



Chapter 1

अथ योगानुशासनम् ।

Following the Path





YS 1.1 atha yogānuśāsanam

Now the instruction on yoga begins

The very first sūtra simply states Patañjali's aim: to present the authoritative teaching on yoga. Like all of the sūtras, it can be read simply at face value, as a straightforward statement of intent; or it can be unpicked and explored to reveal many other levels of meaning. The term *atha*, meaning 'now', is a traditional way to introduce sacred texts and conveys both authority and a sense of an auspicious beginning. It also suggests immediacy: "Now!" It is a call to action – to listen to and receive the teachings and to put them into practice. The phrase *yogānuśāsanam* consists of the words *yoga*, the subject under discussion, and *anuśāsanam*, an authoritative teaching that is passed on from one person to another. The choice of the word 'instruction' in our translation is deliberate here; instruction may be read as both a teaching and as something practical. The Yoga Sūtra is both: a teaching on the nature of being – and particularly the nature of mind – and an instruction manual on how to work with our minds to reduce our experience of fear, dissatisfaction and suffering.

The meaning of yoga

What do you understand by the term ‘yoga’? Ask yourself, honestly: what does the word bring to mind? Physical postures, breathing exercises, meditation, philosophical ideas or a way of living? Perhaps a mixture of all these? Today, yoga is such a common term that we rarely stop to question what it means or where the word came from. For us, working within this tradition, ‘yoga’ is a technical term referring to something very specific, so let’s start by exploring the word itself.

The entry for yoga in a classic Sanskrit-English dictionary¹ is one of the largest in the book and contains a multitude of definitions, many of which (on the surface, at least) have little to do with the practices we are discussing here. Even in the context of a practice system, yoga has been used to describe a wide variety of techniques and ideas over the centuries in India. When new yoga students begin to develop their interest in its history and ideas, it is common, and perhaps naively reassuring, to assume that yoga is a definitive, timeless and complete body of wisdom that has been transmitted faithfully without change since the dawn of time. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Although there are certain shared themes, there are very few (if any) ideas, definitions and practices common to all modern schools of yoga – let alone those that have flourished and faded over the course of history. The development of yoga is complex, and the proliferation of different forms of yoga in the West over the last 50 years has made it even more so. It is perhaps better to think of the term ‘yoga’ as a common word that has been used at different times and in different contexts to refer to quite different things.² This is particularly important if you are reading this book having studied yoga within a different tradition, and already have ideas about the meaning or significance of the word. It may be presented differently here, but that doesn’t necessarily mean either definition is incorrect.

1. M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899).

2. Mark Singleton calls ‘yoga’ a *homonym* (a word with the same sound but with various different meanings), to indicate how yoga is, and has been, used at various times. Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

The word is most commonly derived from the Sanskrit root³ *yuj* meaning to ‘link’ or ‘join together’, in the sense of yoking two things together. Many Indo-European languages (including English) are related to Sanskrit, and thus the root *yuj* has a direct connection to the English word *yoke*. Because Sanskrit developed within an agricultural culture, many of its words have their origins in ideas associated with such a context. *Yuj* was originally used to refer to the yoking of two oxen together so that they could be used for ploughing, or to draw a cart. Two principles (in this case, the oxen) are connected in a way that allows them to interact to produce a useful outcome. When applied in a personal sense, there can be a yoga whenever an individual links themselves to something, or engages in a specific activity, in order to achieve a desired outcome. This principle applies almost universally to the contexts in which ‘yoga’ and other words derived from the root *yuj* are used, even in quite ordinary or mundane usages. Thus for example, yoga can be used in the context of putting on a suit of armour. By employing the armour, one gains a certain invulnerability to attack. Similarly, yoga can be used to describe a magic trick: performing a trick in the prescribed way produces the illusion of magic. Both of these are examples of the use of the word ‘yoga’ in a non-spiritual context.

3. It is a common strategy to identify the roots of Sanskrit words in order to understand their meaning. Some words can be derived from more than one root, so examining the possible roots of words is a traditional way to explore nuances and alternative meanings. The word yoga itself can be derived from more than one root (*dhātu*). *Yuj*, the most commonly stated root is given here; in Chapter 2 a different root will be suggested for the specific meaning of yoga in the Yoga Sūtra. Both are relevant and give us different lenses to explore the word at the heart of our story.

In the context of yoga as a practice, or transformative process, this is perhaps the most universal principle and one we should not forget: in yoga, we place ourselves in relationship to something in order to produce a positive effect. We yoke ourselves to a practice, a discipline, an object of meditation, a yoga posture or a breathing technique in order to bring about a positive transformation. But: no relationship, no yoga. Similarly: no transformation, however small, no yoga. What we might link ourselves to, what type of practice we might engage in, and what techniques and qualities we bring to the practice, form the scope of the rest of this book.

Yoga is frequently translated as ‘union’, but here, this is rather misleading. To us, ‘union’ suggests two things becoming one, whereas central to the idea of ‘yoking together’ is the fact that *the two things remain two things*. They are united only in the sense of being linked, and it is in their interaction and relationship that there is yoga, not in them merging together inseparably.⁴ This, for us, lies at the very heart of yoga, and is fundamental to our approach to the subject – both as teachers and as practitioners.

Yoga as relationship: ‘Taking support’

We have already suggested that the fundamental meaning of the term ‘yoga’ is to engage in a relationship with something to bring about positive change. But what are the qualities that we need to bring to this relationship? The short answer to this is that we need ‘to take support’ on whatever it is that we are linking to. ‘Taking support’ is a slightly awkward phrase, but it is useful. As the leading term in our subtitle, the question of support – what it is, where it can be found and how we take it – is crucial. It’s worth spending a little time getting this cornerstone laid, since it, quite literally, supports everything that is to follow.

Think of how you use a walking stick. It is a literal ‘support’ that allows us to do something that otherwise might be difficult or impossible (assuming we have difficulty walking). So let us consider the steps (no pun intended!) in using the walking stick. First, you need to have an *intention*: the desire to walk better and to use the walking stick for support. Walking sticks don’t pick you up – you have to take the initiative. The next step is *learning to use* the walking stick: there is some technique involved. Thirdly, you have to lean on the stick and *allow* it to support you. This may seem obvious, but in fact is a critical step in our analogy. Unless you actually lean on it, have confidence in its strength and stability, and really give yourself to it, it can’t support you. Finally, you have to be *willing to accept* what it can give you in order to step forward. Using a stick may feel awkward or

4. In the Yoga Sūtra, *saṃyoga* is used to indicate a relationship where two things become confused as if one, with a consequent lack of freedom and vitality (vs 2.17). By contrast, *yoga* is a relationship where the difference between two principles is maintained and yet in their interaction there is vitality, mutual support and freedom. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 8.