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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 (*ahaṁkāra*), the three mental evolutions 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

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THE OBSERVER AND THE PHENOMENAL WORLD

The cause of suffering, which can be escaped, is the connection between the observer and the phenomenal world. (17)

The phenomenal world consists of material elements and sense organs characterized by their clarity, activity, or stillness; this world can serve the goals of sensual experience or spiritual liberation. (18)

The qualities of material things are structured as specific, nonspecific, marked, and unmarked. (19)

The observer is simply the subject of observing—although pure, it sees itself in terms of conceptual categories. (20)

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,” *draṣṭr*, 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)

(*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 imperfection and the need for physical cultivation. The emphasis is on the attention on sacred texts, the Vedas, and the attention to the attention and meditation on a chosen object. The commitment is defined in the *Yoga Sūtra*, who is the author and intention.

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 cre-

ation 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 *hatha-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)

KNOWLEDGE OF THE SPIRIT

Worldly experience is caused by a failure to differentiate between the lucid quality of nature and the spirit. From perfect discipline of the distinction between spirit as the subject of itself and the lucid quality of nature as a dependent object, one gains knowledge of the spirit. (35)

This knowledge engenders intuitive forms of hearing, touch, sight, taste, and smell. (36)

If they become a distraction these powers of perfection are impediments to pure contemplation. (37)

Even for an advanced practitioner of yoga, involvement in the phenomenal world continues as long as one fails to discriminate between spirit (*puruṣa*) and the lucid quality of nature (*sattva-guna*), the most perfect aspect of the material world. Being material, nature's lucidity is mutable, whereas the spirit is immutable. The spirit does not perceive a knowable object in the conventional way. Rather, it is "pure consciousness": when the yogi concentrates on the distinction between spirit and nature's lucidity, he has knowledge of the spirit. The spirit is not known by the idea of spirit, since ideas belong to the realm of conceptual thought. It is the spirit alone that knows itself.

The yogi's aim is not to reach the apex of the material condition, however pure, but to realize his innermost spiritual being. By confusing the perfection of the material world with the spirit, desire for worldly perfection interferes with spiritual attainment.

The relation between knowledge and power is direct, but Patanjali cautions that the powers that knowledge manifests can fool one into overlooking the goal, which is seedless contemplation and total freedom from the material world. The powers are only representations of spiritual development, weak analogies for the ultimate supermundane goal of freedom. This idea is elaborated in aphorisms 3.50-51.

MASTERY OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD

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The turning of thought without reference to the external world is called "the great disembodied thought"; from this the veil that obscures the light is destroyed. (43)