

Yogas citta vrtti nirodha

“When Patanjali outlined the practice of two thousand years ago, he used a form of short, easy-to-remember sayings that could be recited or chanted as slokas, the Sanskrit root for the English word “slogan.” Today we know slogans as catchy phrases used to promote products or sum up larger ideas, like “It’s the real thing” or “Be all that you can be.” But if yoga has one ageless, all-encompassing slogan, it’s Pantanjali’s second Sutra.

“Yoga is the stilling of the modifications of the mind,” or in Sanskrit, Yogas citta vrtti nirodha. (Learn to say it with this step-by-step online audio lesson by Vyaas Houston, the founder of the American Sanskrit Institute.)

As a phrase, Yogas citta vrtti nirodha may not be as catchy as “Just do it,” but as an experience, it’s familiar to nearly every yoga student. You know it as the blissed-out feeling that follows an asana class, or that moment of pure awareness during meditation. You feel it when the thoughts slow and the mind becomes anchored in the present moment. The second sutra is the very heart of yoga, and a closer look at the Sanskrit meanings reveals why.

According to the yoga philosophers, the mind has four functions. Manas is the aspect of mind that records external stimuli. Buddhi, sometimes called “higher mind,” discriminates between and classifies these incoming impressions. Ahamkara is the ego mind, which filters everything through the lens of “I/me/mine.” The sum total of these creates the citta or “mindstuff.” A vast storehouse of conscious and subconscious impressions.

“Vrtti” is often translated as thought waves of the modifications of the mind, but when this root is used in asana names (such as Parivrtta Janu Sirsasana or Jathara Parivartanasana), it means to revolve or turn around. Each of us has experienced how the vrttis—which include emotions, memories, and imagination—spin around inside the mind, especially when we try to sit for meditation.

The final word in Sutra 1.2 has been translated variously as restraint, control, or mastery, but “nirodhah” also implies a process of self-training. Through the process of yoga we learn to restrain the vrttis, which many teachers have likened to calming the surface of a copy lake so that we can see all the way through to the bottom? When we get to the bottom of yoga, we find atman, the true self.

And how do we get there?

“Yoga is both the means and the end,” says B.K.S. Iyengar in his commentary on the Yoga Sutras. In other words, we practice yoga to realize yoga, which Iyengar defines as “integration from the outermost layer to the innermost self.” We integrate; we don’t banish thoughts or repress memories or emotions. Rather, we free ourselves from the turmoil that they (the vrttis) cause by training the mind to observe, discern, and detach through asana, pranayama, meditation, and other yogic practices