*

Isvara pranidhanat va

Or through complete
and total surrender to
a higher power
Yoga Sutra I.23

Several years ago, a friend was trekking at high altitude in Bhutan with her husband and stepson. Three local guides accompanied them, with horses to carry their food and gear. A light snow began to fall, taking them by surprise, as it wasn't the season for it. Within moments, they found themselves in a blizzard, unable to see their own hands in front of their faces. The spooked horses bolted, carrying away all of their supplies. My friend, her family, and the guides huddled under a rock overhang, not knowing if the storm would last hours, days, or even weeks. They had no food, no warm clothing, no GPS. They were truly, hopelessly lost. Thankfully, the storm had passed by morning, and my friend and her companions were eventually able to make their way back down to safety.

In those long hours spent cold, wet, and huddled under the rock—hours which quite easily could have been my friend's last on Earth—she told me that she was not gripped by terror, panic, blame, or regret. Without denying the gravity of the situation, or her fears, she kept her mind clear by **focusing her thoughts** on the sun, both as a source of physical warmth and as a symbol of the light that dispels the darkness, and by thinking loving thoughts of her daughter at home. My friend said she felt a deep sense of stability and calm, a trust in the order of the world, knowing that even though



she couldn't see the sun, it was continuing to rise and set as it did every day, and she trusted that it would rise again. She felt that even if the sun did not shine on their little shelter in time for them to make it back alive (though she very much hoped it would), she would be at peace.

What struck me the most about my friend's story was how this experience of clarity and trust exemplified what Patanjali is referring to in Yoga Sutra I.23 with the introduction of *Isvara pranidhana*: total surrender to a higher



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Find a comfortable place to sit quietly. Close your eyes, relax your chin and neck, and take a few relaxed breaths with your hands resting on your lap (or at your sides if you choose to lie on your back).

As you continue to breathe comfortably, begin to visualize the quality or image you most associate with your higher power or with a force greater than yourself. This could be a wise person or an elder you respect, a religious figure or symbol, or something in nature that represents for you the order of the universe—something like the sun, the moon, a star, or a flower. You might even choose to focus on a quality such as compassion, reverence for life, or joy. Whatever you choose, it should feel like a positive support, something that resonates with you as a symbol of Isvara.

Once this image or quality is clear in your mind's eye, take time to sit with it and be sure it resonates positively for you. You might initially visualize the ocean as a calming, positive support, for example, but then begin to feel overwhelmed

by the depth of it, or shaken by its constant movement. The right image may take some time to come to you. Be patient and allow the right symbol to become clear over a period of days or even weeks.

Inhale, bringing your palms up and together over your heart as you imagine bringing in and filling your heart with that image. Exhale, gradually lowering your palms as you imagine that feeling or force emanating outward from your heart throughout your entire body, suffusing every part of your being. Repeat this as few as 3 times or as many as 12, depending on how much time you have. Afterward, sit quietly again and breathe comfortably for a few moments.

Know that this resource is always within you, an inextricable part of your very being that is always there to support you, no matter what may be happening around you or to you, and that you can rest in the support of this force. Doing this practice regularly will help you to be able to access this resource during times of struggle.

power, no matter what the outcome. Patanjali offers Isvara pranidhana as the first of nine possible solutions for steadying the wavering mind and freeing oneself from agitation and suffering in the face of potential obstacles (for, after all, obstacles are really only obstacles if they agitate you).

This total surrender does not mean that you're denying your circumstances. It is not the belief that everything will "all work out for the best," and it's not a blind faith that everything will turn out the way you want it to. None of us is immune from illness and difficulty, no matter what our faith or the strength of our beliefs. Rather, Isvara pranidhana is trusting in the order of the universe, of which life and death, joy and heartbreak, are all a part. It means that even if the outcome is not what you would have wanted, even if it's

difficult or painful, even if it means your own death, or the death of a loved one, you face it with a deep acceptance. So, if you are caught in a blizzard, Isvara pranidhana does not mean having faith that you will be rescued. It means accepting that you might not make it out alive and finding ease in that complete surrender to something beyond yourself, beyond your cognitive thinking or understanding—even as you continue to actively do everything you can to survive.

Isvara pranidhana, Patanjali explains, is available to everyone who chooses it, not just to those with a particular system of belief. Patanjali's description of Isvara is universal by design, and is intended to be of use to those of any religious or spiritual belief, and even to agnostics or atheists. In Yoga Sutra I.24, Patanjali defines Isvara as a special *purusa*, which can be translated

as a “special being,” “soul,” “divine energy,” “higher power,” or “God,” according to your orientation and comfort.

Patanjali describes this special being in a way that we can relate and aspire to as human beings: as one who is untouched by the consequences of the cycle of suffering based on poor actions. Patanjali goes on to explain that within Isvara is an extraordinary understanding beyond all, which is the source of all knowledge, the teacher of all teachers.

In the simplest, most neutral terms, Isvara can be thought of as a timeless symbol of the highest understanding, of the clarity represented by the light that illuminates the darkness—just as the sun continues to rise each day, dispelling the darkness of night and bringing new life and new growth.

EVERYDAY SURRENDER

While life-and-death predicaments like the one my friend experienced are thankfully not the norm, each of us faces our own “snowstorms” of varying proportions every day. Maybe you don’t get the job you wanted or receive the recognition that you feel you deserve. Life may present you with any number of heartbreaks in the form of death, loss, and disappointment. Each of these instances is an opportunity to see that there can be great freedom and ease in letting go of the illusion of control over your circumstances.

With this knowledge, you continue to act in the best way you know how, to the best of your ability. You still hope, dream, or pray for—and pursue—what you want from life. But when things don’t go as you had hoped, you trust that there is an order beyond your knowing or understanding. You can move forward with the peace that comes from accepting that the outcome is out of your hands, through surrender to something much bigger. And you discover that even when circumstances are beyond your control, life often works out just fine, and sometimes even better than you could have imagined. ❖

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