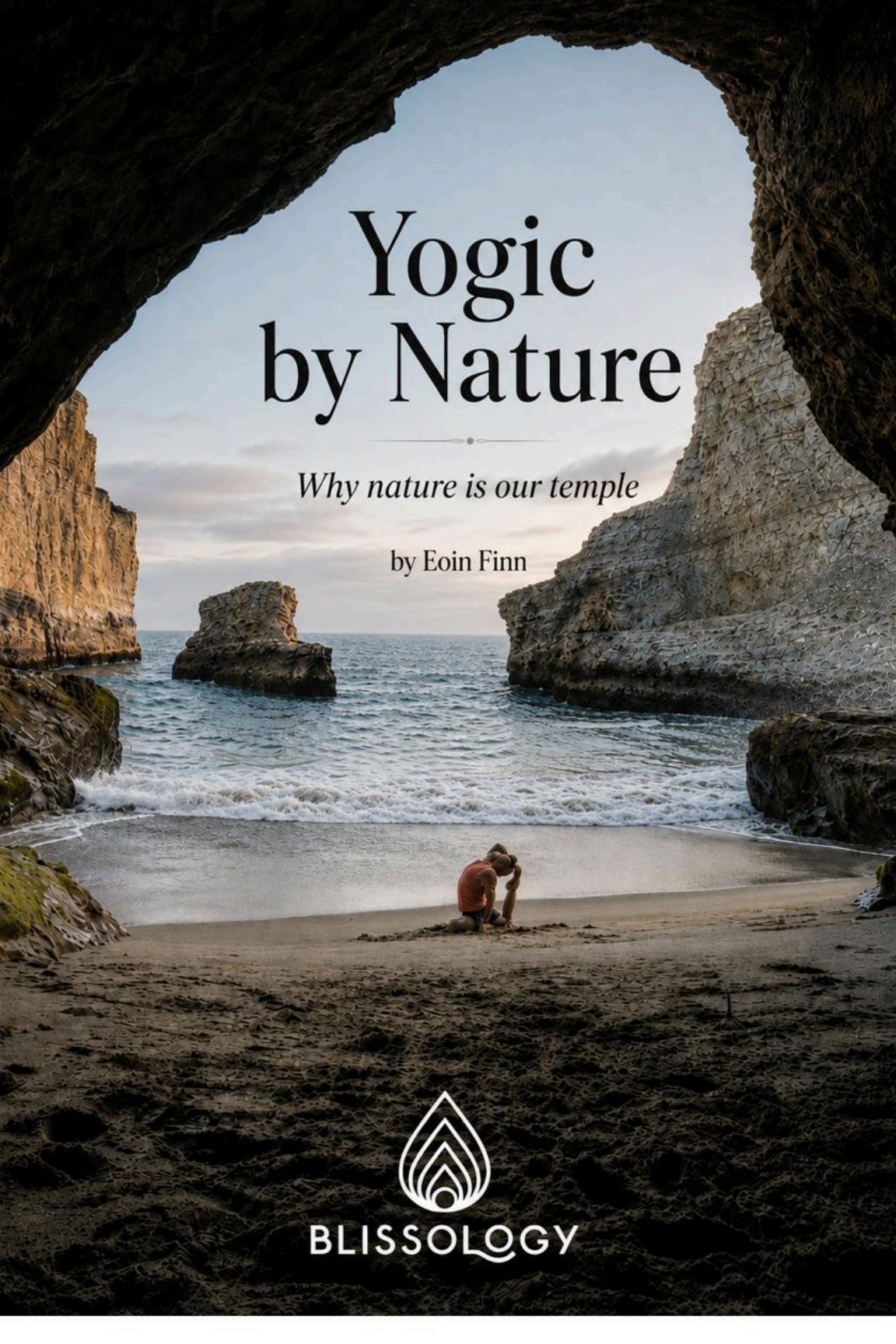
Yogic
by Nature
Why nature is our temple
by Eoin Finn
BLISSOLOGY

Yogic by Nature

Why nature is our temple.

by Eoin Finn

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Yogic by Nature

IMMERSION

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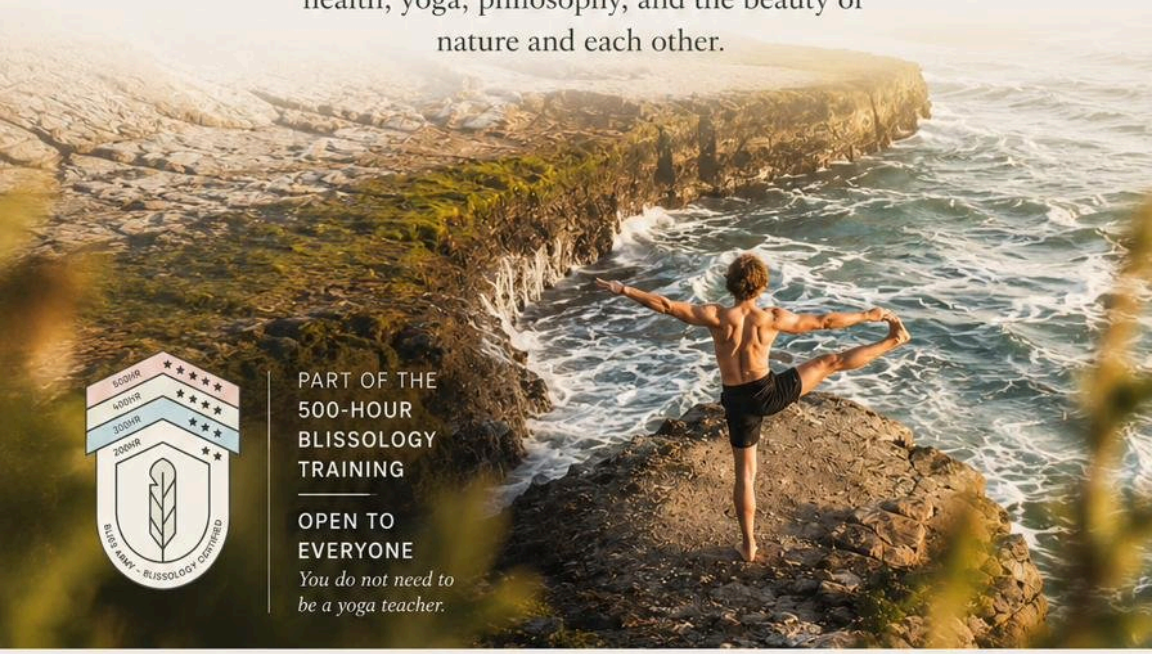

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The forest is my temple

Blissology exists to solve one primary problem. Disconnection.

We have made it normal to live disconnected from our bodies, from our neighbors, from our food, from our highest purpose, and most of all from the living world we are a part of.

In 2018 the United Kingdom appointed a Minister for Loneliness. An actual cabinet post, created after a government commission found that around one in seven people felt alone always or often. The Prime Minister called it “one of the greatest public health challenges of our time.” Three years later Japan appointed one too, after its suicide rate rose for the first time in over a decade.

Sit with that. Two of the wealthiest countries on earth decided the situation was serious enough to need a government department.

Most of us feel it long before anyone names it. A day that goes well enough and still leaves us hollow. A week where nothing is wrong and nothing is quite alive either.

So how did we end up here?

Almost nobody chose it. It arrived as a default, running quietly underneath everything, and most of us never read the terms. The purpose of a life is to work, earn, buy, and be entertained until we are tired enough to sleep.

Look at how it plays out. We live where the work is, which is where the rent is highest, which means we work more to afford being there. The days fill. The evenings are for recovering from the days. Weekends go on errands and catching up. Somewhere in there we are supposed to notice the miracle of the living world, and there is no hour left in which to do it.

It is not that we decided nature did not matter. We simply built a life with no room in it for anything that cannot be scheduled.

And we have learned to mistake the crash for the cure. We spend our days wired and tight, and when we finally stop, we reach for a screen, a drink, a scroll, and call that rest.

Numbness is not peace. Nor is exhaustion.

There is a place inside us where that stops. I have felt it since I was a boy, in quiet solitude in nature. Peace. Gratitude. Joy. A sense of belonging to everything around me.

It is tempting to call that place the soul. I am open to the possibility of an eternal self that lives beyond the death of our bodies, but I cannot say it with any certainty.

I do not know what a soul is. I just know the feeling of one.

What I do know is that through meditation, yoga, and time in nature we can reach it. I call it our wise guide inside.

A place of deep peace and interconnection that puts us in touch with our wisest self.

When we can find it, life has a center. Purpose and meaning arrive on their own, without being chased. When we cannot, we are like satellites that have slipped the pull of the earth. Still moving. Still busy. Nothing to orbit.

I believe nature reveals that wise guide inside. A place of deep wisdom that knows what is sustainable.

And wisdom is not knowledge. Knowledge is how we do things. Wisdom is knowledge put through the filter of sustainability.

For example, we had the knowledge to build nuclear bombs and test them in the Pacific. Should we have detonated them, and left elements with half lives in the thousands of years in the ocean, affecting countless species for generations after us? That is knowledge. It is not wisdom.

Sustainability means not overtaxing a system, so it can keep renewing itself. That applies to a reef, a forest, a friendship, and a nervous system.

What I have always found is that when we are in contact with the wise guide inside, taking care of ourselves, of the people we love, and of the living world stops being a discipline. It comes easily. It is simply what we want to do.

We also find an inner peace that is worth more every year, as the world gets faster and busier and more digital. Our stress levels are rising about as fast as the sea.

So what does any of this have to do with nature?

Everything, as far as I can tell. Nature is where most of us reach that place most easily, and it is the first thing we give up when life speeds up. I went into yoga philosophy looking for a way back to it, and I have spent decades there. This book is what I found, told as plainly as I can tell it, and what I think it asks of us now.

And if you would rather have something to do than something to think about, skip to the last few pages first. There are five simple practices there. None takes more than ten minutes, and one of them happens on your mat, in a room you already go to. The philosophy makes more sense once the body has met it.

It started long before any of the books.

I grew up in a small town two hours north of Toronto called Haliburton, Ontario. Cottage country. By the time I hit eighth grade, I was resisting all of it. I wanted to be at Led Zeppelin concerts, in a city, anywhere with more going on than trees. Looking back, growing up close to nature was the greatest gift I was ever given.

But some of my earliest memories are of nature doing something to me that I had no words for. I was eight years old, lying by a campfire beside a lake in the highlands of Ontario, looking up at the stars. I was a rambunctious kid with an endless appetite for climbing trees and games of tag and capture the flag, and yet the vastness of that night sky stopped me cold. Even then, I realized that the beauty I was seeing outside also lived inside me. I dropped into a deep stillness, a quiet thought running underneath it, wow, I am so lucky to be here. Something in me unplugged from the small world of Eoin and dialed into something vast. My ego felt small. That, it turns out, is precisely what the yogis wanted us to feel.

The highlands of Ontario.

When we fill our heads with an endless craving for what we desire, or with thoughts of what we fear, we lose connection to that peaceful consciousness inside. Some traditions understood it as our deepest self, our soul. Buddhism would describe it very differently. What every one of them agrees on is that when we get stuck on our ego identification, we are further from our own peace.

Connecting to this place is the essence of yoga. The word comes from the Sanskrit for to yoke. In the same way an ox is yoked to a cart, we can yoke the small, chattering mind to the larger one, a place of infinite peace.

If you are unfamiliar with yoga philosophy, the idea is not that we are sinners who need to be saved. The problem is not sin. It is forgetting. We develop a kind of amnesia toward the peaceful place inside us. Yoga is the practice of remembering it. And for me, nothing brings me back to it like quiet time in nature.

I was studying philosophy by then, and I want to be clear about why. My dad wanted me to become a lawyer, learn logic, and win arguments in court. That was the whole reason I was in those classes. He was not thrilled about where it went, but I think secretly he understood, because he was the one who gave me the love of nature in the first place. He was forever walking through the forest, feeding the animals. I called him Doctor Dolittle.

Then, in my second year, in 1988, I came across the PBS series *The Power of Myth*, Bill Moyers in conversation with Joseph Campbell. If you do not know Campbell, he is the man most famous for the line, “Follow your bliss.” The name Blissology is a direct nod to him. I would not be doing any of this without that phrase. I would most likely be a lawyer. He was a professor at Sarah Lawrence College, and he spent his life taking the great art, poetry, literature, religion, myth, and spirituality of the world and looking for recurring themes. The same threads, he showed, appear in very different places.

One thing I remember from Campbell has never left me. He described Indigenous traditions in which sacredness was not confined to a temple, mosque, or church, but encountered in the land itself. I loved that, because it named something I had felt in the forest since I was a boy. He also opened a door for me into the systematic contemplative traditions of India. I was already in the philosophy department for my father’s reasons. From that week on I started expanding east, and I have never turned back.

There is one more thing Campbell said that I did not understand at nineteen and cannot stop thinking about now.

He described what he called a secondary hero. Not the one who goes out and brings something back, but the one who comes along afterward to revitalize a tradition, reinterpreting it so that it is valued as a living experience today rather than a set of worn-out phrases. And he said this has to be done with all traditions.

Then he offered a guess about what the next one would be about, and he was careful to say it was only a guess, because you can no more predict a myth than predict what you will dream tonight. The only myth worth thinking about in the immediate future, he said, is one talking about the planet. Not the city, not these people. The planet, and everybody on it.

He said that decades ago, and it set me on a quest. I went into yoga philosophy properly and I have stayed ever since.

But somewhere along the way I noticed something missing. These traditions gave me extraordinary tools for quieting a mind. What they rarely gave me was the thing I had felt by that lake at eight years old, and the thing I kept finding in Indigenous traditions instead. Kinship. Animals spoken of as relatives. The earth as a mother rather than a setting. A whole web of life that we are one strand of, rather than the point of.

That was what I was longing for, and I believe our generation is longing for it too.

So with all respect to the lineage, I want to take up the work Campbell was describing. Not a correction of the old teachings. A tweak to the formula, so that reverence for the living world becomes the source of our physical, emotional and spiritual health rather than a nice feeling we get on holiday.

Years later, I was interviewed at a festival alongside a row of other teachers, and the editor asked each of us where we drew our spiritual inspiration. When he showed me the clips, it cut from one teacher to the next, and each gave a version of the same answer. India. Mother India. And each had good reasons. Then it cut to me, and I said, “The forest.” Those teachers were right to love the traditions they named, and I have spent my life studying them too. But my spiritual home was never a country. Long before I came to love the wisdom of the East, something moved me under the trees, in the song of the birds, in the silence beneath the stars. The more present I got, the more presence I felt. Calm. Connection. Peace.

How we got here is worth asking, because it did not happen by accident.

Yuval Noah Harari makes a larger point in *Sapiens* that matters here. For most of the history of *Homo sapiens*, humans lived as foragers. Agriculture began only around twelve thousand years ago, and settled farming then reshaped daily life. Foragers and farmers alike survived by knowing landscapes, seasons, weather, plants, animals, and one another with an intimacy most of us no longer need in order to get through an ordinary day.

We have reversed something important. Every one of us now carries the exact time on a phone, a watch, or a screen in the dashboard, while many of us have only a faint working relationship with the living world around us. We know the minute. We do not know the moon.

The same reversal happened between us. The village dissolved into rugged individualism. We used to gather in a room and make music together. Now we stream a song alone. We used to borrow from kin. Now we borrow from a bank. Every one of those trades bought efficiency, and every one of them cost contact.

A line often attributed to Mother Teresa says, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” I would add one line. We have also forgotten that we belong to nature. She did not live with the ecological crisis in the form we face now. Neither did the ancient yogis. That is not a failing of theirs. It simply means our application has to meet our moment. So it falls to us to bring spirituality down to earth, literally.

So what is the cure? At Blissology we say it in four words. “Connection is our currency.”

I mean currency precisely. Money behaves one way. Pour too much of it into the world too fast and it becomes worth less. That is what inflation is. Connection behaves the opposite way. The more of it we spend, the more of it there is. Attention given comes back multiplied. Love given comes back multiplied. Hours spent in real contact with the living world come back multiplied. It is the one treasure inflation cannot touch.

And wonder is how we earn it. It is hard to feel awe and feel separate at the same time.

And we can spend it in three directions. On each other. On the work that is actually ours to do. On the living world. This book is mostly about the third, because it is the one the traditions left least finished, and because the other two get easier once it is in place.

That is the aim of Blissology, and the aim of this book. But not by falling into the trap so much of the modern wellness world falls into, borrowing from ancient traditions and passing the ideas off as its own. We will study these paths with an open ledger and cite our sources as we go, building openly on what we inherited.

Because happiness is closer than we think. It is seeing the miracle of nature unfolding all the time. It is living in awe. It is getting unstuck from a head full of problems, the kind that tighten the body and shrink the world to the size of our worries. Nature loosens that grip. It lets us receive the transmission of the beautiful.

Wonder is what does the work. It is the most underrated antidepressant I know, and I mean that as a description of my own life rather than as medical advice. Wonder begets gratitude. Gratitude begets joy. The order matters. We do not think our way into joy. We notice our way into it.

This book is that lifetime of study, handed to you. Five great wisdom traditions, told without the fog that usually surrounds them, the Yoga Sutras, the Bhagavad Gita, Buddhism, Tantra, and Taoism, with one brief modern interlude on power without force. Each is a technology for being a freer, kinder, more peaceful human. I want to give each its full voice, keeping the gold and letting some of the mud fall away, before I say what I think it all means for us now.

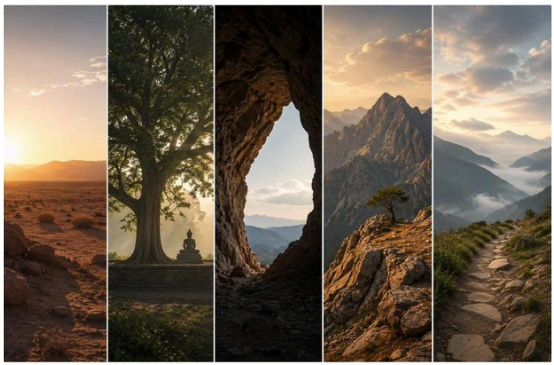
Before we go there, a word about how this book proceeds.

I am not going to jump straight to nature. That is where we are heading, and I hope by the end it feels like your spiritual home too. But I want to earn it. So first we will look, systematically, at how the yogis understood inner peace, meditation, and the soul. Each tradition gets its full voice before I say what I think it means for us now.

Here is something worth sitting with first. Look at where the founding experiences actually happened.

Jesus did not go to the temple. He went into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. The Buddha did not wake up in a hall. He woke up outdoors, under a tree, at the place we now call Bodh Gaya. Muhammad received the first revelation in a cave on a mountain outside Mecca. Moses met the burning bush on a mountainside, and later came down a mountain carrying the law. Legend has Lao Tzu leaving society altogether, heading west into the mountains, and setting down the Tao Te Ching at a pass on his way out.

Not one of them was indoors.



The wilderness. The tree. The cave. The mountain.

Then we built the buildings. The temple, the church, the mosque, the hall, the studio. We built them to remember what happened. Over enough centuries, the building quietly replaced the place.

Which makes what I found next stranger than I expected.

The old texts are full of nature. The Atharva Veda gives sixty-three verses to the Earth as a mother, and one of them asks that whatever we dig from her grow back quickly, and that we not injure her by our labor. The oldest Vedic gods are fire and wind and dawn. Krishna says he is “the taste in water” and the light of the sun and the moon.

But look at what nature is doing in most of those passages. It is being praised, petitioned, or used to explain something else. The mind dissolves like salt in water. The river merges into the sea. Those are beautiful, and their subject is consciousness. Not the river.

What I could not find, especially in Classical Yoga, is the other thing. Kinship. The earth as a relative rather than a setting. Beauty itself as a doorway. An obligation running both ways.

I found that somewhere else. The Haudenosaunee open a gathering with the Thanksgiving Address, the words that come before all else, thanking each part of the living world in turn. The people. The earth. The waters. The fish, the plants, the medicine herbs, the animals, the trees, the birds, the four winds, the thunderers, the sun, the moon, the stars. It takes as long as it takes.

I want to be careful here, because the easy version of this claim is false. The Indian traditions do have reciprocity. The Vedic householder put food out each morning for animals and birds, an obligation called *bhutayajna*, and the Gita says plainly that whoever takes from the cycle and gives nothing back is a thief.

So it is not an absence. It is something stranger. In the texts I have spent my life with, especially Classical Yoga, that material is inherited and then set down. Patanjali's eight limbs have a rung for how you sit and a rung for how you breathe. There is no rung for what you owe a river.

Yoga gives us *ahimsa*, usually translated as non-harming. I translate it as minimal harm, because being alive makes zero harm impossible. The practice is to do what we can to minimize it. Jainism carries it further than anyone. But ahimsa is restraint. It tells us what not to do. It never quite becomes reciprocity. There is no limb of the eightfold path for gratitude to a river.

So they sacralized nature, described the divine within it, and understood profound forms of interdependence long before we had the word ecology. What they rarely did was make relationship with the living world the practice itself. That is the turn this book is making.

Why? I have two guesses, and they are only guesses.

Perhaps their interest was so completely about the nature of consciousness and the soul that the living world was never the question they were asking.

Or perhaps it is because they were already in it.

David Foster Wallace opened a commencement address with a small story. Two young fish are swimming along when an older fish passes the other way and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” The two young fish swim on a while, and eventually one turns to the other and asks, “What the hell is water?”

The yogis were swimming in it. Maybe you do not think to make the water the teaching when you have never known life outside it.

Whatever the pressures of their lives, most of them lived in far more direct contact with weather, darkness, animals, seasons, and the sources of their food than many of us do now. There was no online shopping, no doomscrolling, no thousand channels. They saw the sky at night and the sun come up in the morning. Unlike us, they were not more interested in the stars of Hollywood than in the grandeur of the infinite stars overhead.

Nor were they living in an era of climate change, where our disconnection from nature may be damaging the world our grandchildren inherit from us.

They did not face our particular form of ecological estrangement. We do.

So my aim is to unpack these teachings and stand on the shoulders of giants. Then I want to turn some of their deepest insights toward the wound of our own time, our estrangement from the living world.

I dream of a world where we discover that when we seek quiet solitude in nature, our deepest heart becomes clear.

This book lets old wisdom speak to a recent wound.

Because there is a turn at the end, and it is the reason for the whole journey. The first tenet of Blissology is, “The more we blur the line between where we end and nature begins, the happier we will be.”

These traditions hold a deep reverence for the living world, some of them openly, some quietly, none in quite the form our own moment is starving for. This book honors the lineage, and then turns its tools toward a world the sages did not live to see. Come walk with me. From the mind, to the world, to the forest.

Nature is our yoga.
I want to show you how.

Hawaii. Photograph by Ali Kaukas.

The path of this book

A bridge · I found it again in a hammock
Foundation · The Drop and the Ocean

01	The Yoga Sutras	*transcendence*
02	The Bhagavad Gita	*immanence*
03	Buddhism	*interdependence*
04	Tantra	*matter is sacred*
05	Taoism	*nature as teacher*
	Power Without Force	*an interlude*
06	The Bridge	*energies and layers*
07	The Reverence Our Time Needs	*the turn*
08	EcoKarma	*revere, respect, protect*

A BRIDGE, FROM THE STRIVER TO THE SIMPLE

I found it again in a hammock

For years I did it the hard way. I signed up for my first meditation classes in 1988, studied Eastern philosophy at university, and grew diligent about the texts, hours of *asana* and meditation every day. I wanted to be the perfect yogi. Like most of us, I believed quieting the mind was a battle, and for a long time it was.

Then, in January 2006, I found what I was chasing. Not in India, and not on a cushion. In a hammock. A sun-faded, dusty Costa Rican hammock, strung between two towering banyan trees at a retreat where we surfed and did yoga each morning. Every afternoon I lay in it. And one day, something deeper than relaxation happened. I did not zone out. I zoned in.

My back molded into the curve of the netting, and only then did I notice how much of my life I had spent on high alert, wound up like a toy. My back let go. My belly softened. I exhaled more fully than I had in years. The tension drained out of my lower back like oil from a car.

And as the body came down, the world came up. The light on the leaves was making patterns I lost several minutes to. The wind kept playing with the branches. The birds woke a slow pulsation somewhere in the middle of me, and I understood that most days my mind was moving too fast to hear them at all. In that hammock they seemed to be singing straight into my chest.

My sense of me widened. I stopped feeling like I ended at my own skin. All of it came in, and I was so full of gratitude to be part of it that I could have wept. My body could feel the difference between a human doing and a human being.

What I was ready for, finally, was something I have called the transmission of the beautiful ever since. It had been broadcasting the whole time. I had been moving too fast to receive it.

Something I had spent years reading about was happening in my own body, and it was arriving not by trying, but by letting go. There were no gurus and no lightning bolts. There was, however, a kind of levitation, blissful, between two trees, on an old Costa Rican hammock.

Davenport, California. The hammock keeps moving. The lesson does not.

Here is what stopped me. After all those years of study, the thing I had been chasing turned out to be simpler than what I already knew as a boy by the campfire. I had climbed the whole mountain of philosophy only to find that the summit was the trailhead. The more we blur the line between where we end and nature begins, the happier we will be. I had found it the long way. Now let me show you the short way, the whole of it, in a single picture.

THE HAMMOCK ENLIGHTENMENT MANTRA

"We want to make the world a better place,
By slowing down our frenetic pace,
By doing so we make a space,
To open up to Love and Grace."

The Foundation

The Drop and the Ocean

A WATER-CYCLE MAP OF YOGA PHILOSOPHY

Here is one map I use to introduce a cluster of ideas from Indian philosophy, the one I draw on a whiteboard before I teach anything else. It is not the whole of yoga philosophy, and no single school tells the story exactly this way. It is a teaching map, built from ideas that come from different traditions, and it uses something you have known since grade school. The water cycle.

Here is what it is for. These eleven concepts come from the Indian traditions, and most of them keep reappearing, in different clothes, through the chapters ahead. Some traditions will reject them outright. Buddhism denies the permanent self at the center of this map, and Taoism does not use its vocabulary at all. Hold them and we are oriented. Every text we open afterward has somewhere to land. Without them, page one of almost anything is a wall of vocabulary with no shape to hang it on. So this is not a summary of yoga philosophy. It is the doorway into it.

The journey of the drop back to the ocean.

Here are the eleven, one at a time. I will not take them in numerical order. We start with the two things themselves, the ocean and the drop, and only then look at how they relate.

2. Brahman, The Ocean

Start with the ocean. *Brahman* is ultimate reality. The one vast field of being from which everything arises and to which everything returns. The word comes from a root meaning to grow, or to expand.

Notice what the Upanishads did here. Most religions ask who created the world. These thinkers pushed the question further. What created the creator? Keep pushing and eventually you arrive at something that cannot itself have been created. Something beyond form, personality and description.

Not an old man sitting above the clouds making decisions about your life. Something much harder to put into words. The source beneath all the forms.

The Upanishads give us two beautiful phrases for it. *Tat tvam asi.* Thou art that. And *neti neti.* Not this, not that. Whatever you think ultimate reality is, it is bigger than the box you just put around it. Joseph Campbell called it pure transcendent energy, which is about as close as words get.

This is particularly the language of the Upanishadic and Vedantic traditions.[1] Not every school describes reality this way, but for our water cycle map, Brahman is the ocean.

Everything begins here.

3. Atman, Soul

The sun warms the surface of the ocean. A single drop evaporates and rises into a cloud. In our map, that drop is you. It is *atman*, the deepest Self, soul or consciousness.

The word itself is a clue, and it is my favorite piece of etymology in all of this. Atman is related to the German *atmen*, to breathe. The deepest self and the breath are linguistic cousins. The poet Kabir called God the breath inside the breath.

In the nondual Vedantic tradition, atman and Brahman are ultimately not separate. Your individual consciousness arises from the same ultimate reality, just as a drop arises from the ocean.

Here is the important part. The drop came from the ocean, and although it looks separate, it is still made of exactly the same thing. Water.

The drop is ocean. It just does not know it yet.

Which brings us back to the first word on the map. It is numbered one because it is the point of the whole thing, not because it comes first in the telling.

1. Yoga, Union

This is where the word yoga becomes far more interesting than stretching.

Yoga comes from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, to yoke, to join, to unite. On this map, yoga happens the moment the drop recognizes something. Wait. I am not just this little separate drop. I am part of the ocean.

That is the shift.

We spend most of our lives identifying with the little drop. My body, my personality, my achievements, my failures, my history, my problems. Yoga asks us to experience something underneath all of that. A deeper consciousness that is not being pushed and pulled around by every passing thought.

And the primary tool for finding it is remarkably simple. Meditation. When the mind becomes still, something normally buried under all that activity becomes easier to feel. The ocean was there the whole time. We were just too busy being the drop to notice.

The drop remembers the ocean.

4. Ahamkara, Ego

So why does the drop suffer?

As the drop takes form, it begins to experience itself as separate. *Ahamkara* literally means the I-maker. It is the part of us that says, “I am this. This is me. This is mine.”

One thing to clear up straight away. We usually translate ahamkara as ego, but do not hear that as arrogance. I am not saying you are egotistical.

Think of it as a persona. A role. If you were an actor in a film, your character would need a name, a history, preferences, fears and desires. There is nothing wrong with having a character. You need one to move through the world.

The problem begins when the actor forgets they are playing a character.

There is nothing wrong with being an individual. Being a drop is a marvel. The trouble begins when the drop mistakes its limited identity for the whole story.

And what is a persona made of? Long before Freud or Jung arrived, the next two concepts answered that. At its most basic, an ego is a ledger of things we like and things we do not.

The problem is not that we are drops. The problem is believing we are only drops. Yoga does not ask us to erase ourselves. It asks us to widen.

5. Raga, Desire

Once the drop believes it is separate, it starts looking outside itself for what it thinks will make it whole. It is pulled toward what feels pleasurable.

Raga. Desire.

More approval. More money. More pleasure. More status. More love. More of whatever we believe will finally make us feel complete.

Listen to the commentary in your own head for a day and you will hear the entries going into the ledger. “I love this.” “This rules.” “I hope this happens.”

There is nothing wrong with enjoying any of it. The problem begins when we make the deal. I will be happy when I get them.

Now the drop is chasing.

The drop starts chasing.

6. Dvesha, Aversion

And there is another side to the chase. We spend enormous amounts of our lives trying to avoid what we do not want.

Dvesha. Aversion.

The other half of the commentary sounds like this. “This sucks.” “He sucks.” “I hope that does not happen.”

The mind sorts the world into two baskets. This I want, *raga*. That I do not want, *dvesha*. Chasing one, fleeing the other. We spend our lives on a hamster wheel, running from what we fear and toward what we want, and the running fills the mind with the chatter that drowns out everything quieter.

Social media was built on almost exactly this reflex. Thumbs up. Heart. Thumbs down. The yogis mapped that habit thousands of years before the feed existed.

7. Avidya, Ignorance

Underneath all this grasping and avoiding is something deeper.

Avidya. Often translated as ignorance, but mis-knowing may be closer. It is not stupidity. It is mistaken identity. Avidya is simply *a-vidya*, not-knowing, from the root *vid*, to know. But I remember it with an English wordplay of my own. That place of peace is available at every moment.

We are simply busy elsewhere. We ignore it. We are “ignore-ant” of it. The drop has forgotten the ocean and believes itself to be completely separate.

In the Yoga Sutras, *avidya* is the root affliction from which the others grow. Patanjali defines it precisely in the second chapter. Avidya is taking what is impermanent, impure and painful to be permanent, pure and joyful. Edwin Bryant, whose commentary I have leaned on for years, renders it as mistaking the non-self for the Self.

And once we believe that, the rest makes sense. If I am only this temporary little drop, then of course I need to acquire as much as possible. Of course I am frightened of losing things. Of course I am frightened of disappearing.

The whole chase rests on a mistaken answer to one question. Who am I?

Yoga changes the answer. Instead of replying only with our biography, our personality, our possessions and our roles, the yogis ask us to find the peaceful consciousness underneath all of it.

The drop remembers. I came from the ocean.

8. Duhkha, Suffering

And so the drop suffers.

The word itself is a picture. *Duhkha* is often read as bad axle space, a wheel that does not turn cleanly on its axle. Anyone who has pushed a wobbling cart knows the feeling. Its opposite, *sukha*, is the good axle. The wheel still turns. It just stops grinding.

Duhkha means suffering, dissatisfaction, or unease. Not because pleasure is bad. Not because we should not love sunsets, relationships, success or beautiful experiences.

The suffering is not in loving the sunset. It is in needing the sunset to stay.

Life serves us things on our plate we did not order, and once they arrive there is no sending them back to the chef. Duhkha grows in proportion to our inability to accept the situation. Its opposite, *sukha*, ease, grows in proportion to our ability to accept it.

Here is the formula I use.

Duhkha equals Event times Resistance.
Sukha equals Event times Flow.

The body already knows this. Arteries and veins are not static pipes like household plumbing. Their smooth muscle is constantly constricting and dilating according to what the body needs. The mind does the same thing with events, and how much we suffer depends far less on the event than on which way we move.

Everything we grasp is, by its nature, changing. We get what we want, and eventually it fades, changes, or loses its shine. Then we reach for the next thing. Nothing the drop can hold onto lasts forever.

9. Samsara, The Cycle

Now picture the drop falling to earth. It lands. It flows into a stream. The stream becomes a river, and eventually the river carries it back to the ocean. Then the sun rises. The drop evaporates again.

In traditions that teach rebirth, this repeating wheel of birth, death, and return is *samsara*.

Here is where most of us hear it differently than they did. I am in no rush to die, and if you tell me I get to come back and do this again, my first reaction is that sounds wonderful. Sign me up.

The yogis were less enthusiastic. Yes, another life contains happiness. It also contains loss, fear, sickness, aging and death. Set beside the bliss they believed was available in union with the ocean, another trip around the wheel was not the prize. Freedom from the wheel was.

The drop returns, rises again, and forgets again. The cycle continues until something changes.

10. Karma, Action

What happens during all these journeys matters.

Karma means action. Our actions, intentions and their consequences create momentum. They shape our habits, our circumstances and, in traditions that teach rebirth, the conditions of what comes next.

Every choice sends another ripple through the water. Karma is not simply cosmic reward and punishment. It is cause and effect. What we repeatedly think, choose and do helps shape the course the drop takes.

Which is how the whole thing keeps turning. We mistake ourselves for the separate drop. That creates desire and aversion. Desire and aversion drive our actions. Our actions create momentum. The momentum carries us around again. Round and round the water cycle, until something changes.

11. Moksha, Freedom

And then, one day, the drop wakes up.

Somewhere in the falling, chasing and returning, it recognizes what it actually is. It sees that it was never truly separate from the reality it came from.

That liberation is *moksha*. Freedom. The endless cycle of mistaken identity, grasping and suffering comes to an end.

In the traditions that read samsara literally, this means liberation from the cycle itself. No more birth, death and rebirth as a separate drop. No further trip around the water cycle.

And here is where I want you to feel how radical the promise was.

Imagine offering one of these yogis the whole dream. The house, the beautiful partner, the cars, everything our culture asks us to spend forty and fifty and sixty hour weeks chasing. Or a cave, and a lifetime of meditation.

A lot of them chose the cave.

That has fascinated me for decades. What could they possibly have touched in meditation that felt so sublime they were willing to give up everything the rest of us are working ourselves ragged to get?

They believed they had reached something vastly larger than ordinary pleasure. No more chasing. No more fearing. No more separate drop. Only the bliss of the ocean.

The drop rests in its true nature. Not because it finally acquired everything it wanted. Because it remembered what it was all along.

The ocean in the drop.

> IN THE FOREST
>
> You do not need any of these words to feel what they point at. Stand by moving water for ten minutes. Watch it rise as mist, gather, fall, and run back. Nothing in that cycle is separate from the rest of it, and nothing in it is lost. Everything after this chapter is a different way of saying that.

That is the arc of the map, eleven ideas in one picture, and they are the eleven I would want anyone to carry before opening a single classical text. A drop forgets its belonging, grasps, suffers, returns, and forgets again, until one day it sees differently and is free. The chapters ahead will now pull this picture apart, because the traditions disagree in important ways about what the drop, the ocean, and freedom actually are.

A map, not a creed

Everything I just drew is a set of teachings I love. It is not a set of things I claim to know.

I am what some call a possibilian. On the big questions, is there a soul, a God, do we return, I do not know, and I am wary of anyone who says they do. Maybe the yogis are right and something in us is eternal. Maybe, when we go from Now Here to Nowhere, it is simply black, the way it was black before we were born. I remember nothing from before my birth. Death may be the same. I hold both open, and I have made my peace with not knowing. So take this water cycle as a map, not a creed. No single school tells the story exactly this way. Keep what feeds you, and leave the rest.

But there is one place where I part ways with the old yogis, and it is the heart of everything I teach. The Yoga Sutras aim, in the end, at liberation, stilling desire, detaching, stepping off the wheel to rest in the freedom of pure awareness. The classical word is liberation. To me, it can feel like escape. They are not against love, exactly. They are against clinging, the grip that needs the beloved to stay, because that grip is what binds the drop to its suffering. Their cure is to loosen the grip until it lets go for good.

I have used their tools to survive the worst nights of my life. But escape is not where I want to live. Because if this life is fleeting, and it may be the only one we get, that does not make love smaller. It makes it the most important thing there is. I do not want liberation to mean becoming so detached from the world that its beauty and its suffering no longer ask anything of me. I want to be a drop that loves the ocean, and every other drop, fiercely, for the short time it gets to fall.

They retreated to become free.
I retreat to embrace.

So I take the greatest gift the old yogis left us, the still and peaceful mind, and I point it somewhere the classical path did not ultimately point, deeper into relationship with the living world. Not as a door out, but as an oxygen mask that lets me walk further in. Peace is what makes it possible to love fearlessly, to stay in the fire without being consumed. That is the turn this whole book is walking toward. Now let us meet the traditions themselves, one at a time, and see how each one carries us closer to it.

One

The Yoga Sutras

THE POLE OF TRANSCENDENCE

There is a famous Pink Floyd song with a line that has always stopped me:

> *"You lock the door and throw away the key, there's someone in my head but it's not me."*
>
> PINK FLOYD, "BRAIN DAMAGE"

There is a voice in your head, and you are able to watch it. Sit with how strange that is. If there is a voice, and there is a you who can listen to it, then which one are you?

Do not take my word for it. Try this instead.

You are reading these words. Obviously. Now, without stopping, can you also observe yourself reading them?

Something just shifted. There were the words, and then there was someone noticing you taking them in. That second thing was there the whole time. You simply were not looking at it.

I call it the Eye within the I. There is an inner eye that observes all the thoughts that make up the I.

Eckhart Tolle found his way into that question the hard way. In *The Power of Now* he describes waking one night in a state of absolute dread, one thought circling: "I cannot live with myself any longer." Then something in him caught on how odd the thought was. "Am I one, or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me, the I, and the self that I cannot live with." He saw that his worries were something he was generating, not something he was, and that he could rest instead as the watcher of them. The moment he did, they lost their grip.

The yogis were exploring versions of this question long before *The Power of Now*. In the Yoga Sutras, the seer is *drashta*, from the Sanskrit *draṣṭṛ*, the one who sees. He wastes no time.[2] The second sutra gives the method in a few words: *yogas chitta vritti nirodhah*. "Yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind." The third completes it, saying that then the seer abides in its own nature. If the Yoga Sutras sold bumper stickers, that would be the one. It is the most quoted line in the text by a wide margin, and for good reason. Patanjali has told you what yoga is and what happens when you do it, in a handful of words, and almost everything after it is elaboration. *Chitta* is the mind-field. *Vritti* is a movement or fluctuation. Watch your own mind for ten seconds and you will see the problem. One thought leads to the next, faster than you can catch, all day. The mind is a river that never stops moving.

The chariot, and the runaway horse

The image I find most useful here is older than Patanjali. It comes from the Katha Upanishad, centuries before him, and he inherits its vocabulary rather than inventing it. The old teachers drew the person as a chariot. The body is the chariot. The senses are the horses. *Manas*, the mind, is the reins. *Buddhi*, the discerning intellect, is the charioteer. And the Self, *atman*, is the rider. Patanjali's word for that passenger is purusha, and the two traditions disagree about what the passenger is made of, which we will come to. When the charioteer is discerning and the reins are steady, the horses can be guided. When discernment and attention fail, the senses pull the chariot wherever they please. And the horses are always pulling toward the same things. Warmth, sugar, a hug, a massage, sun on the back of the neck. And away from cold water, a bad smell, a hard conversation.

Here is the trouble. When the charioteer falls asleep, the horses run the show. There is an old parable about a man galloping wildly through the streets, weaving through traffic, going in circles, and someone shouts, “Where are you going?” He calls back, “Do not ask me. Ask the horse.” That is most of us, most of the time. Our desires and our fears drive, and we call it a life. Meditation is the charioteer waking up and taking back the reins. The mind is a wonderful servant and a terrible master.

The ocean and the drop

What is that silent witness, underneath? Classical Yoga calls it *purusha*, pure consciousness.

It is tempting to translate purusha as God, and that translation will send you in the wrong direction unless we are careful about which God we mean.

If the word makes you picture a man in the sky, throwing lightning when you misbehave and keeping a ledger of your good and evil, then you are about as far from purusha as it is possible to get. Set all of that down.

What the yogis meant is closer to this. Think of an electrician and electricity.

An electrician wires the power in a house. He has a personality, a gender, intentions, a will. Electricity has none of those. It is inside every one of us right now. Sodium and potassium and calcium carrying charge across cell membranes, the nervous system firing signals at enormous speed, movement and sensation and thought all running on it. Without it there is no life. And a person can live an entire life without once thinking about it.

There is no supreme electrical being ruling the electricity in your body, judging your actions, or caring in the slightest who you sleep with. It animates you and it is completely indifferent to you.

That is purusha. Not the electrician. The electricity.

Now let me mark the edge of that analogy before it misleads you, because it is doing one job only. It is about impersonality. No face, no gender, no opinions about your behaviour.

Purusha is not literally the electricity in your nervous system. That electricity is sodium and potassium moving across membranes. It changes, it can be measured, and by the test we are about to use it is squarely on the other side of the line. The analogy kills the man in the sky. It does not tell you what purusha is.

For that, the yogis do not hand you a better metaphor. They send you to look.

Once you hold that picture, the usual questions about God stop making sense. Is God male or female? Does he have a long beard and an XY chromosome? You might as well ask whether electricity is male or female. The yogis would say you have missed the plot the moment you start putting a human face on it.

But an analogy will only take you so far, and this one is not meant to stay abstract. You can go looking for purusha right now.

Close your eyes for a moment and watch your own thoughts. Do not try to stop them. Just notice that there is a commentary running, and that something is aware of it. That something is not the critic. It is not the cheerleader either. Those are both voices, and voices belong to the traffic. What you are looking for is underneath all of it, and it does not speak. It only watches.

Find that, even for a second, and then ask what it is like. Not what it is thinking, because it is not thinking. What is its quality?

This is the hard part if you have never meditated. It is difficult to isolate. But if you have ever had a stretch of real stillness in your life, by water or under stars or in the moment after something beautiful, you already know the place I mean.

And what you find there, every time, is the same thing.

I summarize it in two words. **Peaceful indifference.** Peaceful meaning serene, not passionate or vengeful or agitated. Indifferent is the harder one, because indifference needs an object. Indifferent to what?

To *prakriti*, which is the other half of this picture and the word I need to give you now. Prakriti is nature in the widest possible sense. Everything that changes. Rocks, weather, bodies, galaxies, and also your thoughts, your moods and your personality, because those change too and you can watch them happen. If you can observe it, it is prakriti.

Purusha is what is doing the observing. Prakriti is everything observed.

Step back for a moment, because this is the question the whole book is circling.

Every philosophy in these pages is trying to work out one relationship. Consciousness and matter. The observer, and the world that is observed. Which one is fundamental, and how are they related? Everything else follows from the answer.

Modern science mostly works from one answer. There is one kind of stuff, matter, and consciousness is something matter does. The link between brain activity and experience is beyond dispute, and the evidence for it is overwhelming. How physical processes produce felt experience at all is still unsettled, and philosophers have a name for the difficulty, the hard problem. But the working assumption of most of the field is clear enough. Matter is primary. Awareness arises out of it.

Classical Yoga says the opposite about what matters, and something stranger about the structure. There are two kinds of stuff, and neither one produces the other. Consciousness did not come out of matter, and matter did not come out of consciousness. Both are eternal. Both were always here.

Which makes the job of a yogi unusual. Not to unite the two. To tell them apart.

Which sounds abstract until you use it, and then it changes a sentence you say every day.

When we are inside a feeling, we say “I am anxious.” The feeling and the self have fused. But watch it from the seat of the observer and the sentence changes. “There is anxiety.” Anger arrives and it is not I am furious, it is there is anger, and I am here watching it.

That is a small grammatical change and an enormous practical one. The anxiety has not gone anywhere. It has simply stopped being who you are.

And one thing I have to be careful about, because the phrase peaceful indifference invites exactly the wrong reading. This is not numbness. Our culture already has a full toolkit for numbness. A drink, a screen, a scroll, a pill. That is switching the feeling off. The witness does the opposite. It lets the feeling be entirely present and simply stops being swept away by it. Chapter six has a name for the difference, and getting it wrong is one of the most common mistakes in modern practice.

Where the map breaks

And here our ocean metaphor reaches its first limit, which is worth naming out loud, because this is the moment the water cycle gets tested by the tradition itself.

The Foundation gave you atman and Brahman, the drop and the ocean, in the language of Vedanta. Let me put that in the same electrical terms, because it makes what follows much clearer.

In Vedanta, think of your soul as the socket in your wall. You plug in and you receive power. But the power was never made at the wall. It comes from a plant somewhere you have never seen, and the current arriving in your house is not a different electricity. It is the same current, arriving locally. That is atman and Brahman. That is what *tat tvam asi* means.

Classical Yoga says something much stranger, and much lonelier.

There is no power plant.

Your socket was never wired to anything. It is its own uncreated source, eternal, and it always was. And so is everyone else's. In Samkhya, the older philosophical system the Yoga Sutras are built on, there is not one consciousness appearing as many. There are many, each complete and distinct from the others.[3]

Nor does purusha create prakriti. This surprises people, and it surprised me for years. In this system consciousness and nature are two eternal principles that were never produced by anything, including each other. Purusha does not make the world or run it. It witnesses it. The classical image is a dancer and a spectator. The dancer moves on her own. The spectator does not cause the dance. But without someone watching, there is no performance.

One thing worth clearing up, because it trips up almost everyone who has studied elsewhere. In other parts of Hindu thought the word purusha does mean a vast cosmic being. The Rig Veda has a hymn to a cosmic Purusha whose body becomes the world. The Gita speaks of a supreme purusha. Kashmir Shaivism describes one universal Self appearing as many. If you have heard purusha taught as the super soul of the universe, that is where it comes from, and it is not wrong in those contexts.

In the Samkhya-Yoga account of the seer and the seen, which is the one this chapter is describing, purusha is plural and is not the maker of the world. That is the meaning to keep in view whenever Patanjali speaks of the Seer.[4]

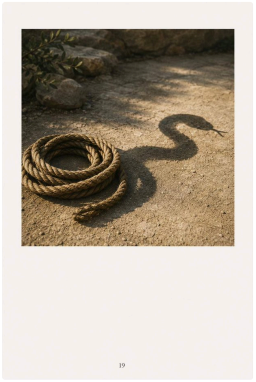
Why we cannot be still, the *kleshas*

Here is the image I keep coming back to. The sun is always in the sky, even on the cloudiest day. It does not leave. It gets obscured. That place of peace works the same way, and the kleshas are the clouds.

Original artwork by Eoin Finn

If the witness is always right here, why is it so hard to rest in it? Patanjali answers with the *kleshas*, the five afflictions, the things that torment us. They run from the general to the specific.

The first is *avidya*, mistaken knowledge. The classical illustration is a rope mistaken for a snake, a teaching story much loved in Advaita Vedanta and used widely across the Indian traditions. I met my own version of it. I once lived in an open-air house by a river in Bali, real snake country, cobras and vipers on the deck. One night I went for water and saw, coiled in the dark on the floor, a snake. My heart slammed. Adrenaline. Every plan for dealing with it raced through me at once. I turned on the light, crept closer, and it did not move, because it was a rope, left out by kids that afternoon. The instant I was certain the rope was a snake, that was avidya. Seeing the rope as a rope, that is clear knowledge. Patanjali calls avidya the field in which the other four afflictions grow. They are not simply versions of it. They each have their own shape. But none of them takes root without it.



Avidya. The rope and the snake.

The second is *asmita*, mistaking your personality for your soul. Jimi Hendrix sang it:

> *"I used to live in a room full of mirrors, all I could see was me."*
>
> JIMI HENDRIX, "ROOM FULL OF MIRRORS"

That is *asmita*, seeing only your own outer form and forgetting the light behind it.

One thing to clear up before we go further. When we translate asmita as ego, we do not mean an overabundance of pride or self-centeredness. It is closer to a persona, an identity, a role an actor would play in a movie. Vanity and egotism are the extreme cases. Most of us are simply wearing the costume without noticing we have it on. Patanjali is more precise in the sixth sutra of the second chapter. Ego is taking the seer and the instrument of seeing to be one and the same thing.

So what is an ego made of? Long before Freud or Jung arrived, the third and fourth kleshas answered that. It is made of the things we like and the things we do not. The things we lean toward and the things we lean away from.

Let me show you how completely that works. I am going to describe somebody using nothing but what they like and what they do not, and I think you will know who it is before I finish.

This person does not care for masks. Loves a cape.

Cannot stand kryptonite. Loves justice.

Has no time at all for Lex Luthor. Loves Lois Lane.

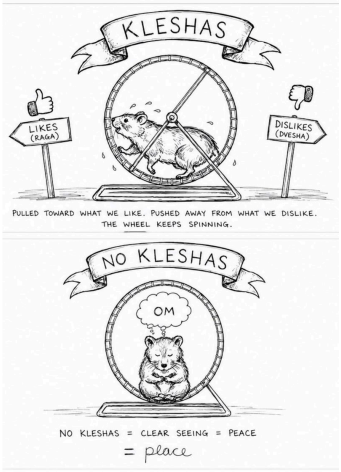
You got there two lines ago. And notice that I never mentioned the planet he came from, the strength, the flying, or the suit. I did not need to. A handful of preferences and the whole persona assembled itself in your head.

Now do it with yourself. Sit down and write out what you love and what you cannot stand. Foods, music, weather, people, ways of being spoken to. Keep going and a shape appears, and the shape has your name on it.

There is the ledger. The likes are *raga*, the dislikes are *dvesha*, the third and fourth kleshas, the two baskets your thoughts fall into all day. "This rules." "That sucks." "I hope this happens." "I hope that does not." It is also, by the way, exactly the reflex social media was built to exploit, thumbs up, heart, thumbs down. The yogis noticed this addiction thousands of years before the feed. If Superman became a yogi, he would answer the question differently. None of these qualities last. Underneath them is a consciousness that is peacefully detached, and that, not the cape, is my real superpower.

Here is what the third and fourth kleshas are really telling us. We spend our lives on a hamster wheel, running from what we fear and toward what we want, and the running fills the mind with whirlpools of chatter that drown out the quiet witness underneath.

Meditation is how we get off the wheel. Not by wanting nothing. By stopping long enough to notice that the wheel was never going anywhere.



Original artwork by Eoin Finn

And one thing to be clear about, because this teaching is easy to hear as punishment. The goal is not to crush the ego. It is to see through it, so the larger consciousness has room to come through. Nobody is asking you to stop being a person.

The fifth *klesha* is the deepest, *abhinivesha*, the fear of death. Patanjali lists it separately from dvesha and roots it, like the rest, in avidya. It is the clinging to this life that even the wise are said to feel. The yoga here is bracing. The body, on this view, is a temporary home. I call it a meat suit, which is my phrase and not his, and you are the passenger rather than the car. John Lennon put it lightly:

> *"I'm not afraid of death because I don't believe in it. It's just getting out of one car, and into another."*
>
> JOHN LENNON

That is the language of someone imagining life on the far side of the last klesha.

Watch what the shift does to the grammar, because it is the same move we made earlier with anxiety, taken to its furthest case. Inside the fear we say "I am dying." From the seat of the observer it becomes "it is dying." Not I suffer, but there is suffering, and I am here watching it.

I want to be careful that none of this sounds despondent, because it is the opposite. This is not depression and it is not a wish to check out early. Nobody here is in a rush. The yogis lost the fear out of connection to something peaceful, not out of losing interest in being alive.

And there is a version of this you already know from the mat. Clinging to life is like forcing a pose. Grip, hold the breath, fight it, and you will injure yourself. Relax and trust and you arrive somewhere you could not force your way to. The same lesson, in a body.

Here is the gem inside the hardest teaching. Once you are connected to your inner light, the fear of death becomes the death of fear.

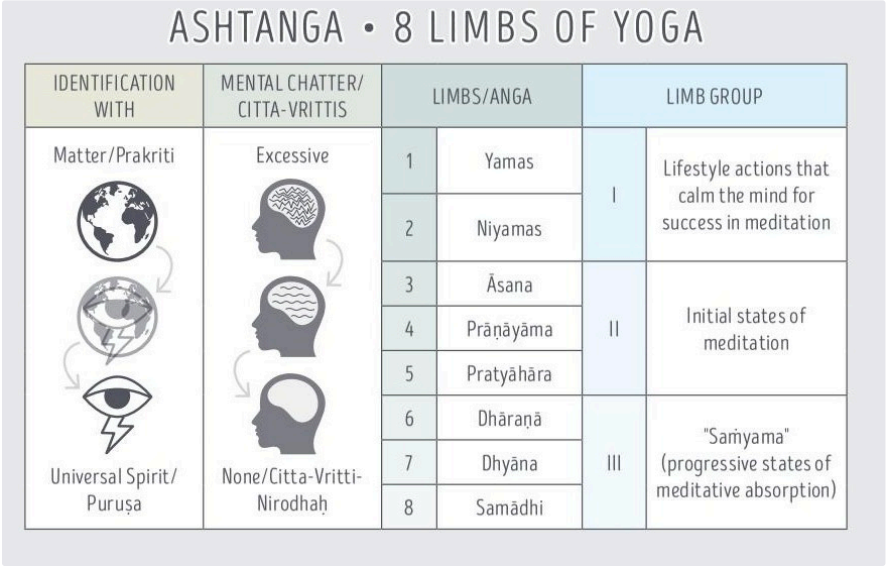
The ladder, eight limbs to stillness

The Sutras are not only a diagnosis. They are a practice, the eight-limbed path, *ashtanga*.

Most of us are handed the eight limbs as a list to memorize, which is a shame, because the list is not the point. The pattern is. So before the names, here is the shape.

There is one question running the whole ladder. Does this raise the chatter, or lower it? Thumb up, thumb down. Every limb is answering it.

And the limbs fall into three groups.



The eight limbs, and what they are actually doing

Read it from the top down and you can see the whole system at a glance. We begin identified with matter, prakriti, and the mind full of chatter. We end identified with purusha, and the chatter stopped. The eight limbs are the staircase between those two states.

Group one, off the cushion. The *yamas* and the *niyamas*. These are not on the mat at all. They are how you live the other twenty-three hours.

The five yamas govern how you treat everyone else. Minimal harm, truthfulness, non-stealing, restraint, non-grasping. The five niyamas govern how you treat yourself and what is larger than you. Cleanliness, contentment, discipline, self-study, and surrender.

Here is why they come first, and it is the most practical thing in the Sutras. Have you ever sat down to meditate with a mind that would not settle, no matter what you did? Most of the time that is not a meditation problem. You arrived at the cushion carrying something. An argument you were dishonest in. Something you took. A thing you cannot stop wanting.

I call that a stillness handicap. And the fix is not a better technique. It is the other twenty-three hours.

Better living through yoga still requires better living.

The yamas and niyamas are tilling the soil, so the seed of meditation has somewhere to take root.

Group two, arriving on the cushion. *Asana*, a steady seat. *Pranayama*, the breath. *Pratyahara*, drawing the senses inward, reining in the horses. These are the preliminary moves, settling the body and the senses so attention has somewhere to rest.

Group three, what happens there. *Dharana*, focus. *Dhyana*, meditation. *Samadhi*, complete absorption, where the usual distinction between the watcher, the watching, and the watched falls away. These three together are called *samyama*, and they are less three separate practices than one thing deepening.

You have touched the top of that ladder without naming it. The athlete who sinks the shot and cannot remember doing it. The musician gone inside the music. The moment on a wave where there is no you and no wave, just the ride.

Something I want to clarify before we go on, because it matters for everything that follows in this book. The Yoga Sutras were written for renunciates, not for people with mortgages and children. Strictly read, the yamas and niyamas are not a recipe for a richer daily life. They are a method for loosening our grip on it. Asking how to bring them into a busy modern life is, strictly speaking, a little like asking which bar is best for quitting drinking.

I am going to keep adapting them anyway, and so does almost every teacher you will ever meet. But you should know we are adapting, rather than pretending the text says what we wish it said.

Good advice, and hard advice

Patanjali is not alone in this prescription. Sit down, get quiet, and something opens. Meister Eckhart, preaching in Germany a thousand years later and knowing nothing of the Sutras, arrived at almost the same sentence.

> *"Nothing in creation is so like God as stillness."*
>
> MEISTER ECKHART

So the instruction is old, and it is nearly universal. There is only one problem with it. We are terrible at it.

Blaise Pascal noticed this in the Pensées, and put it about as strongly as it can be put.

> *"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."*
>
> BLAISE PASCAL, PENSÉES

Sit with the size of that claim. All of them. Every war, every betrayal, every ruined evening, traced back to one small incapacity.

I would add three words. All of humanity's problems come from our inability to sit quietly in a room alone *with our own thoughts*. The room is not the problem. The company is.

Try something. Take your middle finger and start tapping your own forehead, right above the space between your eyebrows. Keep going. Tap, tap, tap. It gets annoying fast, and if somebody walked in they would tell you to stop hitting yourself.

Nobody does that with a finger. Almost all of us do it with our thoughts, most of the day. "Her life looks perfect and mine does not." "If I lost the weight they would like me." "I should have said something." Tap, tap, tap. Then we sit down to meditate, and we wonder why we cannot rest in a room like that.

So when the Sutras say "still the mind completely," we need to realize that it is good advice, and it is also very hard advice. As a surfer, the closest thing I can compare it to is paddling out at Jaws on a thirty-five foot face and being told the plan. "Take off on the steep part, grab your rail, take the high line through the barrel, and do not let the wave land on your head."

None of that is wrong. It is exactly what the best surfers do. It is simply useless to somebody who cannot yet stand up on a two-foot wave.

Good advice and hard advice are not the same thing. The Sutras give us good advice. What I went looking for, for most of my life, was an easier way in.

And here is where Pascal hands it to us without meaning to. Our thoughts drive us crazy when we sit in a room. So do not sit in a room. Go outside, where the rhythm is slower than we are, and let the mind be drawn toward it instead of ordered into it.

> IN THE FOREST
>
> This is the doorway to everything else in this book. You cannot feel your belonging to a river while your mind is a wild monkey. Stillness is not the goal for its own sake. It is what clears the water so you can finally see. On the mat, it is the difference between doing a pose and being in it. This book asks what happens when that clear awareness turns toward the river, the cedar, and the living world.

Which leads to something I find quietly startling about the word itself. Yoga means union, and we usually stop there. But in this system it also means the opposite. Union with purusha is achieved by disunion from prakriti. The yoking and the separating are the same act, seen from two ends.

Notice, then, where the Sutras themselves point. Not toward merging consciousness with the world, but toward disentangling the two. Their final book is named *Kaivalya*, often translated as aloneness, isolation, or independence. In the classical reading, liberation is the complete discernment of purusha from prakriti, pure consciousness no longer mistaking the movements of matter and mind for itself. Nature, in this map, is not the final destination. This is the far pole of our spectrum, pure transcendence. Hold it there. The traditions that follow will lean, one by one, the other way.

◇

In the Sutras, the metaphor changes. Purusha is not literally a drop of Brahman. Pure consciousness and prakriti are fundamentally distinct. The freedom of the drop is not to dissolve into the sea of matter, but to recognize that it was never the water at all. That radical disentangling is kaivalya.

Two

The Bhagavad Gita

A DIVINE HIDDEN IN THE WORLD

The same eleven ideas, read through the Gita. The ocean becomes a person.

Arjuna's mouth goes dry. His arms shake, and the great bow slides from his hand. On the edge of a battlefield, asked to do the hardest thing of his life, to fight his own kin, he simply cannot move. If the Sutras teach you to still the mind, the Gita begins where life actually finds us, undone and unable to act, and teaches us how to live in the world without being torn apart by it.

Krishna and Arjuna, between the two armies.

The Bhagavad Gita, the Song of the Divine, is a small jewel set inside the vast epic of the Mahabharata. I first read it as an undergraduate, slowly, and it cast a spell on me, because it is not an argument to be won but a poem to be entered. Arjuna's charioteer is Krishna, who turns out to be the divine itself in disguise, and the whole poem is their conversation on the field between the two armies. Where the Sutras lean toward disentanglement from the changing world, the Gita speaks to someone who has duties he cannot simply walk away from.

And Arjuna says the thing every honest beginner says. He tells Krishna that the mind is restless, turbulent, and strong, and that trying to hold it is like trying to hold the wind. It is one of my favorite moments in the whole text, because the greatest warrior of his age sits on a battlefield and admits he cannot control his own attention.

Four ways up the mountain

Krishna does something generous. The Gita weaves several disciplines of yoga into one conversation and refuses to make spiritual life a single-lane road. There is *Jnana*, the path of knowledge and discernment. There is *Bhakti*, devotion to the divine. There is *Dhyana*, meditation, a path later traditions often place under the broad label Raja Yoga. And there is the path Krishna presses on Arjuna again and again, *Karma* yoga, disciplined action without attachment to its fruits. You do not have to flee to a cave. You can act fully in the world and still practice freedom.

The referee, not the fan

Karma yoga is deceptively simple. Act, fully and well, and release your grip on the results. You have a right to your actions, never to their fruits. Do your *dharma*, your true work, and let the outcome go. Krishna warns Arjuna that inaction is not even an option, since lying down on the field is itself a choice with consequences. The way through is not withdrawal but non-attachment.

The image I use is the referee, not the fan. The fan is swept up, suffering every turn of the score, because the fan is attached to an outcome. The referee acts inside the game with total commitment and complete impartiality, unbothered by who wins. That evenness is *samatva*, equanimity, and Krishna calls it yoga itself.

There is a phrase people use to excuse almost anything. “Nothing personal, just business.” Krishna is offering the opposite of that, and my best summary of karma yoga turns the phrase around. “Nothing personal, just God’s business.” When you act from something larger than your own wanting, you can stop taking the outcome personally. I do not share Krishna’s cosmology, and you do not need to believe in his God to use this. Call the larger thing God, the Tao, or the living world. You only need one place in you that is not asking what is in it for me.

And there is a hard, freeing line at the center of it. It is better to do your own dharma imperfectly than to do another’s perfectly. Your work, your imperfect real work, is the path. Not someone else’s polished one.

The deathless thread

Underneath the counsel sits a claim related to Classical Yoga but framed in the Gita’s own language. The deepest Self is not born and does not die. Krishna tells Arjuna that it puts on and takes off bodies the way a person changes worn clothes; weapons cannot cut it, fire cannot burn it, water cannot wet it, wind cannot dry it. This is the Gita’s metaphysical ground for loosening the grip of fear and grief. You do not have to share the cosmology to feel the invitation to widen who you take yourself to be.

Fed by each other, the reciprocity at the heart of the Gita

There is a passage in the third chapter that I cannot read without thinking of ecology, though the Gita would not have used the word. “Beings arise from food,” Krishna says, “and food from rain, and rain from sacrifice, and sacrifice from action.” It is a picture of a living cosmos held together by mutual giving. The one who takes from this cycle and gives nothing back, he says plainly, is “a thief.” Change the vocabulary and that is a web of reciprocity where nothing stands alone.

A God soaked into the world

And here the Gita gives us what the Sutras cannot. A divine that is not only beyond the world but pressed into every part of it. Krishna describes himself as the taste in water, the light in the sun and the moon, the sound in the air, the life in all that lives, the hands and feet and eyes that are everywhere, pervading all. The chapter on the three *gunas* names the very strands, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, out of which all of nature, and all of us, is woven.

The immanence is real.
The explicit ethic is ours to add.

> IN THE FOREST
>
> Take one walk this week with no destination and no phone, and do it well. Not to get anywhere. Not to log it. That is karma yoga in about twenty minutes. On the mat it is the pose you stop trying to improve while you are still in it. Act fully, release the fruit, and notice how strange it feels to do something outdoors that has no outcome attached to it.

This is not decoration. It is a theology of profound immanence, the divine encountered directly through the natural world, while never being limited to it. Does that make the Gita an environmental text? No. Its aim is devotion and liberation, and it still treats binding yourself to ever-changing nature as the trap to escape. But it hands us what the transcendent Sutras never could. The felt sense that when you stand in the forest, you are standing inside the sacred, not beside it.

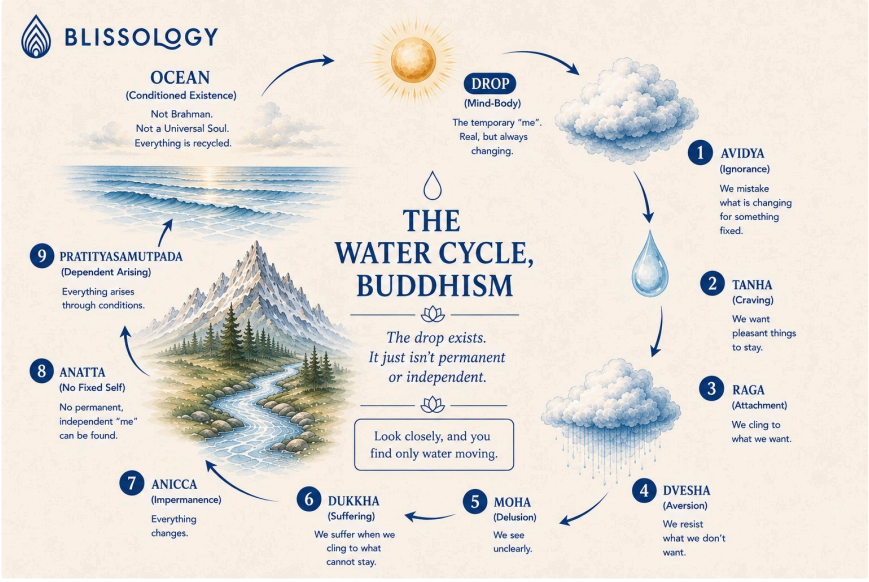
◇

In the Gita, the ocean becomes divine and the divine saturates every drop. Krishna is not only beyond the world but within it, the taste in water, the light of the sun and moon, the life in everything that lives. The drop acts fully in the world while learning that the sacred was flowing through it all along.

Three

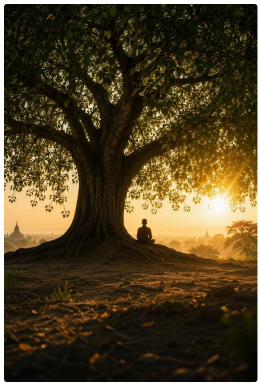
Buddhism

THE WEB OF INTERDEPENDENCE



The same picture again. The drop is real. It is simply not permanent, and not its own.

The traditional story tells of a young prince named Siddhartha Gautama, kept behind palace walls, shielded from every hard thing. One day he rides out and sees, in quick succession, an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a wandering seeker at peace. The first three break the spell. Suffering is woven into every life, his own included, and no wall is high enough to keep it out. The fourth plants a question. He renounces his royal title, gives up his possessions, and after years of searching, sitting under a tree, he wakes up. From then on they call him the Buddha, the awakened one.



Siddhartha, under the tree.

Including Buddhism in a survey of yoga matters because it arose in the same ancient Indian world and developed its own rigorous traditions of ethics, meditation, and liberation. But it makes a striking move. The Buddha is portrayed in the early texts as setting aside speculative questions that did not conduce to awakening, while directly challenging the idea of a permanent, independent self. In one early discourse he summarizes his teaching starkly: suffering, and the ending of suffering. That gives Buddhism an unusually practical center. He did not deny a supreme field of being, and he did not affirm one either. To me that makes early Buddhism read more as a psychological path than a metaphysical one, though I should say that later Buddhist traditions built cosmologies and metaphysics as rich as anything in India. Whatever you believe about ultimate reality, you begin with suffering and what releases it.

The four noble truths

The whole teaching begins as a physician’s diagnosis, in four movements. First, *dukkha*, that life carries an ache, a friction, a sense that things are not quite right. Second, *samudaya*, that the ache has a cause, and the cause is craving and the ignorance beneath it, our endless grasping after pleasure and our fleeing from pain. Third, *nirodha*, the good news, that the ache can end. And fourth, *magga*, that there is a way to end it, the Noble Eightfold Path.

The path is eight strands of one rope, and it groups into three. Good conduct, right speech, action, and livelihood. Meditation and mental development, right effort, mindfulness, concentration. And wisdom, right understanding and right thought. I prefer to call right mindfulness by another name, mind-body fullness, because the attention it asks for does not live only in the head. It is not a straight line but a weave, each strand strengthening the others, a whole way of living rather than a set of beliefs to sign.

Many rivers, one ocean

Over the centuries the teaching branched. Theravada, the Way of the Elders, is the oldest surviving Buddhist school and preserves the Pali Canon. Its ideal of awakening is the *arhat*. Mahayana, the Great Vehicle, developed the *bodhisattva* ideal and includes traditions such as Zen, Pure Land, and many others. Vajrayana uses tantric ritual, mantra, visualization, and other esoteric methods; it is especially associated with Tibetan Buddhism but is not limited to Tibet, with important surviving lineages in East Asia as well. Different vessels, one ocean.

The turn toward love

For all its clear-eyed focus on suffering, Buddhism is not cold. At its heart sits the cultivation of compassion and loving-kindness, *metta* in Pali, widened beyond the narrow borders of self-interest. Mahayana gives this its vastest expression in the bodhisattva ideal, where awakening is pursued for the benefit of all beings. Picture the one who stands at the very door of liberation, and turns back, and refuses to pass through until every being can come too. The point is not to escape alone. It is to make wisdom and compassion inseparable.

> *"Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them.*
> *Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them.*
> *The dharmas are boundless; I vow to master them.*
> *The buddha way is unattainable; I vow to attain it."*
>
> A TRADITIONAL FORM OF THE BODHISATTVA VOW

Emptiness, and the web

And now the idea that matters most for a book about nature, especially as it develops in Mahayana philosophy: *shunyata*, emptiness. It does not mean that nothing exists. It means, in this context, that things are empty of independent, self-existing essence. They arise dependently, through causes and conditions. That principle is *pratityasamutpada*, dependent origination. Emptiness and dependent arising are not identical teachings in every Buddhist school, but in Mahayana thought they become profoundly intertwined.

Sit with what that says. The line where a completely independent "you" stops and an independent world starts becomes very hard to find. You are your parents and their food and the rain that grew it and the sun that warmed it and the ancient light of stars. The cedar, the breath, the soil, and you participate in one continuous arising. In the modern language of Thich Nhat Hanh, this is *interbeing*. Of all the traditions in this book, Buddhism gives me some of the strongest tools for questioning the fantasy of separateness.

And there is an image for it that I have never been able to improve on.

Indra’s Net. The net belongs to the Vedic god Indra, and it hangs over his palace, stretching out infinitely in every direction. At every single knot in the net there is a jewel. Each jewel is polished to a perfect mirror, so every jewel reflects every other jewel. And since each of those reflections contains the reflections of all the others, look closely at any one jewel and you will find the entire net inside it.

Change one jewel and every reflection in the net changes with it.

The image is old. The earliest mention of a net belonging to Indra is in the Atharva Veda, and the version we know, with the jewels and the infinite reflection, was developed in the Mahayana Avatamsaka Sutra and elaborated centuries later by the Huayan school in China.

I know of no better picture of what ecology describes. Remove one species and the reflections shift throughout the whole web. Nothing in the net stands alone, and nothing in it is unimportant.

> IN THE FOREST
>
> Emptiness is not a void to fear. Here is how I feel it in the forest. You were never a separate thing dropped into a world. You are the world, arising as you, for a little while. That last step is mine, not the tradition’s. Buddhism dismantles the independent self. What I do with the space that opens is my own.

◇

Buddhism does something more radical with our picture. It asks whether there was ever a permanent drop, or an eternal ocean underneath it, at all. Look closely and you find only water moving: conditions arising from other conditions, waves appearing and disappearing, nothing separate and nothing permanent. Freedom comes not when the drop discovers an eternal identity, but when it stops clinging to the idea that it ever possessed one.

Four

Tantra

MATTER IS SACRED

Here the tradition turns, and the turn is everything.

Remember the question. Consciousness and matter, and which one is fundamental.

Modern science answers with one kind of stuff, and says it is matter. Classical Yoga answers with two, eternal and unmixable, and spends its whole path telling them apart.

Tantra gives the third answer, and it is the one almost nobody expects. There is only one kind of stuff after all. It is consciousness. And matter is not a separate thing that consciousness is trapped inside. Matter is what consciousness looks like from here.

That is what *nondual* means, and it is the word this chapter turns on. Not two. Not spirit hiding inside stuff, waiting to be freed. Stuff being spirit, wearing a form.

Notice what that does to the whole project. If there is nothing to disentangle from, then liberation cannot mean escape. It has to mean recognition.

Tantric traditions are far too diverse[5] to reduce to a single philosophy, so I am going to follow the stream most relevant to our journey, nondual Shaiva Tantra, especially the traditions associated with Kashmir. They make a move that changes the whole game. Where the Sutras seek freedom through disentanglement from prakriti, these nondual Shaiva traditions understand consciousness and its creative manifestation as inseparable. The sacred is not elsewhere. It shines as the world itself.

This is why Tantra feels so close to the modern heart. In a reductionist age that says everything is only matter, and in an older yoga that says matter must be renounced, Tantra insists that both the world and the spirit are real, and that they are one. Even the mood of the divine changes here. It is no longer the peacefully indifferent witness. It is ecstatic, joyous. In this view, the fundamental particle of matter is joy.

Leela, the cosmic game of hide and seek

In this nondual vision, the whole show becomes *leela*, divine play. The infinite spirit, out of sheer abundance, veils itself in matter, contracting into stone and river and body and you, forgetting on purpose what it is, for the joy of rediscovering itself. The spiritual life is not a climb out of the world. It is a remembering, right here, of what we always were.

Shiva and Shakti

In nondual Shaiva Tantra, reality has two faces that are one. *Shiva*, pure consciousness, the still awareness. And *Shakti*, its creative power, the energy that pours itself out as everything, every galaxy and gnat and gust of wind. They are never truly two, consciousness and its own dancing. And so everything that appears is an expression of Shiva-Shakti, which means everything that appears is sacred. Not by decree. By its very nature.

Contraction and expansion

There is one more piece of this map worth carrying, because it comes back later in the book. Tantra describes consciousness as moving between contraction and expansion. Contraction is the veiling, the drawing in, the forgetting. Expansion is the opening, the recognition, the remembering. Neither is a moral state. They are the two motions of one thing.

You know both in your own body without any Sanskrit. There are days you feel small, guarded, pulled in tight around yourself. And there are days you feel wide, permeable, glad to be here. Tantra says those are not two different people. They are the same consciousness, breathing.

The body as the path

Because embodied existence can be understood as an expression of the sacred, the body becomes a vehicle of practice rather than merely an obstacle. Many tantric and later yogic traditions charted channels called *nadis* and centers called *chakras*, and named the coiled power at the base of the spine *kundalini*, from the word for coiled, which can be awakened to rise up the central channel to the crown and there reunite with the divine energy it was always part of. These currents influenced later Hatha Yoga, although Hatha Yoga was not simply invented by one tantric school and its history draws on multiple Hindu and Buddhist sources.

I learned this from a Balinese woman who worked at the house we rented by the river. Every morning she set out small woven trays, a few grains of rice, a flower, a stick of incense, at the door, at the gate, at the base of a tree, on the engine of the motorbike. I asked her once why the motorbike. She looked at me as though I had asked why the sky. Because it carries me, she said.

I had spent years reading about matter and spirit. She was not making an offering to a bike. She was treating an ordinary object as though it were already part of something sacred, every single morning, before breakfast, without thinking about it once.

IN THE FOREST

Try it on one thing. A tree you pass daily. A stretch of shoreline. The tap you drink from. Not worship. Just attention offered on purpose, in the same place, repeatedly, until the thing stops being scenery and starts being somebody. Tantra says the sacred was always there. This is how you find out whether that is true for you.

This is the hinge of our whole walk. For the first time, the sacred is found here, in the flesh, in the world, in nature, rather than beyond it. Everything the earlier traditions taught us to see through, Tantra teaches us to see into.

◇

Tantra turns the ocean ecstatic. In the nondual Shaiva traditions, the sea is Shiva-Shakti, consciousness and its creative power, endlessly becoming every wave and drop. The drop does not need to escape the ocean. It wakes up mid-fall and realizes that the whole thing, sea, cloud, rain, body, world, is the divine dancing as form.

Five

Taoism

NATURE AS THE TEACHER

Leave India now, and travel to ancient China, where a different kind of sage is watching water. The Taoists ask a question none of the others quite ask. Not how do I escape the world, and not even how do I act rightly in it, but how does nature already do it, so easily, and can I learn to move like that?

Why a Chinese text belongs in a book about yoga

Taoism is not part of the yogic path. It came from China, not India, and I want to say plainly why it is here.

Two reasons. The first is that ideas travel. Even twenty-five centuries ago there was trade and movement between these worlds, and ideas do not stop at borders. The second matters more to me. There may be truths available to any person in any place that do not need to be carried anywhere. Sometimes I wonder whether different traditions are looking at the same mystery from different shores. I cannot prove that, and this book will show you places where they plainly disagree.

The Tao is the way, the nameless current that runs through everything and cannot be pinned down. The Tao Te Ching opens by admitting as much.[6]

> *"The Tao that can be followed is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name."*
>
> TAO TE CHING, CHAPTER 1, TRANSLATED BY CHARLES MULLER

I am taking liberties here, but when I feel the Tao in me it is not just the way. It is the way I can feel when my heart and my head are aligned. It is the way of my internal compass.

Put practically, the Tao is what my head and heart together tell me is the most efficient use of my energy.

You do not master it by grasping. You align with it by letting go. This is a wisdom you learn less by thinking and more by watching, the river, the seasons, the low quiet valley.

The Tao is not a God

Here is why this tradition sits closest to how I actually live.

Daoism is both philosophical and religious, depending on which centuries, communities, and practices we mean. Here I am drawing mainly from the philosophical voice of the Daodejing and Zhuangzi. Yoga is equally hard to box into one category. It developed across Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions and has served religious, philosophical, contemplative, and practical aims. So I do not need either tradition to fit neatly into the word “religion” before I can learn from it.

But the Tao does not ask me what I believe about creation or what happens after death. I find that restful. Whenever a path starts answering those questions with certainty, I get uneasy, because I do not think anyone is qualified to answer them. We fear death so much that we cling to inherited stories and call them real because everyone around us does.

At the same time, I am not willing to become a hard reductionist and shut the door on anything larger than us. I think there are unseen energies in this universe. I just cannot tell you they made the world.

The Tao is the middle ground between those two poles. Spirit and matter. Religion and skepticism. It asks me to align with something without requiring me to define it.

Wu wei, effortless doing

The heart of the practice is *wu wei*, often translated as non-doing but closer to effortless action, doing by not forcing. It is flowing with the grain instead of fighting against it.

I learned that literally. A tree in our garden had roots working into the house, so it had to come down. I borrowed a chainsaw from a neighbor. I felt the thing come alive in my hands and I felt like a mighty man with a mighty tool. Then I started cutting. I had no plan and almost no experience, and I worked against the grain. I dulled the blade and I wore out my wrists. The tree taught me before I taught it anything. There is a grain to trees and there is a grain to life.

Martial arts taught me the same lesson from the other side. Younger, wanting to channel my inner action hero, I would tense everything to kick a heavy bag as hard as I could. Jaw clenched, muscles gripped, maximum effort. The bag would move three inches. When I found the way and let the leg relax into a whip instead of a club, with less effort and better timing, the bag would swing several feet.

The soft prevails. This is why Lao Tzu says:

> *“The stiff and the rigid are disciples of death. The soft and the supple are disciples of life.”*
>
> TAO TE CHING, CHAPTER 76

A master gets the most result from the least effort

I ask people in my trainings what it means to be a master. The usual answers come back. Ten thousand hours. Skill in teaching. Mine is simpler.

> A master is someone who gets the most result from the least effort.

What a master has mastered is energy. A boxer who lets an opponent swing and tire, staying loose and evasive, then striking once at the exact moment. “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee” is one of the most Taoist things anyone has ever said. Float like yin, conserve, let the other tire, then sting like yang with the right energy at the right time.

If you have ever said “work smarter, not harder,” you are more Taoist than you knew.

Energy is never wasted

I have spent my life watching nature two ways, as a person full of wonder and as a person who wants the science. Both have taught me the same law.

Energy is not spent carelessly.

Every system runs on this. A wolf does not waste energy on a hunt it cannot win. A farmer does not burn through the nutrients in the soil. A yoga practitioner has no reason to hold the breath, grip, and spend more than the pose requires.

And nothing is lost. A whale falls to the sea floor and can feed a whole community down there for years, thousands of feet down in the dark. The atoms move on even when the form is gone. A physicist would tell me energy still disperses, and that is true. But nature is extraordinarily good at turning one ending into somebody else’s beginning.

We are the ones who miss this. We try to outsmart nature with our big brains instead of moving with the way.

Total relaxation is not the answer either

This is where people misread the Tao, and where the yoga room shows it most clearly. I see practitioners go completely passive, all yin, sinking into a shape with nothing supporting the joints. Yielding when the moment calls for resistance is how people get hurt.

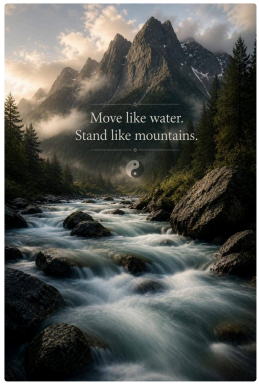
Yin needs yang. The wolf still has to run. The farmer still has to till. The yogi still has to find the balance point between the active and the passive.

This is the same conversation that runs through everything I teach in movement. Yin sinks down and out in gravity. Yang rises in and up. Yin without yang collapses. Yang without yin grips. Neither one is the goal. The tuning is the goal, and the tuning is Taoist.

Our state of mind is in our hands

I often say our state of mind is in our hands. If the hands are tense and gripping, the mind is not at ease, and the stress in the body climbs. If the fingers press together like knives, we are trying too hard to control things. More military, less fluid. But when the hands lead with softness, we find flow, in the body and in the mind. The tai chi masters knew this.

Stay loose when life allows. Stand firm when you must. Move like water. Stand like mountains. Stay in harmony with nature. This is the way.



Move like water. Stand like mountains.

The Tao of parking

I used to keep a copy of the Tao Te Ching in the glove compartment.

When there was no parking on a street, I would not circle the block waiting for a space to appear, and I would not try to manifest one. I would pull over at the end of the block, relax, and read a few pages until something opened. Something always opened. I spent no energy and got the same result.

The Tao Te Ching is not only a mystical manual. Read it as a business book, a manual on governing people, or a martial arts text, and it works as all of them, because they are all questions about the intelligent use of energy.

Do not seek power over people. Seek to empower people.

The old text says the best leader is the one whose people barely know exists. Next best is the one who is loved, then the one who is feared, then the one who is despised. When the work is done, the people say, “We did this ourselves.”

I have found the same thing in a yoga room. I cannot force anyone to like a class, and the moment I start wondering whether they approve of me, I am the guy with the chainsaw again, working against the grain. All I can do is stand in what moves me and let the room attune to it.

The underlying philosophy of everything I teach is that yoga is a feeling and not just a shape. And I cannot hand anyone a feeling by force. I can only have it myself, in front of them, and let it be contagious. That is the Taoist way of teaching, and it took me years to stop fighting it.

When I lived in Japan I watched sumo and thought it was a silly sport until I understood it. It was not always the biggest wrestler who won. Smaller wrestlers would use the momentum of a larger opponent to move him out of the ring. Aikido puts it as a rule. Push when pulled, pull when pushed.

Try it in an argument sometime. Instead of locking horns and spending your whole nervous system, play the game of energy efficiency, and let the insults run off like water off a duck.

> IN THE FOREST
>
> Find water and do nothing to it. A creek, a gutter after rain, waves against rock. Ten minutes, no phone. Watch where it yields and where it does not, and how it never once looks like it is trying. That is the entire teaching, and no one has to explain it to you.

The uncarved block

There is one more image the Taoists love, the uncarved block, plain wood before the craftsman touches it. It stands for our original nature, simple and whole, before we complicated it. The way back is not to add more effort, more knowledge, more self, but to return to that simplicity.

I found my own version of this at thirteen, years before I read a word of Lao Tzu. I had a saying I lived by. “Everything works out better with minimal effort and maximum attitude.” I had no idea how Taoist that was. I was a Taoist before I knew the word.

That keeps happening to me. The campfire at eight. The aphorism at thirteen. The hammock in Costa Rica. Every time I climb far enough into a philosophy, it hands me back something I already had.

Already home

Of all the traditions in this book, this one is already home. The Taoist does not need to be argued into revering nature. Nature is not a metaphor here, and not a backdrop. It is the teacher, the model, the scripture. Here, philosophy begins to feel ecological.

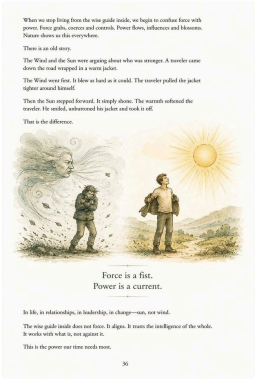
◇

Taoism is less interested in telling the drop what the ocean ultimately is. It says: watch how water moves. It yields without surrendering its nature, takes the low place, flows around obstacles, and reaches the sea without forcing its way there. Do not solve the water. Learn from it.

Power Without Force

Not a tradition. A short stop between the five and the bridge, for one distinction I use every day.

The best way I know to describe it is an old story about the wind and the sun. They made a bet about who could get a child in a field to take off his jacket.


When we stop living from the wise guide inside, we begin to confuse force with power. Force grabs, coerces and controls. Power flows, influences and blossoms. Nature shows us this everywhere.

There is an old story.

The Wind and the Sun were arguing about who was stronger. A traveler came down the road wrapped in a warm jacket.

The Wind went first. It blew as hard as it could. The traveler pulled the jacket tighter around himself.

Then the Sun stepped forward. It simply shone. The warmth softened the traveler. He smiled, unbuttoned his jacket and took it off.

That is the difference.

Force is a fist.
Power is a current.

In life, in relationships, in leadership, in change—sun, not wind.

The wise guide inside does not force. It aligns. It trusts the intelligence of the whole. It works with what is, not against it.

This is the power our time needs most.

36

The wind and the sun.

The wind went first. It blew and blew, trying to force the jacket off. But the harder it pushed, the colder the boy felt, and the tighter he clung to it. Then the sun took its turn. It did not fight the wind, and it did not strain against the boy. It simply found its own true essence, and shone a little brighter. The boy grew warm, and took the jacket off himself.

No force required. Just leaning more into who we are.

Force is a fist.
Power is a current.

Force pushes, provokes resistance, and eventually tires. It needs an enemy. Power aligns with the way things already move, and needs no strain.

The wind is force. The sun is power. And the sun did not win by trying harder. It won by being more fully what it was. I am using this as metaphor and not as physics. But the image holds something practical. Effort is not the same thing as effectiveness.

Contracted and expanded

There is a pair of words I keep coming back to.[7] Contracted and expanded. Shame and guilt and fear at one end. Courage and love and peace at the other.

You do not need a device to check this. When I feel shame, my body is heavy and wants to droop. When I feel pride, it lifts and glows. When I feel love, it is warm and open and takes up more room. That is not a lie detector and I am not claiming it measures truth. It is ordinary interoception, the sense that reports the inner state of the body, and everyone has it.

What interests me is the resonance between that language of contraction and expansion and the way I understand contraction and recognition in nondual Shaiva Tantra. I am not saying the two systems are historically connected, scientifically equivalent, or describing the same measurable thing. I am saying the metaphor lands in the body. We know the felt difference between curling inward and opening outward, and that is enough for the comparison to be useful.

> IN THE FOREST
>
> Walk uphill somewhere, and halfway up find the place where you are working harder than the hill requires. Jaw, shoulders, hands, breath. Let those go without slowing down. Same hill, same pace, less spent. That is the difference between force and power, in your own legs, in about a minute. It is also every held pose you have ever gripped your way through.

Getting out of your own way

There is a working definition of yoga I use more than any other. “Yoga is the art of getting out of your own way.”

Put through this chapter’s lens, it becomes simple. Do not force it.

When people compliment a class, I say the same thing every time, and I mean it. “It was not me doing that. If I took credit it would be like a radio taking credit for the music.” My original mission, long before I called myself a conduit for love, was “to absorb the energy of nature and radiate it out as positive action.” That is a description of power, not force. The radio does not generate the signal. It stops interfering with it.

The Gita said the same thing in different words. You have a right to your actions, never to their fruits. You can let go of the outcome because the action was never only yours to begin with.

Nothing to prove. Everything to share.

ONE WALK, FROM TRANSCENDENCE TO THE LIVING EARTH

Sutras	*transcendence*
Gita	*immanence*
Buddhism	*interdependence*
Tantra	*sacred matter*
Taoism	*nature as teacher*

And running through all of it, power over force, the felt difference between a life that strains against nature and one that flows with it.

Six

The Bridge

NATURE AND THE LAYERS OF YOU

We have walked through five traditions and one modern interlude. Before we step into the forest, we need one bridge, and it runs straight through nearly all of them.

The three energies

The old Samkhya and Yoga traditions describe three *gunas*: *sattva*, rajas, and tamas. The word means a strand, as in the strands twisted together into a rope. From a distance you see one rope. Up close you see three fibers, always braided, always interacting. That is the claim. Not three boxes you are in, but three threads whose proportions are always shifting. I often translate them into modern felt language as three kinds of energy, but "energy" is my shorthand, not a literal translation. You have felt something like all three today.

Rajas is stimulation. The revved, wired, tight energy of a mind that will not stop. In the body it is a clench, in the belly, the jaw, the shoulders. I picture a sea anemone that has just been touched, snapping shut, gripping. Fear does this. So does excitement. Rajas is not bad. We need it to build and to act. But it burns fuel fast.

For anyone ambitious, here is the version that lands. Too much rajas is borrowing at a high interest rate. The cash is real and the spending is fun, and the repayment is brutal and arrives later, when you have less to pay it with.

The strangest thing about rajas is how invisible it becomes. I traveled to Sri Lanka not long after the twenty year civil war ended, and a relative living there said something I have never forgotten. We did not know how much stress we had been carrying until it was gone. It had become the water they swam in. Most of us are running a milder version of the same thing. It is not a war. But it is constant, it is draining, and it has been normalized so thoroughly that we would only notice it by its absence.

Tamas is numbness, and it is the trickier one. The dull, heavy, checked-out energy. A burnt-out campfire, gray and cold. Here is the trap our whole culture falls into. We spend our days wired and tight, and when we finally crash, we reach for a screen, a drink, a scroll, and call that rest. It is not. Numbness is not peace. Exhaustion is not peace.

Sattva is clarity. The calm, luminous, flowing energy of a mind quiet and awake at once. A jellyfish, moving in a slow, graceful pulse. And that pulse is the pulse of nature itself. The tide. The breath. The slow open and close of the living world. Sattva is what you drop into when you stop gripping and stop numbing.

Here is my own way of picturing them, and I want to flag that plainly, because it is not drawn from any classical text. Think of our energy as a wave, with an amplitude, meaning how big the swings are, and a frequency, meaning how fast they arrive.

Rajas is a high wave arriving fast. Big swings, one after another, the mind bouncing hard between peaks and troughs. Plenty of energy and almost no steadiness.

Sattva is a long, slow wave. The swings are gentle and they arrive unhurried, like an ocean swell. This is not deadness. There is still movement and there is still energy. It is energy without unnecessary turbulence.

Tamas is a flat line. No swing at all. It can look like calm from the outside, and that is exactly why collapse gets mistaken for rest. A flat line is not a gentle wave. It is a fire that has gone out.

A caution here, because this is where the modern wellness world usually overreaches. Those waves are a picture of how the three states feel from the inside. They are not measurements of brain waves, heart rhythms, or anything else. The yogis were not secretly neuroscientists. Rajas, sattva, and tamas are not Sanskrit names for sympathetic and parasympathetic states, and I am not going to pretend they are. What does interest me is that the ancient map and modern physiology quietly overlap in places. Two maps of the same territory, laid side by side. Not stacked, and not the same map.

There is a word we use without hearing it. Well-being. Not well-doing. We are human beings, and well-being is the state of being done well. Rajas is not that. Tamas is not that either. Sattva is what being done well feels like.

These three tie the whole book together. They come from Samkhya, the ground the Sutras stand on. The Sutras cultivate sattva to clear the mind. The entire fourteenth chapter of the Gita is the yoga of these three energies. So the practice is simple. Catch the sea anemone clenching, and breathe it open. Catch the numbness, and know it is not the rest you are looking for. Find the jellyfish, the slow pulse, and let it carry you home.

Regulating toward sattva is not an abstraction. It is tuning your own rhythm to the rhythm of the world. One form of the disconnection disease of our time is tamas wearing the mask of rest. The cure begins the moment you can tell the difference.

And this is where the wave picture stops being a picture. The mind tends to run fast. Much of what settles us outdoors unfolds at slower rhythms. Tides. Weather. Growth. Light changing across a day.

It works the way a musical note does. When someone sounds a clear C, we can match the pitch almost without trying. The tone is already in the air and the voice simply falls into it. Ask a person to find that same C cold, out of silence, with nothing to tune to, and it is far harder. Meditation forced from a racing mind is trying to hit the note alone. Sitting in nature is letting the note be sounded for you.

So let the living world reset your tone. Do not manufacture the calm. Let the long, slow swell draw your own chop toward it.

Think less. Observe more.

> IN THE FOREST
>
> Read your own gauge outdoors. Sit somewhere with weather in it and ask which wave you are on. Choppy and fast. Flat and gone. Or the long slow swell. Do not fix it. Just name it. Naming it is most of the work, and the outdoors makes it easier to see. Try the same thing lying in *savasana*. The answer is often not the one you would have guessed walking in.

From the earth, to the light, the five layers

There is one more old map worth carrying into the forest. The traditions describe us as five sheaths, the *koshas*, running like the rings of a tree from the densest to the subtlest.[8]

The food body. The physical you, made of what you have eaten, drunk, and breathed. The tradition calls it the *annamaya kosha*, the food body. Sit with that. This layer is, quite literally, the earth. The minerals in your bones were stone. The water in you was rain. The outermost layer of you is not separate from nature. It is nature.

The breath body. The *pranamaya kosha* is the sheath associated with prana, the vital life-breath of the tradition. Breath is our most immediate doorway into it, but prana is not simply an ancient word for oxygen. I love the ecological fact that breathing also makes our material dependence obvious: with every breath, molecules move between body and world.

The mental body. Your thoughts, moods, and the endless commentary, the *chitta-vrittis* the Sutras want to still.

The wisdom body. The *vijnanamaya kosha*, associated with discernment, and the faculty that can know rather than merely react. It overlaps with what Indian traditions call *buddhi*, without being reducible to it.

The bliss body. The *anandamaya kosha*, the sheath of bliss, the subtlest of the five. I experience it as the quiet peace that becomes easier to notice when the noisier layers settle. I am letting two different maps touch without pretending they are identical.

Here is what the map lets me see. You do not have to despise the body in order to explore the subtle. The outermost, food-made body is materially continuous with the earth. Where do you end and where does nature begin? Biology can draw useful boundaries, and lived experience keeps complicating them. You do not end. Your outer layers are made of the world, your inner layers open toward the light, and you are the place where earth remembers it is also bliss.

Seven

The Reverence Our Time Needs

THE TURN

Stand back and look at the whole walk, and you see not a single road but a spectrum, from the Sutras at one pole to Taoism at the other. Reverence for the living world runs through all of it, unevenly, some of it stated, some of it implied.

Wisdom traditions speak most clearly to the suffering of the worlds that formed them. The sages met their own wounds with genius. What they did not face is ours.

Many of us now live at an extraordinary distance from the living world, indoors, lit by screens, watching forests burn and coral bleach through panes of glass. Our suffering is a different shape.

But the forest was always there

Someone who knows this literature will object here, and the objection is a good one, so let us meet it.

The forest is everywhere in these traditions. An entire class of Vedic text is called the *Aranyakas*, the forest books, composed and transmitted away from the village. The greatest of the Upanishads is the Brihadaranyaka, the great forest teaching. The classical scheme of life includes *vanaprastha*, the forest dweller stage. The Thai forest monks are practicing in the woods today. Patanjali prescribes meditation on the sun and the moon. Krishna, in the tenth chapter, names himself the *ashvattha* among trees and the Ganges among rivers.

All true. And look closely at what the forest is doing in each case.

The forest dweller goes to the woods to leave the village. The forest is the absence of distraction, not the presence of a relationship. The sun and the moon are objects of concentration, chosen because they are steady, not because they are loved. When Krishna says he is the ashvattha, the tree is naming the divine. The divine is not naming the tree.

So the forest is the room. It is almost never the teacher, and it is almost never the beloved.

That is a small distinction and it is the whole book. A person can sit under a tree for forty years and never once have a relationship with the tree.

IN THE FOREST

Go and stand somewhere old. A tree that was here before you and will be here after. Say nothing, photograph nothing, post nothing. Stay until you feel the difference between looking at it and belonging with it. That difference is what this whole book has been walking toward.

What we do with that

The task is not to correct the sages. It is what medicine does when an unfamiliar illness appears. The principles hold. The application changes.

So take the stilled mind, and point it at the cedar rather than through it. Take the interdependent web, and notice that it includes the watershed you drink from. Take sacred matter, and let it mean this matter, the soil in the garden, the salmon in the river, the body that is made of both. Take the flowing way, and let the water be a teacher and not only a metaphor.

Gather the thread of reverence that runs through every one of these traditions, make it the center instead of the footnote, and carry it back to the forest we forgot we belonged to.

◇

And this is where I make my own turn. I do not want the drop to escape the ocean, possess the ocean, or cling desperately to its brief shape. I want it to know that it belongs, and then love the water around it fiercely for as long as it gets to fall. The more we blur the line between where we end and nature begins, the happier we will be.

Because reverence is one of love's deepest forms, and love is the whole point. Nature is not quite the destination. It is the place where reverence becomes easiest to remember. Stand among old Douglas firs with the light coming down in pieces, moss soft underfoot, a raven turning overhead, the smell of cedar and rain, and go quiet, and you will feel it.

You are not looking at the forest. You are the forest, briefly awake and able to love itself.

Campbell said something close to this, in that same conversation I watched at nineteen. That we do not arrive on the earth from somewhere else, we come out of it, and that we are its consciousness. Its eyes. I did not remember that line until long after I had written mine down. Perhaps it had been sitting in me the whole time.

That is what the trees have been teaching all along, without a single word of Sanskrit. And it is what four days under a canopy are for. Not to read about the wisdom, but to carry it outside, and let the oldest teacher of all finish the lesson.

There is one last thing, and it is the reason for all the rest. Reverence is not the destination. It is the fuel. We protect what we revere, and we do not protect what we do not love. It is harder to fight for a forest you have only read about, or an ocean you have only seen through glass. But the one you have knelt in, gone quiet in, felt yourself dissolve into, that one you will protect without being asked.

> *"If you want to build a ship, do not drum up the crew to gather wood and give orders. Teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."*
>
> A WIDELY CIRCULATED PARAPHRASE OF AN IDEA IN ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY'S *CITADELLE*

That is this whole book. I am not here to hand you a list of rules for saving the planet. I am here to help you fall so completely in love with it that stewardship becomes the most natural thing you do.

Which brings us to the last thing I have to say, and the reason for all the rest.

Vancouver Island.

You are the forest, briefly awake. You are also the ocean, briefly able to protect itself. So be a steward. Leave the water cleaner than you found it.

That is where reverence was heading all along.

Eight

EcoKarma

REVERE · RESPECT · PROTECT

Everything in this book has been teaching two words.

Revere. Fall in love with the living world. Go outside. Pay attention. Feel what happens to a nervous system when it returns to the place it came from.

Respect. Understand that we are not separate from any of it. Yoga and ecology arrive at the same insight from opposite directions. We exist through relationship. Our breath, our food, our water, our bodies and our consciousness all sit inside systems vastly larger than us.

But there is a third word, and it is where this book has to land.

Protect.

Because it is not enough to keep receiving. Nature gives us physical health, emotional health, spiritual health, beauty, food, oxygen, water, perspective, awe. If these pages have done what I hoped, and you have fallen a little further in love with the living world, then one question remains.

What are we going to do with that love?

Notice that I did not open this book by telling you to protect the ocean. I have spent it teaching you to yearn for the sea. To feel small beneath the stars. To stand under enormous trees. To feel sunlight and wind and cold water on skin.

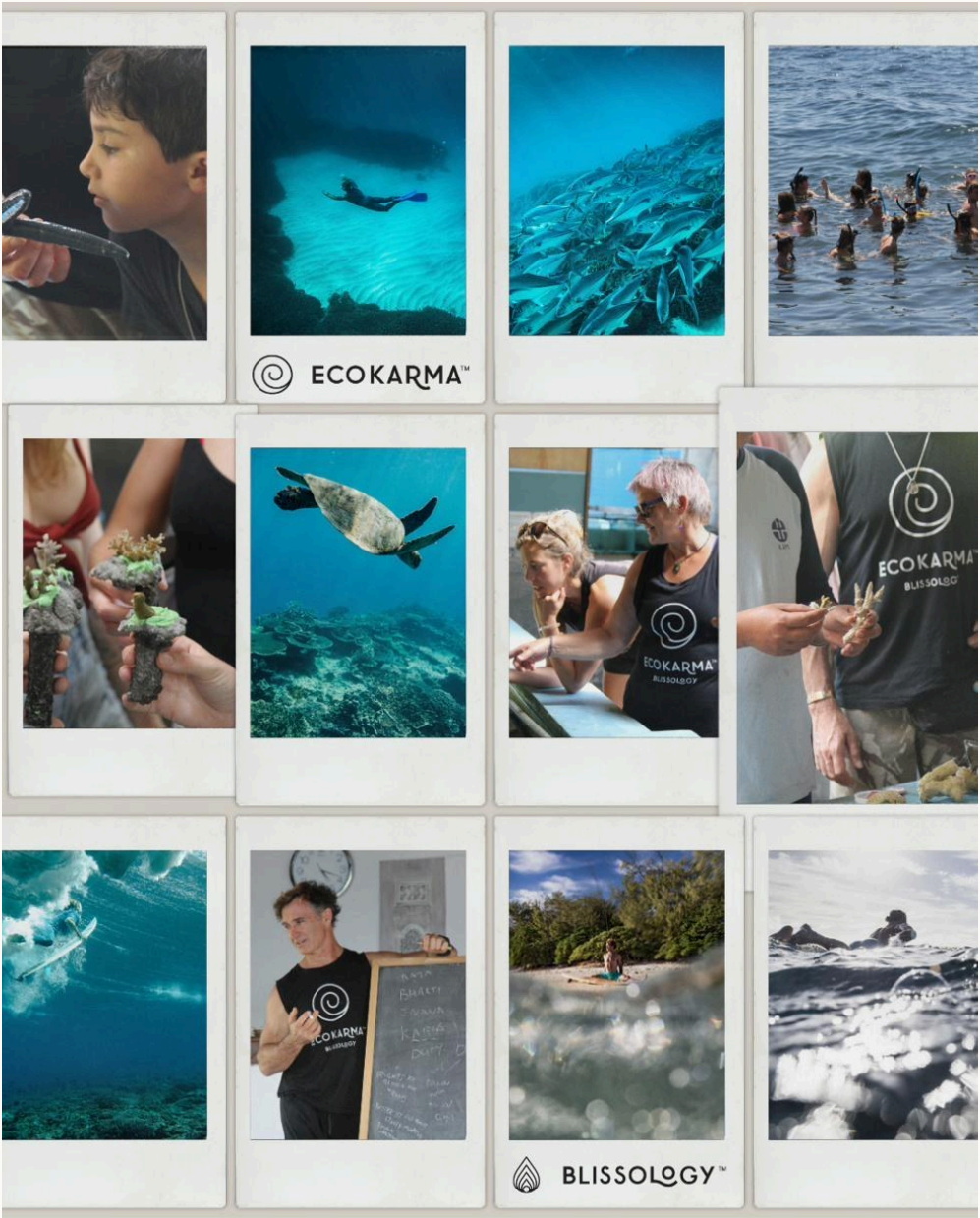
Do that first, and protection stops being an obligation imposed from outside. It becomes the natural expression of love. Jacques Cousteau said it in four words.

> *“People protect what they love.”*
>
> JACQUES COUSTEAU

Which returns us to Robin Wall Kimmerer and reciprocity. We have spent this whole book asking what nature gives us. The last question is the other one. What do we give back to what sustains us?

Not on my watch

For me this stopped being abstract in the water.



EcoKarma

I spent years surfing over reefs I loved, paddling across the same coral season after season and watching it change beneath me. There came a point when appreciation was no longer enough.

How could I spend my life teaching people about yoga, about interconnection, about the beauty of the natural world, and watch the reef under my board disappear?

Not on my watch.

That contradiction demanded action, and there is an old teaching that had been waiting for exactly this. *Karma yoga*, the yoga of action. To me it means taking our dharma, the thing we feel called to serve, and bringing it fearlessly into the world.

EcoKarma is my attempt to fuse that ancient teaching with modern stewardship.

The rainforests of the sea

Coral reefs occupy less than one percent of the ocean floor, and roughly a quarter of all marine species depend on them at some point in their lives.

So when we lose coral we are not simply losing one beautiful organism. We are losing habitat. Take the trees out of a forest and you do not just lose trees. You lose the living architecture that shelters and feeds everything else. A reef is the same.

And the coral itself is an extraordinary demonstration of the thing this whole book has been arguing.

The hard structure we recognize as coral is calcium carbonate, essentially a mineral skeleton. Living on it are colonies of tiny animals called polyps. And inside the tissues of those animals live microscopic photosynthetic algae, the *zooxanthellae*.

The coral gives the algae a protected place to live. In return the algae use sunlight to photosynthesize and hand back most of the energy the coral needs to survive and build the reef. Corals can also catch plankton with their tentacles, but for many reef-building species the algae supply the majority of the energy. It is why tropical reefs flourish in shallow, clear water. They need light. Those same algae are also responsible for most of the colour we associate with a healthy reef.

Animal. Algae. Mineral. Sunlight. Ocean.

Not separate things competing for existence. A relationship, creating something none of them could create alone.

Symbiosis made visible.

When the relationship breaks down

That relationship is delicate.

When corals become severely stressed, most famously by unusually warm water, the partnership between the coral and its algae breaks down. Ocean acidification and other pressures compromise reef health further.

The coral expels its algae. The colour disappears, and through the now transparent tissue we see the white skeleton underneath.

That is coral bleaching.

A bleached coral is not necessarily a dead one. If conditions improve soon enough, the algae return and the relationship recovers. But without its main source of energy the coral is living on greatly reduced resources, and if the stress continues it becomes vulnerable to disease and starvation.

When enough coral dies the consequences move outward. The reef loses its architecture. Fish lose habitat. Food webs change. Biodiversity falls. A thriving underwater city becomes a graveyard.

Growing a reef

The most tangible thing we do is coral transplantation, and the idea is beautifully hopeful.

Working with local restoration experts, viable fragments of coral are propagated and carefully attached to structures or suitable reef substrate where they have a chance to thrive. Think of taking a cutting from a healthy plant. A small fragment keeps growing. Over time those fragments spread into larger colonies, and the three-dimensional architecture of the reef begins to return.

And with habitat comes life. Fish find shelter. Juveniles find nursery grounds. Other organisms move in. One piece of coral becomes part of something much larger.

Something I want to clarify about the limits. This is not an instant solution, and transplantation cannot substitute for addressing the larger causes of reef decline, particularly warming oceans, pollution, destructive fishing and acidification.

But restoration matters. It gives a damaged reef a helping hand. It lets people participate directly in healing a place they love. And it turns environmentalism from an abstract position into a relationship.

You hold a living piece of coral in your hands. You place it carefully into its new home. You come back months or years later and find it has grown.

You realize your actions matter.

That is EcoKarma. Not saving nature as though we somehow stood outside it. Remembering that we are nature, and taking responsibility for the relationship.

> IN THE FOREST
>
> You do not need a reef. Pick one piece of the living world near you and give something back to it this month. Pull invasive weeds from a trail. Carry a bag on your beach walk and fill it. Plant something native. Learn the name of the watershed your tap water comes from. Reciprocity starts wherever you already stand.

Receive. Reciprocate.

The natural world has given us extraordinary gifts. Beauty. Food. Oxygen. Water. Medicine. Wonder. Belonging. For many of us, some of the happiest moments of our lives.

So the question is not only what nature can do for our health and our happiness.

The deeper question is what we can do for nature.

This is where reverence becomes reciprocity.

This book is given freely. I hope it travels far, and I hope it helps people experience yoga not only as something done on a mat but as a way of remembering our place in the web of life. If you have received something from it and feel moved to reciprocate, any donation to the EcoKarma Project is gratefully received, and it goes toward bringing living coral back to reefs that need it.

GIVE TO ECOKARMA
blissology.com/ecokarma

And if you would like to go further into all of this with me, the Yogic by Nature Immersion runs February 25 to 28, 2027, live online from anywhere in the world, or in person at Nandi Yoga in San Mateo, California. Four days of philosophy, movement, meditation and time in the living world. Details at blissology.com/yogic-by-nature-75-hr

Because gratitude should not only be something we feel.

It can be something we do.

Revere. Respect. Protect.

BEFORE YOU CLOSE THE BOOK

Five things to do this week

None of these takes more than ten minutes. Four happen outdoors. One happens in the room you already practice in.

ONE

Find a sit spot

Pick one place you can reach in ten minutes. A bench, a tree, a patch of grass, a step with a view of sky. It does not have to be beautiful. It has to be close, because close is what makes it repeatable.

Go there. Sit for ten minutes. Take nothing out of your pocket.

Then go back to the same place, at least twice more this week. The first visit you will notice almost nothing. By the third you will start noticing what has changed since the last time, and that noticing is the beginning of a relationship. This is the practice the whole book is pointing at. If you only do one, do this.

TWO

Put your feet on the ground

Take your shoes off outside. Grass, sand, dirt, cold stone. Two minutes.

I am not making a claim about your physiology here. What I know is that the fastest way I have found to stop being a head with a body attached is to give the soles of my feet something real to read. Feel temperature, texture, damp, the small unevenness of actual ground. Then walk twenty steps slowly and pay attention to nothing else.

THREE

Borrow a slower rhythm

Find something moving at nature's pace rather than yours. Water is easiest. Branches in wind, clouds, a fire, waves.

Watch it and let your breath find its way toward it. Do not force a count or a technique. Remember the note. You are not manufacturing calm, you are letting something slower sound the pitch so your own tone can fall into it.

Three or four minutes is enough. This is the single most reliable thing I know for a mind that will not settle on a cushion.

FOUR

Take it to the mat

This one needs no forest at all. Next class, do three things.

Keep your hands soft. In every pose and every transition. If the fingers press together like knives you are gripping, and the mind is gripping with them. Soften the hands and notice what the rest of you does.

Before savasana, read your gauge. Choppy, flat, or the long slow swell. Do not fix it. Just name which wave you came in on. That is the *guna* teaching in about four seconds.

Then take the last three breaths of class slower than the ones before. Not deeper. Slower. That is you sounding the note for yourself, in a room, on a Tuesday.

Do this for a month and nobody will need to explain non-attachment to you.

FIVE

Look up at night

Go outside after dark, somewhere you can see sky, and look up for as long as you can stand it.

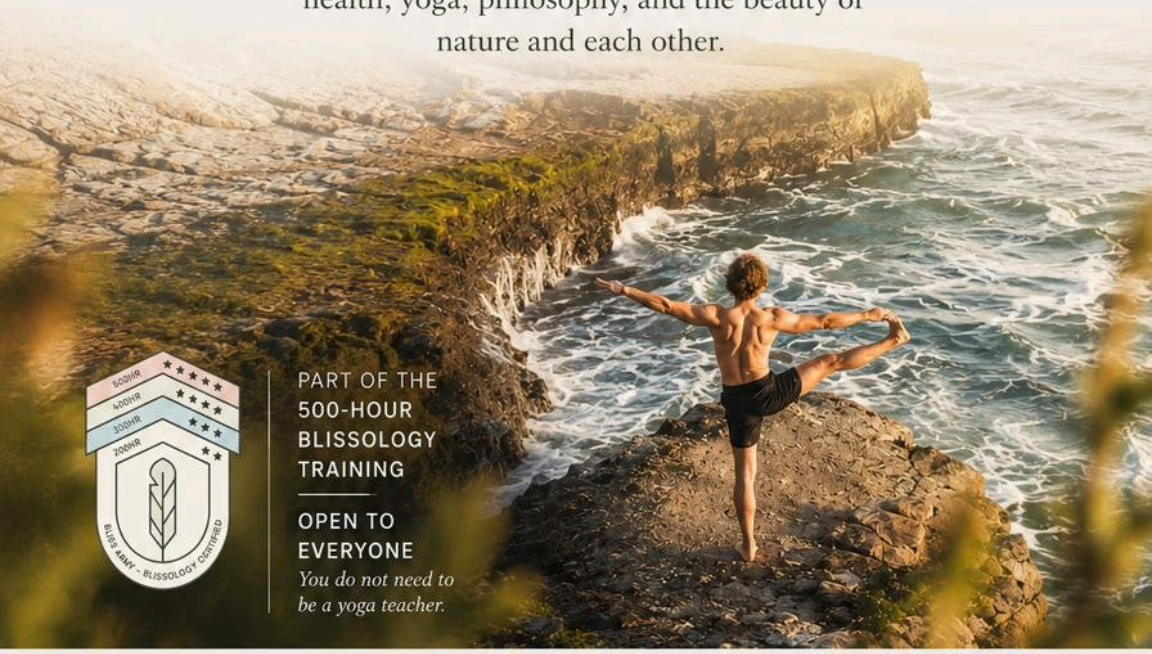
You will feel small. That is the point. The ego gets quiet in the presence of scale, which is what happened to me at eight years old by a lake, and what has kept happening ever since. Nothing in this book works better than this, and it is free, and it is available almost every night of your life.

Do these and the philosophy stops being something you read.

Yogic by Nature

IMMERSION

Four days to reconnect with what matters most—
health, yoga, philosophy, and the beauty of
nature and each other.



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Notes

For readers who want the distinctions. None of these are needed to follow the argument.

1. Even within Vedanta the schools disagree about how far the drop and the ocean are finally one. A drop that keeps its own shape while never being other than the sea is closer to Ramanuja than to Shankara, for whom the distinction ultimately dissolves. The picture I draw here leans toward the first.

2. Patanjali's text is difficult to date precisely. Scholarly estimates range across the early centuries of the Common Era, and it draws on an oral tradition considerably older than the written compilation.

3. Classical Samkhya also argues for a plurality of purushas rather than one universal consciousness. Samkhya Karika 18 reasons that if there were only one, all beings would be born and die at the same moment.

4. Yoga departs from Samkhya on one point worth knowing. Patanjali admits *Ishvara*, a special purusha never entangled with the afflictions or with karma (Yoga Sutras 1.24), and surrender to Ishvara is one of the niyamas. Ishvara is not a creator, and not a source the other purushas come from, which is why the Samkhya picture still governs the purusha and prakriti teaching.

5. Tantric traditions become clearly visible in surviving Hindu and Buddhist sources during the middle centuries of the first millennium CE, and flourished in many forms over the centuries that followed.

6. The classical Daoist texts emerge in ancient China during the late first millennium BCE, in roughly the same broad age that saw major philosophical and religious ferment in India. The Daodejing is a layered text whose date and authorship are debated, and the familiar figure of Laozi belongs as much to tradition and legend as to secure biography.

7. I first met that pair of words in *Power versus Force* by David Hawkins. I should say plainly that much of that book is pseudoscience. I do not vouch for the muscle testing, and I do not vouch for the tidy numbers it assigns to states of consciousness. What it gave me was vocabulary, and I would rather credit it than quietly keep the words.

8. The Taittiriya Upanishad describes a series of selves nested one inside the next. Later Vedanta systematized them into the five sheaths now generally called the *koshas*.

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