



# **Yoga And Mindfulness In Indian Philosophy: Comparative Insights From The Bhagavad Gita And Patanjali's Yoga Sutras**

Maya Kumari,

Research Scholar

Department of Education

University of Lucknow

Dr. Preeti Maurya,

Assistant Professor & Head

Department of Education

National P.G. College, L.K.O

## **Abstract**

This research paper investigates the philosophical foundations and practical expressions of mindfulness in two cornerstone texts of ancient Indian wisdom: the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. While mindfulness is often presented in contemporary contexts as a secular stress-reduction technique, its original conceptualizations are embedded within rich spiritual and ethical frameworks. The *Bhagavad Gita* presents mindfulness as an inner discipline that enables individuals to engage fully in action without attachment to results, a principle central to Karma Yoga. Through Krishna's guidance to Arjuna, the text illuminates mindfulness as a practice of steady awareness amid life's conflicts and moral dilemmas. In contrast, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* systematize mindfulness within the eight-limbed path of Ashtanga Yoga, particularly in the progressive cultivation of Dharana (focused concentration), Dhyana (meditative absorption), and Samadhi (union). By analyzing and comparing these texts, the paper uncovers how mindfulness functions both as a method for personal transformation and as a philosophical worldview oriented toward liberation (moksha). Additionally, this study considers how these ancient insights can enrich contemporary perspectives on mental well-being, ethical conduct, and spiritual development. By situating mindfulness in its original cultural and metaphysical contexts, this research challenges the reductionist tendencies of modern adaptations and advocates for a more holistic understanding. The paper concludes that revisiting these classical sources not only deepens academic engagement with Indian

philosophy but also offers practical guidance for integrating mindfulness authentically into modern life.

**Keywords**-Mindfulness, Yoga Philosophy, Bhagavad Gita, Yoga Sutras, Indian Spiritual Tradition.

## **I. Introduction**

In recent decades, mindfulness has emerged as a widely accepted practice for stress reduction, psychological well-being, and personal growth. Popularized in therapeutic contexts through programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), it has become a central component of contemporary wellness culture. However, the contemporary presentation of mindfulness often simplifies or secularizes its deeper philosophical roots. As a result, much of its original cultural, ethical, and metaphysical significance is lost in translation. This gap between modern applications and ancient origins has led scholars and practitioners to re-examine classical sources to rediscover more holistic understandings of mindfulness.

Among the foundational texts of Indian philosophy, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* stand out for their rich explorations of awareness, discipline, and self-transformation. The *Bhagavad Gita*, composed as part of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, frames mindfulness within the context of ethical action and devotion, presenting it as a path to equanimity and liberation amidst the inevitable struggles of life. In contrast, the *Yoga Sutras*, attributed to the sage Patanjali, systematize the yogic path into an eightfold structure, describing mindfulness as a gradual refinement of consciousness culminating in the absorption of the self into pure awareness.

While both texts address similar themes—self-mastery, detachment, and liberation—they approach mindfulness from distinct philosophical perspectives. The *Bhagavad Gita* integrates devotion (Bhakti), knowledge (Jnana), and action (Karma) as complementary avenues toward freedom. Patanjali's system, on the other hand, emphasizes methodical practices of concentration and meditation, underpinned by a dualistic metaphysics that distinguishes pure consciousness (Purusha) from material nature (Prakriti).

This paper argues that studying these two texts side by side illuminates not only their philosophical foundations but also offers practical insights for applying mindfulness in contemporary life. By situating mindfulness within its original Indian contexts, this research challenges the reductionist tendencies of modern adaptations and proposes a more integrated approach that honors both the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the practice.

The central thesis of this study is that the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras* present complementary but distinct models of mindfulness—one rooted in engaged action and devotion, the other in systematic meditative discipline—and that these models provide valuable guidance for cultivating authentic, transformative awareness today.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **1. Mindfulness in Contemporary Contexts**

Over the past several decades, mindfulness has become a central concept in psychology, health sciences, and education. Scholars such as Kabat-Zinn (1990) defined mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally,” emphasizing its secular applicability. This definition has shaped clinical programs like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, which demonstrate measurable benefits for anxiety, depression, and chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013). However, critics argue that extracting mindfulness from its historical and philosophical roots risks diminishing its depth (Purser, 2019). Purser, in particular, contends that “Mc-Mindfulness”—a commodified version of mindfulness—reduces the practice to a stress management tool devoid of ethical or spiritual substance.

### **2. Historical Scholarship on Yoga Philosophy**

Yoga philosophy has been a subject of both Western and Indian scholarship since the 19th century. Early Indologists such as Max Müller and Arthur Avalon (Sir John Woodroffe) contributed translations and commentaries that popularized Sanskrit texts globally. More recent scholars, including Georg Feuerstein (1998), have emphasized the importance of understanding yoga as an integrated system encompassing physical, mental, ethical, and spiritual practices. Feuerstein’s work highlights that Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* are not merely instructional manuals but philosophical treatises outlining a path to liberation through disciplined practice.

In contemporary scholarship, Mallinson and Singleton (2017) have also argued that yoga traditions are diverse and evolving, cautioning against treating the *Yoga Sutras* as the singular authoritative source. This research acknowledges their perspective while focusing specifically on the *Yoga Sutras* as one of the earliest systematic expositions of mindfulness in Indian thought.

### **3. Interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita**

The *Bhagavad Gita* has inspired diverse readings, ranging from philosophical treatises to devotional guides. Radha Krishnan’s (1948) influential commentary positions the *Gita* as an enduring philosophical dialogue that integrates action, knowledge, and devotion. Gandhi (1946) considered the text an ethical handbook, emphasizing detached action as the highest form of duty. More recent interpreters, such as Easwaran (2007), have presented the *Gita* as a guide to mindful living, highlighting the concept of *sthita-prajna*—the person of steady wisdom—as a model for modern practitioners seeking equanimity.

However, some scholars caution against oversimplifying the *Gita*’s teachings into purely psychological principles. Larson (1975) argues that its concepts are embedded in a metaphysical framework centered on dharma, karma, and liberation, which must be appreciated in their original cultural context.

#### 4. Interpretations of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* remain one of the most commented-upon texts in Indian philosophy. Classical commentators such as Vyasa and Vachaspati Mishra offered interpretations that shaped later understandings of the sutras. In contemporary studies, scholars like Bryant (2009) emphasize the dualistic metaphysics underlying Patanjali's system, wherein consciousness (*Purusha*) is distinct from material nature (*Prakriti*). This dualism influences the sutras' approach to mindfulness, viewing it as a progressive purification of awareness culminating in *kaivalya*, or isolation of pure consciousness.

Other scholars have examined the practical aspects of Patanjali's teachings, particularly the eight limbs of yoga (ashtanga yoga), which include ethical precepts (*yama* and *niyama*), posture (*asana*), breath control (*pranayama*), sense withdrawal (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and absorption (*samadhi*). While many modern yoga practitioners focus primarily on asana, research consistently underscores the importance of these higher limbs for the cultivation of mindfulness and liberation (Desikachar, 1999).

#### 5. Modern Applications and Critiques

In recent years, efforts to adapt yoga and mindfulness to modern therapeutic contexts have led to innovative programs but also generated debate. Some scholars and practitioners argue that secular adaptations risk appropriating and decontextualizing ancient traditions (Hyland, 2015). Others, such as Shapiro et al. (2006), propose integrating ethical and spiritual dimensions into contemporary mindfulness frameworks to maintain their integrity.

This research engages with both perspectives. While acknowledging the benefits of secular mindfulness, it argues for a more nuanced understanding that respects the original philosophical and cultural contexts of these practices. This approach aligns with the work of scholars such as Gethin (2011), who advocate situating mindfulness within broader traditions of contemplative philosophy.

#### 6. Gaps in Existing Research

Despite the growing body of literature, few studies systematically compare the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras* to analyze how each articulates mindfulness. While both texts are often cited individually as sources of yogic wisdom, their distinct perspectives on awareness, ethics, and liberation are rarely examined side by side. This research aims to address this gap by offering a comparative study that highlights their complementary and contrasting approaches.

### **III. Methodology**

This research uses a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine how the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* describe and apply the idea of mindfulness. The goal is to understand each text's unique perspective and to compare their teachings in a way that respects their cultural and philosophical contexts.

#### **1. Research Design**

The study follows three main steps:

- **Detailed Reading of Primary Texts**

The analysis begins by closely reading selected passages from respected English translations of both texts. Focus is placed on verses and sutras that discuss awareness, mental discipline, detachment, and the pursuit of liberation. Each text is first explored separately to ensure its ideas are presented accurately and without bias.

- **Comparative Analysis**

After the individual readings, the main themes are compared side by side. This comparison highlights where the texts agree—such as on the value of steady attention and self-mastery—and where they differ, including their views on devotion, action, and structured meditation.

- **Contextual Interpretation**

To deepen understanding, the teachings are situated within their historical and cultural backgrounds. The *Bhagavad Gita* is viewed within the broader tradition of Hindu philosophy and the epic narrative of the *Mahabharata*, while the *Yoga Sutras* are analyzed as a classical framework for yogic practice shaped by Samkhya metaphysics. Contemporary scholarship supports these interpretations and helps relate ancient insights to modern discussions about mindfulness.

#### **2. Data Sources**

Primary sources include selected chapters and sutras:

- *Bhagavad Gita*: Chapters 2, 3, 6, and 12
- *Yoga Sutras*: Samadhi Pada and Sadhana Pada

Secondary sources consist of academic commentaries, scholarly articles, and books that explain the texts' philosophical ideas and historical development (e.g., Bryant, 2009; Easwaran, 2007; Feuerstein, 1998).

### 3. Principles of Interpretation

Three guiding principles inform the analysis:

- **Clarity and Precision:** Concepts are defined directly from the texts themselves.
- **Respect for Philosophical Context:** Each text is treated on its own terms without imposing modern categories.
- **Relevance to Contemporary Practice:** When appropriate, the study relates these teachings to present-day applications of mindfulness.

This methodology aims to create a balanced and thoughtful comparison that reveals both the depth and practical value of these classical works.

## IV. Analysis

### A. Mindfulness in the Bhagavad Gita

The *Bhagavad Gita*, set against the backdrop of the Mahabharata's battlefield, offers a rich and practical understanding of mindfulness that blends self-awareness with ethical action and devotion. Unlike philosophies that promote complete withdrawal from the world, the *Gita* insists that true mindfulness is achieved by engaging fully in life while maintaining inner freedom.

One of the text's core ideas is **Karma Yoga**, or the path of selfless action. In Chapter 2, Krishna teaches Arjuna that while we have control over our actions, we do not control their results. He states:

**“You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work. Never let the fruits of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction.” (2.47)**

This perspective shows that mindfulness, as presented here, isn't about passivity or escape. Instead, it is an attitude of attentive presence and non-attachment, where actions are performed sincerely but without clinging to personal gain or fear of loss. Practicing this attitude develops **equanimity** (*samatva*), a calm steadiness that remains undisturbed by success or failure.

Chapter 6, known as **Dhyana Yoga**, explains meditation as a practical tool for steadying the mind. Krishna describes how a practitioner should choose a clean, quiet place, sit upright, and gradually withdraw the senses inward. However, he also warns against extremes: **“Yoga is not for one who eats too much or too little, nor for one who sleeps too much or too little.”(6.16)**

This balanced approach makes it clear that mindfulness in the *Gita* is part of a well-rounded life, not an isolated technique.



A major theme is recognizing the Self (*Atman*) as different from the constantly changing mind and body. This witnessing awareness allows one to observe thoughts and feelings without being controlled by them. In many ways, this idea is similar to what modern mindfulness teachers call “the observing self.” Seeing oneself as the steady witness of mental activity opens the possibility of freedom from habitual reactions.

In addition to disciplined self-awareness, the *Gita* places great value on **Bhakti Yoga**, the path of devotion. Mindfulness here is not only about watching the mind but also about fostering trust and surrender to the Divine. In Chapter 12, Krishna praises those who keep their thoughts centered on him, remaining steady regardless of external circumstances. This devotion gives mindfulness a heartfelt dimension, blending focus with love and humility.

Throughout the text, Krishna uses vivid metaphors to illustrate the mindful state. For example, he compares the wise person to a lotus leaf resting on water, untouched by it. This image perfectly captures the idea of living in the world without becoming entangled in it.

The *Gita* also teaches that mindful action, performed without selfish desire, purifies the mind (*chitta-shuddhi*). This purification is more than a psychological benefit—it prepares the practitioner for deeper self-knowledge and ultimately liberation (*moksha*). Here, mindfulness is part of a larger spiritual journey rather than an isolated goal.

Scholars like Radhakrishnan (1948) and Easwaran (2007) have observed that the *Gita* presents mindfulness as an integrated way of living, combining ethics, mental discipline, and spiritual devotion. Unlike many modern approaches that treat mindfulness as a stand-alone practice for stress relief, the *Gita* situates it within a lifelong commitment to personal growth and service to others.

Overall, the *Bhagavad Gita* offers a vision of mindfulness that is active, balanced, and deeply connected to higher purpose. It shows that mindful awareness is not just about calming the mind but about aligning one's actions, thoughts, and intentions with a sense of duty and devotion.

## **B. Mindfulness in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali**

The *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* offer one of the most detailed and structured presentations of mindfulness in the Indian tradition. Unlike the *Bhagavad Gita*, which encourages integrating awareness into everyday actions and relationships, Patanjali's text centers on an inward path of discipline, ultimately leading to the complete quieting of the mind. This systematic approach has shaped many contemporary understandings of yoga and meditation.

Right at the beginning, Patanjali defines yoga in a single, concise statement:

**“Yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind.”** (Sutra 1.2)

This clear declaration sets the tone for the entire work. Here, mindfulness is not simply paying attention

to thoughts or feelings—it is about reaching a state where the mind’s constant activity comes to rest, revealing pure, undisturbed awareness.

To guide practitioners toward this goal, Patanjali describes the **eight limbs of yoga**, known as Ashtanga Yoga. The last three limbs show how mindfulness matures through sustained practice:

- **Dharana** involves concentrating the mind steadily on one chosen object, whether it is the breath, a mantra, or an image.
- **Dhyana** is the stage when this concentration becomes continuous and effortless, no longer interrupted by distractions.
- **Samadhi** represents complete absorption, in which the distinction between the observer and the object disappears entirely.

This gradual deepening shows that, in Patanjali’s system, mindfulness is not a single technique but an evolving process that moves from deliberate focus to profound inner stillness.

Two key principles support this progression: **abhyasa**, or consistent practice, and **vairagya**, or non-attachment. Patanjali emphasizes that both are essential, stating: “**The mind’s activity is stilled by sustained effort and detachment.**” (Sutra 1.12) In other words, mindfulness requires not only commitment over time but also the willingness to let go of cravings, expectations, and aversions.

A central theme of the *Yoga Sutras* is the distinction between **prakriti** (the material world and the mind) and **purusha** (pure consciousness). Patanjali teaches that suffering arises when we identify with the changing content of the mind rather than recognizing our true nature as the unchanging observer. Mindfulness practice, especially in its deeper stages, helps uncover this distinction. Over time, practitioners learn to witness thoughts without being caught in them, which ultimately leads to freedom from the cycles of confusion and pain.

The text also acknowledges that cultivating this steady awareness is not easy. Patanjali lists common obstacles, including doubt, restlessness, carelessness, and lack of perseverance. To overcome these challenges, he recommends positive mental attitudes—like friendliness, compassion, and contentment—and encourages a steady, patient approach. This guidance shows that mindfulness is both a mental discipline and an ethical commitment.

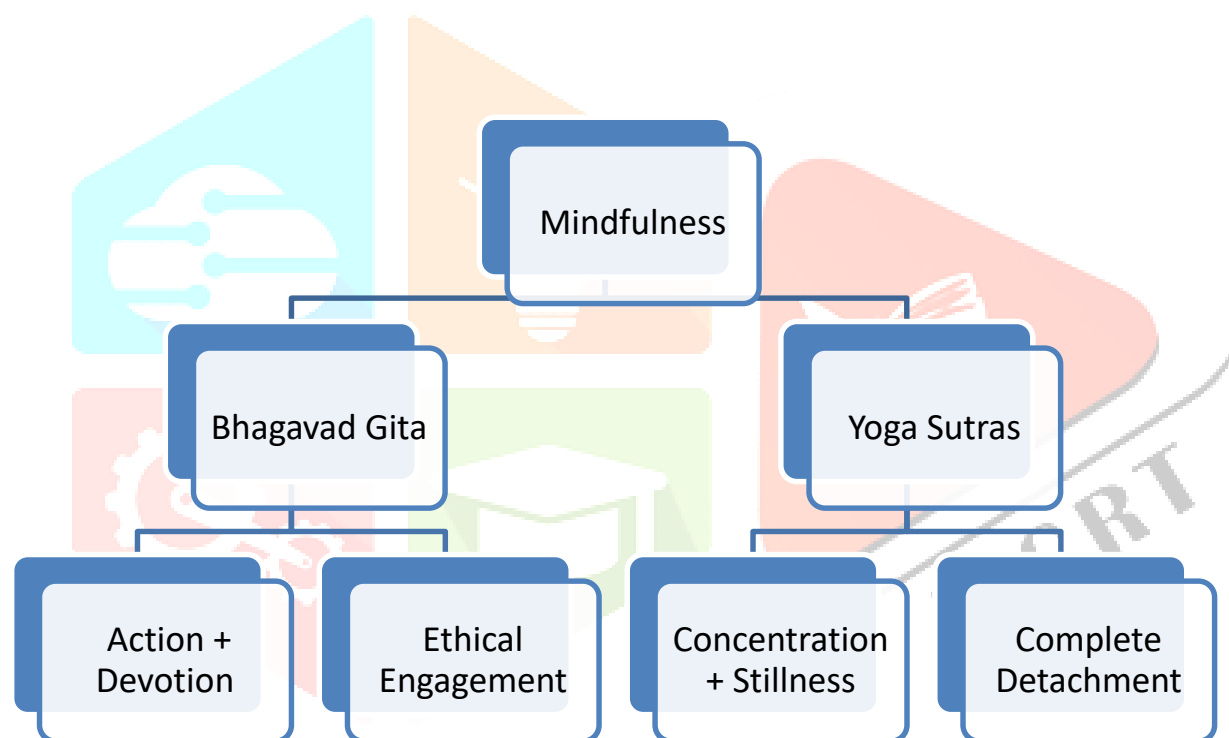
Contemporary scholars, such as Bryant (2009) and Feuerstein (1998), point out that Patanjali’s conception of mindfulness goes far beyond simply observing the present moment. While modern mindfulness practices often emphasize awareness for the sake of stress reduction, Patanjali’s method is oriented toward a radical transformation of consciousness. The final aim is *kaivalya*, or liberation—the complete realization that one is pure awareness, untouched by thoughts, memories, or sensations.



Despite being composed centuries ago, the *Yoga Sutras* remain strikingly relevant. They offer a detailed roadmap for anyone seeking a deeper, more disciplined form of mindfulness that is not just about calming the mind but about discovering the unchanging witness within. For many contemporary practitioners, this framework provides both practical tools and a clear philosophical foundation for integrating mindfulness into a lifelong spiritual path.

In summary, Patanjali's vision of mindfulness is precise, gradual, and transformative. It begins with focused concentration and culminates in a state of total absorption that reveals our true nature as pure, limitless awareness. Unlike purely secular approaches, this perspective sees mindfulness as a journey toward ultimate freedom rather than merely a tool for temporary relief.

### Concept Map: Mindfulness in the Gita and Yoga Sutras



### C. Comparative Discussion

When studied side by side, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* offer two rich but distinctly different ways of understanding mindfulness. Both texts agree that the mind must be trained to gain freedom from suffering, yet they envision this process in different contexts and with different goals.

A clear similarity is their shared emphasis on discipline and consistent practice. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, mindfulness develops through acting with full awareness while letting go of attachment to results. Krishna teaches that when a person performs their duty without selfish motives, their mind becomes steady and calm. In Patanjali's framework, too, mindfulness is the product of sustained effort—what he

calls **abhyasa**—paired with **vairagya**, the capacity to remain unattached. Whether through action or meditation, both traditions see mindful awareness as something cultivated over time, not something that appears spontaneously.

Both texts also recognize attachment as the main obstacle to inner peace. For Krishna, clinging to outcomes clouds judgment and fuels anxiety. He urges Arjuna to act with composure, whether he faces success or failure. Patanjali describes attachment as a form of mental entanglement that keeps consciousness restless and unsettled. In both cases, mindfulness becomes the practice of seeing thoughts and desires clearly without being dominated by them.

However, the two texts differ in how they expect the practitioner to relate to the world. The *Bhagavad Gita* emphasizes that mindfulness can flourish in the midst of everyday life. Krishna does not advise Arjuna to withdraw from action. Instead, he encourages him to participate fully in his responsibilities as a warrior while keeping his mind anchored in detachment and devotion. This vision of mindfulness is deeply integrated with ethical living, social duty, and spiritual surrender.

In contrast, the *Yoga Sutras* describe a more inward-focused approach. Patanjali outlines a path where the practitioner gradually withdraws the senses and turns attention completely inward. Through the final limbs of yoga—**dharana**, **dhyana**, and **samadhi**—the mind becomes so concentrated that it eventually transcends all ordinary thought. The ultimate goal is **kaivalya**, a state where pure awareness stands alone, entirely separate from the movements of the mind and the material world. While Krishna's path is one of engagement, Patanjali's is primarily about inward absorption.

These differences reflect deeper philosophical roots. The *Bhagavad Gita* is influenced by Vedantic ideas that see the Self as ultimately united with the Divine. Mindfulness in this context is about realizing that unity while acting in harmony with dharma, or cosmic order. Patanjali's philosophy, shaped by Samkhya dualism, insists that the true Self (*purusha*) is forever distinct from nature (*prakriti*). Mindfulness here becomes a way to disentangle awareness from everything that changes.

Another important contrast lies in their tone. The *Gita* encourages a sense of balance—engaging in life, fulfilling duties, cultivating devotion, and practicing self-discipline. It blends action, knowledge, and love into a single, holistic path. The *Yoga Sutras* take a more analytical, structured approach, guiding the practitioner step by step into deeper states of concentration until the mind is completely still.

Despite these differences, the texts share a profound respect for the transformative power of awareness. They both teach that without some form of mindfulness—whether expressed in action or in meditation—it is impossible to overcome the tendencies of the restless mind.

They also remind us that the pursuit of mindfulness is not just about managing stress or increasing productivity; it is ultimately about freedom.

In the modern world, these perspectives offer complementary lessons. The *Bhagavad Gita* shows that mindfulness can be woven into the fabric of daily life, helping us act with clarity and purpose without losing our sense of inner peace. The *Yoga Sutras* remind us of the value of sustained inward focus and the possibility of touching a dimension of awareness beyond the ordinary. Together, these ancient texts reveal that mindfulness is not a single practice or philosophy but a spectrum of approaches, each with the power to transform how we see ourselves and how we live.

**Table Example: Comparative Overview**

Aspect	Bhagavad Gita	Yoga Sutras of Patanjali
Core Approach	Mindfulness within action and devotion	Mindfulness through disciplined meditation
Key Practice	Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga	Eight-Limbed Yoga (Ashtanga Yoga)
Main Goal	Liberation through selfless action	Liberation through stilling the mind
Ethical Framework	Dharma (righteous action)	Yamas and Niyamas (ethical observances)
Ultimate Realization	Unity of Atman with Brahman	Isolation of Purusha from Prakriti

## V. Contemporary Relevance and Conclusion

Mindfulness today has become something of a buzzword. It's found in meditation apps, therapy sessions, classrooms, and boardrooms—often promoted as a quick fix for stress or a way to boost focus and productivity. While these modern practices do offer real benefits, they tend to simplify or even strip away the deeper roots of mindfulness. By returning to classical Indian texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, we begin to see that mindfulness was never meant to be just a technique—it was a profound path toward personal growth, inner freedom, and self-understanding.

The *Bhagavad Gita* gives us a version of mindfulness that is fully engaged with the world. Krishna doesn't tell Arjuna to escape from the battlefield or his responsibilities; instead, he teaches him how to face them with clarity, courage, and detachment. That's a powerful message for modern life. We often feel torn between getting things done and staying calm—but the *Gita* reminds us that we don't have to choose. We can live mindfully right in the middle of action, by doing what needs to be done without being consumed by the outcome. This idea—that mindfulness can happen not only in stillness but also in motion—is especially relevant for people trying to stay grounded while navigating the chaos of everyday life.

In contrast, the *Yoga Sutras* offer a quieter, more inward path. Patanjali outlines a step-by-step process for training the mind, gradually moving from focus to meditation to complete absorption. In a world that is always rushing, scrolling, and multitasking, his teachings offer a gentle but firm invitation to slow down. Patanjali's approach shows that mindfulness isn't just about noticing what's happening—it's about learning to rest deeply in stillness and becoming familiar with the silence underneath all the mental noise.

What both texts have in common, though, is the idea that mindfulness is more than just awareness—it's part of a bigger, ethical way of living. The *Gita* emphasizes dharma—living with purpose, integrity, and alignment with a greater good. The *Yoga Sutras* begin with ethical foundations like nonviolence, truthfulness, and self-discipline before moving into meditation. These teachings remind us that mindfulness isn't only about paying attention to our breath—it's also about paying attention to how we live, how we treat others, and the kind of people we are becoming.

Perhaps the most powerful insight both texts offer is the idea that we are more than our thoughts, our emotions, or our circumstances. Whether it's the *Gita* pointing to the eternal Self (*Atman*), or Patanjali's teaching on pure awareness (*Purusha*), both texts describe a deeper layer of identity that is always present, even when our minds are busy or troubled. Mindfulness, in its truest form, helps us reconnect with that deeper self—a place of stillness, clarity, and peace that isn't shaken by what's happening around us.

In conclusion, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* offer two powerful perspectives on what it means to live mindfully. One teaches us how to stay steady while engaging with the world; the

other shows us how to go inward and discover the silence within. Both approaches have something meaningful to offer in our current moment. As mindfulness continues to grow in popularity, returning to these ancient roots can deepen our understanding and enrich our practice—reminding us that mindfulness isn't just about feeling better, but about becoming freer, wiser, and more fully alive.

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