

*Before I begin... context for my cohorts and monitor. My audience is who I spend time with every week: the members at my gym who come to in-person classes. My only visuals are a few small spools of thread, each a different color.*

Why did you start practicing yoga? You don't have to respond out loud, but take a moment and answer that question for yourself. There is no right or wrong answer. But I would like to know you have one before we continue.

Our setting focuses on the poses - or asanas - and the physical benefits we receive. You've probably been encouraged to "notice your breath" in a yoga class - maybe you've even been introduced to some breath practices. While not specifically offered here, you might have participated in a meditation class, or yoga nidra. (If you haven't heard of that, it's ok.)

Here in Virginia, it's my favorite season: fall. It's a time of transition where we see nature - in particular trees - let go of leaves that no longer serve them. And that choice by the tree to refocus - to be strategic, even mindful, or where, how, when, and why it invests its vital energy - unleashes a beautiful spectrum of colors that transforms the landscape - and inspires me to do the same. We see them preparing for their next season of growth. We see them practicing Raja Yoga.

Trees practicing yoga? Here's what I mean by that. (Still, from today forward, every time you look at your favorite tree in your yard, or an unusual one that catches your eye, I want you to think "It's practicing Raja Yoga.") Trees offer a practical way to understand Raja Yoga as we see trees of all shapes and sizes, each one unique like us, yet they all have a similar foundation: their root system. Some deep underground, some visible near the surface, their roots provide the source of strength, stability, nourishment, communication with the world around them (other plants, trees, soil) for all of the tree that we see above the ground. These roots are like the first two "limbs" of the 8-limbed path of yoga: the universal principles, known as the Yamas, and the ethical practices, the Niyamas. The trunk that grows majestically towards the sky, expanding its circumference every year, is like the physical poses of yoga, the asana - that we primarily explore in our time together on our mats. Seamlessly taking form from the trunk in fascinating shapes come the branches, the next "limb" of pranayama, control of the breath. From those larger branches more subtle branches emerge - eventually leading to clusters and arrangements of leaves. All of those continued refinements and nuances are like the remaining limbs: pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and finally samadhi - which for today's purpose I will simply refer to as perfect peace and true happiness.

You might be thinking, "I didn't bring my yoga mat expecting to find THAT today." Maybe you might even question if you'll ever really find those things in life. The good news: Raja Yoga offers a path where we can. A path unique to you - just like a tree - your journey. Your pace. You decide when, where, how, why you go - even who leads you there.

Our guidebook on our journeys is the Yoga Sutras. The word "yoga" is a sanskrit word often translated as "union" or "yoke." Not like an egg yolk, but the kind worn by oxen, for example. Now I used to view that yoke as some kind of torture device - like when you may have seen pictures of someone being punished by having their neck and wrists restrained in stocks. But a yoke is very different. It's a connection that allows two animals to focus their energy, their power, their intention in order to achieve more and go further than they would be able to alone. And to do it with less effort, less strain, less depletion of their energy.

“Sutra” means thread. Like this one (*holding up one spool*). Hard to see on it’s own, but still useful by itself. Thread it through a needle and you can repair many things so that their purpose can be extended. With each thread you add to it, as they weave together and build on each other... a tapestry forms. Each tapestry reveals a unique design and pattern. Each thread playing a key role, contributing to the big picture. This always expanding, refining tapestry is your yoga practice - reflecting what you choose to pursue over time.

In the text of the Yoga Sutras there are 196 of these threads, divided into four books, padas. Don’t worry - there’s no expectation to memorize them. You don’t even have to study them all. Our study will focus primarily on sutras in book one - which introduces themes, ideas and principles of yoga, and book two - which looks at the motivation behind and useful guidelines for practicing yoga. Coming back to the image of our tree for a moment you might think of the sutras like the rings of the tree - building upon each other - expanding the presence of the tree, allowing its growth, its impact and role in all of creation to be more... alive.

The sutras have been around a long time - more than 4,000 years. We credit someone named Patanjali with putting them in written form. Prior to doing that, the sutras were taught in relationship - conversation, practice, moments between teachers and their students. In written form they are concise - and in sanskrit. We have access to many translations - I’m happy to share ones I find helpful, but the “best” translation is the one you actually use. We don’t know much about Patanjali - even if he (or she) was an individual, or a name given to several people who contributed to writing them down. Who Patanjali was or wasn’t doesn’t diminish the sutras.

Before we begin our study, I do want to make one thing very clear: yoga is not a religion. One of my favorite authors, Jaganath Carrera, describes it best: “The Yoga Sutras of Sri Patanjali is the science of joy and a blueprint for living a deeply satisfying life.”

Let’s pause for a moment and consider this. Because I want you to know - and truly believe - that whenever we are together to study and practice, you are in a safe place. I will never ask you to believe what I believe, or try to convince you to believe anything. As we’ll discover, that would go against the sutras and Raja Yoga.

At the same time, if you consider yourself a person of faith, I also want you to know that this is a safe place - where you can explore, experience and express your faith through your practice and study of Raja Yoga. I will share that I believe we are meant to “do life” in relationship, and in order to do that here, we must choose to give the gift of acceptance, safety and respect to each other. We are each on our own path - and while different we can champion each other to keep going.

You may have noticed I didn’t say Raja Yoga isn’t spiritual. That word may be triggering for you - which is why I’d like to spend some time with it and give it context for our study. As we study Raja Yoga, one theme will be to work from the gross to the subtle - the easiest layer to access moving towards the most challenging. From what we can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch to what we can’t - but we know are there. At the most basic/accessible/gross level, we have a physical body. We are physical beings. We have a mind that lives in a physical brain - we know we do, even though we can’t touch and see our thoughts. We not only feel things in a tangible way - we also experience a spectrum of emotions that we can’t measure through our senses - but we know are real. Our word “spirit” traces back to the latin word for breath: spiritus. That word has given us many words around that idea: respiration, perspiration, inspiration...expiration. We measure the moment of death as

we understand it by the exhalation of the final breath. At its core to be “spiritual” is to be alive. This is the understanding I invite you to hold as we encounter aspects of our study that are spiritual.

This is a lot of information, so know I’m available if you’d like to ask questions or share thoughts before we come together again. Since our minds have been very active for the past twenty minutes or so, I’d like to close our time with a brief breathing practice.

*End with extended exhalation and guided imagery.*