



Buddhism and the Yoga Sutra with Brian K. Smith, Ph.D.

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By **Charlotte Holtzermann**

Buddhism and Yoga share the same goal of stopping the turnings, the illusionary habits, of our minds. "Both traditions start with ethics, end with meditation and aim to eliminate suffering" said Brian Smith, our workshop leader.

Also known as Ven. Sumati Marut, meaning good mind, strong wind, Smith was ordained in 2005 as a novice monk in the Gelukpa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

Looking robust in the red robes of a Tibetan monk, he led us through four nights of study of Buddhist thought in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, a spring course offering in LMU's Yoga Philosophy program. Buddhism and yoga were presented as plural, interdependent and complementary traditions. Four nights were only enough to scratch the surface.

Smith chanted with vigor, explained the roots and key words with a clan of cognates and handed out a thorough syllabus. His interpretation of Patanjali's text in *The Essential Yoga Sutra*, a translation by his teachers, Geshe Michael Roach and co-author Christie McNally was part of the discussion.

Chanting is critical to the understanding and study of the *Yoga Sutra*. Each class included a group chant of "*citta – vritti – nirodhah*," from the second verse of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*: yoga is the restraint of fluctuations of the mind. Smith's most repeated example illustrating *vritti*, how the mind turns and projects deception, recognized that "the irritating person out there is really our own inner irritation."

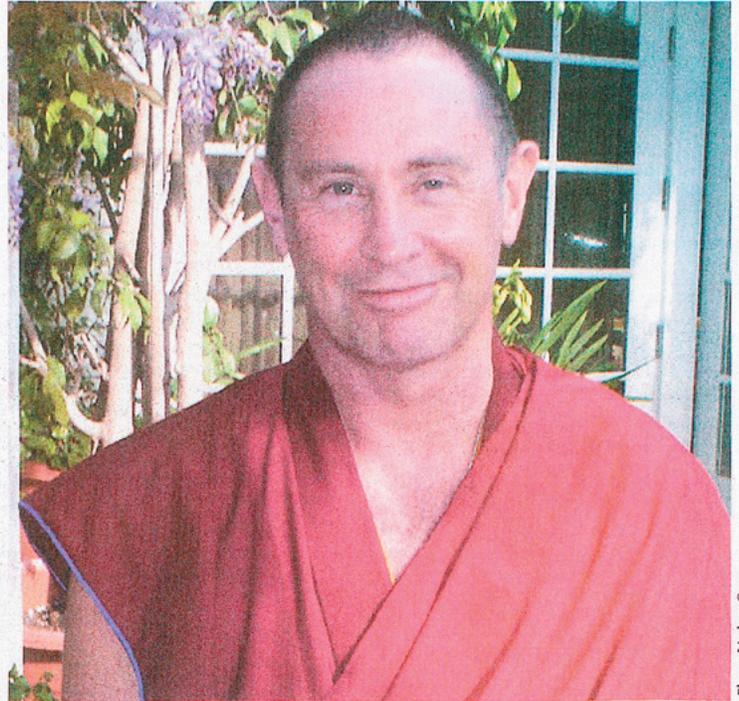


Photo: Lindsay Crouse

Smith led us to probe and consider ideas common to Buddhist and Yogic texts: ignorance, impermanence, suffering, emptiness, ethics, *karma*, compassion, liberation. Hearing "Everything changes all the time, you will lose everyone you love at some point," gave me a mindset to mend an aching heart. I left class feeling grateful for this small dose of Buddhist therapy.

Patanjali's eight *angas* or limbs of yoga impart a sense of structure and definition. 2.29 *yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, samadhaya astav angani*: restraints, observances, postures, control of breath, withdrawal of senses, concentration, meditation and *samadhi* are the eight limbs.¹

The group looked at these eight rungs on the ladder, so to speak, of yoga practice in view of the Buddhist Eightfold Path which discusses right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right effort, right mindfulness, right livelihood and right concentration. Here again was evidence of the similarity of intentions and means in Buddhism and yoga.

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Further investigation utilizing *The Five Precepts in Buddhism* by Thich Nhat Hanh, yielded parallel views yet again. Thich Nhat Hanh cites “no killing, no lying, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no intoxicants” while “non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence and non-coveting” are found in the *yamas*, the first limb of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*.

Smith stressed that understanding and living the ethics of the *yamas* and *niyamas* comes before practicing poses. With Buddhism, the observances and restraints from the second *pada* give rise to *siddhis* or rewards of an enlightened mind.

Sanskrit words settled deep in my mind as I sat again reminiscing on advice from one of my Iyengar teachers, Eric Small: “You should lie down and do *pranayama* for ten years before you practice sitting meditation.” The notion of *sunyata*, emptiness, transparency, formlessness, helped me glimpse living in freedom, understood as *kaivalya* in yoga and *nirvana* in Buddhism.

Notes:

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Chapple, Kelly, Sri Sat Guru Publications, Delhi, India, 1990.

www.yogastudiesinstitute.org;

www.aci-la.org;

www.extension.lmu.edu

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