Intro to Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras
A brief overview of Patanjali’s path to a live well lived

I. Introduction.

Earlier we talked about what constitutes success in life. While financial freedom is certainly something we might think about when defining success, many people at some point realize that a truly rich life requires something more.

From personal experience and study I can attest that there really is something more besides financial freedom if we want a life rich and full. We likely differ as to what constitutes the something more.

This series of talks is based on two propositions: First, I propose that a successful life, the “something more,” is a life of well-being as identified by Dr. Martin Seligman in his 2011 book, *Flourish*. Second, I propose that an understanding of yoga philosophy and engaging in its practices, particularly meditation, is an excellent pathway to creating such a life.

A. In *Flourish* Dr. Seligman identifies five indicators of a life well lived: positive emotions, engagement, meaning, accomplishments, and nurturing relationships. We’ve discussed each of these in some detail.

B. We’ve also discussed how yoga can help us attain a life well lived. Starting in our second talk we’ve begun the process of studying yoga from that perspective – how it can operate as a roadmap to well-being.

1. Following Dr. Seligman’s admonition that we must study ourselves to determine our particular strengths we’ve spent time studying a yoga viewpoint on the inner nature of human beings, helping us better understand ourselves and our potential.

2. We’ve studied how yoga gives us a map of our inner selves, the subtle body, including the Chakras, and how we can work with that knowledge.

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1 See the posted outline of the first talk in this series: Dorigan, William (April, 2014). *What is Success?*


3 Posted outline: *What is Success?*

4 See the posted outline of the second talk in this series: Dorigan, William (April 2014). *Yoga as a Path to a Life Well Lived.* [www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks.html](http://www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks.html)

5 *Flourish*, at 12.

6 See the posted outlines of the following talks: *Our True Nature* and *The Creation Story and Maya.* [www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks.html](http://www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks.html)
to deepen our experience of the world.\(^7\)

3. We’ve also discussed a tool yoga gives us for optimizing our engagement with the world outside us, the *Tattvas*. The *Tattvas* help us learn how to recognize the possibility of connection to God and to others in the material world; through interaction with each other, observation of nature – using all our senses to create a rich life.\(^8\)

4. We’ve also studied *Prana*, the life force that connects us all, connecting our inner world with the outer world. We’ve looked into how we transmit energy to each other, whether we like it or not.\(^9\)

C. We thus have quite a bit of information to use in learning how to feel positive emotions, recognize opportunities for meaningful engagement and accomplishment, and for cultivating relationships of value.

We are now ready to move into the nuts and bolts of how yoga can help us achieve these goals. For the purpose of deepening our understanding of yoga and identifying the practices it provides, there may be no better resource than Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, a true user’s “manual” for creating a life well lived.\(^10\)

1. Through study and practice of these Sutras we develop the ability to discover, experience, and fully appreciate and enjoy all that life has to offer.\(^11\)

2. We learn how to awaken to and experience positive emotions and nurturing relationships.

3. We learn how to live with purpose and with integrity.\(^12\)

4. Like Dr. Seligman, Patanjali tells us that to be successful we must engage in serious, deep self-study to discover our most inner self, our strengths, and our connection to something bigger than ourselves, and how to best serve that connection.\(^13\)

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\(^7\) See posted outlines of the following talks: *Intro to the Subtle Body*, *Deep into the Subtle Body*, and the series of four talks on the *Chakras*.

\(^8\) See posted outlines of the following talks: *Tattvas in the Material World* and *The Rasas*.

\(^9\) See posted outline of the following talk: *How we Connect-Whether We Know It Or Not*


\(^12\) *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at xvii.

\(^13\) *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 11.
Tonight we begin our study of these Sutras through a short overview of each of the four Padas, or chapters.

II. Background of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras.

Scholars say Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra compile the history and evolution of yogic thought as of the time he wrote them. The date of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras is a subject of debate. For example, Dr. Edwin Bryant writes that certain scholars date this work to somewhere just after the turn of the Common Era, between 100 and 200 C.E. Mr. Iyengar, on the other hand, places the text much earlier, between 500 and 200 B.C.

Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras are considered to be the bible of yoga, and respected as one of the most important texts in Hinduism and a classic of world thought.

These sutras remain vital today, no doubt even more so because of the ever-increasing level of distraction in our modern society. They are, as I mention, an excellent manual for how to create a life well lived. For example:

1. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras teach us how to relate to others, removing patterns of thought and behavior that interfere with our ability to sustain meaningful relationships and participate purposefully in society.

2. The sutras offer guidelines as to how to conduct our relationship with ourselves, explaining how we can treat ourselves with greater dignity and respect. This places us in a position to be increasingly aware of life’s opportunities because we no longer get in our own way.

3. We learn to cultivate our body and breathing. Part of creating a life well lived is maximizing our health and capacity to experience life as fully as we are able.

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14 The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at xxxiii.

15 The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at xxxiv.

16 Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 1.

17 Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at viii.

18 The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at xviii

19 See, generally, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at lvii-lviii.
4. The sutras teach us how to calm our senses and learn to focus on what’s inside us so we can better understand ourselves, assimilate what we’ve experienced, and, from that place, make sound choices as to where and how to participate in the world as significant members of family, workplace, and community.20

The Sutras are broken up into four chapters, called Padas. Briefly:

A. First Pada.

The first Pada, Samadhi Pada (“Meditative Absorption”21), introduces us to yoga, explaining that yoga involves learning how to stop the mind’s endless chatter so that union with the Divine can be achieved. It describes the nature of our mind, the different types of thoughts, and obstructions and distractions to our thinking; i.e., typical patterns of negative thinking that block us from enjoying a full and active life. Patanjali describes how to achieve connection to Consciousness, the Divine, and also describes ways that to overcome the obstructions and distractions that impede our progress.

This first chapter gives us the big picture – how yoga can work for us to create a life of well-being. It explains how our attitudes get in our way and prevent us from feeling the positive emotions inherent in our daily experiences, how our mind’s chatter prevents us from becoming fully engaged in what we are doing, how we miss opportunities for meaningful activities and opportunities to serve, and how we sabotage our ability to forge and maintain positive, nurturing relationships. To the degree we have a desire for spiritual connection to God, this chapter tells us that we can indeed achieve such a union.

B. Second Pada.

The second Pada, Sadhana Pada (“Practice”22), introduces us to the yoga of action, Kriya yoga, practices we need to achieve the objectives of the first Pada. Patanjali starts by describing additional obstacles, Kleshas, which can interfere with our goals, introduces us to the notion of Karma, how we shape the quality of our life through our actions. Patanjali then introduces us to the eight limbs of yoga as the method of achieving connection.

This is the nuts and bolts chapter of a nuts and bolts text. It teaches us centuries of life lessons about how to treat others, how to treat ourselves, and how to find the Divine in each moment, as well as the practices for absorbing these lessons and


21 The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 3, et seq.

22 The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 169, et seq.
making them habitual.

C. Third Pada.

The third Pada, Vibhuti Pada (“Mystical Powers”\textsuperscript{23}), concludes Patanjali’s discussion of the eight limbs of yoga by describing the states of meditation and the resultant implications for the practitioner, including supernatural or mystical powers available to a person who has integrated his mind, body, and soul.\textsuperscript{24}

Before scoffing at the notion that such mystical powers exist, consider that, at a minimum, these powers metaphorically offer tremendous lessons on how we can use our strengths to greatly enhance our relationships, whether at home, at work, or in the community, as well as how to be of service. In my book, \textit{Finding the Midline}, I devote Chapters 103 to 107 explaining how the supernatural powers described by Patanjali can inspire us in our daily interaction with others.\textsuperscript{25}

D. Fourth Pada.

The fourth Pada, Kaivalya Pada (“Absolute Independence”\textsuperscript{26}), explains how we can become free of the grasp of Prakriti, the material world. Doing so, Patanjali discusses \textit{Karma} in detail.

We learn here how to truly create our future by the way we participate in the present, utilizing the practices taught in the preceding chapters. We find ourselves liberated from the nagging, often toxic habits that prevent us from experiencing life’s precious offerings.

III. Overview of the first Pada.

The name of the first Pada, Samadhi Pada, refers to “Meditative Absorption.”\textsuperscript{27} Here Patanjali tells us in Yoga Sutra 1.2, “yogas citta vrtti nirodhah,” that yoga involves stopping our mind’s chatter so that we can experience union. He doesn’t tell us in this Sutra why we would want to do this or how to do it. That is what the rest of the Sutras are about.

A. In Yoga Sutra 1.3 Patanjali tells us that when we are able to stop the mind’s

\textsuperscript{23} The \textit{Yoga Sutras of Patanjali}, at 301, \textit{et seq.}  

\textsuperscript{24} Light on the \textit{Yoga Sutras of Patanjali}, at 175.  


\textsuperscript{26} The \textit{Yoga Sutras of Patanjali}, at 406, \textit{et seq.}  

\textsuperscript{27} The \textit{Yoga Sutras of Patanjali}, at 3, \textit{et seq.}
chatter, the *Vrttis*, we dwell in our own true nature. Yoga Sutra 1.4 tells us that when we fail to calm the mind’s chatter, we become distracted by that chatter. In other words, the various and sundry thoughts constantly moving through our mind effectively block or at least hinder our ability to see what’s important, to feel the joy or inspiration of the moment, or to find a way to meaningfully express ourselves.

At this point we’ve barely begun our study of the Yoga Sutras and we can already see the major reason we don’t quite get where we want in terms of creating a life of well-being. We let our chattering mind inhibit our ability to figure out what is important.

How can we experience positive emotion or see the potential for engagement, meaning, accomplishment, or connection to others, when we allow our mind to rule us with its endless whispers of fear, envy, or random babble about where we have to be tomorrow or at 5 pm? How do we intimately engage in a conversation with a possible new friend when our mind is racing with thoughts about something other than the person right in front of us? How do we communicate love to our child or partner when, instead of listening to them fully, our mind is running through a checklist of other thoughts?

B. Not all thoughts move us away from a life well lived. In Yoga Sutra 1.5 we learn that this chatter can be divided into five types that are either detrimental (*Klista*) or not (*Aklista*) to the mind. The five types of chatter are identified in Yoga Sutra 1.6 as right knowledge (*Pramana*), error (*Viparyaya*), imagination (*Vikalpa*), sleep (*Nidra*), and memory (*Smrtyayah*). Patanjali then elaborates on each of these five in Yoga Sutras 1.7 to 1.11.

C. In Yoga Sutras 1.12 to 1.16, and 1.20 to 1.29 Patanjali explains we stop the mind’s chatter through practice and detachment, including meditation that contemplates God (Yoga Sutra 1.23).

D. Yoga Sutras 1.17 to 1.19 describe states of union or connection, *Samadhi*.

E. In Yoga Sutras 1.30 and 1.31 Patanjali lists thirteen obstacles or distractions to achieving union: disease, inertia, doubt, heedlessness, laziness, lack of discipline of the senses, erroneous views, lack of perseverance, backsliding, sorrow, despair, unsteadiness of the body, and irregular breathing.

F. Yoga Sutras 1.32 states that a single-minded effort prevents these obstacles from arising. Yoga Sutra 1.33 teaches that the qualities of friendliness, compassion,
joy, and equanimity keep the mind in a state of well-being.\textsuperscript{30} I’ve seen the word “spaciousness” used in lieu of equanimity. Yoga Sutras 1.34 to 1.40 describe various methods of single-pointed meditation for creating such a mind.

G. Yoga Sutras 1.41 to 1.49 describe various states of transformation, \textit{Samapatti}, leading to states of \textit{Samadhi}, a \textit{Sattvic} or pure mindset, and direct spiritual perception.

IV. \textbf{Overview of the second Pada.}

The name of the second \textit{Pada, Sadhana Pada}, refers to “Practice.”\textsuperscript{31} In his first chapter Patanjali teaches us what yoga is and what the fruits of a yoga practice can be. He shows us an overview of a mystical life, connection to God, certainly a description of a person living a full life.

In this second chapter, starting in Sutra 2.1, Patanjali introduces us to the practices and attitudes that create such a life. He describes the yoga of action, \textit{Kriya} yoga. He tells us that success in yoga requires zeal in practice, self-study, and surrender to God.\textsuperscript{32} A life filled with positive emotion, engagement, meaning, accomplishment, and nurturing relationships requires effort, serious self-analysis, and commitment.

A. In Yoga Sutras 2.2 to 2.10 Patanjali explains that yoga will reduce what he calls “afflictions,” \textit{Kleshas}, and identifies them: spiritual ignorance (\textit{Avidya}), ego (\textit{Asmita}), desire or attachment (\textit{Raga}), hate (\textit{Dvesa}), and clinging to life (\textit{Abhinivesah}). These afflictions inhibit our capacity to fully create the life we seek.

B. Yoga Sutras 2.11 teaches that the chattering of the mind due to the \textit{Kleshas}, afflictions, can be stilled by meditation.

Note the significance of meditation practice in creating a life well lived. In the first chapter Patanjali outlines numerous obstacles that can cause chatter, such as disease, inertia, doubt, heedlessness, laziness, lack of discipline of the senses, erroneous views, and lack of perseverance, among others (Yoga Sutras 1.30 and 1.31) and prescribes a number of meditation practices for overcoming these obstacles. Here, in the second chapter, Patanjali tells us that our path will be subject to certain afflictions but meditation is a cure for such afflictions.

C. In Yoga Sutras 2.12 to 2.16 Patanjali discusses \textit{Karma} and explains we can escape from the web of problems our conduct creates.

D. Yoga Sutras 2.17 to 2.28 describes our human nature and our relationship to God, and tells us we can become free of the distractions of the world that prevent us

\textsuperscript{30} Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 86-87; The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 128-130.

\textsuperscript{31} The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 169, et seq.

\textsuperscript{32} Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 108.
from a life of well-being and connection.

E. Yoga Sutra 2.29 introduces the eight-limbed path of yoga, the means for creating the life we want. The eight limbs, listed in Yoga Sutra 2.29 are: 1) vows of abstention (Yamas) - ways to treat others; 2) observances (Niyamas) - ways to treat ourselves; 3) posture (Asana); 4) breath control (Pranayama); 5) withdrawal of the senses (Pratyahara); 6) single-pointed focus (Dharana); 7) meditation (Dhyana); and 8) absorption (Samadhi, or Samadhi).

F. Yoga Sutra 2.30 lists the five Yamas: 1) non-harming (Ahimsa); 2) honesty (Satya); 3) non-stealing (Asteya); 4) sexual restraint (Brahmacarya); and 5) lack of greed (Aparigrahah). Yoga Sutra 2.31 admonishes that the Yamas are universal vows, applicable to everybody regardless of place, time, or class.

G. Yoga Sutra 2.32 lists the five Niyamas: 1) purity (Sauca); 2) contentment (Santosa); 3) burning desire (Tapas) 4) study of scriptures and the self (Svadhyaya); and 5) surrender to God (Isvara Pranidhāni). Yoga Sutra 2.33 advises that when we are faced with thoughts that run contrary to the Yamas and Niyamas we should cultivate counteracting thoughts.

H. In Yoga Sutras 2.34 to 2.39 Patanjali discusses the five Yamas in more detail.

I. In Yoga Sutras 2.40 to 2.45 Patanjali discusses the five Niyamas in more detail.

J. In Yoga Sutras 2.46 to 2.48 Patanjali discusses Asana.

K. In Yoga Sutras 2.49 to 2.53 Patanjali discusses Pranayama and its effects.

L. Yoga Sutras 2.54 and 2.55 discuss Pratyaharah (Pratyahara).

The last three limbs of the eight-limbed path of yoga, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi, are discussed at the beginning of the third chapter or Pada.

V. Overview of the third Pada.

The name of the third Pada, Vibhuti Pada means “Mystical Powers.”33 Thus far Patanjali has described the power of yoga and the practices that help us harness this power to create a meaningful life full of connection. In this chapter, after completing his discussion of the final three eight limbs of yoga, Patanjali concludes his discussion of the eight limbs of yoga and its potency, and discusses the integration of these powers. He then shares with us the breadth of these powers.

33 The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 301, et seq.
A. In Yoga Sutras 3.1 to 3.3 Patanjali discusses the final three limbs of the eight-limbed path of yoga; these are Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi.

B. Yoga Sutra 3.4 identifies Samyama, the integration of the last three limbs. Patanjali then describes in Yoga Sutras 3.5 to 3.8 the state of being arising when Samyama is attained, telling us that the last three limbs are a more internal practice than the first five limbs, and lead the practitioner to the soul.

C. Patanjali then explains in Yoga Sutras 3.9 to 3.14 the experience and significance of restraining rising thoughts, Nirodha, to a state of tranquility, Prasanta. Yoga Sutra 3.15 points out that transformation follows a regular sequence, Krama. These Sutras lay the metaphysical groundwork for a discussion of the mystical powers that follows.

D. Yoga Sutras 3.16 to 3.56 describe the mystical powers and how we can reach liberation. The mystical powers include the Eight (Asta) Siddhis, or superpowers, we may have learned about through the stories of Hanuman: the power to become tiny (Anima), the power to be large (Mahima), the power to become light (Laghima), the power to become heavy (Garima), the power to dominate and obtain whatever one wants (Prapti), the power of freedom of will (Prakamya), power over all (Isatva), and the power to subjugate anyone or anything (Vasitva).34 These are references in Yoga Sutra 3.46 (Yoga Sutra 3.45 in Dr. Bryant’s text. Dr. Bryant points out that only the first of the eight powers, Anima, is actually identified by Patanjali who uses the term “Animadi,” meaning minuteness, “etc.” Dr. Bryant says that this form of the word indicates that Patanjali knew that the people of his time were so familiar with the list of eight as to not need to include them all.35 Mr. Iyengar also notes this word as meaning powers “such as” for the same point.36 I find it fascinating that a list of mystical powers that we scoff at today was so well known around the beginning of the Common Era that they didn’t even need to be listed in such a scholarly text.37 We will discuss this point in future talks.

NOTE: Mr. Iyengar includes Yoga Sutra 3.22: “etana sabdadi antardhamam uktam” which he translates as “In the same way as described above, he is able to arrest sound, smell, taste, form and touch,” and comments that some texts omit this sutra because it can be inferred from the previous sutra.38 One text that omits this sutra is Dr. Bryant’s commentary referenced in these talks and outlines. Therefore, Dr. Bryant’s text contains 55 sutras in the third chapter whereas Mr. Iyengar

34 Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 177.
35 The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 384.
36 Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 227-228.
38 Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, at 206.
discusses 56 in his commentary. My numbering system follows that used by Mr. Iyengar, except when I refer to a specific comment by Dr. Bryant pertaining to a sutra in this *Pada*.

VI. Overview of the fourth *Pada*.

The name of the fourth *Pada*, *Kaivalya Pada*, means “Absolute Independence.” Patanjali explains how we can become free of the grasp of *Prakriti*, the material world, and moves us to the soul.

Yoga Sutra 4.1 provides five ways that the mystical powers can be obtained: birth, spiritual experiences through herbs, *Mantra*, devotional practice, and *Samadhi*.

Patanjali moves on in Yoga Sutras 4.2 to 4.14 to discuss the role of *Prakriti* or matter in our mind’s processes, and additional discussion of *Karma* and the *Gunas*.

Yoga Sutras 4.15 to 4.28 discuss the mind’s processes as it seeks to find connection or union with Consciousness. The balance of the chapter, Yoga Sutras 4.29 to 4.34 lead us *Kaivalya*, absolute liberation, where our soul is no longer subject to the effects of the *Gunas*. We return to *Purusha*.

According to Dr. Bryant, Patanjali stops here and doesn’t describe how a living person continues to exist in the world in this state. Mr. Iyengar suggests we turn to the Bhagavad Gita (XVIII.61-62) for guidance, surrendering all actions as well as ourselves to God. Citing Mr. Iyengar, I’ve concluded for myself, as I write in *Finding the Midline*: when are thoughts are of God, or Spirit, we will necessarily only find Spirit in everyone and everything.

VII. Conclusion.

We now begin our discussion of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras in more detail. We will focus, as have so far in our previous talks, on how Patanjali’s teachings can help us create a life of well-being.

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39 *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 406, *et seq*.

40 *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 457-459.

41 *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 286-287.

42 *Finding the Midline*, at 301, citing *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, at 274-275.