

## HOW TO NIRODHA YOUR CHITTA VRITTIS

Perhaps one of the most widely known definitions of yoga is found in the 1800-year-old *Yoga-Sutra* by the sage Patanjali. It reads “yoga is the restriction of the fluctuation of consciousness” (*yogash-citti-vrtti-nirodhah*). If you haven’t studied classical yoga, as the system Patanjali outlines in this manual is usually called, you might wonder what he is talking about. In plain English he is saying that yoga is really nothing more than a method for calming your mind. Why you want to do this and how you accomplish it is what the *Yoga-Sutra* is basically all about.

Unlike today’s more celebrated practice of Hatha-Yoga, which is a resolutely body-based approach to self-knowledge and self-realization, classical yoga focuses on *citta* (pronounced CHIT-TA), which variously denotes “attending observing, thinking, imagining, reflecting, intelligence, reason,” and is probably best rendered as “consciousness.” I suppose each of us has an intuition about the nature of consciousness—after all, we’re all conscious beings—but no doubt we would have a difficult time, if pressed, to say what it is exactly. For Patanjali *citta* is the result of a confluence, or as he says “correlation,” between two eternal—and eternally separate—principles, the “person” (*purusha*) and nature (*prakrti*). The person is our authentic self, the immaterial, omniscient, never-changing, joyful “seer” or witness to the play of material, insentient, forever-changing nature, the “seen,” which it illuminates by its proximity. Nature includes not only the physical world around us, but also the “contents” of our own consciousness, all the thoughts, emotions, memories and whatnot that define what we think of as our personality. It has a twofold purpose: to provide us with experience and lead us, ultimately, to emancipation.

Patanjali’s assertion that *citta* has a material component might strike you as odd. Of course, you can’t actually touch or see this consciousness-stuff because it’s extremely subtle, beyond the range of our most powerful microscopes and only visible to self-realized yogis with their extraordinary powers of insight. Even odder though is the idea that what we think of as our subjective environment is different from our authentic self, that thoughts, emotions, and memories aren’t really part of who we are, but rather belong to the objective world. But oddest of all is Patanjali’s central teaching that we are all afflicted with a kind of spiritual amnesia, that we’ve somehow unknowingly mis-identified ourselves with and bound ourselves to nature and forgotten about our true person-hood. Patanjali calls the root cause of this deeply seated self-alienation ignorance (*avidya*). In his world only the person has ultimate meaning and value, and the result of our ignorance is unremitting, universal sorrow (*duhkha*).

To end this pervasive sorrow, as we all desire in our heart of hearts, we have to disengage our identity from nature and shift it to where it belongs, on the person. It’s easier said than done. That’s because the contents of *citta* are in constant flux or, as Patanjali says, fluctuation (*vrtti*, pronounced VRIT-TEE). Along with our karmic inheritance, these fluctuations present a powerful obstacle to self-realization, incessantly tangling our identity ever more inextricably in the snares of nature. They seem to have a life of their own, and like all living things when threatened with dissolution, they struggle mightily

for survival.

While the rarefied consciousness-stuff itself may be beyond our ken, you don't need to be a great yogi with decades of ascetic practice under your loin cloth to get in touch with your fluctuations. Just sit back right now, close your eyes, and train your awareness like a spotlight on the ceaseless interior parade of thoughts, emotions, and memories. You *believe* these fluctuations are part and parcel of who you are and so cling to them tenaciously; but as I've said, all of this is what you will need to turn your back on and leave behind in order to discover and actualize your authentic self.

This is where restriction comes in. As a translation of the Sanskrit *nirodha* (pronounced NIR-RO-DHA), restriction sounds a little like some kind of Freudian defense mechanism that curtails our innate freedom and dooms us to years of expensive psycho-therapy. But for Patanjali, *nirodha* is a well-defined and time-tested meditative technique. It's intent isn't to limit your freedom but just the opposite, to erode your attachment to nature by calming the fluctuations and so free you from your limitations and sorrow.

How does *nirodha* work? I can't, in this short article, go into much detail, although I will say a bit more about it soon. If you are curious about *nirodha* though, look in the books in Recommended Reading below for some answers. But we can go into an important and accessible preparation for Patanjali's method of calming the fluctuations, called posture (*asana*), the third "limb" of the "eight-limb" (*ashta-anga*) program that's the practical core of classical yoga.

It's important to recognize that posture (as well as the subsequent five limbs) is only effective when grounded in the first two limbs of the classical program, the "restraints" (*yama*) and "observances" (*niyama*). Through them, you begin to "restrict" both your objective behavior and subjective mental states and mimic the deportment and demeanor of an already self-realized person, and so take your first baby steps on the road to self-realization.

Earlier I asked you look inward to experience your fluctuations, but I didn't mean to suggest that they are only in your head. As Patanjali recognized the *vrttis* ripple constantly throughout your entire body. The mental fluctuations of thoughts, feelings, and emotions have their physical counterparts in all the unconscious bodily agitations—the head scratching, toe tapping, finger drumming—of our waking life. In fact, you could say that, in Patanjali's estimation, we are hardly ever still, even while asleep; indeed, even dreamless sleep is classified as a *vrtti*.

The first step then (after establishing *yama* and *niyama* as your practice's cornerstone) is to restrict these physical *vrttis*, since they are the most accessible, by learning how to sit in *asana*. In the West today, *asana* is probably the most ubiquitous and well-developed of the traditional yoga practices, and for this we can thank Hatha-Yoga. In the classical system, *asana* is nothing more than a "seat" (the literal meaning of the word) that serves as a platform for the higher practices. While certain seats, like Lotus Posture, may be more esteemed than others, just about *any* seat will do, even sitting on a chair, as long as

you can remain there “steady and comfortable” for a decent length of time.

If you have ever tried to do this for even a short time though, you already know it’s a great challenge. We live in a hyper-active society that is constantly “on the go.” As children we’re taught how to ride a bike and play sports but never how to just sit still, at least not consciously for the purpose of self-investigation.

Try this exercise. Put down this wonderful magazine and make up your mind that for the next few minutes, you are going to sit (either on the floor or in a chair) without any fidgeting. Maybe even the thought of doing this makes you nervous. So take a few deep breaths, rest your hands in your lap, and lift your heart. Then, as you sit tranquilly with the physical *vrttis* subdued, direct your awareness-spotlight again on the mental *vrttis*. What happens? Maybe not much at first. But Patanjali notes that in time this simple practice, by itself, without any special effort, is powerfully transformative. It relaxes physical tension and soothes the fluctuations so that consciousness feels more spacious, and leads to a state of blissful neutrality in which we are no longer tugged this way and that by what he calls the “pairs-of-opposites.”

Of course asana by itself, though efficacious, will never restrict the *vrttis* entirely and unmask our authentic self. For that you need to pass through the succeeding limbs of the classical path, breath control (*pranayama*), sense-withdrawal (*pratyahara*), and the so-called “inner limbs” of concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*) and ecstasy (*samadhi*). Each of these practices results in a further restriction, spiraling inward from the physical to the subtle: first of the breath, then the senses, and lastly the mental *vrttis* themselves. At this point, Patanjali assures us that the “own form” or essence of the true person will be revealed.

It may seem surprising that just sitting can have such a profound effect on consciousness. But as one of my favorite writers, Karlfried Graf Von Durckheim, reminds us:

The exercise of sitting is the most fundamental of all. Here the practice of stillness has its source. A thousand secrets are hidden in simply sitting still. A person who has once learned to collect himself completely in his sitting will never again let a day pass without practicing for at least half an hour for it is this which gives complete inner renewal . . . When the aspirant has fulfilled the basic condition of all work—to be turned with all his mind towards the Highest—sitting in stillness will one day lead to his becoming one with Being [*Hara: The Vital Centre of Man*, p. 142-43].

#### RECOMMENDED READING

Bouanchaud, Bernard. *The Essence of Yoga*. Portland: Rudra Press, 1997.

Feuerstein, Georg. *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1996.

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