

This document is a compilation of background information on yoga drawn from *Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* by BKS Iyengar, *A History of Yoga* by Vivian Worthington, (now out of print) and Barbara Stoller Miller, *Yoga: Discipline of freedom* to provide the student with an introduction to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Following articles will outline the themes in Yoga Sutras. Through this series of articles I hope to give the student an introduction to the themes in the Yoga sutras so that they might go on to read and explore more.

History

From *History of Yoga* by Vivian Worthington

‘Yoga is very ancient, certainly much older than the archaeological record, which is the only reliable one we have at present. The archaeological finds indicate a well-established system of yoga practice, which must have existed long before the figurines and seals that have been found were fashioned. One of the difficulties of tracing a history of yoga has been that by its nature it leaves nothing behind except myths and legends of miraculous powers possessed by some of the more accomplished practitioners of the art. Only in the last thousand years or so have efforts been made to provide it with intellectual content such as would elevate it to the status of philosophy in its own right. The attempts have not been successful because yoga is not an intellectual activity. So in India it has tended to run in harness with the Samkhya philosophy, of which more later. Yoga has in fact tended all along to be anti-intellectual, even anti-religious. To be true to itself it must ever stand close to the spontaneous fount of human creativity. It is more intuitive than reasonable, more experimental than formalistic, more other-worldly than of this world, and more akin to art than to science.

For these reasons it has not been studied in its comprehensiveness in its own right, but always as part of other studies. As far as the West is concerned, where the subject has come up at all in the universities it has been submerged within the subject of Indology, or of comparative religion. From the point of view of the universities, who deal in mental concepts, mind stuff if you like, there would be very little in yoga to study anyway. This is to be expected from an activity that is meaningful only if practised. So until the present time yoga has not been studied as a subject in its own right in the universities of the Western world. In fact only about twenty yoga texts have been rendered into any European language. Some of these translations date from the end of the nineteenth century, and make for very dull reading. Most effort has been concentrated on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, followed by some of the tantras. The Upanishads have tended to be studied as Vedic, whereas they are yogic. The fact that they were adopted by the Brahminical establishment within Hinduism sometime after they were uttered, and later written down, does not mean that their original source was Vedic. The same can be said of many other works as we shall see in the course of our study. The Bhagavad Gita is certainly in this category.

Buddhism is studied as quite a separate subject, as indeed it should because of its importance. But the Buddha is still looked on as a Hindu reformer, and Buddhism as a revolt against Hinduism. In fact the Buddha, though almost certainly brought up as a Hindu, being of the Kshatriya caste, never spoke of trying to reform Hinduism. The teachings he enunciated were of quite a different order and emphasis. When he left his palace and went into the real world he very soon contacted another stream of religious thought and practice, one that was much more naturalistic than the priest-ridden Brahminism that he had left behind.

This stream, which has been called Sramanism (not to be confused with Shamanism) is believed by many to have been the original religion of India before the Aryans imposed their own Vedic religion on their conquered peoples. It is very much older than Vedic Hinduism, and was represented by a great variety of free-thinkers outside of, and opposed to the Vedic religion of the Brahmins. They were probably equally opposed to the pre-Vedic animistic religions with their emphasis on placating the gods by offering sacrifices, maybe even human sacrifice, and fertility rites of the type that were current throughout the world at that time. The unifying feature of this freelance religious movement was the practice of yoga.

The Buddha came into contact with this movement, becoming as one of them, a wandering mendicant beggar, first absorbing the teachings, trying to find their relevance for him, and eventually putting out his own distinctive contribution. Yoga practice at that time, reduced to its barest essentials, comprised austerity, meditation and non-violence. In his first and most famous utterance, the sermon at Benares, also called the Sermon of the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, the Buddha himself referred to a long line of teachers or Rishis who had gone before, and whose line of teaching and practice he was continuing.

At a time of great spiritual awakening, between 600 and 400 BC two of the greatest exponents of yoga formed movements that were to become great religions. These were Jainism and Buddhism. Yoga practice continues as part and parcel of these faiths, as it does for modern Hinduism. Yoga went to China and Japan along with Buddhism but became more distinctive as the Chan in China, and the Zen sects in Japan. In the Moslem world it worked its leaven through Sufis, and is now doing the same in Christianity.

The reason why Yoga survives, and will continue to live, is that it is the repository of something basic in the human soul and psyche.’¹

Yoga as Philosophy: The Six Systems

From *History of Yoga*

‘After Patanjali had systematised yoga, or to be more precise raja yoga, in his justly celebrated Sutras the subject became understandable in an intellectual way. Previously it had merely been looked on as a system of self-development, an ascetic discipline which shunned all intellectual argument and maintained that the stage of moksa, liberation, which it sought, was beyond mind and therefore beyond philosophy. This is still the view of true yogis. In keeping with the Sramanic tradition the ultimate depository of the yoga system is to be found in the personal lives and examples of its devotees. No amount of discussion or formulation will get beyond that essential basis. However, the academic world loves to categorise and so attempted to fit Patanjali's Sutras into the intellectual framework of Indian life. This was probably done against the wishes of practising yogis. There are no records to tell us one way or the other. It fitted yoga into this intellectual straitjacket by coupling it with its illustrious contemporary, samkhya. The aims of yoga and Samkhya are the same. The methods of achieving those aims are not in conflict. They are complementary in that yoga is primarily practical, while Samkya is essentially intellectual. Moreover Samkhya possessed a most attractive cosmology and psychology, which yoga is able to subscribe to wholeheartedly .

Thus yoga became a subject of study in the universities of India along with other philosophies, and about the year AD 200 it was fitted into the scheme of the Six Systems of Philosophy, a position held to this day, although largely irrelevant to the true life and purpose of yoga - unlike the other five which sit fairly comfortably in the academic mould.

These Six Systems are not really complete in themselves, but are all complementary to each other, so are looked on as six parts of a complete Indian system. The six grew out of sixty-two systems. They provide a metaphysics, a religion, an explanation of ultimate reality, and a means of salvation. They tend to be bracketed together in pairs. The oldest are Yoga and Samkhya, the next being Vaisesika and Nyaya, and the final pair Purva Mimamsa and Vedanta. They are often referred to as *Darsanas* or points of view.

Each of them propounded their systems in the form of short sutras whose elucidation requires lengthy commentaries. All seem to stand at the end of a long period of discussion and disputation (or practice in the case of yoga), rather than as initiators of anything new. The six were formulated from the about the year AD 200 and take us right up to the present time as far as Indian philosophical speculation is concerned.’²

Hatha Yoga

From *History of Yoga*

¹ *History of Yoga* by Vivian Worthington

² *History of Yoga* by Vivian Worthington

'References to asanas (postures and exercises) are found in yoga literature right back to the Upanishads. At that time the asanas were for purposes of meditation. The body was to be placed in a suitable seated posture so that the aspirant could meditate with a straight spine, and with lungs and stomach not restricted. In such a position the body could be forgotten and rhythmic breathing practised. The classic position has always been Padmasana, or Lotus Seat. When sitting not just for quiet meditation, but for development of siddhis or psychic powers, it was found that some other seated postures were more conducive to such activities. The hands were placed in different ways, from which developed a range of hand gestures known as mudras. The number of breathing exercises increased. A range of cleansing practices came into being known as kriyas, and several body locks known as bandhas, similar to mudras but with a different purpose. This array of physical practices was considered entirely secondary and subservient to the main practice, which was sitting for meditation with the object of eventually achieving samadhi. These practices were not even mentioned during the classical period, except to say, as in Patanjali and in the Bhagavad Gita that a comfortable seated position was necessary for effective meditation. In the tantric period, however, when attempts were being made to develop the siddhis, more active exercises began to be employed. It was also noticed that the general health of yoga practitioners could often be greatly improved by the practice of certain asanas. It began to be apparent that the purely physical aspect of yoga had its own considerable value.

The Nath yogis of north India took up this aspect of the art, and widened its basis considerably. They flourished from the tenth to the twelfth centuries in the area round Gorakhpur near Nepal. The founder of the Nath yoga sect, also known as Natha-Siddhis, was Goruknath. The Gurkhas derive from this area. From all accounts the Nath yogis were extremely vigorous, being devoted to physical fitness. They were much travelled and their way of life was very austere. Being often in situations of great danger they became adept at various martial arts. The fighting traditions of the Gurkhas lend credence to this fact. Claims have also been made that they carried knowledge of these practices into China and were thus instrumental in laying the foundations of the Chinese martial arts such as judo and karate. These claims have not yet been substantiated.

As the Nath yogis were also known as Natha siddhis it is obvious that they were likewise renowned for their psychic powers. They lived quite close to Tibet, at a time when Milarepa had given a further impetus to such experimentation in that country. In pursuance of the siddhis the Natha yogis developed a range of asanas, kriyas, mudras, bandhas and pranayamas. Their yoga became distinguished from the other forms by taking the name hatha yoga. Hatha is a compound word. 'Ha' means sun, and 'the' means moon. This is a reference to pranayama. The right nostril is positive, and represents the sun. The left is negative, and represents the moon. Both must be brought into balance if our nature is to be balanced. Because the nadis ida, pingala and sushumna form a triple knot at the nose, correct breathing exercises will activate the chakras, and through them the whole internal environment of the body. So, although hatha refers only to the breath, hatha yoga has come to mean the whole range of yoga physical exercises.

The Nath yogis were social reformers. They tried to break the caste system, and treated women and outcasts as equals. For their pains they were themselves relegated to a lower caste by the Brahmin establishment. This Natha caste still survives as a very small group living in the Vindhya range of mountains in north India. Today they are largely unaware of the revolution wrought by their forebears. The Nath yogis also attempted to unite Hindus and Buddhists in their region, a fruitless task, but a worthy effort. They appear to have been neither Buddhist nor Hindu themselves; perhaps they were both.

Goruknath and his followers left notes and instructions on the various asanas, mudras, pranayamas, bandhas and kriyas, but not in the form of a complete text. These fragments were gathered together by Svatmarama Swami and published in the fifteenth century as the Hathayogapradipika.³

What knowledge does it deal with?

(*Yoga: Discipline of freedom* p2) 'Patanjali's yoga offers a set of powerful techniques for countering the tyranny of mental chaos and moral confusion. Personal freedom is the concern normally associated with the private

³ *History of Yoga* by Vivian Worthington

sphere, and morality with the public sphere. But they are inseparable. In the ancient Indian hierarchy of values, a concern with ultimate spiritual freedom is dominant. And yet the discipline that is required to achieve freedom is rooted in moral behaviour, according to Patanjali. Even though proper moral action in the world is not the goal of yoga, a great vow to live by the universal principles of nonviolence, truthfulness, avoidance of stealing, celibacy and poverty is specified as a precondition for further yogic practice. The cultivation of friendship, compassion, joy and impartiality towards all creatures, a central formula of Buddhist ethics, is also deemed efficacious for achieving the absolute tranquility of yoga. The antiworldly isolation prescribed for certain stages of yoga is not the ultimate yogic state. Periods of solitude are necessary, but one need not renounce the world forever to practice yoga.’⁴

Yoga as Religion

‘The essential assumption underlying yogic practice is that the true state of the human spirit is freedom which has been lost through misidentification of one’s place in a phenomenal world of ceaseless change. This is the root of human suffering. Paradoxically, in yoga the freedom of spiritual integrity occurs in the act of the discipline itself, which is ultimately rendered superfluous by the reality its practice discloses.’⁵

Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras

Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras deals with our relationship to the world and the way our senses, thought and past experiences lead us inextricably towards pain within ourselves.

Yoga is not so much a system of belief as a set of practices which allow us to see the influence and relationship of thought, experience and senses. A study of consciousness.

Padas

The yoga sutra in 4 chapters (Padas) outline the practices, benefits or attainment’s, and the ends of yoga. This is done in aphorisms or sutra - short terse statements which state the essence. This was done as yoga being an oral tradition was learnt by chanting the sutras after which the teacher would discuss the meaning. This has led to the various schools of thought and divergence in the practices.

Samadhi pada -on contemplation

Sadana pada- on practice

Vibhuti Pada- on properties and powers

Kaivalya pada- on emancipation and freedom

Chapters 1 and 2 are those most commonly studied. The astanga yoga limbs are the central tenet of the sutra and outline the practices and progression of yoga but before we start on these we must consider the observations yoga makes of our existence.

What is yoga – its aim?

‘Yoga is most concerned with the effects of our actions within us, not the effects of our actions on others. Stealing is not a problem of morality but a problem because it generates more desire, a desire which can never be fulfilled.’⁶

The essential assumption underlying yogic practice is that the true state of the human spirit is freedom which has been lost through misidentification of one’s place in a phenomenal world of ceaseless change. This is the root of human suffering. Paradoxically, in yoga the freedom of spiritual integrity occurs in the act of the discipline itself, which is ultimately rendered superfluous by the reality its practice discloses.’⁷

The aim of yoga is to see clearly - to see the nature of reality. We experience the world through the senses. The senses become clouded and unreliable - this happens in 2 ways - the senses become clouded through desire and

⁴ *Yoga: Discipline of freedom*, Barbara Stoller Miller p.2

⁵ *Yoga: Discipline of freedom*, Barbara Stoller Miller p.6

⁶ *Yoga: Discipline of freedom*, Barbara Stoller Miller p.2

⁷ *Yoga: Discipline of freedom*, Barbara Stoller Miller p.6

aversion, and Samskaras. Yoga is the cleansing of that lens of the senses through which we experience. We will consider these 2 effects.

Senses

One of the main concepts underpinning yoga is drawn from the classification of everything into two categories – nature and soul, and the effect of a busy life on our ability to know ourselves.

We live in a world of illusion where things are not as they first appear. Over stimulation draws the senses outwards - we live to fulfill our desires. We attribute our happiness to objects outside ourselves. We are so full there is no chance to know ourselves or hear the small quiet voice of God within.

Everything – all experience and all material objects come under the two classifications –

Prakrti - Nature. Everything that exists in the world, including the body, the senses, and even thought.

Purusa - soul. That unchanging place within each of us that is untouched by the world around us.

Characteristics of Purusa

‘Purusa, the seer or the soul, is absolute pure knowledge. Unlike nature (prakrti), which is subject to change, purusa is eternal and unchanging. Free from the qualities of nature, it is an absolute knower of everything. The seer is beyond words, and indescribable. It is the intelligence, one of nature's sheaths, which enmeshes the seer in the playground of nature and influences and contaminates its purity. As a mirror, when covered with dust, cannot reflect clearly, so the seer, though pure, cannot reflect clearly if the intelligence is clouded. The aspirant who follows the eightfold path of yoga develops discriminative understanding, viveka, and learns to use the playground of nature to clear the intelligence and experience the seer’⁸.

Samskaras - Past impressions or imprints

‘In order to penetrate the logic of Patanjali's method, it seems crucial to grasp his analysis of how Purusa becomes bound to material nature through the workings of thought (Citta) and the accumulation of subliminal memory traces or impressions (Samskaras).

The central notion here is that any mental or physical act leaves behind traces that can subtly influence a person's thought, character, and moral behaviour. The store of memory is composed of subliminal impressions (Samskaras) and memory traces (vasana), which are the residue of experience that clings to an individual throughout life and, in the Indian view, from death to rebirth. The relation between the turnings of thought - citta vrtti and memory is basic to Patanjali's epistemology. When thought passes from one modification into another, the former state is not lost but rather is preserved in memory as a subliminal impression or memory trace. Thus, thought is always generating memories, and these memories are a store of potential thoughts, available to be actualised into new turnings of thought. The very act of thinking not only generates but preserves memories, like roots of a tuber that spread underground and produce fresh tubers which blossom in season.’⁹

Vrttis

‘These endless cycles of fluctuations are known as Vrttis: changes, movements, functions, operations, or conditions of action or conduct in the consciousness. Vrttis are thought waves, part of the brain, mind and consciousness as waves are part of the sea.

Thought is a mental vibration based on past experiences. It is a product of inner mental activity, a process of thinking. This process consciously applies the intellect to analyse thoughts arising from the seat of the mental body through the remembrance of past experiences. Thoughts create disturbances. By analysing them one develops discriminative power and gains serenity.

When consciousness is in a serene state, its interior components, intelligence, mind, ego and the feeling of I also experience tranquility. At that point, there is no room for thought waves to arise either in the mind or in the consciousness. Stillness and silence are experienced, poise and peace set in and one becomes cultured. One's thoughts, words and deeds develop purity, and begin to flow in a divine stream.’¹⁰

⁸ Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, 1993, p.24

⁹ *Yoga: Discipline of freedom*, Barbara Stoller Miller p.15

¹⁰ Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, 1993, p.12

Why practice and detachment?

'Freedom, that is to say direct experience of Samadhi, can be attained only by disciplined conduct and renunciation of sensual desires and appetites. This is bought about by adherence to the twin pillars of yoga, abhyasa and vairagya.

Abhyasa (practice) is the art of learning that which has to be learned through the cultivation of disciplined action. This involves long, zealous, calm, and persevering effort. Vairagya (detachment or renunciation) is the art of avoiding that which should be avoided. Both require a positive and virtuous approach.

Practice is a generative force of transformation or progress in yoga, but if undertaken alone it produces an unbridled energy which is thrown outwards to the material world as if by centrifugal force. Renunciation acts to sheer of this energetic outburst, protecting the practitioner from entanglement with sense objects and redirecting the energies centripetally towards the core of being.'¹¹

'Abhyasa (practice) dedicated, unswerving, constant, and vigilant search into a chosen subject, pursued against all odds in the face of repeated failures, for indefinitely long periods of time. Vairagya is the cultivation of freedom from passion, abstention from worldly desires and appetites, discrimination between the real and unreal. It is the act of giving up all sensuous delights. Abhyasa builds confidence and refinement in the process of culturing the consciousness, whereas Vairagya is the elimination of whatever hinders progress and refinement. Proficiency in Vairagya develops the ability to free oneself from the fruits of action'.¹²

Practice implies a certain methodology, involving effort. It has to be followed uninterruptedly for a long time, with firm resolve, application, attention and devotion, to create a stable foundation for the training of the mind, intelligence, ego and consciousness.

Renunciation is discriminative discernment. It is the art of learning to be free from craving, both for worldly pleasures and for heavenly eminence. It is training the mind to be unmoved by desire and passion. One must learn to renounce objects and ideas which disturb and hinder one's daily practices. Then one has to cultivate non-attachment to the fruits of one's labors.

If abhyasa and vairagya are assiduously observed, restraint of the mind becomes possible much more quickly. Then, one may explore what is beyond the mind, and taste the nectar of immortality, soul realisation. Temptations neither daunt nor haunt one who has this intensity of heart in practice and renunciation. If practice is slowed down, then the search for soul realisation becomes clogged and bound in the wheel of time.'¹³

Ashtanga Yoga

Patanjali outlines the 8 fold path of Ashtanga yoga for the first time

1. YAMA. Ethical Disciplines.

These include Non-violence, Truthfulness, Not stealing, Not misusing sex, Not coveting.

2 NIYAMA. Individual Disciplines.

Purity, Contentment, Ardour or Austerity, Self study, Surrender to God.

3 ASANA. Cleansing and strengthening the body Asanas are not just exercises but they strengthen every muscle, joint and gland in the body bringing lightness and stability. The real importance of the Asanas is the way they train and discipline the mind.

These first three limbs form the outward quest (bahiranga Sadhana), helping to control the Yogi's emotions and passions and keep one in harmony with Humanity. Asanas keep the body healthy and strong and in harmony with nature.

4 PRANAYAMA. Breathing techniques. where the Yogi learns to observe and channel the breath.

¹¹ Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, 1993, p.5

¹² Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, 1993, p.14

¹³ Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, 1993, p.14

Directing it's energy.

5 PRATYAHARA. Sense withdrawal. Where the senses are withdrawn from outside stimulus and turned inwards to observe the core of the being.

These two limbs form the second stage, the inward quest (Antaranga Sadhana). When the body has been made light and strong and the Yogi has gained control of the outer form, the Yogi moves to observe the nuances of the inner being. To learn stillness and inquiry.

6 DHARANA. Concentration on an object.

7 DHYANA. Contemplation or Meditation.

8 SAMADHI. To become one with the object of Meditation.

These last three take the Yogi to the innermost recesses of the Soul and are called Antaratma Sadhana, the quest of the soul