

Ashtanga Yoga Opening Chant

The Opening Prayer is a blessing of gratitude offered to the lineage of teachers and their students who have enabled this ancient practice to survive through thousands of years so that we can experience its benefits today. The recitation of this mantra cleanses the energy of the space we have chosen to practice yoga, as well as preparing the mind, body and emotions for the forthcoming Ashtanga sequence.

Like all mantra, there is a literal meaning, a metaphor and an intention.

The first verse was a particular favourite of Krishnamacarya's, and comes from a longer text called the Yoga Teravali, written by Adi Shankar.

The author of the second verse is unknown, but is believed to have been invoked before reciting the Yoga Sutras. (dated back about 1000 years)

Opening prayer (Invocation to Patanjali)

Om

*vande gurūṇāṃ caraṇāravinde
saṁdarśita svātma sukhāvabodhe
niḥśreyase jāṅgalikāyamāne
saṁsāra hālāhala mohaśāntyai*

*ābāhu puruṣākāraṁ
śaṅkhacakrāsi dhāriṇam
sahasra śirasaṁ śvetam
praṇamāmi patañjalim*

Om

*I bow to the lotus feet of the Supreme Gurus
which awaken insight into the happiness of pure Being,
which are the refuge, the jungle physician,
which eliminate the delusion caused by the poisonous herb of Samsara (conditioned existence).
I prostrate before the sage Patanjali
who has thousands of radiant, white heads (as the divine serpent, Ananta)
and who has, as far as his arms, assumed the form of a man
holding a conch shell (divine sound), a wheel (discus of light or infinite time) and a sword
(discrimination)*

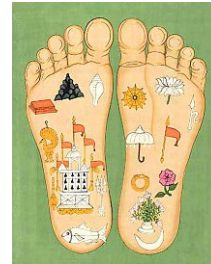
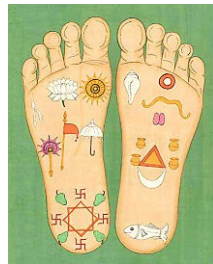
I praise the lotus-feet of my teachers,
who show [the method of] becoming aware of the joy in my own self;
They serve as the highest of healers,
pacifying the poisonous delusions of cyclical existence.

I bow to Patanjali, who has a half-human form,
a thousand radiant heads, a conch-shell, a discus, and a sword.

First line: gratitude for the lineage of teachers/practitioners (gurunam is plural) that have gone before us (and we are now part of that living tradition). As a prayer honouring teachers – it cultivates within us studentship – reminding us to remain open to what will be revealed in the practice. In this, we also surrender our ambitions/what we “know”, which is as important as the practice itself (vairagya and abhyasa). The symbolism of “lotus-feet” has several connotations: knowledge embodied (the lotus indicates transcended knowledge/awareness or purified mind);

following the footsteps of those gurus who have walked the path before us – the feet being the vehicle of travel on a physical journey, the lotus-feet on the spiritual; prostrating to feet cultivates humility – often touching the guru's feet then one's own forehead hoping that even the lowest of the guru's knowledge can be understood by us; the imprint of the guru on the earth/on us, it is said the master plants his lotus-feet in the heart of the disciple; similarly, using the word “carana” which also means “root” reminds us we need to build deep roots/foundation, to grow to our highest potential. Finally, though called lotus-feet, the images are sometimes of footprints indicating transcendence (from the human condition).

In a nutshell – we aim to be humble and to follow the footsteps of the gurus.



Second line: gratitude for the methods they show us to reveal the essence of our true nature – which is that of Happiness. It is believed that all suffering comes from avidya (ignorance of our true nature) resulting in mistaken identity with this body/mind complex. From there all other ailments arise (greed, anger, attachment etc). I/e ignorance leads to delusion (moha) considered to poison our minds and heart, clouding our vision and thinking.

Jungle physicians were once the highest rank of healers – removing even the most toxic poison from the body. They also needed to know Nature intimately to be able to heal and not harm. Our gurus are like that, knowing our Nature intimately and removing the poison of delusion from our minds, that keeps us stuck in the cyclic nature of existence = conditioning (and from experiencing our true nature). I also like the suggestion by a yoga teacher called Griffin – that they are able to “who can enter the twisted “jungle” of our minds and guide us toward healing “ - they can show us the way. The poison causes dis-ease/agitation in our minds, the healers pacify/bring peace to our minds. (remember calming the vrittis?)

Then the invocation to Patanjali (which like many slokas/hymns is simply a description of the deity/guru – in this case Patanjali has taken almost god-like status for his divine mind). This chant reflects the status of Yoga (not just asana) in Pattabhi's system. He was a Sanskrit scholar and placed high value in the philosophy. The name of Pattabhi's system is Ashtanga – named in honour of the classical Ashtanga (8 limb system) at the heart of the Yoga Sutras, of which “asana” is just one branch. The 5% theory 95% practice quote attributed to Pattabhi could as easily be attributed to putting into practice the whole methodology of Yoga, as much as simply practicing asana.

Often translated to talk about his half-human form with the other half being serpent, the more literal translation is that he was a rare man among many. “Abahu” meaning few/rare but also can mean “bodily limbs”. The serpent that is referred to is Ananta – the serpent deity that acted as Brahma's couch when he became tired and needed to rest after creating the world. So the wisdom of Patanjali can be said to be strong enough to take the weight of all creation, and yet soft as a couch (reflected in the instruction that our asanas be “sukham sthiram”). It holds true for all.

With the half-man, half-deity representation, we are reminded of the spark of divinity within us all.. After all, our yoga journey is to remember Who we are – divine! It can also reflect the union of our lower/human nature with our higher/Divine nature The serpent is said to represent Kundalini energy – which when awakened is said to unite the opposites and unify all aspects of the Self. Patanjali, although he doesn't mention Kundalini is said to have mastered this creative force. Master of Creation. The thousand white radiant heads are said to be serpent heads – white meaning purity,

also undifferentiated state. The snake is said to be a cobra with its hood spread providing shelter and protection – also warning away those who want to stay in delusion. It is also a reminder that this path is not without danger, and one must approach carefully, with dedication. The more heads in iconography indicate more wisdom. A thousand is usually the highest number used, therefore the highest wisdom. Also a thousand perspective/ways of viewing the world (darshana meaning philosophy, literally means view or perspective), yet concentrated in the one – Patanjali. Patanjali has also become a title – with healers and sages being known collectively as Patanjali. They all share the same source of ultimate knowledge. He holds a shanka/conch = call to action, call to battle (of the egoic mind), call to the spiritual path, a beginning, a commitment, and also you can hear the sea within – the sound of the ocean of bliss/oneness – the sound behind all sounds. The conch is often sounded at the beginning of ceremony.

He holds a chakra/wheel/discus = the cyclic nature of samsara/conditioned mind and the sharp weapon to cut through the conditioning. The wheel also represents time – when one has attained yoga they are beyond time/cyclic existence, and dwell in the centre of all, which is the NOW, which is emptiness.

He holds an Asi/sword – to cut through the veils of delusion. The sword is the sword of discernment – cutting through confusion to see clearly, to know truth from untruth. It cuts the ties that bind us and sets us free from our attachments to the material world. The sword also cuts through our internal ego structures – a process that can be painful.

The final description is the thousand radiant white heads as previously mentioned – a thousand ways of seeing the truth, yet we are one. The crown chakra is also called Sahasrara – thousand petals – again the highest number of petals indicating the highest wisdom.

In a nutshell – we are grateful to Patanjali, who represents the source of all knowledge and all of those who have gone before us and show us the methods of liberation. We know we will have to work, but we will be set free.

वन्दे : *Vande* : *I Praise*

गुरुणां : Gurunam : The plurality of all teachers

चरण : Carana : Feet / Root

अरविन्द : Aravinda : Lotus Flower

सन्दर्शित : Sandarsita : Shown / represented

स्वात्म : Svatma : Sva Atma : Own self / True nature

सुख : Sukha : Pleasant or joy

अवबोधे : Avabodhe : Avabuddhyate : To become aware of / to inform or explain

निःश्रेयस : Nishreyase : Best

जाडल् : Jangal : Jungle

कय : Kaya : Every one

अमनि: Amani : Way or road

संसार : Samsara : Cycle of worldly existence

हलाहल : Haalaahala : Deadly poison

मोह : Moha : Delusion

शान्तयति { शान्तय् } : Shantiyai : Pacify

अबहु : Abahu : Few

पुरुष : Purusha : Men

आकर : Akaram : Of multitudes

शङ्ख : Shanka : Conch Shell

चक्र : Chakra : Disc or wheel

असि : Asi : Sword

दारि : Dari : To tear asunder. Darinam is the “plural” case, meaning an uncounted/uncountable number.

सहस्र : Sahasra : Thousand

शीर्ष : Sirsam : Heads

श्वेत : Sveta : White

प्रणाम : Pranama : Bow or respectful salutation

मीनाति { मी } : Minati { Mi } : To make

पतञ्जलि : Patanjali : to Physicians / Philosophers (the name has become a title)