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Yoga

Discipline of Freedom

The *Yoga Sutra* Attributed to Patanjali

A translation of the text, with commentary,
introduction, and glossary of keywords

by Barbara Stoler Miller

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PART ONE

Cessation of Thought and Contemplative Calm

THE NATURE OF YOGA

This is the teaching of yoga. (1)
Yoga is the cessation of the turnings of thought. (2)
When thought ceases, the spirit stands in its true identity as observer to the world. (3)
Otherwise, the observer identifies with the turnings of thought. (4)

The first four aphorisms define the nature of yoga as a state of mental tranquility and spiritual freedom, as well as the means to achieve this state. These aphorisms also introduce technical terms that will recur and be elaborated throughout the text as Patanjali clarifies his view of human psychology. In the self-reflexive style characteristic of Indian philosophical texts, the *Yoga Sutra* contains various complementary definitions of yoga. This first definition establishes the focus of the doctrine.

Yoga is defined as *citta-vṛtti-nirodha,* "cessation of the turnings of thought." The text will be concerned throughout with *citta,* which may be translated as "thought"—the sensitive, subtle aspects of the mental capacity.[1] Thought exists in the form of its activity, or "turning" (*vṛtti*). "The turnings of thought" (*citta-vṛtti*) refers to the totality of mental processes—conscious, subconscious, and hyperconscious—not simply to the faculties of intellect, recollection, or emotion. Although *citta* is often translated as "mind," this blurs the contrast with *manas. Manas* is the organ of cognition, whereas *citta* is the total process of thought. This thought process is a composite of mind (*manas*), intelligence (*buddhi*), and ego (*ahaṃkāra*), the three mental evolutes of material nature (*prakṛti*).

Thus, in Patanjali's view, thought is fundamental to the spirit's involvement with material nature. The way to extricate one's spirit is by making thought invulnerable to stimulation by the world of experience. "Cessation" (*nirodha*) means that the turnings of thought have stopped.

Insofar as the subtle mental processes are active, the subject or self is necessarily unstable and agitated. The goal of yoga is to stop the thought processes so that the spirit can be free, isolated from the turmoil of thought from which it mistakenly takes its identity. This idea is echoed in the *Bhagavad Gita,* where Krishna says of the yogi: "He should gradually become tranquil, firmly controlling his understanding; focusing his mind on the self, he should think nothing" (6.25).

The observer (*draṣṭṛ*) is the subject who watches the visible world of phenomenal experience but who does not participate in it. For the observer everything extrinsic to itself—even the subtleties of thought—is witnessed with detachment, rather

than experienced. "Observer" is also a designation for the spirit (*puruṣa*) in its conscious aspect (cf. 2.12, 20).

THE TURNINGS OF THOUGHT

> The turnings of thought, whether corrupted or immune to the forces of corruption, are of five kinds. (5)
> They are valid judgment, error, conceptualization, sleep, and memory. (6)
> The valid means of judgment are direct perception, inference, and verbal testimony. (7)
> Error is false knowledge with no objective basis. (8)
> Conceptualization comes from words devoid of substance. (9)
> Sleep is the turning of thought abstracted from existence. (10)
> Memory is the recollection of objects one has experienced. (11)

Patanjali delineates five modes of thought, each of which can be either corrupted or immune to corruption. The nature of "corruption" will be defined at greater length in Part Two (see 2.4–9), but it is important to note here that even the most subtle and benign workings of thought are obstructions to freedom of the spirit.

Valid judgment is based on one of the three legitimate methods for accurately apprehending material reality (7). Error is false knowledge that has no such basis in fact. Conceptualization is the tendency of thought to construct an image of reality

that has no foundation beyond individual subjectivity. We may thus have verbal knowledge in which words and meanings fail to correspond to any objective reality.

Sleep includes both dreaming and dreamless states. "Thought abstracted from existence" is a liberal rendering of *abhāvapratyayālambanā,* which more literally means "founded on the awareness of nonexistence."[2]

Memory is basic to Patanjali's epistemology. No thought is ever lost; rather, it is preserved as a subliminal impression or memory trace. These traces not only allow us to recall past events and perceptions, but they also actively shape future experiences in a never-ending process.

PRACTICE AND DISPASSION

> Cessation of the turnings of thought comes through practice and dispassion. (12)
> Practice is the effort to maintain the cessation of thought. (13)
> This practice is firmly grounded when it is performed for a long time without interruption and with zeal. (14)
> Dispassion is the sign of mastery over the craving for sensuous objects. (15)
> Higher dispassion is a total absence of craving for anything material, which comes by discriminating between spirit and material nature. (16)

Patanjali now turns to the question of how thought may be stilled. Aphorisms 12 through 40 describe the many paths to

this single goal. All involve some form of practice leading to dispassion.

Yogic practice is the link between the ordinary self and ultimate freedom of spirit. In Patanjali's philosophy, we are not dependent on any external agency to grant us this freedom. It is achieved over time through our own efforts and through discipline. Practitioners may progress slowly or quickly, and may achieve different degrees of detachment or dispassion. These differences will be discussed in subsequent aphorisms.

A recognition, however tentative, that the spirit is distinct from material nature makes the practitioner disinterested in material things—even those which seem desirable or good. This detachment from material desire is an important step toward spiritual freedom. It culminates in Patanjali's "higher dispassion"—a complete detachment from the world of experience, in which we cease to identify ourselves with the material world.

In its essence the phenomenal world exists only in relation to an observer. (21)
Even if the phenomenal world ceases to be relevant for an observer who has realized freedom, it continues to exist because it is common to other observers. (22)
The connection between the observer and the phenomenal world causes a misperceived identity between active power and its master. (23)
The cause of this connection is ignorance. (24)
When there is no ignorance, there is no such connection—the freedom of the observer lies in its absence. (25)
The way to eliminate ignorance is through steady, focused discrimination between the observer and the world. (26)
Wisdom is the final stage of the sevenfold way of the observer. (27)

In these aphorisms, Patanjali analyzes the misunderstanding that binds the observing spirit (*puruṣa,* also called "the observer," *draṣṭṛ,* as at 1.3) to the phenomenal world (*prakṛti*). Ignorance of the true nature of this relation misleads us into egoistically believing in a unified self and falsely identifying spirit with matter. Since worldly existence occurs in an environment of corruptive forces, the unliberated spirit tends to be attracted by the phenomenal world, and misidentifies itself with it. This misidentification, together with the attachment to that misidentification, is the source of pain—but the connection can be severed by discrimination, which comes about through

the practice of yoga. When ignorance is dispelled, the spirit becomes an observer to the world, detached from the world's painful transience (cf. 1.34; 2.6).

In order to effect this detachment, the yogi must understand the multidimensional structure of the world, in which everything is composed of the three qualities of material nature (*guṇa*). These qualities—lucidity (*sattva*), passion (*rajas*), and dark inertia (*tamas*)—are like energy existing in potential form. Among them, Patanjali is mainly concerned with lucidity, which he contrasts with spirit (see 3.35, 49, 55).

The qualities of material nature are structured into gross elements that can be particular or specific, subtle elements that can be universal or nonspecific, subtle matter that is differentiated or marked, and gross matter that is undifferentiated or unmarked. The misidentification of the power to act in the world (*śakti*) with its master, the spirit (*puruṣa*), is brought about by the false attribution of the qualities of material nature to the nature of the spirit itself.

The reference to a "sevenfold way" is somewhat obscure, since Patanjali does not elaborate on it. Commentators have proposed several versions of the sevenfold way and how its stages relate to the eight limbs of yogic practice described in the following sections.

THE LIMBS OF YOGIC PRACTICE

When impurity is destroyed by practicing the limbs of yoga, the light of knowledge shines in focused discrimination. (28)

> The eight limbs of yoga are moral principles, observances, posture, breath control, withdrawal of the senses, concentration, meditation, and pure contemplation. (29)

Patanjali's eight-limbed practice includes moral principles (*yama*), observances (*niyama*), posture (*āsana*), breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), withdrawal of the senses (*pratyāhāra*), concentration (*dhāraṇā*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and pure contemplation (*samādhi*). The eight limbs are essentially eight stages in the cumulative acquisition of yogic power. The first five will be elaborated in the remaining aphorisms of Part Two and the last three, which constitute the final stage of yoga, will be addressed in Part Three.

Patanjali's set of practices is parallel to the eight-limbed path of early Buddhism. In both yoga and Buddhism, this set of practices is crucial to the realization of spiritual freedom. The Buddhist eight-limbed path comprises right views, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation. Several of these are also central elements in Patanjali's practice: right conduct encompasses moral principles and observances, right mindfulness includes breath control and withdrawal of the senses, and right contemplation is equivalent to pure contemplation (*samādhi*).

THE MORAL PRINCIPLES AND OBSERVANCES

> The moral principles are nonviolence, truthfulness, abjuration of stealing, celibacy, and absence of greed. (30)

> These universal moral principles, unrestricted by conditions of birth, place, time, or circumstance, are the great vow of yoga. (31)
>
> The observances are bodily purification, contentment, ascetic practice, study of sacred lore, and dedication to the Lord of Yoga. (32)
>
> When one is plagued by ideas that pervert the moral principles and observances, one can counter them by cultivating the opposite. (33)
>
> Cultivating the opposite is realizing that perverse ideas, such as the idea of violence, result in endless suffering and ignorance—whether the ideas are acted out, instigated, or sanctioned, whether motivated by greed, anger, or delusion, whether mild, moderate, or extreme. (34)

A commitment to live according to the five universal moral principles (*yama*), without restrictions, constitutes the great vow (*mahāvrata*), which is the first step in undertaking yogic practice.[11] In distinct contrast to the relativity of values that characterizes caste Hinduism, where moral obligations and relations are relative to one's birth, for Patanjali social status is irrelevant to moral behavior.

Basic to Indian religious practice are vows of various kinds, such as the solemn vows to fast, to practice celibacy, and to perform acts of merit. The great vow of yoga parallels vows made by initiates in various Asian and Western ascetic traditions. Once the vow is made, the yogi proceeds to establish personal discipline through the observances (*niyama*) of bodily purifi-

cation, contentment, austerity, study, and dedication to the Lord of Yoga.

The practice of "cultivating the opposite" involves recognizing that failure to follow the moral principles and observances leads to great pain and suffering throughout the world. For example, the opposite of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) is violence, which is destructive on both personal and universal levels. Violence not only harms the injured, but also the perpetrator of the violent act, who falls into an endless moral abyss. Any act of violence also increases the general level of destructive immorality in the world, while the practice of nonviolence increases the general good.

THE MORAL PRINCIPLES

When one perseveres in nonviolence, hostility vanishes in its presence. (35)
When one abides in truthfulness, activity and its fruition are grounded in the truth. (36)
When one abjures stealing, jewels shower down. (37)
When one observes celibacy, heroic energy accrues. (38)
When one is without greed, the riddle of rebirth is revealed. (39)

Here, as with the observances that follow, Patanjali attributes direct results to specific moral actions, in a kind of reciprocal magic between the yogi and the world. The yogi's power of nonviolence is such that it neutralizes enmity in his presence.

Likewise, truthfulness assures the purity of actions and their fruit.[12]

According to Patanjali, the effects of the related moral principles of abjuring both stealing and greed are no less dramatic. He claims that if one renounces the attractions of the sensuous world that tempt one to covet and rob the wealth of others, real treasures accrue—"jewels" of inherent value and knowledge of the mystery of the cycles of birth and rebirth in transmigration.

THE OBSERVANCES

Aversion to one's own body and avoidance of contact with others comes from bodily purification. (40)
Also purity of intelligence, mental satisfaction, psychic focus, victory over the sense organs, and a vision of one's inner being. (41)
Perfect happiness is attained through contentment. (42)
Perfection of the body and senses comes from ascetic practice, which destroys impurities. (43)
Communion with one's chosen deity comes from the study of sacred lore. (44)
The perfection of pure contemplation comes from dedication to the Lord of Yoga. (45)

It should be recalled that three of the observances—ascetic practice, the study of sacred scripture, and dedication to the Lord of Yoga—receive emphasis at the opening of Part Two (2.1) as the components of the "active performance of yoga"

(*kriyā-yoga*). Here, the specific benefits of these and the other observances are set forth.

The purification of the body makes one aware of its imperfections and the absurdity of attachment to it. This cultivation of aversion to the body also gives the yogi a distaste for physical contact with others and increases an inward focus.

Study involves intensive recitation of and meditation on sacred lore, especially the hymns or mantras of the ancient Vedas, which Hindus believe to possess the power to compel the attention of any deity invoked. Through the repetition of and meditation on specific mantras, the yogi can commune with a chosen deity, who can then aid his spiritual practice.

Dedication to the Lord characterizes the yogi's commitment to the discipline of the supreme yogi. The Lord—defined in Part One (1.24) as a distinct form of the spirit (*puruṣa*), who is unaffected by the forces of corruption or by actions and intentions—can serve as a model for the yogi to emulate.

POSTURE

> The posture of yoga is steady and easy. (46)
> It is realized by relaxing one's effort and resting like the cosmic serpent on the waters of infinity. (47)
> Then one is unconstrained by opposing dualities. (48)

Posture (*āsana*) is the relaxed positioning of the body that is necessary for practicing breath control and meditation. Patanjali compares it to resting like the cosmic serpent on the waters of infinity in the calm interval between cycles of universal creation and destruction. Ananta, "the infinite," is the cosmic serpent on whom the god Vishnu lies sleeping when the world dissolves at the end of each cosmic cycle, before the beginning of the next. Ananta may also refer to "the infinite" in a more abstract sense. This is the interpretation of the *Yogabhashya* commentary, which states that posture becomes perfect when effort to that end ceases, so that there is no more bodily movement, and when the mind is transformed into the infinite—that is, recognizes infinity as itself.

For Patanjali, the interior dimensions of yoga are impossible to attain unless one first pays attention to the body. Later traditions expand this aspect of yoga into a system of physically and spiritually efficacious postures, commonly known as *haṭha-yoga*.

Although Patanjali does not specify a particular posture, the lotus position has become, over time, the paradigm of all yogic postures. It is considered to be the perfect position for practicing breath control and meditation. Sitting with spine erect and one's legs folded into themselves, like the petals of a closed lotus, one can bring the entire body into a resting state. The relaxation that comes from sitting in the yogic posture fosters a state of equanimity, where pairs of opposites, such as heat and cold, pleasure and pain, self and other, cease to shape the yogi's awareness of existence.[13]

BREATH CONTROL

> When the posture of yoga is steady, then breath is controlled by regulation of the course of exhalation and inhalation. (49)

The modification of breath in exhalation, inhalation, and retention is perceptible as deep and shallow breathing regulated by where the breath is held, for how long, and for how many cycles. (50)
A fourth type of breath control goes beyond the range of exhalation and inhalation. (51)
Then the cover over the light of truth dissolves. (52)
And the mind is fit for concentration. (53)

Breath control (*prāṇāyāma*) involves the precise regulation of the rhythm of inhalation, retention, and exhalation of breath (*prāṇa*). The ability to control this vital force directs consciousness inward and concentrates it for meditation. In yoga, breath control is essential to further spiritual advancement. According to Patanjali, in order to control breathing one must focus on the place within the body where breath is held, adjust the length of time one inhales, retains, and exhales breath, and count the cycles of breathing.

Beyond the practice of disciplining normal breathing patterns, Patanjali suggests that there is a fourth mode of breathing, which transcends the three processes of exhalation, inhalation, and retention. This mode allows one to breathe effortlessly, thus dissipating the veil that obscures the true nature of things.[14] Although Patanjali gives no details, several commentators suggest that this process occurs when breathing virtually stops in pure contemplation (*samādhi*). Such minimal breathing is what allows advanced yogis to be buried alive for long periods without suffering ill effects.

WITHDRAWAL OF THE SENSES

When each sense organ severs contact with its objects, withdrawal of the senses corresponds to the intrinsic form of thought. (54)
From this comes complete control of the senses. (55)

Withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*) consists in isolating the senses from their objects. When the mind is made fit for concentration, the sense organs lose their attraction to their objects. The senses withdraw from external objects, allowing thought to turn inward. This in turn enables the yogi to practice the perfect discipline of the final three stages of yoga, which are delineated in Part Three. Withdrawal is thus the transitional phase in the process of introversion that culminates in concentration, meditation, and pure contemplation.

PART THREE

Perfect Discipline and Extraordinary Powers

PERFECT DISCIPLINE

Concentration is binding thought in one place. (1)
Meditation is focusing on a single conceptual flow. (2)
Pure contemplation is meditation that illumines the object alone, as if the subject were devoid of intrinsic form. (3)
Concentration, meditation, and pure contemplation focused on a single object constitute perfect discipline. (4)
The light of wisdom comes from mastery of perfect discipline. (5)
The practice of perfect discipline is achieved in stages. (6)
In contrast with the prior limbs of yoga, the final triad is internal. (7)
Yet it is only an external limb of seedless contemplation. (8)

This section defines the final three limbs of the eightfold way, collectively the hyperconscious state known as "perfect discipline" (*saṃyama*). Concentration, meditation, and pure contemplation are the internal limbs of yoga, which concentrate the yogi's energy and free his thought of constraints, allowing it to experience limitless knowledge and powers, such as the ability to know past and future, enter into other bodies, and understand the languages of animals and birds.

Each of the three limbs of perfect discipline is a stage in the process of achieving spiritual freedom. Concentration (*dhāraṇā*) involves focusing attention on a particular spot, such as the navel, the heart, the tip of the nose, or an internally visualized image. Meditation (*dhyāna*) is unwavering attention to a single object—a continuous flow of attention that, like the flow of oil, is uninterrupted by any extraneous idea. Pure contemplation (*samādhi*) is achieved when the meditative subject is so absorbed in the object of meditation that the distinction between subject and object disappears. The observer, transcending all awareness of a separate personal identity, takes the form of the object contemplated, attains complete control over it, and is absorbed in it—obliterating the artificial, conceptual separation between the observer and object.

Patanjali closes his account of the limbs of perfect discipline by reminding us that even pure contemplation (*samādhi*) is not the deepest level in the process of spiritual transformation. Beyond it, at the culmination of yogic practice, is seedless contemplation (*nirbīja-samādhi*), which was defined at the close of Part One (1.47). Seedless contemplation—the absolute freedom that exists when all thought has ceased—will be the subject of the fourth and final section of the text.