

## Understanding the chant to Patanjali

Yogena cittasya padena vācām.....If you've ever attended an Iyengar yoga class, you've heard these Sanskrit words being chanted just after the ohm's and before the practice starts. Maybe you know the chant and maybe you don't but perhaps you've wondered what the chant means and why it is performed.

The sage Patanjali is the author of the original yoga sutras. No one really knows when Patanjali lived but the best guess is sometime in the period of 200 BC to 200 AD. At that time, yoga had been practiced for maybe thousands of years. But no one had written down how to practice it or the significance and meaning of the practice. Patanjali codified his thoughts about yoga and compiled them into one hundred and ninety-five sutras or aphorisms. The sutras don't explain the postures or the breath but are an outline for living a moral life and for incorporating the science of yoga into finding your true self.

Patanjali defines yoga as calming the fluctuations of the mind. He explains the path of yoga as well as the obstacles in following that path. But he didn't stop there. He also wrote about Ayurveda, the science of medicine and the sister discipline of yoga. And he wrote about Sanskrit grammar. This Patanjali was obviously a very intelligent and talented sage.

The translation of the chant is this: To purify the mind and consciousness, Patanjali gave us the science of yoga. To purify the use of words and speech he gave us commentary on grammar allowing us to speak in a clarified and distinct manner. To remove the impurities of the body and perfect our health, he gave us the science of medicine (Ayurveda). Let me go near the one who has given these things to us. Let me bow down my head with my folded hands to Patanjali.

The next part of the chant describes the appearance of Patanjali. The chant says his upper body is in the human form. In one hand he is holding a conch and in the other a disc. On top of his head he has a thousand hoods of cobra because he is the incarnation of Adishesha, the greatest cobra. I bow down to Patanjali. The importance of repeating the particulars of his appearance is to practice and meditate with his form before our eyes.

The conch and the disc have a distinct meaning. The conch was used as a horn and blown before rituals. The horn was a call to the ceremony but it also has a deeper meaning. The sound is meant to awaken us and open our ears so we can hear the meaning of the ritual. In this case it's the practice of yoga. Our ears are opened so we can hear the lessons of the teacher. The disc is weapon that has a sharp edge. The sharpness is meant to cut through our ego and any denseness that is covering our ability to absorb the teachings and the meanings of the practice.