

The Restless Mind and the Path to Inner Stability in the Yoga Sutras

Vidushi Chhetri^{1*}

ABSTRACT

The body stays still while the mind goes back to past conversations, unfinished tasks, and imagined futures while reading a book. This experience seems quite familiar and relatable to a lot of people of this generation. Yet centuries ago, the yoga sutra of Patanjali called this very condition as “Chitta Vritti,” which means, mental fluctuations that disturb the state of inner balance. However, the yogic perspective does not regard restlessness as weakness. Rather than suppressing it, yogic approach encourages understanding, discipline, patience and awareness. This paper looks at how the Yoga Sutras offer a kind and practical way to move from mental chaos to inner stability.

Keywords: *Restless Mind, Chitta Vritti, Yoga Sutras, Inner Stability, Mental Fluctuations*

The mind has often been compared to a monkey, that is constantly jumping from one branch to another, barely pausing in stillness. Similarly, even at those moments when our body is at rest, our mind refuses to stay still and thoughts keep jumping from memories to anxieties to imaginations and unfulfilled desires. The metaphor of monkey mind, beautifully captures the unpredictable and restless nature of mind. This restlessness is not something new to human beings in this modern lifestyle, though this new materialistic lifestyle has a lot of stimulation and distractions. Long before the emergence of contemporary psychological discourse, ancient Indian knowledge traditions reflected deeply on the unstable and wandering nature of the mind. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra have been among one of those traditions that stands out the most for its systematic and deep exploration on mental fluctuations.

Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra, composed around the 2nd century BCE (Sahu & Tripathy, 2023), have been credited to Sage Patanjali, often called as the father of yoga, which is quite incorrect. He was not the father, he was the organiser or systemiser of yoga. He distilled knowledge of yoga that came down from ancient times and encapsulated yoga in the form of sutras. Patanjali organised and clarified the concepts for his students, and as he explained the students recorded those ideas in a shorthand form known as ‘sutras’. The term literally means ‘thread’ and these sutras are just, combination of words thread together which are usually not even complete sentences with subject and predicates (Satchidananda, 2012).

¹B.A. Psychology, School of Liberal Arts, Uttaranchal University, Dehradun 248007, India

*Corresponding Author

Received: March 19, 2026; Revision Received: March 22, 2026; Accepted: March 25, 2026

The Restless Mind and the Path to Inner Stability in the Yoga Sutras

There is total 195 sutras, divided into 4 chapters, Samadhi padah, Sadhana padah, Vibhuti padah and Kaivalya padah (Bryant, 2015).

In this paper, our focus would be on the first chapter of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, samadhi pada. The study aims to understanding the concept of mental modifications, what causes it and how to control it, through the philosophical framework presented in the yoga sutra of Patanjali. The study seeks to understand how yogic teachings shows a path from mental restlessness toward inner stability.

MEANING OF "YOGAŚ CITTA VṚTTI NIRODHAḤ"

Coming straight to the point, in the second sutra, Sage Patanjali define yoga as,

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥२॥

Yogash-citta-vritti-nirodhah ||2|| [PYS 1.2] (White, 2014).

Here, yogaś mean yoga, chitta is the mind stuff, vritti means modifications, and nirodhah translates to restraint (Satchidananda, 2012).

Now let's discuss about each word of the sutra with deeper understanding. The word yoga literally means "union", but then, it raises a question, what exactly is being united? In the context of yoga philosophy, yoga is not just about asanas, rather, it's a union between physical practice and inner experience or Yogic experience. As explained by Satchidananda (2012), Yoga refers to the exceptional sensation of controlling mental fluctuations, so that one could experience a more unified and peaceful state of mind.

"Citta is the sum total of mind" (Satchidananda, 2012). To understand what Patanjali means by "mind," you should know that chitta is not just one thing, it is the combination of three layers, that are grouped together and constitute, inner life of an individual (Bryant, 2015). These layers are, Manas(mind) the part that receives information through senses and engage in thinking, Buddhi(intellect) the part that analyse and make decision and Ahamkara(ego) the sense of "I" that make us identify things with ourself (Thakur, 2024). According to Bose (1966) chitta covers both the receptive and the executive functions of the mind.

Let's understand vritti with a beautiful example by Swami Vivekananda, he says to imagine your mind as lake. When the lake water is still, you can see the bottom of the lake very clearly, but when the waves start appearing on the surface, the water become disturbed and muddy, which becomes hinderance and you cannot see the bottom of the lake. Here, lake represents our chitta (mind), waves represent vritis (mental fluctuations) and bottom of the lake represents our true self or consciousness (Vivekananda, 2022).

The above example might have given a clear idea of what vritti is, similar to the lake with ripples, our mind is constantly disturbed by thoughts, emotions, memories and worries, all these constantly juggling in our mind making us restless. For example you are doing an important project, you start it with a hope to complete it in time with creativity, but as you proceed your mind started wandering from project to your another upcoming assignment, to any past conversation, to imaginations and then, you find yourself gradually crowded with your own thoughts, and just like that you waste your time and after a while with no new creative ideas arising in your mind, you will start worrying that you won't complete it on time. And with that "you" who started this project with hope is now anxious and stuck because of your own mind. (Sachidanand, 2012), states that normally you are in a peaceful

The Restless Mind and the Path to Inner Stability in the Yoga Sutras

state, it means that it is the natural tendency of our mind to be in a peaceful state, but it's because of these chitta vrittis or modification of mental stuff that disturbs that peace.

The whole key is therefore, to establish control over these vrittis that form like a whirlpool, in loop over and over, not allowing us to get to peck on our inner self and let our mind be in peace, so that one could accomplish their true potential. Smallwood & Schooler (2013) found that in almost any cognitive task, mind wandering is inevitable, so rather than being frustrated when the mind drifts away from a task, it is better to establish a control over these vrittis. This control or restraint in mental modification is what yoga refers to as Nirodhah. The idea of nirodhah is explained as control, not suppression. It is to gain control over vrittis, not to suppress or completely abandon it. Nirodhah is like a door not a wall, a door that selectively chooses whom to allow entry and whom not to, whereas wall completely blocks the entry irrespective of how positive the thought is.

TYPES OF MENTAL MODIFICATIONS

वृत्तयः पञ्चतय्यः क्लिष्टाक्लिष्टाः ॥५॥

Vrittayah panchatayyah klishtha-aklishtaah ||5|| [PYS 1.5] (White, 2014).

This sutra means that there are five kinds of mental modifications which are either painful or painless (Satchidananda, 2012).

Patanjali says that there are 5 types of vrittis that are classified into two categories, first is the klishtha which mean painful, and second is aklishtha which mean painless. He did not divide the thought into painful or pleasurable, but why so? It's because the thought itself is not causing pain or pleasure, it is the actual motive behind the thought or selfishness that causes the problem (Satchidananda, 2012). Let's understand it with the help of an example, at office, your colleague gets promoted for his hard work, now at the same scenario lets look at the two different thoughts influenced by two different motives. First, he got promoted? Why not me? Am I not good enough? And the second one goes like, he got promoted? His efforts paid off, I can also learn from him and improve. Here, in both the scenario you can see the difference, the first thought is influenced by jealousy and insecurity whereas, the second one is influenced by motivation and clarity. That is why, Satchidananda (2012) says that we should analyse our motives and try to cultivate positive and selfless thoughts.

Some people may ask, isn't yoga and meditation all about making our mind thoughtless? But the truth is you can't make your mind thoughtless immediately, yes, it is possible only after a long practice and that's definitely not easy. So, what can we do? We can start by developing certain positive thoughts while removing the negative ones. But how would we know which one might cause pain and which one won't? For that, we have to become an analyst. We have to watch when our thought start arising in our mind. This is what yoga practice is, it is to analyse our own thought and introspect it (Satchidananda, 2012).

प्रमाणविपर्ययविकल्पनिद्रास्मृतयः ॥६॥

Pramaana-viparyaya-vikalpa-nidraa-smritayah ||6|| [PYS 1.6] (White, 2014).

Here, Patanjali names the five vrittis mentioned in the above sutra, these are, Pramana, Viparyaya, Vikalpa, Nidra and Smriti. Let us understand them one by one.

प्रत्यक्षानुमानागमाः प्रमाणानि॥७॥

Pratyaksha-anumaana-aagamaah pramaanaani ||7|| [PYS 1.7] (White, 2014).

This sutra explains that we gain right knowledge (parmana) in three ways, that are, direct perception, interference and testimony. Direct perception is when we gain knowledge by

The Restless Mind and the Path to Inner Stability in the Yoga Sutras

direct experience. Interference is when we understand something indirectly by some evidence or signs and make a conclusion, for example you concluded that there must be fire because you saw smoke coming out. And testimony means when you learn something through trustworthy sources. So, all these three ways helps us to gain knowledge. Regardless of whether it is valid or invalid, one must put it aside, to put your mind at rest and feel inner peace. But before we push out all thoughts, we must analyse them and eliminate one set after another. We can't just throw everything into one garbage pail (Satchidananda, 2012).

So, it explains that not all thoughts in our mind are random, some arises from these three sources of knowledge and even right knowledge works like vritti to our mind, which needs to be controlled.

विपर्ययो मिथ्याज्ञानमतद्रूपप्रतिष्ठम् ॥८॥

Viparyayo mithyaa-jnaanam atad-ruupa-pratishtham ||8|| [PYS 1.8] (White, 2014).

It means, Viparyaya or misconception is an illusory knowledge, based on mistaking something with a completely different thing (Stiles, 2021).

For example, at very dim light, you saw a rope and mistaken it with a snake. Now, even though it's a false perception, it still creates terror in your mind. This shows that vrittis does not arise only from right knowledge, but also from false or mistaken perception (Satchidananda, 2012). In short, even something in front of you is not true, your mind would still react to it and would cause disturbance.

शब्दज्ञानानुपाती वस्तुशून्यो विकल्पः॥९॥

Shabda-jnaana-anupaatii vastu-shuunyo vikalpah ||9|| [PYS 1.9] (White, 2014).

Vikalpa means verbal delusion. A thought or image arises by hearing mere words, even though there is no reality behind it. You may create some opinion about something that might wasn't even be there (Satchidananda, 2012). For example, when I say the fish was flying, you start imagining it even though there is no logic or reality in this statement.

अभावप्रत्ययालम्बना वृत्तिर्निद्रा॥१०॥

Anbhava-pratyaya-aalambanaa vrittir-nidraa ||10|| [PYS 1.10] (White, 2014).

“Sleep is a vritti which embraces the feeling of voidness” (Vivekananda, 2022). When we say, “I slept well”, or “I didn't sleep well” it means that the mind does have some kind of activity even in sleep. If there was no activity in your mind during sleep, you won't even remember that you slept at all. During sleep there is a special type of wave that temporarily removes all other thoughts from mind except the thought of emptiness (Vivekananda, 2022).

अनुभूतविषयासम्प्रमोषः स्मृतिः ॥११॥

Anubhuuta-vishaya-asamproshah smritih ||11|| [PYS 1.11] (White, 2014).

“When a mental modification of an object previously experienced and not forgotten comes back to consciousness, that is memory” (Vivekananda, 2022). Memories (smriti) create impression in our mind, impression that come back to surface later. Sometimes they appear when we want them, for example recalling answers when teacher asks, and sometimes they appear when we don't want them, like remembering your embarrassing moments out of nowhere. Memories come in two ways, dreaming (when we sleep) and daydreaming (when we are awake) (Vivekananda, 2022).

Patanjali says that as long as one's mind is not under his control, he would eventually be distracted by the external object and desires, and it would cause mental and behavioural

The Restless Mind and the Path to Inner Stability in the Yoga Sutras

issues (Devi & Barnwal, 2024). The mind constantly generates the five kinds of vrittis discussed earlier, each producing different waves of thought that keep the mind restlessly active.

IDENTIFICATION WITH MENTAL MODIFICATIONS

वृत्तिसारूप्यमितरत्रा॥४॥

Vritti-saarupyam itaratra ||4|| [PYS 1.4] (White, 2014).

At other times, the seer identifies itself with the modification (vritti) (S Vivekananda, 2022). In other words, if the effects of vrittis on chitta are not regulated, the chitta gradually becomes identified with these mental modifications. It means that we start to identify ourselves more and more with our traits and vrittis, than with our actual nature. It leads us to behave in cyclic maladaptive manner (Satchidananda, 2012).

Yoga helps individual to control their mental modifications or vrittis, but for that individual should first need to analyse and understand their thoughts. But sometimes, individual rather than observing their thoughts and emotions, they start identifying themselves with these modifications. And when the person constantly identifies themselves with these thoughts and emotions, it strengthens the influence of mental modifications and affects your mind, as it keeps reacting to every mental movement, your emotional fluctuation increases and it becomes difficult to keep your mind clear and stable. Let's look at an example and understand it, a student studied hard for a quiz but still fails and didn't qualify for the next round, a thought occurs in his mind "I failed", along with the emotions he was feeling at that moment, sadness, anger and disappointment he start identifying himself with that thought and emotion, and would say, "I am a failure". Instead of seeing this failure as a temporary event, he begins to see this as who he is. It creates emotional disturbance with constant feeling of shame, self doubt and anxiety for future competitions, along with that it might influence his behaviour as well, by avoiding new challenges and lack of motivation. The mind repeatedly recalls the event and past mistakes, leading to constant worrying for future failure. This continuous mental activity increases mental instability and distractions.

Distraction and internal turbulence result from mental fluctuations, that continue to dominate our awareness as long as this identification persists. So, knowing about this tendency is an important step toward understanding the restless mind. In order to overcome this condition, Patanjali suggests a practical way to stabilize the mind through detachment (vairagya) and disciplined practice (abhyasa), which gradually help release the hold of mental fluctuations and restore inner balance.

THE PATH TO INNER STABILITY

अभ्यासवैराग्याभ्यां तन्निरोधः॥१२॥

Abhyaasa-vairaagyaabhyaam tan-nirodhah ||12|| [PYS 1.12] (White, 2014).

Abhyāsa means practice and vairāgya means non attachment. This sutra means that, the constant waves or the mental modifications can be controlled by practice and non-attachment (Satchidananda, 2012). Practice means regularly training the mind, for example through concentration, meditation, or mindful awareness, so that it slowly learns to stay calm and focused. Non-attachment means not becoming too emotionally involved or dependent on thoughts, desires, or experiences. In an easy way, it is like learning to guide the mind gently. Practice strengthens the mind, while non-attachment helps us let go of things that disturb it. Together, these two approaches gradually reduce mental restlessness and help the mind become more peaceful and stable.

तत्र स्थितौ यत्नोऽभ्यासः॥१३॥

Tatra sthitau yatno 'bhyasah ||13|| [PYS 1.13] (White, 2014).

“Of these two, effort toward steadiness of mind is practice” (Satchidananda, 2012). Here, Patanjali explains that practice (abhyasa) is a continuous and sincere effort to keep your mind focused. You should always be aware and analyse your thoughts. Its not like you practice it for a minute or so and then allowing your mind to wander freely and let them control you for the rest of the day, then it won't be considered as a practice. Instead, practice is when you are constantly developing awareness of your thoughts, emotions, actions and words, and when your mind becomes distracted and start wandering, you gently bring mind back to track. So, in short, practice is all about regular and constant effort to train your mind. Patanjali gave three qualifications that a person must develop. These three qualities are discussed in next sutra (Satchidananda, 2012).

स तु दीर्घकालनैरन्तर्यसत्कारासेवितो दृढभूमिः॥१४॥

Sa tu diirgha-kaala-nairantarya-satkaara-aasevito dridha-bhuumih ||14|| [PYS 1.14] (White, 2014).

“Practice becomes firmly grounded when well attended to for a long time, without break and in all earnestness” (Satchidananda, 2012). It explains the three qualifications an individual must develop. The first qualification explains that the practice(abhyasa) needs to be done for a long time. It has become human tendency to want something immediately, but that's not how it works in yoga, one needs to be patient to see a change in their mind. The second qualification is that the practice needs to be done constantly without any break, and the last qualification is earnestness, one should do the practice with sincerity, full attention and having full faith in the process (Satchidananda, 2012). So, in short, Patanjali is saying that, just like how dedicated and persistent one becomes to achieve their goal in life, that similar dedication, earnestness and consistency is what your mind also needed while training it, so that you have control over your vrittis and make mind calm, clear and stable.

दृष्टानुश्रविकविषयवितृष्णस्य वशीकारसञ्ज्ञा वैराग्यम् ॥ १५॥

Drishta-anushravika-vishaya-vitrishnasya vashiikaara-sanjnaa vairaagyam ||15|| [PYS 1.15] (White, 2014).

This sutra explains the state of vairagya or non-attachment, it's a state where one doesn't crave or attach towards things they see and hear about. Normally, our mind run after objects that we see or hear about, for example we saw a beautiful dress and want it or we hear about how good the food is of that café and we feel the desire to taste it. But, before mind get attracted to something after seeing or hearing about it, one should understand if, that thing is good for you or not. The judgement is important, rather than allowing the mind to grasp things impulsively. However, non-attachment doesn't mean being indifferent, it simply means that you have the understanding of taking a pause and making a decision whether something you are chasing is really beneficial or not (Satchidananda, 2012). For example, you are studying, and your friend keep messaging you and texting you about some new gossip, but at that moment you understand that right now gossiping is not something necessary to do, so you put your phone aside and completely focus on your study. This is non attachment.

Vairāgya literally means “colorless”. Desires are the colors in mind, that forms ripples, just like a stone that is thrown in the lake and creates waves, and when the mind is agitated by these desires, mind could not find peace and with the restless mind one could not stay steady while practicing or meditating. Satchidananda (2012) also explains that practice alone is not

The Restless Mind and the Path to Inner Stability in the Yoga Sutras

enough if the mind is full of desires. You are practicing regularly, meditating and even analysing your thoughts and emotions, but your mind is still influenced with desires, all these practices may lose their true purpose. So, when your personal desire reduces, your mind become calmer and your practice flourishes, and you could see the difference in yourself (in a good way).

The yoga sutras from 1.12 to 1.15 explains a very practical way to deal with restlessness. Patanjali says that to calm the restless mind, there are two ways that are discussed above, abhyasa (practice) and vairāgya (non attachment). Practice means making steady effort over a long time, with sincerity and consistency, whereas, non attachment is not letting your personal desire take control of your mind. Both goes hand in hand. For example, an athlete, who is preparing for an important upcoming competition, he is practicing regularly yet because he got distracted by social media or any other desire, at the end it would affect his performance during the competition. Practicing consistently and also learning to let go of your unnecessary distraction, keep your mind at peace and increases your concentration level. So, patiently train your mind while reducing distractions and unnecessary desires, the vrittis or the waves slowly settle down and your mind naturally becomes calmer, concentrated and less restless.

INNER STABILITY AND PERSONAL GROWTH

The restless mind which is shaped by continuous mental fluctuations (vrittis), gradually settle down and find stability with the help of continuous abhyāsa and vairāgya. It improves our control over our vrittis, allowing our mind to stay calmer and more centered. The state of this mental stillness is described in sutra 1.3 of Patanjali's yoga sutra.

तदा द्रष्टुः स्वरूपेऽवस्थानम् ॥३॥

Tadaa drashtuh svaroope 'vasthaanam ||3|| [PSY 1.3] (White, 2014).

Then the Seer or the self, abides in its own true nature (Satchidananda, 2012).

We have till now understood what vrittis is, what causes these mental modifications, how our identification with these vrittis causes mental restlessness and what practical ways Patanjali tells to control these vrittis. Now, with this sutra, we would understand what is the state of mind when our mental fluctuations are controlled?

Patanjali explains that our real identity is not the body or our constantly fluctuating mind, it is the awareness, that observes everything, including our emotions, thoughts and behaviour. Satchidananda (2012) explain this with an example of a mirror, he says that we cannot look at face directly, but through our reflection in the mirror. If the mirror is covered in dust, curved or cracked, the reflection would look distorted, but for that we do not blame the face, because we know that there is a fault in the mirror. In the same way, the true you reflect in the mind (mirror). But when your mind is colored with desires and vrittis, the mirror (mind) shows the distorted form. If the mind is restless and disturbed by continuous thoughts, it distorts our understanding of who we truly are, and we start thinking, "I am confused", "I don't know anything" or "I can't do anything". However, when our mind is cleared with control over our vrittis, it is like a still and calm lake without any ripples. The reflection of our true self could be seen clearly in the mirror (mind) (Satchidananda, 2012).

Thus, calming of mental fluctuations brings a significant change in the state of the mind. When our mind is not being disturbed by the constant shifting of thoughts, emotions, memories and desires, you can feel the clarity in our mind. This inner stability reduces

The Restless Mind and the Path to Inner Stability in the Yoga Sutras

mental disturbance and increases our self-awareness and emotional balance. Over the time, with constant yoga practice, this steadiness helps individual to face any situation in life with mental clarity and face the challenges with full concentration, calmness and with emotional balance. It gradually leads you to become a greater version of yourself, in short, towards self-growth and inner peace.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of restless mind made us understood that the mental disturbances that quite a lot of people face today, is not just a modern psychological problem, but a concern that was explored in the ancient times as well, and was thoroughly understood in the Patanjali's yoga sutra. Patanjali explains that this instability in our mind arises because of the constant fluctuations in our mind, and this concept was called as chitta vritti. Yoga taught us how control over these vrittis (nirodha) is important, to bring our mind in its normal state of peace, like a still mirror. This paper taught me that these disturbances and distractions that we face in our daily life is something that is quite normal, yet something that needs to be controlled, so that our true potential could come out and we could experience peace in our mind. I have once heard a line that goes like, "your mind could either become your greatest friend, or your greatest enemy. It is just about fact if you can control your mind, or your mind controls you". It explains how much of an influence your mind has over you, and with the help of yogic practices, you can make your mind your greatest friend.

REFERENCES

- Bose, G. (1966). *The yoga sutras*. Calcutta: The Indian Psycho-Analytical Society.
- Bryant, E. F. (2015). *The yoga sutras of Patanjali: A new edition, translation, and commentary*. North Point Press.
- Devi, N., & Barnwal, S. L. (2024). *Need and Usefulness of Methods of Chitta-Prasadhan in the Prevention of Mental Problems of Present Life-A Review*.
- Sahu, D. B., & tripathy, d. M. *Exploring patanjali's yoga sutras through a psychological perspective: an indigenous framework for mental health and consciousness*.
- Satchidananda, S. S. (2012). *The yoga sutras of Patanjali*: reprint edition. Buckingham, Va.: Integral Yoga Publications.
- Smallwood, J., & Schooler, J. W. (2013). *The restless mind*.
- Stiles, M. (2021). *Yoga sutras of Patanjali*. Weiser Books.
- Thakur, D. (2024). *Importance of Patanjali's Chitta Prasadhanam for Mental Wellbeing. Yoga-Exploring the Health Benefits and Diverse Dimensions*.
- Vivekananda, S. (2022). *Patanjali'S Yoga Sutras: Bestseller Book by Swami Vivekananda: Patanjali'S Yoga Sutras*. Prabhat Prakashan.
- White, D. G. (2014). *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali. A Biography*.

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Chhetri, V. (2026). The Restless Mind and the Path to Inner Stability in the Yoga Sutras. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 139-146. DIP:18.01.514.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.514