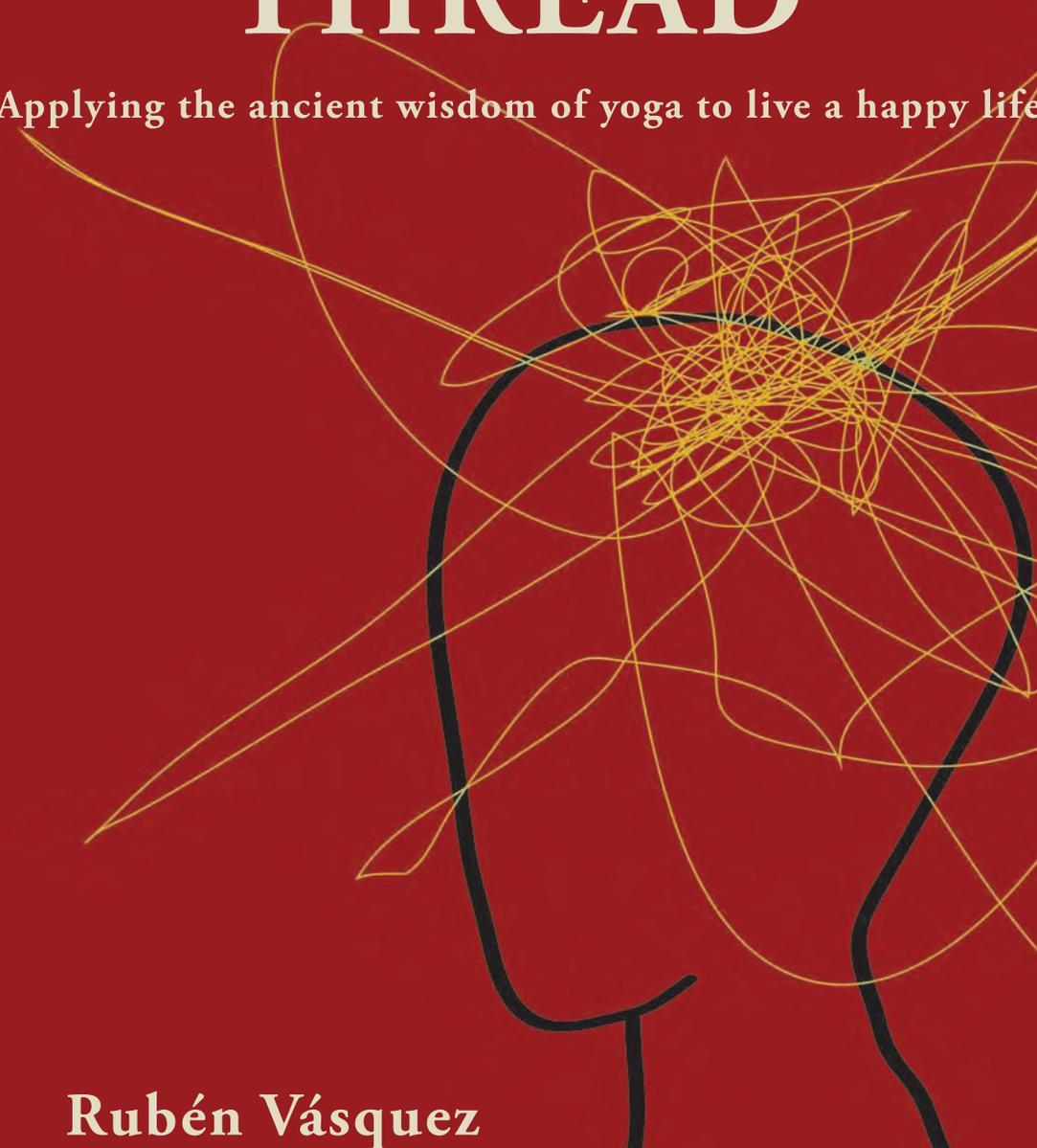


UNRAVEL THE THREAD

Applying the ancient wisdom of yoga to live a happy life

Rubén Vásquez



Unravel the Thread

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‘Unravel the Thread’ by Rubén Vásquez is an excellent book that gives a practical and down-to-earth review and interpretation of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. The writing style is coherent and easy to read. The author has made a text that is generally very difficult to read, let alone understand or use, very accessible for the general public. By using modern day-to-day examples, the author has made it very easy for the reader to relate to the subject matter. If you are in any way interested in yoga, then I wholeheartedly recommend this book.

Simon Borg-Olivier MSc BAppSc (Physiotherapy) APAM c-IAYT

Reading Unravel the Thread may transform your life! But only if you put it into daily regular practice.

What you will find in this beautiful new book by Rubén Vásquez is a friendly, compassionate and joyful map toward establishing a workable, daily practice that reflects the essence of Yoga as codified and understood through the ancient text of Patanjali Yoga Sutras. Rubén helps to de-mystify these ancient writings and offers suggestions for designing a life practice that is simply defined, practical and inherently joyful to implement. His writing voice is kind, down-to-earth, and evocative.

Keep this book by your bedside. It will inspire you to rise in the morning, curious about how you will show up in your own life, and eager to continue the process of bringing your best Self forward into this present moment.

Peentz Dubble, Certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher (CIYT), IYNAUS
Teacher Trainer and Assessor, IAYT accredited Yoga Therapist

Unravel the Thread

Rubén Vásquez has taken the time to make the Yoga Sutra's of Patanjali accessible to all, his examples and use of practical questions for the reader to answer, make it accessible to all. I highly recommend this book!

Bianca Machliss BSc BAppSc (Physiotherapy) YA-ERYT 500

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SECTION ONE: OVERVIEW



As we consistently try to meet ourselves where we are just as we are, we notice how often we get entangled by our habits, weighed down by our stories, and bound by our preferences and beliefs. We may also notice how many of our choices turn out not to be really ours. Although all this may sound discouraging, this shift in perspective carries with it the promise of transformation.

AWAKENING, ENLIGHTENMENT, LIBERATION AND TRANSCENDENCE

Yoga is not inherently good or bad, harmful or beneficial. All the practices are techniques for exploring your ability to show up to your life with integrity, grace and enthusiasm. That's why an open mind and open heart are useful because they enable you to show up unencumbered by your beliefs. The words *awakening*, *enlightenment*, *liberation* and *transcendence* are used frequently in yoga circles. Perhaps the idea of **awakening** can be understood as recognizing the fact that this moment is unique, because it has never happened before, and it will not be repeated ever again. In fact, regardless of how much you want to be in a different moment you can only be in this moment, right here and now. Indeed, this moment is the culmination of your whole life up until now. At the same time, this moment is the starting point for the rest of your life. In other words, by being in this unique moment you are experiencing the effects of all your previous actions while also planting the seeds for your own future. This moment is all that you have and the only moment in which you can act. To be awake is to recognize that you have never been in yesterday, or in tomorrow, and that you are always only in today. Awakening to that simple and irrefutable fact can be all the motivation you need to show up and do the best you can – instead of living in your head, in the *what ifs*, *what used to be*, and *what could have been*. This realization urges you to make your presence in the world matter today. The opposite of being awake is to go through life as though you were sleepwalking. Awakening is the recognition

that the present moment is the most important moment of your life. Be open to experiencing directly what awakening feels like.

When you keep repeating the same beliefs and opinions, eventually you convince yourself that your opinion is more than just a thought and, that it is actually true. Acting from that perspective may lead you to seek others with similar opinions or to be hostile to those who do not share your beliefs. Anybody familiar with human history can recognize how dogmatic ideologies have served as tools of oppression and violence for millennia. In yoga, the notion of **liberation** can be interpreted as your conscious decision to relinquish your beliefs and opinions so that you can experience your life directly, seeing what is happening with as much clarity as possible and without the interference of your preconceived ideas. Liberation also can refer to freeing yourself from your attachments and your constant inner commentary. All the techniques of yoga provide ways to uncover unhelpful patterns. A complete understanding of yoga leads you to notice the patterns in your thoughts and ways of thinking. You also see tendencies in your emotions. Your physical body, like a bodysuit, adapts to your posture and activities developing strengths and weaknesses. Your posture and emotional states influence your breathing patterns. All these tendencies influence your actions. The main approach in yoga is to remove inefficiencies and restrictions. As you free yourself from ways of being that weigh you down, notice what happens to your inner life and to your participation in everything you do.

The notion of **enlightenment** can be understood as lightening your attitude and choosing to touch everything gently, with kindness and compassion. In other words, you lighten your load by

modulating your ways of being to minimize restrictions, leading to wholehearted and mindful living. A simple way to play with this idea is to try to make your daily movements as graceful as possible and then to notice if that simple change can bring lightness within. Another suggestion would be to consider if you might be taking yourself too seriously. Often just bringing a smile to your face and your heart can have a similar lightening effect. From this perspective, enlightenment would mean to make your smile your default mode of being. Enlightenment can also be understood as flooding the present moment with the light of your undiluted awareness. Rather than trying to predict how enlightenment will feel for you, feel it directly in the wondrous interactions between your body, your mind and your emotions as well as in your daily interactions with the people and world around you.

Another word that is often used in relation to yoga and its goals is **transcendence**. In addition to the common definition of transcendence as going beyond material experience, there is a very practical aspect of transcendence, which is surpassing current limitations. Learning is a process of transcending your present levels of understanding so that your perception expands beyond its current limits. In order to grow past your current level of knowing, it is essential to be able to sit with the discomfort of not knowing. Because without acknowledging what you do not know, it is unlikely that you might even consider venturing outside the boundaries of what you do know. In other words, be curious to discover what is beyond your current levels of presence, awareness and understanding. The process of learning also entails discerning between bearable discomfort and pain. Pain produces a protective response. It feels like your body, breath and mind brace for impact.

This is very useful and highly relevant information alerting you to avoid potential injury. However, bearable discomfort is different from pain. Bearable discomfort is something that makes you uneasy, yet it does not tighten your muscles and you are still able to breathe. Bearable discomfort often emerges when you go against the grain of habit, as well as when you step out of what is familiar. It tends to happen that you may label the unusual as pain, when what you are experiencing is actually the discomfort of not knowing. It could be argued that advancing in yoga is developing a high sensitivity to distinguish clearly between bearable discomfort and pain. This is the key to transcending beyond your current ways of being, not only in yoga, but in every aspect of life.

One possible way of bringing all of these ideas together is to see yoga as a vehicle for liberation from the physical, mental and emotional ways of being that restrict your life experience and your participation. Yoga can be a journey of optimizing your participation in life with grace and kindness. You are still responsible for your own decisions and actions, and the quality of your life confirms, or denies, the accuracy of your understanding.

It may be tempting to see yoga as one way to remove yourself from life and living in the world. However, yoga is an invitation to establish clear, coherent and harmonious relationships between your body, breath, mind and emotions. Yoga is witnessing the natural symbiosis of all your systems working in unison. Moreover, there is no time when you are absolutely alone and in isolation from everything else. The belief that you are only what is confined by the boundaries of your skin, denies the fact that there is a deep interpenetration between yourself and everything else. As Lawrence

Krauss (2001) suggests, every time you breathe you are connected to almost all of life on Earth today, in the past and perhaps in the future. Because of the interconnectedness of everything, your life is a constant dance between you and your circumstances. How you choose to participate in this dance, resonates directly or indirectly with everything that exists. Yoga provides a system to guide your choices for treading through life with awareness and kindness.

Agency: you choose

As you take steps to immerse more deeply in the Yoga Sutra, notice that Patañjali offers a framework but does not make decisions for you. This respect for your own judgment pervades all of the Yoga Sutra. This may be one of the most helpful and empowering aspects of Patañjali's work. At the same time, it may be one of the most challenging because it asks you to be responsible, that is, it asks you to choose your intentions, decisions and actions consciously and deliberately. This makes sense, particularly if you see the Yoga Sutra as a handbook offering you options for self-regulation.

It is important to emphasize that nowhere in the Yoga Sutra are you asked to give up your capacity to decide for yourself. On the contrary, you are encouraged to continually cultivate your capacity to discern, so that your own internal clarity and peace can inform your actions and interactions in all environments and circumstances. This makes even more sense when you consider that you are in charge of your life and decisions, and that regardless of the choices you make, you will have to live with their consequences, including your successes and your mistakes. Yoga provides a framework guiding you to establish truth through your own explorations.

Actually, you have been conducting your own experiment throughout your life, and this yogic framework offers you a viable path to continue your experiment with intelligence and compassion. All these factors combine to underscore the importance of **not giving up your ability to choose**, so that you are committed to making your own decisions as best as you can. Since nobody can know fully your own experience, it does not make sense to let anybody else choose what is best for you. It could be argued that making your own choices and facing their consequences is your main responsibility in life.

These concepts of agency, awakening, enlightenment, liberation and transcendence are best understood as a process rather than a destination. The process begins as you choose to participate in your life consciously. Then you notice that your thoughts, words and actions generate feedback. Often the feedback you receive will trigger reactivity in the form of the bearable discomfort indicating to you that your previous perspectives, attitudes and habits no longer fit who you are. Your agency enables you to choose what you do with the feedback you receive. Choosing to ignore the feedback may seem like an easy way to deal with it. This overlooks the fact that the feedback you receive is exquisitely calibrated to your current situation. Ignoring the feedback and continuing living your life as you have been doing will result in more powerful feedback. The harder you try to stay with your old habitual ways of being, the more discomfort you will experience. The message gets louder to ensure that it goes through. This is how identity is reshaped. Every traditional culture has rites of passage marking these life transitions. It is a transformation, in many cases presented as a symbolic death of the old ways of being. Although it is sometimes a forceful process,

it also happens in a gradual, and less dramatic way, every single day when you learn something new. Remember that it is a lifelong process of growing in awareness. Trust that the process happens at the pace that you can handle.



*There is nothing as vital, essential and empowering as presence.
Presence of mind and heart communicate aliveness to intentions,
actions and interactions, thus enriching life with enduring meaning,
inspiration and responsibility.*

PRESENCE

One word summary: Atha (अथ)

Several texts in the yoga tradition start with the Sanskrit word “*atha*” (अथ). The “th” sound is pronounced like the “th” sound in *hothouse* or *lighthouse*. *Atha* can be defined both as “now” and as an exclamation used to draw attention. From the simplest point of view, all yoga techniques offer ways of bringing your complete and undivided attention to the moment you are in. The words “awareness” and “mindfulness” point to this quality of attending. The word “*atha*” is both a reminder to embark on the journey as well as a pointer to the destination: Presence. One contemporary commentator on the Yoga Sutra, Deshpande, suggests that “*atha*” can be interpreted as “and now,” which acts both as a reminder to be in this moment and a suggestion that life consists of the imperceptible passing of this now into the next now. Indeed, seeing “*atha*” as “and now” also points to the fact that even as you try to be present you will keep getting distracted from this specific and unique moment. The bulk of the practice is about keeping yourself coming back to the now moment that you find yourself in.

*BEING PRESENT IS THE ESSENCE AND GOAL OF THE
PRACTICE*

Yoga is about being present. In other words, yoga is about showing up for your life with the intention of doing the best that you can. Obviously, presence can only be experienced directly. Thus, talking about presence is not presence itself, but it can help clarify the map to your destination.

Yoga = Presence = Awareness = Being with what is

FIGURE 1. YOGA IS PRESENCE

Presence, yoga, is being with what is. When you attend to what is happening you notice that the present moment, “what is,” is dynamic. So, you find a paradox, because you are always only in this moment, right here and right now, but, this present moment keeps morphing into a brand new and unrepeatable moment. The paradox is that the present is a fleeting instant in eternal transformation. It is both a single point in time and all the different times that you have ever been in, as well as all the potential moments that you will ever be in. Take a moment to close your eyes and take this in.

Life is a precious gift delivered as the present, an always new moment. You are free to do with that gift whatever you want, and

anything you want. For instance, you can choose to ignore this moment because you think that a previous moment is the most important moment in your life. So, you may choose to invest your attention, energy and money either in trying to go back to that previous moment, or conversely, in avoiding any recollection of that previous moment at all cost. You can also choose to ignore this moment by trying to project (technically it is more like trying to re-create, because it is based on previous information) some idea, thought, emotion or experience into the future. Regardless of which avenue you choose – and many of us are trying to do both at the same time– you are still choosing to ignore this moment.

Take a moment to consider if this might be the case for you. Do you find yourself dwelling in the past or planning the future? It is remarkable that you can choose whatever approach you prefer for participating in your life. And you are choosing what you do with this precious gift all the time. Yoga is both a complete system to get you to be present and it is also the state of being with what is. For yogis, the destination is being in the eternal present moment. If you are constantly thinking about other times and places as more desirable or more important than the moment you are in, there are three reasons for understanding that this moment, right here and now, is the most important moment of your life. First, this moment is the culmination of every single moment in your life so far. Second, the moment you are in is the only moment in which you can act. Third, this moment is the starting point for the rest of your life. The actions you take right here and now will influence the rest of your life. Reflect on these three reasons. Can they invite you to show up fully to every moment?

Obviously, if you are already present all the time, or most of the time, you may already be in the state of yoga and you probably have figured out a few effective ways to stay present. However, many of us, myself included, notice quite regularly that we keep getting distracted from the present moment. In my case, I would say I get distracted much of the time. Indeed, that is the main reason I practice yoga regularly.

Presence, Being Present, Being with what is, Mindfulness, Consciousness, Attention, Awareness

Think about all of these words as focusing only on the task at hand; concentrating on a single activity; paying close attention to your actions; acting consciously and deliberately, to do what you are doing, being here now, conscious awareness, remaining focused on what is actually happening right where you are.

Life is an experiment

I confess that I am both an optimist and an idealist. So, up until not very long ago I used to assume that everyone who appeared successful in my eyes had figured out answers to at least some of the mysteries of life. By observing and listening more attentively to people and by removing my assumptions, it became apparent that each person is conducting an experiment with life. For instance, even when you have a recipe for a dish that you like and that you have made many times, every time you make it, in spite of following the recipe to a T, life in its ongoing newness and uniqueness brings

variations, large or small, that influence how the recipe turns out. Of course, that is the essence of life: ongoing newness ever transforming.

All of us are currently conducting an experiment with our lives. As Samuel Butler said, “Life is like playing a violin in public and learning the instrument as one goes on.” Some people are more or less successful at dealing with the uncertainty of not really knowing how the experiment will turn out, while others become good at pretending that they have it all figured out. In fact, since nobody has ever been in this moment before, every single person in the world is constantly improvising. Your life is your experiment, which means that you get to decide how you want to go about it. A couple of ideas can help navigate your life experiment: Framework and Attitude. A framework is a system that provides a sound structure for your experiment, and the attitude is the way in which you choose to go about it.

YOGIC FRAMEWORK

The yogic framework simply asks you to act consciously and deliberately. It is possible also to see this framework is like the scientific method. Some guidelines for applying it:

- Keep your mind open. Choose not to assume or predict.
- Notice your biases and keep them in check.
- Use your direct experience to establish what is.

- Be aware that internal activities, such as narrating, describing and complaining, etc. are not what is. They are only your reactions to what is.
- Discard anything that takes you away from what is.

ATTITUDE

The attitude you choose influences what you do and what you experience. For instance, you could choose the attitude of a seeker. In that case, you are searching, or looking, for something. The challenge is that in order to look for something, you already need to know what you are going to find. For instance, when I misplace my keys, if I do not know what they look like, I won't be able to find them. When you let go of preconceived ideas, predictions and assumptions, you are better able to notice what is actually happening, instead of dedicating energy to try to find out why things are different from your expectations. In other words, you are able to actually experience directly what is taking place. When you already think you know, you are more likely to focus your perception on being right and on seeing what think you "should" see. So, for this journey it is helpful to adopt instead the attitude of an explorer, scientist or artist, as captured in Pablo Picasso's words, "I do not seek. I find."

Another key attitude is curiosity. Curiosity is a genuine desire to understand, which infuses your actions with the energy of discovery. Curiosity tends to be more fruitful in supporting your full participation in your own life. Remember, every person is

improvising. Since life is changing all the time nobody knows what will happen. Nobody has been in this moment before, we are all improvising! What happens when you shift your energy from predicting to being curious?

Lastly, since your life is your own project, it is essential that you make your own choices instead of letting others decide for you. This is particularly helpful when you remember that you will have to deal with the consequences of your own choices and actions. The next section, Guidelines for the Journey, expands on the idea of attitude. Of course, having a useful framework and attitude is helpful only if they make sense to you and if you actually use them.

Throughout this book the application exercises are invitations for you to explore your own internal environment. Note that these exercises are not telling you what you should feel or find. In other words, rather than trying to elicit a specific answer or experience, these exercises create opportunities for you to experience presence directly in your life. Because you are unique, and your life is also unique, the experience of being you is individual. Thus, you may find some of these exercises and techniques helpful, while others may not do anything for you. Every single time, you are the one who decides if you want to make this tool part of your repertoire.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: AM I PRESENT?

Take about 15 minutes to complete this exercise.

You may find this exercise relaxing, frustrating, annoying, enjoyable, or some combination of these, and possibly other feelings. You may even notice something you had not noticed before, like some ache or pain, or some underlying preoccupation. Many of us get a feeling like it is busy inside. Perhaps you found that there is an internal voice constantly talking, describing, liking or disliking, narrating, endlessly giving opinions and asking if it is time to stop. For many of us, the exercise can help us see that our experience of the present moment seems fragmented and that our mind keeps running between the past, the future and the present. If that was the case for you, welcome to being human in the 21st century. Despite all these internal activities, let me assure you: **There is nothing fundamentally wrong with you.**

Guidelines for the Journey

The heart of the practice is to choose to be here. You attend to whatever you are feeling right here and now. Rather than engaging in internal dialogue, the point is to choose to feel what is happening. There is no need to compare with other times and places, because this experience is unique. You can choose to perceive this experience as valid, if only because you are having it right now. Whatever is happening is what your life is at this very moment. Paying attention teaches us that what we are feeling is probably changing from one moment to the next. (You may even choose to explore how your attitude, posture, breathing, thinking and feelings may influence your perception of what is happening. More on this later.) The suggestions offered here provide a guide for using yoga as your

approach to conduct your life experiment. It is intended to serve as a tool for living a conscious and deliberate life, a life that feels meaningful, joyful and vibrant.

DESIRE: SHOW UP, ONLY YOU CAN DO IT

Seeing the word desire may already prompt conflict with some traditional ideas in yoga and Buddhism, which say that all suffering results from desire. In the long history of philosophy in South Asia, there have been innumerable debates over the question of desire, including the following question: Is it possible to have no desire whatsoever? In fact, one of the ancient critiques of Buddhism argued that wanting to be enlightened is itself a desire. For the average person living in the world, not having any desire at all could result in never getting out of bed in the morning or doing anything at all. Even if it were possible, this is quite impractical for most of us. Without desire, it is very hard to get motivated to do anything.

Every day, consciously and unconsciously you make choices, big and small, about what you wear, what you eat, what you do, etc. Throughout your exploration of the Yoga Sutra, you will have to make some choices, and those choices will likely be influenced by what you want to accomplish. In this context, desire is a meaningful and heartfelt aspiration carrying with it the spark of energy to move towards what is meaningful and inspirational to you. Awakening to the undeniable fact that this moment is your life, that your life does not happen at any other time or place but right here and now can be a powerful reminder that ignites your interest and commitment to

show up to your life. Nobody else can do it for you! Anything you have achieved in your life happened because it was important enough for you to commit your time and energy to completing it. Yoga is a commitment to show up to your life ready and willing to give it your best try. In fact, can you think of a better way to participate in the source of all creativity, life itself? Besides, being present in your life is both your inalienable right and your responsibility.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Take about 10 minutes to complete this exercise.

In a comfortable position, close your eyes. Take a few moments to soften any tension from your eyes, mouth and jaw, neck and throat, shoulders and arms, abdominal and lower back area, hips and legs. Invite yourself to investigate your desires by asking yourself:

- What do I want?

As you review your answers, is there anything that helps you feel alive, awake and energized? Answers to these questions may change over time. However, it is also possible that some deeply felt desires that give you a profound sense of commitment to your life may be long-lasting. Consider choosing the most meaningful answers and turn them into affirmations to remind yourself of what you care deeply about. These affirmations may be something like, “I participate fully in my life” or “I am present and full of compassion” or “I offer support and inspiration to myself and others” or “I am contributing to make the world a better place by....” These are just a few examples. The most powerful affirmation is one that is meaningful to you, because it reflects your own personal goals and values.

ATTITUDE: OPEN MIND AND OPEN HEART

“We see the world, not as it is, but as we are.” anonymous

In the context of meeting each moment just as it is, our attitude plays a decisive role. A few years ago, my wife and I were meeting a friend in a city we had never visited before. We agreed with our friend to stay at a bed and breakfast close to the city center. The two of us arrived first, checked in, and we marveled at how charming and lovely we found our accommodations. Upon returning from a quick stroll around the city center, we found our friend had arrived at our B & B. While the two of us very much liked our place, our friend kept pointing out things that were, in her opinion, inadequate or lacking. It struck me how the same place, during the same day, could

be seen in such different ways by different people. This encounter showed clearly how our own individual attitudes influence how we feel as well as what and how we see.

Recognize that this is a unique moment, a moment in which you have never ever been before and a moment that you will never be in again. This mindset is what is sometimes known as “beginner’s mind.” Just like when we visit a new place, as our senses sharpen, and we pay close attention to what is happening, seeing this moment in its uniqueness invites us to truly appreciate it. Think about the first time you traveled to a new city and how everything captured your attention, from the quality of the light, the local architecture and color, the local shops, foods and aromas. Newness invites awareness. However, if you keep traveling to the same location again and again, or if you move to that place, it is very likely that some of the features that were new, over time, become familiar and, therefore, easy to ignore, partly because you think you already know the place. Similarly, even though you only have one chance to be in each day, because you have been in many other Tuesdays, you may assume that you already know what will happen or how you will feel. Predicting what will happen is a way to remove the anxiety resulting from uncertainty. Trying to predict is also a way of living in the past because your predictions are usually based on your previous experiences and on what you think you know. However, since life is always changing in unpredictable ways, it is impossible for most people to predict accurately what will happen even in just 48 or 72 hours. Having an open mind enables you to come to each moment appreciating that you have never been in this moment before, so that you can approach this moment with curiosity and awareness.

The complement to an open mind is an open heart. Have you noticed how arguments with our loved ones and friends often result from somebody holding on tightly to his or her way of thinking and feeling? It is difficult to be receptive while feeling defensive. Inviting the mind to open is also an invitation for the heart to release the tendency to decide beforehand how you “should” feel. Believing that the world is a hostile place closes your heart and creates the inclination to see everything through the filters of fear and anxiety. Thinking that the world is a place of cooperation and connection, creates possibilities for communication and community. Take a moment to reflect on how you see the world: Is it a hostile place or a friendly place? Does life require you to be aggressive and competitive, or does it ask you to be helpful and cooperative? What direct evidence has informed your current views? How do your ideas influence your attitude, perceptions and emotions?

Trying to be present and focused on each moment may uncover some unconscious ways of thinking and feeling that influence your attitude. One of the questions to revisit frequently is this: Are there any obstacles preventing you from showing up to each moment with an open mind and an open heart? What are the assumptions coloring your mind? What are the predispositions coloring your emotions? What would it take to invite yourself to participate in your life with gentle curiosity, gratitude and enjoyment? What happens if you see that this day will never come back? What happens if you act as if you had infinite time for what you are doing?

OFFERING YOURSELF THE GIFT OF TIME

Giving yourself time is an essential skill for engaging in meaningful projects and for establishing meaningful relationships with yourself, with others, and with the world around you. Currently, we treat time as a commodity. Time seems to be a luxury that not everybody has. It seems unusual, at least for urban dwellers, to find people who have plenty of time. On the contrary, it seems like a great majority of people feel pressed for time. Despite having more and more technological tools to help us “manage our time” and increase our productivity, time remains scarce. Believing that “time is money” generates a way of thinking urging us to stop wasting time, to save time and to gain time, as if time were a concrete object. People living in areas where daylight savings is observed, agree on advancing or reversing the clock at certain times in the year. This action of changing the clock can be a reminder that time is a human convention, a tool we created for our convenience.

As author Joe Marshalla points out, time is just a way to measure the passing of now. Regardless of what day of the week or what time of day it is, **you are always only in right here and right now**. Right here and now is the most important moment in life, because your actions can only take place in the present moment. Actions that happened before or may happen in the future exist only as memories and ideas in our minds. Seeing that this moment is unique and precious can be enough to offer ourselves the gift of time. However, feeling busy often gives a person a sense of self-importance, a sense of being needed in other times and places. What does it take to give yourself permission to be fully present? Will life elsewhere continue its endless movement even when you are not there? Can the world

survive without you? What if you consider that there are tens of thousands of different circumstances that had to happen in order for the moment you are in to be exactly as it is? Perhaps all of these things are conspiring to create a unique opportunity for you to participate consciously and deliberately in this moment, inviting you to take part in the only way that you can, by being you. Learning to see that your own life deserves your undivided attention is important. Otherwise, it is highly unlikely that you can be present. You are important. You have something unique to contribute to the world, something that nobody else can give. Offering yourself the gift of time enables you to dedicate your attention and energy to what is truly important.

RELAX

Knowing that you can be effective only in the place where you are enables you to let go of other times and places. Consider how often you take time just to be. When we try to be still and quiet, many of us notice a constant stream of thoughts and opinions running through our minds. Many, if not all, of those thoughts are related to either the past or the future in the form of regrets, worries, plans, dreams and fears. One way of redirecting your attention and energy is to ask yourself if there is anything wrong (that is within your power to change) right where you are. If there is something that needs fixing and, you can fix it right there and then, then do it. Otherwise, if whatever needs to be fixed is out of reach at this point, then just drop it. Let it go. As a result, you can efficiently free up energy currently used as tension, stress and worry.

Being relaxed is not the same as feeling sleepy or exhausted. Actually, redirecting energy away from mental, emotional and muscular tension and towards being in the present moment has the dual effects of helping you feel relaxed and energized at the same time, because that energy that was previously allocated to tension, suddenly becomes available for presence. Try this now for a few minutes. Redirect your energy away from planning, remembering or worrying by asking this: Is there anything that is wrong, right here and now, that is within your power to change? Then, fix whatever needs fixing, if anything. If there is nothing to fix, then smile and enjoy being in a time and place where there is nothing wrong. Notice how you feel afterward.

DISTRACTIONS

If you are a normal human, know that distractions will happen. They will happen, sooner or later, either a few times or countless times. Distractions may be either external or internal. They may come in many forms, like memories and emotions. Some distractions may be enticing, while others may not be welcome at all. Regardless of what the distraction is, to the best of your ability, just drop it. It may help to remember that this is the only moment you have and thus, that no other moment can be more important. So, let go of the distraction and **return to this irreplaceable moment without any struggle, any strain or self-judgment**. Note: *This attitude may be the single most important skill to cultivate*. Notice that you got distracted, and just return to now, without agitation, without complaining, without self-criticism. I would even suggest that this is what the

practice aspect of yoga is about: letting go of what is not here and calmly choosing to be in the only place where we can act and make a difference. Struggle, strain and self-judgment are completely the opposite of being with what is. In clear and simple terms: In yoga we practice presence.

Indeed, I have discovered that the process of presence is easy and simple. We wake up to the fact that the moment we are in requires and deserves our undivided attention. We choose to be here, doing what we are doing. I'll repeat this: It is simple, and it is easy. In order to bring your awareness into this moment, just chose to pay attention to one of your senses, take a conscious breath or move in a deliberate and slow manner. It is simple. What seems difficult is noticing how often distractions happen. If we have expectations like "I should be able to be free from distractions for at least X minutes," frustration will emerge as soon as we notice that we got distracted. All human beings tend to develop patterns of thinking, feeling and moving. Some of those patterns are more useful than others. Noticing that you are getting distracted, that your attention is not focused on what you intended, is not a failure. On the contrary, noticing distractions is proof that your practice is working because you are becoming aware of your inclinations – your ways of being. Remember, what is important is to keep returning to your focal point, this moment. And, returning without struggle, strain or self-judgment and with a gentle smile helps lessen your level of frustration. Over time, your ability to return to presence will become its own helpful pattern.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: ATHA

Remember that *atha* is a call to attention. In Sanskrit one of the meanings of the word “*mantra*” is “instrument of thought.” A *mantra* is a reminder, a word used to engage your mind and to collect your attention. You can use any word as your *mantra*. *Atha* can be the simple reminder to return from distracted mind to presence. The practice is simple: Every time you notice that you are distracted, either by thinking of other times or places or by listening to one of your internal “stations,” say *atha* aloud or mentally. Once you return to being with what is, let go of the *mantra*. You can choose to combine the previous exercise, “Am I present?” with this one and notice if it is helpful in returning to presence. Please keep in mind that nobody is keeping count of how many times you get distracted. The only thing that matters is to keep coming back to presence. Sometimes, you may think that you should keep using the *mantra* all the time. However, just like you exit the train or get off the bus, once you reach your destination, you can let go of the *mantra* once it has served its purpose, to bring you into presence again. Of course, if you get distracted again, you may use the *mantra* again, as many times as you get distracted.

SMILE

Growing up my father often reminded me to smile. His reminders took a while to take hold, but now I am grateful for his advice. During my time living in Thailand, I was inspired by the beautiful, heartwarming and genuine smiles of Thai people. It made

a lot of sense to me that Thailand is often called “The land of smiles.” Often, during my day, I still remind myself to bring a smile to my face, my eyes and my heart. It is still amazing to me to feel how simple and powerful a smile can be. When you are walking around, what happens when you look at someone and smile gently? How do you feel? To what extent do your attitude and experience change when you smile?

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: HOW DOES A SMILE FEEL?

Take about 5 minutes to explore this exercise

Find a place where you can relax in a comfortable position. You may keep your eyes open or closed. However, remember that your optic nerve is one of the major sources of stimuli to your brain. Try to feel as best as you can what it feels like to be you right now. Then bring a gentle smile to your face and pay close attention to any changes in your internal environment. First, notice the physical changes that happen when you smile. Then notice if there are any associated changes in your mental and emotional states. If the changes are beneficial in any way, would you consider making a smile part of your regular mode of being? It is simple, it is inexpensive, and it is often useful, not only internally but also in your interactions with others. Relax. Notice the climate in your internal environment. Smile. What happens? How do you feel?

Would it make sense for you to make a habit of bringing a smile to your face?

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: I AM HERE NOW

Take 5 minutes or more to complete this exercise.

Another mantra we can use is saying to ourselves “I Am Here Now.”

Find a comfortable position where you can be relaxed and attentive. Close your eyes. Invite your body to relax and your mind to attend to the ongoing sensations taking place in this moment. Observe your body breathing at its own natural rhythm. As you feel your breath, you can say to yourself, “I,” when you notice your body inhaling. On the exhalation say, “AM.” As the following inhalation begins, mentally say, “HERE.” And when you exhale the next time say to yourself, “NOW.” Stay with the *mantra* for the duration of the exercise. Remember, most likely there will be distractions. As you become aware that you are distracted, just keep returning to saying the *mantra* with the rhythm of your natural breath. Then release the *mantra* and take a few moments to notice the effects.

This simple technique gives you the opportunity to tune into presence. This happens as you feel your natural breathing process and through giving your mind a very simple task that follows your natural breathing. The meaning of the words reinforces your intention to bring yourself to this moment.

Results

Like with any other activity, it is essential to be able to tell if your practice is working. When you define yoga as presence, your yoga practice consists of choosing to show up to your own life, every day for every moment of it. It is a self-reinforcing cycle that starts with your decision to participate consciously and deliberately in your own life. Increasing the quality of your participation in your daily activities has a direct influence in the quality of your life. You know that your yoga practice is working because your life experience improves: You feel healthier, happier and more energetic.

If, on the other hand, any aspect of your yoga practice is generating more agitation, negative self-talk, pain and complaining, then the techniques you are using, or the approach you are following, may not be the most appropriate at this time. In that case, you can return to the notion that yoga is both a practice and a state. To start the cycle, choose to be present. Second, notice the distractions that take you away from this moment. Next, choose to drop the distractions. With a friendly attitude, keep returning to the only moment when you can act, the moment you are in. Knowing that whatever decisions you make in this moment have ramifications that will influence the next moment (and the rest of your life) may be enough motivation to make intelligent decisions right where you are. In the end, it is your responsibility to participate in your own life, because it is your life, and nobody else can decide for you what is best or what to do. Make conscious and deliberate decisions, if only because you are the one who will have to live with the consequences. A question that can direct your exploration is this: Am I noticing a growing tendency to participate actively in my life instead of

endlessly entertaining myself with my opinions and internal dialogue?

Yoga → Quality of Life +

FIGURE 2. YOGA RESULTS IN INCREASED QUALITY OF LIFE

SUCCESS

Success can be defined as accomplishing goals. As a living being, staying alive is your main goal. The fact that you are alive, breathing and reading this, means that you have navigated successfully all the previous moments in your life. Indeed, every single moment in your life, every single decision and action, including triumphs, mistakes and everything in between, have brought you to this moment. This moment is the culmination of your whole life. In other words, this moment is the single most important moment of your entire life.

THIS MOMENT IS IT

There is no other moment. This is the only time you can act and participate in your life. How you attend to this moment is a choice (conscious or unconscious) that you make. Your actions will influence every single moment after this. Of course, since it is your

life, you are free to choose whatever you want to do. Being fully present in this moment is essential.

The other definition of success is to keep trying. As a normal human being you will be distracted many times. Just keep returning to this moment with gentle friendliness and cultivate everything that is conducive to living a vibrant, joyful and meaningful existence. As you continue exploring options for living consciously, remember that you *are* a success and remember that presence can be invited but it cannot be forced.

As you continue on this path, consider keeping a journal of your explorations as a space for reflection. This may offer you some insights into how your journey is unfolding.

PRESENCE GUIDELINES

- Set your meaningful intention
- Show up with open mind and open heart
- Give yourself time
- Relax and cultivate being with what is
- Distractions will happen
- Keep returning to this moment
- Release any strain, any struggle and any self-judgment
- Smile
- Feel the effects

Unravel the Thread explains ancient yogic wisdom in simple everyday language. Anyone who is curious about personal transformation will be able to relate to the concrete, practical advice, examples, questions and suggestions presented in this book. In addition, because it explains the complete Yoga Sutras at both an overview level and at an individual sutra level, **Unravel the Thread** is an ideal reference and guide for yoga students, yoga teachers as well as for teacher training programs.

‘Unravel the Thread’ by Rubén Vásquez is an excellent book that gives a practical and down-to-earth review and interpretation of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. The writing style is coherent and easy to read. The author has made a text that is generally very difficult to read, let alone understand or use, very accessible for the general public. By using modern day-to-day examples, the author has made it very easy for the reader to relate to the subject matter. If you are in any way interested in yoga, then I wholeheartedly recommend this book.

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What you will find in this beautiful new book by Rubén Vásquez is a friendly, compassionate and joyful map toward establishing a workable, daily practice that reflects the essence of Yoga as codified and understood through the ancient text of Patanjali Yoga Sutras. Rubén helps to de-mystify these ancient writings and offers suggestions for designing a life practice that is simply defined, practical and inherently joyful to implement. His writing voice is kind, down-to-earth, and evocative.

Peentz Dubble, Certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher (CIYT), IYNAUS Teacher Trainer and Assessor, IAYT accredited Yoga Therapist

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