

Yoga Sutras 1.12-1.16: Practice and non-attachment

Two core principles: Practice (abhyasa, [1.13](#)) and non-attachment (vairagya, [1.15](#)) are the two core principles on which the entire system of Yoga rests ([1.12](#)). It is through the cultivation of these two that the other practices evolve, by which mastery over the mind field occurs ([1.2](#)), and allows the realization of the true Self ([1.3](#)).

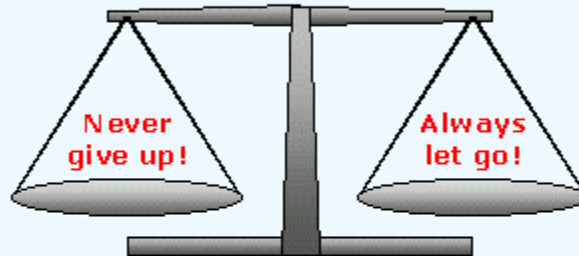
1. **Abhyasa/Practice:** Abhyasa means having an attitude of persistent effort to attain and maintain a state of stable tranquility ([1.13](#)). To become well established, this needs to be done for a long time, without a break ([1.14](#)). From this stance the deeper practice continues to unfold, going ever deeper towards the direct experience of the eternal core of our being.
2. **Vairagya/Non-attachment:** The essential companion is non-attachment ([1.15](#)), learning to let go of the many attachments, aversions, fears, and false identities that are clouding the true Self.

They work together: Practice leads you in the right direction, while non-attachment allows you to continue the inner journey without getting sidetracked into the pains and pleasures along the way.

Supreme Non-attachment: Gradually, non-attachment expands to the depth of the subtlest building blocks (gunas) of ourselves and the universe, which is called paravairagya, supreme non-attachment ([1.16](#)). Eventually the three gunas resolve back into their cause during deep meditation, leading to final liberation ([4.13-4.14](#), [4.32-4.34](#)).

Practice and Non-Attachment

Abhyasa and **Vairagya** are two of the most important foundation principles of Yoga. Abhyasa means practice and Vairagya means non-attachment. Balancing these two companions is a key to spiritual life, allowing one to pursue the subtler meditation practices.



Abhyasa involves cultivating a strong conviction, a persistent effort to consistently choose practices with actions, speech, and thoughts that lead in the direction of a stable tranquility (sthitau).

Vairagya involves learning to actively and systematically encounter, explore and let go of the many attachments, aversions, fears, and false identities that are clouding the true Self.

They work together: Practice leads you in the right direction, while non-attachment allows you to continue the inner journey without getting sidetracked into the pains and pleasures along the way.

(See Yoga Sutras 1.12-1.16)

SwamiJ.com

[top](#)

1.12 These thought patterns (vrittis) are mastered (nirodhah, regulated, coordinated, controlled, stilled, quieted) through practice (abhyasa) and non-attachment (vairagya).

(abhyasa vairagyabhyam tat nirodhah)

- abhyasa = by or with practice, repeated practice
- vairagyabhyam = non-attachment, by desirelessness or dispassion, neutrality or absence of coloring, without attraction or aversion
- tat = of those, through that of
- nirodhah = control, regulation, channeling, mastery, integration, coordination, understanding, stilling, quieting, setting aside of

Two practices: Abhyasa and vairagya are companion practices, and are the means of mastering (nirodhah, [1.2](#)) the many levels of mind, so as to experience the true Self ([1.3](#)). All of the many other practices of Yoga rest on these two principles.

Two directions: There are two directions that one can go in life as well as individual actions, speech, or thoughts. One direction is *towards* truth, reality, Self, or spiritual realization. The other direction is opposite, and involves those lifestyles, actions, speech, and thoughts that take one away from the higher experiences.

Abhyasa means cultivating the lifestyle, actions, speech, and thoughts, as well as the spiritual practices that lead in the positive direction (rather than going in the opposite direction, away from the positive, and towards the negative).

Vairagya is the practice of gradually letting go of the mental colorings ([1.5](#), [2.3](#)) that lead one away from the spiritual (rather than going in the opposite direction, giving in to the attachments and aversions).

Discrimination is key: To be able to do the practices and to cultivate non-attachment, it is necessary to become better and better at discriminating between what actions, speech, and thoughts take you in the right direction, and those which are a diversion ([2.26-2.29](#), [3.4-3.6](#)). This discrimination is both a foundation practice and also the subtler tool of the inner journey.

[top](#)

1.13 Practice (abhyasa) means choosing, applying the effort, and doing those actions that bring a stable and tranquil state (sthitau).
(tatra sthitau yatnah abhyasa)

- tatra = of these two (abhyasa and vairagya)
- sthitau = stability, steadiness, stable tranquility, undisturbed calmness
- yatnah = effort, persistent exertion, sustained struggle, endeavour
- abhyasa = by or with practice, repeated practice

Two words for *practice*: There are two different words that are often translated into English as *practice*. One is abhyasa and the other is sadhana, which is the title of [Chapter 2](#) of the Yoga Sutras (Sadhana Pada). It is important to understand the difference between these two words.

Abhyasa means practice, but in a very general, all encompassing way. It means choosing (with [buddhi](#)) the wiser of alternative courses of action. It means making decisions on the basis of what will bring greater tranquility or peace of mind, as these are the preparation for the deeper, subtler practices leading to Self-realization.

Sadhana also means practice, but is more specific, relating to the direct practices one does. These include the specific methods or techniques of working with the body, breath, and mind, as well as the specific principles applied in working with the external world and other people. For example, the eight rungs of Yoga ([2.29](#)) are all a part of sadhana.

Stithau has two parts: Abhyasa is defined in this sutra as choosing or cultivating that which leads to *sthitau*. To understand the meaning of *sthitau*, it is necessary to combine two principles. First is that of tranquility, calmness, or peace of mind. Second is that of stability, steadiness, or being of firm ground. Thus, *sthitau* means a *stable* form of tranquility. In other words, it is the pursuit of an equanimity that is with you at all times.

This stability is not just a matter of regaining peace of mind when it has been lost, like having a weekend away from work or taking a vacation. One might be able to temporarily have some tranquility while avoiding the core decisions of lifestyle, attitudes, and practices. However, to have *stable* tranquility, which is with you all, or most of the time, it is necessary to take the extra steps in life planning that supports meditation. This is the meaning of *sthitau*.

Exercise with Abhyasa: Abhyasa is the practice of choosing that which brings *sthitau*, or a stable state of tranquility. It applies to all levels, ranging from the most external, worldly actions, speech and thoughts, to the most subtle aspects of our being. To practice Abhyasa, it is easiest to start with the gross and gradually work towards the subtle.

One simple way to enhance this practice is to sit quietly and reflect on what actions, speech or thoughts lead you either *towards* or *away* from *sthitau*, that state of stable tranquility. Put two columns on a piece of paper and write down your personal reflections from your own life:

| Actions, speech or thoughts which lead me towards steady, stable, undisturbed calmness or tranquility; I need to do <i>more</i> of these: | Actions, speech or thoughts which lead me away from steady, stable, undisturbed calmness or tranquility; I need to do <i>less</i> of these: |
|--|--|
| 1) _____ 2) _____ 3) _____ 4) _____ 5) _____ 6) _____ 7) _____ | 1) _____ 2) _____ 3) _____ 4) _____ 5) _____ 6) _____ 7) _____ |

In the *away from* column, you'll probably be listing some of your negative habits that are not useful to you on your journey. In the *towards* column, you may be listing some of the practices related to yoga, as well as other positive actions that you already know are useful to you on your journey. Such simple exercises can be quite insightful and helpful in building a solid foundation for meditation.

By increasingly taking charge of your choices in life and the ways in which you use your personal energy, and increasingly focusing on doing what is in the *left* column, you gradually watch that which is in the *right* column weaken and fade away.

1.14 When that practice is done for a long time, without a break, and with sincere devotion, then the practice becomes a firmly rooted, stable and solid foundation. (sah tu dirgha kala nairantaira satkara asevitah dridha bhumiḥ)

- sah = that (practice)
- tu = and, but, however

- dirgha = long time (dirgha = long; kala = time)
- nairantaira = without interruption, continually,
- satkara = with devotion, sincerity, respect, reverence, positive attitude, right action
- asevitah = pursued, practiced, cultivated, attended to, done with assiduous attention
- dridha-bhumih = stable, solid foundation, firmly rooted, of firm ground (dridha = firm; bhumih = ground)

Keep practicing: One of the most important principles of living yoga meditation is that of continuing to practice without a break. Often a meditator gets started, practices for a few weeks or months, and then stops for a while due to some life situation. Then, he or she starts over again. While it is good to start again, it is better to choose a level of practice that you know you can maintain without a break. If, for example, you try to practice 2-3 hours per day when you are well aware you do not consistently have that much time in your current lifestyle, it is a set up for breaking practice. It's far better to choose an amount of time that you can consistently practice.

Choose your level of practice: Because of the importance of consistency of practice, one of the later sutras ([1.21-1.22](#)) suggests that you choose one of nine levels of practice to which you commit yourself.

Q&A on Practices leading to Tranquility

Q: I have a pretty busy life. How long do I have to do these practices?

A: A long time! Keep going and never give up, whether "a long time" means days, weeks, months, or years. Surrender, yes, but give up? Never!

Q: I'm not sure I have my heart in this. Can I just plod along with a bad attitude and still make progress?

A: Do the practices leading to tranquility with all the conviction, devotion and sincerity you can muster. Cultivate the positive and let go of the negative. Gentle, loving persistence is the way to peace.

Q: How often can I take a break from this? What if I'm too tired, or too busy some days? Can I take a vacation from these practices and just pick up where I left off?

A: No breaks! We eat food every day. We sleep every day. We use the toilet every day. We gossip with other people or have negative thoughts and emotions every day. If we can do all these things every day, then we can do the practices leading to tranquility each and every day, without exception.

Q: What is the payoff from all of this work? This sounds so much like doing this

for such a long time without even a vacation? What's in it for me?

A: You will get a practice that has become a firmly rooted, stable foundation for the subtler experiences that you are longing for in your heart. One day, you will come to see that your practices are a beautifully elegant, simple and rewarding part of your life. You will truly find that this is the most valued asset you have. It will leave a smile on your face.

Develop attitude: The attitude *satkara* contains the principles of devotion, sincerity, respect, reverence, positiveness, and right choice. As you choose your proper level of practice, and decide to do that daily, the attitude will come more easily. It is like having a little flame of desire in the heart for the fruits of meditation, and then slowly starting to experience those benefits. That little flame starts to grow slowly and consistently into a burning desire to guide your life in the direction of spiritual realization.

It all rests on attention: Throughout the science of Yoga meditation *attention* is a critical principle to practice. This sharp, clear, assiduous attention (*asevitah*) is essential if you are to develop the attitude of conviction for practices over a long time, and without a break as described in this sutra. "Attention, attention, attention!" is the formula to follow, though done in loving kindness towards yourself.

1.15 When the mind loses desire even for objects seen or described in a tradition or in scriptures, it acquires a state of utter (*vashikara*) desirelessness that is called non-attachment (*vairagya*).

(*drista anushravika vishaya vitrishnasya vashikara sanjna vairagyam*)

- *drista* = seen, perceived
- *anushravika* = revealed, scriptural, heard in tradition
- *vishaya* = objects, subjects, matters of experience
- *vitrishnasya* = of one who is free from desire or craving
- *vashikara* = supreme, mastery, total control
- *sanjna* = awareness, consciousness, knowing
- *vairagyam* = non-attachment, desirelessness, dispassion, neutrality or absence of coloring, without attraction or aversion

Letting go and not taking on: The simplest way of describing non-attachment is as the process of letting go. We gradually learn to let go of our attachments and aversions, systematically moving subtler and subtler through the layers of attachments in the mind. However, non-attachment goes beyond this; it is not just a practice of *letting go*, but is a practice of *not taking on* in the first place.

Love is what is left when you
let go of all the things you love.

Non-attachment is not suppression: Non-attachment is not a mere personality trait that one practices in dealing with the other people of the world. It is very easy to fool oneself into thinking that non-attachment is being practiced when what is really happening is pretending to be non-attached. It is like saying that you have lost your inner craving to some object while inside you are longing for it intensely. Non-attachment is not a process of suppression or repression of wants, wishes, desires, thoughts, or emotions. It comes by the ongoing practice of awareness of the existence of attachments (kleshas, [1.5](#), [2.3](#)) and gradually letting these weaken ([2.4](#)).

Non-attachment is cessation: If attachment does occur (whether attraction or aversion), wherein attention wraps itself around a deep mental impression, the ensuing non-attachment comes from the cessation of mental clinging, not from an act of prying attention away forcefully. It is easy to hear of the philosophy of non-attachment and then mistakenly walk around lying to ourselves, internally saying something like, "I'm not attached; I'm not attached." This is not non-attachment. It is better to see realistically where our minds are attached, and then learn to systematically release that coloring through the external and internal practices of yoga meditation.

Non-attachment is not detachment: It is not mere semantics to say that non-attachment is different from detachment. Detachment implies that there is first attachment, and that you then apply some method or technique to disconnect that attachment. It implies an act of *doing* something to cause the separation to occur. Non-attachment, on the other hand, means that the connection simply does not occur in the first place. Non-attachment is not a case of *doing* something, but is instead a *non-doing* sort of thing. It means that your attention does not grab onto that impression in the mind in the first place.

Like two ex-smokers: While the principle applies to all the gross and subtle levels, a gross level example will help. Think of two people who stopped smoking many years ago. One is still attached to cigarettes, and when he sees a cigarette, the craving begins. When he resists acting on that desire, and then let's go of the desire, this is the meaning of *detachment*. The other person also used to smoke, but when he sees a cigarette there is literally no reaction; the desire has completely disappeared at all levels of his conscious and unconscious mind. This is the meaning of *non-attachment*. The attachment is not *released*, but is simply not there any more; it is *non* or the absence of attachment.

Non-attachment deepens through all levels: Patanjali explains that non-attachment applies to progressively deeper levels of our being. While we might begin with our more surface level attachments, such as the objects and people of daily life, the practice deepens to include all of the objects or experiences we might have only heard about, including the many powers or experiences of the psychic or subtle realm. We gradually see that even these are nothing but distractions on the journey to Self-realization, and we learn to set them aside as well.

Exercise with Vairagya: Vairagya or non-attachment does not often happen in black and white, either being *there* or *not* there. Usually, non-attachment comes in stages (See Sutra [2.4](#) on stages).

To better understand non-attachment, it is useful to explore personal examples of both attachments and aversions (aversions are actually just another form of attachment). By writing on a piece of paper your personal examples (like the columns below), you can see not only currently active attractions and aversions, but older attractions and aversions, for which you've already witnessed and experienced the process of letting go.

Active attractions and aversions

Ideas, beliefs, opinions, people, organizations or institutions towards which I feel an **attraction** that is not useful; I need to gradually let go of these attractions:

- 1) _____ #: _____
- 2) _____ #: _____
- 3) _____ #: _____
- 4) _____ #: _____
- 5) _____ #: _____
- 6) _____ #: _____
- 7) _____ #: _____

Ideas, beliefs, opinions, people, organizations or institutions towards which I feel an **aversion** that is not useful; I need to gradually let go of these aversions:

- 1) _____ #: _____
- 2) _____ #: _____
- 3) _____ #: _____
- 4) _____ #: _____
- 5) _____ #: _____
- 6) _____ #: _____
- 7) _____ #: _____

In the blank marked #:____, enter the degree to which there is attraction or aversion, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the greatest.

Older attractions and aversions

Some old *attractions* that I've mostly let go of:

- 1) _____ #: _____
- 2) _____ #: _____
- 3) _____ #: _____
- 4) _____ #: _____
- 5) _____ #: _____
- 6) _____ #: _____
- 7) _____ #: _____

Some old *aversions* that I've mostly let go of:

- 1) _____ #: _____
- 2) _____ #: _____
- 3) _____ #: _____
- 4) _____ #: _____
- 5) _____ #: _____
- 6) _____ #: _____
- 7) _____ #: _____

Enter the current # (0-10) of that attraction or aversion that you've mostly let go of. Seeing those low numbers can help reinforce, or give insight into the process of letting go, of non-attachment. If you have let go of attractions and aversions in the past, you can also do it in the present and the future, and even more efficiently and thoroughly through the process of yoga meditation.

What to do with attachments: As you are reading this current sutra on non-attachment, it is useful to keep the perspective that the whole process of Yoga has to do with the mastery and integration of the fluctuations of the mind field, as introduced in Sutra [1.2](#). This allows the seer to rest in its true nature, the state of

Self-realization, as outlined in Sutra [1.3](#). By also being mindful of the broad categories or clusters of sutras (as clustered on this site), it is relatively easy to see that we gradually need to stabilize the mind, weaken those attachments, and then start the ongoing process of letting them go entirely. In the meantime, we seek the direct experience of the Absolute, so that we might do an even more efficient job of letting go of the attachments. To better understand that process, take a look at the [Chapter Outlines](#), which include the following:

- Efforts and commitment ([1.19-1.22](#))
- Obstacles and solutions ([1.30-1.32](#))
- Stabilizing and clearing the mind ([1.33-1.39](#))
- Minimizing gross coloring ([2.1-2.9](#))
- Dealing with subtle thoughts ([2.10-2.11](#))
- Breaking the alliance of karma ([2.12-2.25](#))
- The 8 rungs and discrimination ([2.26-2.29](#))

[top](#)

1.16 Indifference to the subtlest elements, constituent principles, or qualities themselves (gunas), achieved through a knowledge of the nature of pure consciousness (purusha), is called supreme non-attachment (paravairagya). (tat param purusha khyateh guna vaitrshnyam)

- tat = that
- param = is higher, superior, supreme, transcendent
- purusha = pure consciousness, Self
- khyateh = through knowledge, vision, discernment
- guna = elements, prime qualities, constituents, attributes; (three gunas of sattvas, rajas, tamas)
- vaitrshnyam = state of freedom from desire or craving (for the gunas)

Non-attachment to the building blocks: Sutra [1.15](#) describes non-attachment; it is a process that evolves progressively as practice deepens. Eventually it leads to a supreme non-attachment, which is described here. Paravairagya means there is non-attachment even in relation to the most fundamental building blocks of all manifestation. This level of non-attachment comes through the direct experience of pure consciousness or [purusha](#) ([3.56](#)).

Three levels of non-attachment: We can think of this as a systematic process of developing non-attachment (vairagya) at three levels:

1. **Gross world:** There are many objects of our daily lives for which our mental impressions are colored with various degrees of attraction or aversion. This is the first level of developing freedom from those bondages and experiencing greater inner peace.
2. **Everything between:** There are many types of objects between the levels of the gross world and the subtlest building blocks. After the mind is stabilized ([1.33-1.39](#)), these subtler levels are explored and set aside with non-attachment and discrimination. This includes, for example, meditation and

non-attachment to pranic energy ([3.40](#)), the five elements ([3.45](#)), the senses ([3.49](#)), and the subtler aspects of mind ([3.50](#)).

3. **Subtlest building blocks:** These are the three primal elements (gunas) that are addressed in this current sutra. The idea is that the yogi becomes non-attached even to the subtlest building blocks (paravairagya).

Analogous to freedom from atomic particles: This concept of levels may seem foreign, but we are all accustomed to this in our world. If we compare this to only the physical universe, it would be somewhat like becoming non-attached to protons, electrons, and neutrons, which are the particles that form atoms. Notice how the physical universe is also constructed in levels or layers:

- Particles (protons, electrons, neutrons)
- Atoms
- Molecules
- Compounds
- Objects

Imagine that you were free from attachment and aversion to the particles (protons, electrons, and neutrons). Then (in our metaphor) you would be free from attachment and aversion to all of its evolutes as well, including, molecules, compounds, and all of the physical objects of the world.

Supreme non-attachment: Similarly, this is the suggestion of supreme non-attachment (paravairagya) to the gunas, the three primal elements that the yogis speak of as the prime constituents of the manifest and unmanifest matter ([prakriti](#)). Non-attachment to the gunas includes non-attachment in relation to not only the gross world, but also the entire subtle, psychic, astral plane, as well as the causal out of which they arise.

Paravairagya comes *after* Self-realization: On a practical level, this is not to say that we must attain the paravairagya level to attain direct experience of the center of consciousness ([purusha](#)). Rather, it is describing where non-attachment ultimately leads once you have the tool of samadhi and direct experience.