
Sankhya Philosophy

Freeing Ourselves from Our Stories

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Introduction

One of the central aims of yoga throughout history has been the **alleviation of suffering and the cultivation of freedom or liberation**. Yoga philosophy asks a simple but profound question:

If we want to reduce suffering, we first have to understand what causes it.

Two important philosophical systems help us explore this question: **Sankhya Philosophy** and **Patanjali's Yoga Sutras**. Together they offer a map for understanding the nature of reality, the ways we become confused or entangled in our thinking, and the practices that help us return to clarity.

Sankhya Philosophy

Sankhya is one of the oldest philosophical systems in India, dating roughly from **700–500 BCE**.

The word *Sankhya* means “**to list,**” “**to count,**” or “**to enumerate.**” The philosophy attempted to create a **complete inventory of everything that exists in the universe**. In other words, Sankhya was trying to understand **what is actually real**.

In its simplest form, Sankhya proposed that all physical reality could be understood through **five fundamental elements**:

- **Earth**
- **Water**
- **Fire**
- **Air**
- **Ether / Space**

According to the Sankhya yogis, when we describe something as anything beyond these basic elements — when we say something is *good, bad, beautiful, annoying, unfair, mine, or yours* — we have moved into the realm of **story**.

Stories can include:

- opinions
- preferences
- judgments

- likes and dislikes
- assumptions
- prejudices

The goal of Sankhya was to **strip away the stories** so we could see **what is real and true**.

Why? Because our stories often **cloud perception**, and when our perception is clouded, **suffering follows**.

During the time of Sankhya, much of the work focused on **understanding and mapping reality**. The philosophers created detailed descriptions of the building blocks of existence and the different qualities that shape the natural world and the human experience. They also spoke about the importance of developing **discernment**—the ability to distinguish between what is truly real and what is a projection, interpretation, or story created by the mind.

But in many ways, Sankhya remained largely **theoretical**. While it pointed clearly toward the problem—the ways the mind becomes entangled in stories about ourselves, others, and the world—it offered fewer **practical, everyday methods** for how to consistently strip those stories away.

It did suggest that clarity comes through **meditation, inward reflection, and cultivating the ability to observe the mind rather than immediately believing it**. In other words, learning to step into the role of the **witness**—the part of us that can watch thoughts, reactions, emotions, and sensations arise without becoming completely identified with them.

This idea of the **witness** became incredibly important in later yoga traditions and is also a central teaching in **Kripalu Yoga**. In Kripalu practice, students are encouraged to cultivate *witness consciousness*, which means developing the ability to observe thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations **without judgment or immediate reaction**. This kind of self-observation helps practitioners recognize that they are **not their thoughts or emotional reactions**, but rather the awareness that can notice them.

Through this compassionate witnessing, we begin to see our habits, stories, attachments, and aversions more clearly. Instead of automatically reacting, we create a little space—space that allows for curiosity, honesty, and wiser choices.

Still, during the time of Sankhya philosophy, much of this remained **more conceptual than practical**. The philosophy pointed toward the problem—the ways the mind becomes tangled in interpretations and stories—but it did not always offer clear, structured methods for how to consistently work with the mind in everyday life.

So we look forward to the next stage in the evolution of yoga philosophy.

A few centuries later, the sage **Patanjali** took many of these philosophical insights and translated them into something far more **practical and methodical**: a structured path of practices designed to help people work directly with the mind, loosen the grip of these stories, and gradually move toward greater clarity and freedom.

From Sankhya to the Yoga Sutras

A few centuries later, the sage **Patanjali** built upon these philosophical ideas in the text known as **The Yoga Sutras** (approximately **200 BCE – 400 CE**).

While Sankhya focused largely on **theory and understanding reality**, Patanjali focused on **practice**.

He asked:

If suffering comes from misunderstanding reality, what can we actually do about it?

Patanjali offered a path known as the **Eight-Limbed Path of Yoga**, a set of practices designed to help practitioners gradually move toward clarity and freedom.

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

1. **Yamas** – Guidelines and practices for social harmony
2. **Niyamas** – Inner observances and practices for personal harmony
3. **Asana** – Postures
4. **Pranayama** – Breath practices
5. **Pratyahara** – Turning the senses inward
6. **Dharana** – Concentration
7. **Dhyana** – Meditation
8. **Samadhi** – Deep absorption / liberation

Patanjali understood that if we want to reduce suffering, we first need to **name the causes of suffering**.

He called these obstacles the **Kleshas**.

The Kleshas: Causes of Suffering

Patanjali described **five Kleshas**, or mental afflictions, that cloud perception and lead to suffering.

Avidya — Ignorance

Unconscious, misperception of our true, divine nature.

Asmita — Egoism

Over-identifying with our roles, thoughts, or identity.

Raga — Attachment

Clinging to pleasure or wanting experiences to continue.

Dvesha — Aversion

Pushing away discomfort or unpleasant experiences.

Abhinivesha — Fear of death / Clinging to life

A deep fear of loss, change, or letting go.

Patanjali defined yoga as the process of **quieting the fluctuations of the mind** (*chitta-vrtti-nirodhaḥ*), the constant stream of thoughts, reactions, and stories that shape how we experience the world. To work with these patterns, he offered two essential and complementary approaches: **consistent practice** (*abhyasa*) and **non-attachment** (*vairagya*).

Practice refers to the steady and ongoing effort to cultivate a calm, stable, and focused mind. This includes the many practices of yoga—meditation, breath-work, posture, and ethical living—that help train attention and build awareness over time.

Non-attachment is the willingness to release our grip on outcomes, identities, and expectations. It reminds us to engage fully in the practice while letting go of the need for a particular result, preventing the practice itself from becoming another expression of ego or striving.

Together these two principles create a balanced path: **effort and letting go**. Practice keeps us engaged and moving forward, while non-attachment softens the tendency to cling, control, or judge the experience.

To help practitioners embody this balance in everyday life, Patanjali outlined the **Eight Limbs of Yoga**, a practical framework for reducing suffering and cultivating greater clarity and freedom. The path begins with the **Yamas and Niyamas**, which create the foundation for harmony in our outer relationships and our inner life.

Yamas and Niyamas

These first two limbs create **outer and inner harmony**, providing a stable foundation for deeper practice.

The Yamas

Guidelines and practices for how we interact with the world to foster social harmony

Ahimsa — Non-violence

Acting with compassion toward ourselves and others.

Satya — Truthfulness

Honesty in thoughts, words, and actions, aligned with reality.

Asteya — Non-stealing

Not taking what is not freely given.

Brahmacharya — Moderation

Using our energy wisely.

Aparigraha — Non-grasping

Letting go of excessive attachment and accumulation.

The Niyamas

Observance and practices that cultivate inner clarity and stability.

Saucha — Purity / Clarity

Cultivating cleanliness and clarity in the body, mind, and environment so we can perceive things more clearly.

Santosha — Contentment

Practicing appreciation and acceptance of the present moment rather than constantly chasing something more.

Tapas — Discipline (uplifting) / Effort

Developing the willingness to stay present with effort and challenge in ways that build strength and resilience.

Svadyaya — Self-Study

Reflecting on our thoughts, patterns, and behaviors so we can better understand ourselves and grow in awareness.

Ishvara Pranidhana — Surrender to Something Greater

Letting go of excessive control and trusting in something larger than our individual ego or personal will.

Yoga as a Practice Library

Once we begin working with inner and outer harmony, we can deepen into practices like **postures, breath-work, and meditation**.

These practices are powerful because they give us a **controlled environment**.

On the mat we choose, the posture, the intensity, and the duration.

This allows us to **observe ourselves when the stakes are low**.

Over time we become more familiar with our patterns—our attachments, aversions, and the stories our minds create.

Then, when life becomes challenging and **the stakes are higher**, the tools are already familiar.

Practicing Being with What is Real

The yogis were deeply interested in learning how to be with **what is real and true**.

One powerful insight is this:

The body and the breath only exist in the present moment.

When we connect with the **raw experience of sensation and breath**, it becomes easier for the mind to settle into the present moment.

And when we are truly present with an experience—without immediately layering stories onto it—it becomes easier to see **what is actually happening**.

Home Practices: Bringing the Workshop into Your Daily Life

These practices are designed to help you continue noticing the stories your mind creates and return to the **direct experience of the present moment**. You can practice them independently, in your own time, using your body, breath, and reflection as guides.

Practice 1 — Meditation: Witnessing the Stories

This meditation is intended to help you observe thoughts, judgments, and stories without becoming entangled in them. The goal is to **see your mind in action** and practice stepping into the role of the witness—the part of you that notices what is happening without immediately reacting.

How to practice at home:

1. Find a quiet, comfortable space where you can sit undisturbed.
2. Close your eyes and bring your attention to your breath, noticing its natural rhythm.
3. When a thought, story, or judgment arises, gently label it as a “story” and return your focus to the breath.
4. Repeat for 5–10 minutes, gradually extending the time as you feel ready.
5. Notice how it feels to **observe without automatically believing** everything your mind says.

Optional guided recording: [link to recorded guiding coming soon, please check back]

Practice 2 — Journaling: Self-Study

Journaling is a tool for **Svadhya**, or self-reflection. It helps you uncover recurring patterns, attachments, and aversions, and observe how the stories you tell yourself shape your experience.

How to practice at home:

1. Set aside a few minutes each day for the next few days with a notebook or journal.
2. Reflect on a recent experience that triggered a strong reaction—frustration, joy, discomfort, or pleasure.
3. Ask yourself questions such as:
 - What story did I create about this situation?
 - How did that story affect my feelings or actions?
 - What might be closer to the actual experience or truth?
4. Write freely, without censoring your thoughts. The goal is **awareness, not judgment**.
5. Over time, notice patterns in your thinking and how you might respond differently with more clarity.

Practice 3 — Posture: Embodied Awareness

Physical practice is a powerful way to connect with the **raw, present-moment experience** of your body and breath. Holding a posture intentionally allows you to observe how tension, discomfort, shifts in energy, and mental stories arise—and how you can return to the **direct sensation** rather than the narrative about it.

How to practice at home:

1. Choose a posture such as **Standing Squat (Chair Pose)** or another pose that challenges you slightly.
2. Focus on your breath and bodily sensations as you hold the posture.
3. Notice any stories your mind creates—judgments like “I can’t hold this,” “This is too hard,” or comparisons to others.
4. Bring your attention back to **the raw sensations of your body**: the pressure in your feet, the sensation in your legs, the rise and fall of your breath.
5. Practice staying present for several breaths, observing **mind and body together**.

Optional practice video: [link to recording coming soon, please check back]

These three practices—meditation, journaling, and posture—are designed to be **gentle, repeatable, and cumulative**. Over time, they help you recognize where your mind creates stories, practice returning to the **truth of the moment**, and build skill in responding to life with clarity and ease.

A Closing Reflection

With all this said, in our modern world we are not trying to completely dismantle our understanding of the world. Stories help us navigate life.

But yoga invites us to **get as close to the truth of the moment as possible**, and to recognize when we repeatedly run into the same obstacles.

When we see the patterns clearly, we have the possibility of choosing a different path.

A beautiful illustration of this comes from **Portia Nelson's** poem:

An Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

Chapter I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter III

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it there.
I still fall in... it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter V

I walk down another street.