

I. The Four Infinite Thoughts

The following list of the Four Infinite Thoughts is from the first chapter of Master Patanjali's classic, The Yoga Sutra:

मैत्रीकरुणामुदितोपेक्षणां सुखदुःखपुण्यापुण्यविषयाणां
भावनातश्चित्तप्रसादनम् ॥ ३३ ॥

*Maitri karuna muditopekshanam sukha duhkha punya-apunya vishayanam
bhavanatash chitta prasadnam.*

I.33 You must use kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Learn to keep your feelings in balance, whether something feels good, or whether it hurts; whether something is enjoyable, or distasteful. This practice makes the mind bright and clear as pure water.

* * * *

Here is the full context in which the Four Infinite Thoughts appear in the Yoga Sutra, along with some explanation from The Essential Yoga Sutra:

21

Beginning Obstacles

I.30a Obstacles occur when the mind is distracted, and this can be caused by illness, fogginess in the mind, having doubts, carelessness, and laziness...

*Vyadhi styana sanshaya pramada-alasya
avirati bhranti darshana-alabdha
bhumikatva-anavasthitatvani
chitta vikshepas tentarayah.*

We have too much to do, too much to think about. It's all our own choice, but it gets worse under certain conditions. Here begins a list of major obstacles to the life of the spirit.

Illness is obviously an obstacle but can also become a fulfilling spiritual practice. It inspires us to work on what's really important in life, and makes us more humble and sympathetic of others who have problems.

Mental fogginess or dullness comes for example from not enough sleep, or too much food. As a culture we have perfected gluttony and abolished the word. It keeps our minds from operating quickly and clearly.

Incorrect meditation can also leave us a little foggy-headed. Real meditation gives us a bright, clear, strong mind that enables us to do anything well, from dishes to computers to ultimate reality.

Examining spiritual ideas critically is excellent; doubt in the form of avoiding the job of figuring out life is not. Carelessness here is not staying aware of how our actions affect others and ourselves—alcohol and drugs are ideal ways to cultivate carelessness. Laziness is when we simply don't feel like doing things that we know are good and helpful for everyone.

22

Ultimate Obstacles

I.30b ...And by mistaken views of the world
which are left uncorrected,
failing to reach specific levels,
or not being established in them firmly.

How we view the world—our worldview—is in the end the only thing that decides whether we suffer or find real happiness.

It's extremely important to realize that an entire civilization can be caught up for many years in a disastrously mistaken view of the world. For thousands of years sensible people believed that the world was flat. The courageous, democracy-minded founders of the United States kept human beings as slaves and believed they were animals, not people.

Our culture today has its own massively mistaken ideas of the world, and these cause all the hunger, poverty, sickness, and war in the world. If our people's view of the world is causing pain to others and ourselves, then we must look for a better one, one that works. If it doesn't work, we cannot simply continue to follow whatever we learned as children, whether it came from parents or schools, churches or governments. True yoga is the search for a worldview that actually works to bring people happiness.

There are specific levels in our path where we eliminate, forever, different spiritual obstacles like doubt. We need to learn what these levels are, how to reach them, and how to stay there.

23

Inner and Outer

I.31 The mind flies off,
and with that come pain in the body;
unhappy thoughts; shaking in the hands
and other parts of your body;
the breath falling out of rhythm
as it passes in and out.

*Duhkha daurmanasya angam ejayatva
shvasa prashvasa vikshepa sahabhuvah.*

Yoga is also the union of the inner and outer methods for reaching total purity. This union depends upon the connection between our physical outer body and our spiritual inner body.

Your entire being is like the layers of an onion. The outermost layer is the gross physical body. The next layer down is what feeds this layer, the breath being our most important “food.” This breath layer is linked to a layer of subtle physical energy called prana, or the “inner winds.”

These winds flow throughout our body in the next layer, a network of tiny tubes or channels more subtle than the finest light. Upon the winds in these channels ride our thoughts themselves, the innermost layer, like a rider atop a horse: the amazing frontier where mind and body meet.

In a negative way, problems at one layer of this onion affect all the others. If our thoughts are unstable, this disturbs the inner winds upon which they ride. This then disturbs the breath, and causes nervousness and shaking.

This ultimately causes physical ailments like ulcers or heart problems, which again sets off unhappy thoughts—a continuous downward spiral. The outer exercises and inner meditations of yoga reverse this cycle.

24

The Four Infinite Thoughts

I.32-33a And if you wish to stop these obstacles,
there is one, and only one,
crucial practice for doing so.

You must use kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.
Learn to keep your feelings in balance, whether something feels good
or whether it hurts; whether something is enjoyable, or distasteful...

*Tat pratisheda-artham eka tattva abhyasah.
Maitri karuna muditopekshanam sukha dukkha
punya-apunya vishayanam...*

There is one crucial practice for stopping all obstacles, and this is the Four Infinite Thoughts. They are called “infinite” because, in the end, we look upon infinite living creatures on infinite worlds with our own eyes, in a single moment, and love them all.

Infinite kindness is the desire to bring all living beings happiness. And it means deciding that I myself will make it happen, even if no one else wants to help me. Infinite compassion is the decision to remove the pain of every living being, by myself if need be.

Infinite joy is the decision to bring all living beings to a higher form of happiness. A cup of coffee or cocoa makes almost anyone happy. But we don't finish feeling happy until we can actually help and serve countless other people.

Infinite equanimity is the decision to help everybody this way—not just our friends or family. Equanimity begins with avoiding extremes of feelings: happy when we feel well, or not when we don't.

Which is only to say we shouldn't be thrown off balance by how we feel. We must of course escape all pain, and achieve all happiness—and we must desire to do so.

25

Bright and Clear

I.33b-35 ...This practice makes the mind
bright and clear as pure water.
It gives the same effect as releasing,
then storing, the wind of the breath.
It also helps us control the tendency
that we have, of thoughts constantly arising
about outer objects of experience.

*...bhavanatash chitta prasadanam.
Prachardana vidharanabhyam va pranasya.
Vishayavati va pravirttir utpanna
manasah sthiti nibhandani.*

A daily meditation on the Four Infinite Thoughts changes our entire life. It gives our life real and lasting meaning. Eating, earning and spending money, working for a house that we will lose, the slow descent into weak old age and death are not what we were meant to do with our lives. Deep inside, we know that very clearly.

That's why it makes our minds feel bright and clear when we hear someone say that our real purpose in life is to help and serve others; and not with kinds of help that will themselves quickly be used up and disappear. We were all meant for more.

The physical yoga exercises, and the special breathing techniques that go with them, are meant to open up the subtle inner channels. But because the thoughts themselves travel in these channels, we can get the same results—a lot more quickly and easily—by simply thinking these highest four thoughts of all.

We rarely really think about what others around us want or need. When we do, we find that we are released from our constant, exhausting compulsion for the bigger and better—clothes, food, money, fame.

26

Freedom from Selfishness

I.36-37 It also makes your heart carefree,
and radiant like starlight.
And it frees your mind from wanting things.

*Vishoka va jyotishmati.
Vita raga vishayam va chittam.*

The Four Infinite Thoughts ultimately trigger infinite love. This love begins when I quite seriously believe, after much thought and training, that it is possible for any normal person to become someone who can assist countless people all at once.

For a time, even now, this love is just an idea. But it gets stronger, and one day it explodes into the direct experience of ultimate love.

This feels completely different from what we normally think of as love. In almost all people, the inner channels at the heart are tangled and blocked. At the first instant of ultimate love, the inner winds break free in crystal-colored light from the heart. Physical yoga was created to help this happen.

When it does, then for a brief time we can actually see the face of every living being, not just in our world but on countless planets. And in this moment we see as well that we will spend every hour of the rest of our life, and lives beyond this one, learning to go and take care of each one of these beings. We are freed forever from selfishness, and forever from wanting anything less than this.

27

The Deeper Powers

I.38-40 It moreover enables you to be conscious
in your dreamlife, as you sleep.
It brings you to the same exhilaration
as deep meditation does.
You gain mastery over the tiniest atoms,
and galaxies as well.

Svapna nidra jnyana-alambanam va.
Yatha-abhimata dhyanad va.
Parama-anu parama mahattvantosya vashi kara.

We've talked about how our world is a product of the seeds within our own minds. Just wanting to help a single other person alters these seeds drastically. The wish to help infinite numbers of people—even if it is only a wish, and a very feeble wish at first—has the power to transform all the seeds within our minds. This then transforms—well—everything there is, everywhere.

Naturally this effect spreads to all those states of mind we go through in a normal day. The act of sleep itself becomes an adventure—we're as lucid in dreams as we are in our everyday life, and we use our sleeping hours to explore and improve both mind and heart.

If meditation can bring us a kind of bliss, then simply standing in the kitchen and thinking the four thoughts brings us the same bliss, with a lot less effort.

As the seeds in our mind transform, we suddenly become very good at anything we try to do—whether small exacting tasks or monumental projects. As this process continues, we even gain the power to actually enter and alter processes from subatomic to galactic levels—if that would help somebody.

* * * *

The following full description of the Four Infinite Thoughts is from Fulfilling the Hopes of those with the Needed Goodness: Notes on the Practice of Transference, and a General Confession, relating to the "Lama Practice of Indivisible Bliss and Voidness," by Master Ngulchu Dharma Bhadra (1772-1851), ACIP digital text S6411:

སེམས་ཅན་ཐམས་ཅད་ཉི་འོང་ཆགས་སྣང་དང་བྲལ་བའི་བཏང་སློམས་ལ་གནས་ན་ཅི་མ་རུང་།
གནས་པར་གྱུར་ཅིག །གནས་པར་བདག་གིས་བྱའོ། །དེ་ལྟར་བྱེད་ཅུས་པར་སྐྱ་མ་ལྷས་བྱིན་
གྲིས་བརྒྱབ་ཏུ་གསོལ།

How nice it would be if every living being could remain in equanimity, free of liking those who are close to them and disliking those who are not. They should be free. I will see to it that they get free. And I ask my Teacher, my Angel, for the power to do so.

སེམས་ཅན་ཐམས་ཅད་བདེ་བ་དང་བདེ་བའི་རྒྱ་དང་ལྡན་ན་ཅི་མ་རུང་། །ལྡན་པར་གྱུར་ཅིག
།ལྡན་པར་བདག་གིས་བྱའོ། །དེ་ལྟར་བྱེད་ཅུས་པར་སྐྱ་མ་ལྷས་བྱིན་གྲིས་བརྒྱབ་ཏུ་གསོལ།

How nice it would be if every living being could find happiness and the causes of happiness. They should find them. I will see to it that they do. And I ask my Teacher, my Angel, for the power to do so.

སེམས་ཅན་ཐམས་ཅད་སྐྱབས་བསྐྱེད་དང་སྐྱབས་བསྐྱེད་གྱི་རྒྱ་དང་བྲལ་ན་ཅི་མ་རུང་། བྲལ་བར་གྱུར་
ཅིག །བྲལ་བར་བདག་གིས་བྱའོ། །དེ་ལྟར་བྱེད་ཅུས་པར་གྲུ་མ་ལྷས་བྱིན་གྱིས་བརྒྱབ་ཏུ་
གསོལ།

How nice it would be if every living being could be free of pain and the causes of pain. They should be free. I will see to it that they get free. And I ask my Teacher, my Angel, for the power to do so.

སེམས་ཅན་ཐམས་ཅད་མཐོ་ངོ་དང་ཐར་པའི་བདེ་བ་དམ་པ་དང་མ་བྲལ་ན་ཅི་མ་རུང་། མི་
འབྲལ་བར་གྱུར་ཅིག །མི་འབྲལ་བར་བདག་གིས་བྱའོ། །དེ་ལྟར་བྱེད་ཅུས་པར་གྲུ་མ་ལྷས་
བྱིན་གྱིས་བརྒྱབ་ཏུ་གསོལ། ཞེས་ཚད་མེད་བཞི་བསྐྱོལ།

How nice it would be if no living being were without ultimate happiness: the happiness of the higher births, and freedom. They shouldn't be without it. I will see to it that they aren't. And I ask my Teacher, my Angel, for the power to do so.