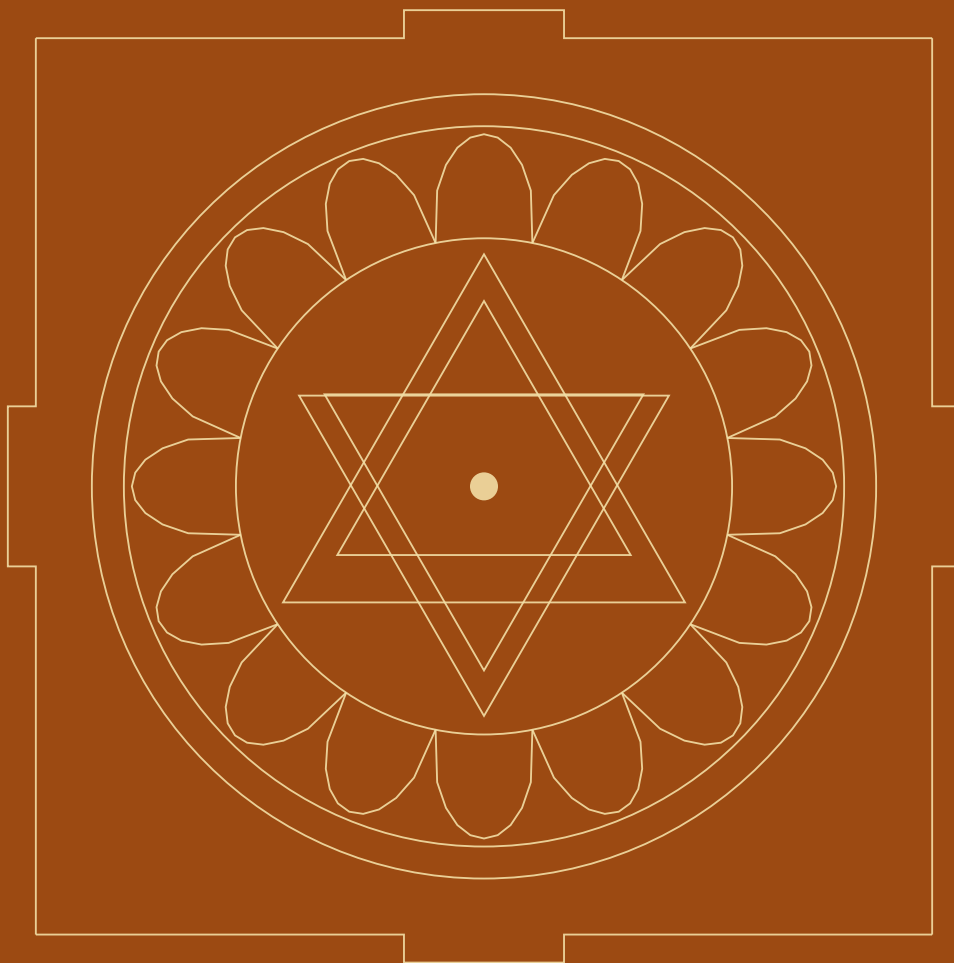


PRACTICE

Meditation for Beginners: 21 Days

Four classical methods of the yoga tradition, from 5 to 20 minutes a day



ध्यान

dhyāna

YOGIDE

Free sample

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teacher or medical advice. Questions: administration@lacangel.fr

Before you begin

Meditation is the heart of yoga. Long before the postures became famous around the world, the yogis of India sat still, with the spine erect, and turned their attention inward. The Upaniṣads describe it, the Bhagavad Gītā gives it a whole chapter, and Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra, the classical manual of yoga, is from its first lines a treatise on the mind.

Yet most beginners find meditation surprisingly hard. They sit down, close their eyes, and are met by a torrent of thoughts, an itching nose, a stiff back and the conviction that they are "doing it wrong". This book is written for that moment. It gives you a path of twenty-one days, from five minutes to twenty, built on four methods that the Indian tradition has used for centuries: observing the breath, repeating a mantra (japa), steady gazing (trāṭaka), and the guided relaxation known today as yoga nidrā. Each day is described in full: how long, what to do, what to notice, and one question to write about afterwards.

What this book promises, and what it does not. It promises clear instructions, faithful to the tradition, with their sources. It promises that by day twenty-one you will know how to sit for twenty minutes, will have tried four classical methods and chosen the one that suits you, and will understand what the texts mean by concentration and meditation. It does not promise enlightenment, cures or guaranteed calm. Meditation is a practice; its fruits ripen with time, and the classical texts themselves warn against chasing results.

About the sources. Quotations from the Yoga Sūtra, the Bhagavad Gītā, the Upaniṣads and the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā are either our own renderings and paraphrases from the Sanskrit, with the verse number given, or come from public-domain translations listed at the end. No scientific claims are made in this book. Where a practice is a modern adaptation, that is stated.

This book informs; it does not replace professional care.

Meditation is generally a gentle practice, but it can bring difficult emotions or memories to the surface. If you live with post-traumatic stress, severe depression, a psychotic disorder, bipolar disorder, a dissociative condition, or if you are going through an acute crisis, speak to your doctor or therapist before beginning, keep sessions short, and stop if you feel destabilised. Do not practise trāṭaka (candle gazing) if you have epilepsy or an eye condition. If you ever have thoughts of harming yourself, contact a crisis line or emergency services in your country at once.

How to use this book

Read Chapters 1 to 3 before day one: they explain what meditation is in the yoga tradition, how to sit, and the four methods. Chapter 4 contains the twenty-one days. Chapter 5 is the troubleshooting chapter: return to it whenever you are stuck. Chapter 6 shows how to carry meditation into daily life, and Chapter 7 what to do after day twenty-one.

You will need: a cushion or a chair, a blanket, a timer with a gentle sound, a notebook, and, for the second

week, a candle and optionally a mālā (string of 108 beads).

If you miss a day

Do not try to catch up by doing two sessions. Simply continue with the next day in the programme. If you miss three days or more, repeat the last day you completed. Regularity matters more than speed; Patañjali says that practice becomes firm when it is cultivated for a long time, without interruption, and with devotion (Yoga Sūtra 1.14).

Chapter 1. What meditation is in the yoga tradition

The word dhyāna

The Sanskrit word usually translated as "meditation" is dhyāna (ध्यान), from the root dhyai, to think of, to contemplate, to reflect upon. The same word travelled with Buddhism to China, where it became chan, and to Japan, where it became zen. In the yoga tradition, dhyāna is the seventh of the eight limbs described by Patañjali, between concentration and absorption.

Three stages of one movement

Patañjali defines the last three limbs together, and they are best understood as three degrees of the same inward movement:

Yoga Sūtra 3.1.

deśa-bandhaś cittasya dhāraṇā — "Concentration (dhāraṇā) is the binding of the mind to one place."

(Our rendering.) **Yoga Sūtra 3.2.** tatra pratyaya-ekatānatā dhyānam — "Meditation (dhyāna) is the continuous flow of awareness towards that object." (Our rendering.) **Yoga Sūtra 3.3.** tad

evārtha-mātra-nirbhāsaṃ svarūpa-śūnyam iva samādhiḥ — "Absorption (samādhi) is when that same meditation shines forth as the object alone, as if empty of its own form." (Our rendering.)

In concentration, you place the attention on an object (the breath, a mantra, a flame) and keep bringing it back when it wanders. In meditation, the attention flows towards the object without needing to be brought back: there is continuity. The Bhagavad Gītā gives the classic image: like a lamp in a windless place that does not flicker, so is the controlled mind of the yogi absorbed in meditation (6.19, paraphrased). In absorption, the sense of a separate meditator fades and only the object shines in awareness. Patañjali calls the three together saṃyama (3.4).

For a beginner, this is very good news. What you will mostly be doing in these twenty-one days is dhāraṇā: placing the attention, noticing that it has wandered, bringing it back. That is not a failure to meditate; it is the first stage of meditation, as the tradition itself defines it.

Not emptying the mind

A widespread idea is that meditation means "emptying the mind" or "stopping thoughts". The classical texts do not describe it that way for a beginner. Patañjali defines yoga as the stilling of the movements of the mind (1.2), but he describes a gradual path towards that stillness, and the method he gives is to bring the mind to rest on one object at a time.

The Bhagavad Gītā is realistic about the difficulty. When Arjuna objects that the mind is restless, turbulent, strong and obstinate, and as hard to control as the wind, Kṛṣṇa does not deny it:

Bhagavad Gītā 6.34-35 (paraphrase).

Arjuna: "The mind is restless, turbulent, powerful and stubborn; to control it seems to me as difficult as controlling the wind." Kṛṣṇa: "Without doubt the mind is restless and hard to hold. But by practice and by detachment it can be held."

Practice (abhyāsa) and detachment (vairāgya): the same two words that Patañjali uses in Yoga Sūtra 1.12. They are the whole method in two words.

Pratyāhāra: the doorway

Before concentration comes pratyāhāra (प्रत्याहार), the fifth limb, the withdrawal of the senses. Patañjali compares it to the senses following the mind inward, as if imitating its nature (2.54). The Bhagavad Gītā uses the image of a tortoise: the wise one withdraws the senses from their objects as a tortoise draws in its limbs (2.58).

In practice, pratyāhāra is what happens in the first minutes of a sitting: the noises of the street become less gripping, the body settles, the attention starts to turn inward. You do not need to force it; you allow it by sitting still, closing the eyes and giving the mind something interesting inside.

Meditation in the Upaniṣads

The Upaniṣads, the philosophical texts that close the Vedas, contain some of the earliest descriptions of meditation in India. The Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad gives instructions that could almost be read today:

Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 2.8-10 (paraphrase).

Holding the body steady, with the three upper parts (chest, neck and head) erect, drawing the senses and the mind into the heart, the wise one crosses the frightening streams by the boat of Brahman. Restraining the breath, moving gently, let him breathe out through the nostrils with diminished breath. In a clean, level place, free of pebbles, fire and gravel, pleasant to the mind by its sounds and waters and not offensive to the eye, sheltered from the wind, in a cave or a protected spot, let him practise yoga.

And the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad gives an image of meditation on Om:

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 2.2.4 (paraphrase).

Om is the bow, the self is the arrow, Brahman is called the target. It is to be struck with undistracted attention; one becomes one with it, as the arrow with the target.

What meditation is for, according to the texts

The aim of meditation in the yoga tradition is not relaxation, though relaxation often comes. Patañjali's aim is kaivalya, the isolation of pure awareness from the movements of the mind. The Gītā's aim is union with the divine and the evenness of mind that comes from it. The Upaniṣads aim at the knowledge of the Self (ātman) as one with the absolute (brahman).

You do not have to share any of these aims to practise. But it helps to know that, in its own tradition, meditation is not a technique for being more productive; it is a path of inner freedom. Patañjali even warns that the extraordinary experiences that may come with deep concentration are obstacles to absorption, though they look like powers to the ordinary mind (Yoga Sūtra 3.37). Do not chase experiences. Sit.

End of the sample

Thank you for reading this far. We hope these first pages already help your practice, and that they show how the rest of the book is built: clear steps, texts quoted with their source, nothing invented.

The full book has 26 pages.

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