# Yoga

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**Dr. Arpita Mishra**

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# Preface

The philosophy behind the ancient Indian practice of yoga has influenced various aspects of how society in India functions, whether it be in relation to areas such as health and medicine or education and the arts. Based on unifying the mind with the body and soul to allow for greater mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing, the values of yoga form a major part of the community's ethos. Yoga consists of a series of poses, meditation, controlled breathing, word chanting and other techniques designed to help individuals build self-realization, ease any suffering they may be experiencing and allow for a state of liberation.

The art and science of yoga is dedicated to creating union between body, mind and spirit. Its objective is to assist the practitioner in using the breath and body to foster an awareness of ourselves as individualised beings intimately connected to the unified whole of creation. In short it is about creating balance and equanimity so as to live in peace, good health and harmony with the greater whole. This art of right living was perfected and practiced in India thousands of years ago and the foundations of yoga philosophy were written down in the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, approximately 200 AD. This sacred text describes the inner workings of the mind and provides a blueprint for controlling its restlessness so as to enjoying lasting peace.

The name Patanjali means "falling from joined hands" (in Sanskrit, the word patat means falling and anjali means joined hands). As with most great Indian mystics, sages and priests, there are mythical stories explaining their incarnation (or reincarnation). The myth widely held for Patanjali is that he

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deeply desired to share with the world the teachings of Yoga and other knowledge so he chose to be reborn as a seven-year old boy, falling from the ethereal world directly into his mother's hands, a Brahmin woman named Gonika.

Traditionally, yoga was transmitted using the Guru-Shishya model (master-pupil) with yoga gurus as the main custodians of associated knowledge and skills. Nowadays, yoga ashrams or hermitages provide enthusiasts with additional opportunities to learn about the traditional practice, as well as schools, universities, community centres and social media. Ancient manuscripts and scriptures are also used in the teaching and practice of yoga, and a vast range of modern literature on the subject available.

This book thus provides the psychological context and the relevance of studies of yoga for advancing the existing psychological knowledge. Yoga psychology provides the foundation for Indian psychology, an emerging discipline, rooted in classical Indian tradition.

***—Dr. Arpita Mishra***

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# 1

# Introduction

The Yoga Sûtras were thus seen by all schools, not only as the orthodox manual for guidance in the techniques and practices of meditation, but also for the classical Indian position on the nature and function of mind and consciousness, for the mechanisms of action in the world and consequent rebirth, and for the metaphysical underpinnings and description of the attainment of mystical powers. In terms of literary sources, there is evidence as early as the oldest Vedic text, the Rg Veda (c. 1200 - c. 1500 B.C.E.), that there were yogi-like ascetics on the margins of the Vedic world. In terms of the archaeological record, seals found in Indus Valley sites (c. 3000 - c. 1500 B.C.E.) with representations of figures seated in a clear yogic posture (the most famous figure is seated inpadmasana, lotus pose, with arms extended and resting on the knees in a classical meditative posture), suggest that, irrespective of its literary origins, Yoga has been practiced on the Indian subcontinent for well over 4000 years. However, it is in the late Vedic age, marked by the fertile speculations expressed in a genre of texts called the Upanisads (c. 800 - c. 600 B.C.E.), that practices that can be clearly related to classical Yoga are first articulated in literary sources.

While the Upanisads are especially concerned with jñ na, or understanding Brahman, the Absolute Truth, through the cultivation of knowledge, there are also several unmistakable references to a technique for realising Brahman (in its localised aspect of atman) called Yoga. As with the Upanisads in general, we do not find a systematic philosophy here, but mystico-poetic

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utterances, albeit profound in content. The Mahâbhârata Epic, which is the largest literary epic in the world, also preserves significant material representing the evolution of Yoga, indeed, the term "yoga" and "yogî" occur about 900 times throughout the Epic. Usually dated somewhere between the 9th–4thcenturies C.E., the Epic exhibits the transition between the origins of Yoga in the Upanisadic period and its expression in the systematised traditions of Yoga as represented in the classical period by Patañjali. Nestled in the middle of the Epic, the well-known Bhagavad Gîtâ (c. 4th century B.C.E.), devotes a good portion of its bulk to the practices of Yoga, which it considers to be "ancient".

This, of course, indicates that practices associated with Yoga had gained wide currency in the centuries prior to the common era, with a clearly identifiable set of basic techniques and generic practices, and we will here simply allude to the fact that scholars have long pointed out a commonality of vocabulary, and concepts between the Yoga Sûtras (YS) and Buddhist texts. All this underscores the fact that there was a cluster of numerous interconnected and cross-fertilizing variants of meditational Yoga – Buddhist and Jain as well as Hindu – prior to Patañjali, all drawn from a common but variegated pool of terminologies, practices and concepts (and, indeed, many strains continue to the present day). Of closer relevance to the Sûtras is the fact that the history of Yoga is inextricable from that of the Sâmkhya tradition. Samkhya provides the metaphysical infrastructure for Yoga, and thus is indispensable to an understanding of Yoga. While both Yoga and Sâmkhya share the same metaphysics and the common goal of liberating purusa from its encapsulation, their methods differ.

Sâmkhya occupies itself with the path of reasoning to attain liberation, specifically concerning itself with the analysis of the manifold ingredients of prakrti from which the purusa was to be extricated, and Yoga more with the path of meditation, focusing its attention on the nature of mind and consciousness, and the techniques of concentration in order to provide a practical method through which the purusa can be isolated and

extricated. Sâmkhya seems to have been perhaps the earliest philosophical system to have taken shape in the late Vedic period, and has permeated almost all subsequent Hindu traditions; indeed the classical Yoga of Patañjali has been seen as a type of neo-Sâmkhya, updating the old Sâmkhya tradition to bring it into conversation with the more technical philosophical traditions that had emerged by the 3–5th centuries C.E., particularly Buddhist thought. In fact, Sâmkhya and Yoga should not be considered different schools until a very late date: the first reference to Yoga itself as a distinct school seems to be in the writings of Sankara in the 9th century C.E. Yoga and Sâmkhya in the Upanisads and Epic simply refer to the two distinct paths of salvation by meditation and salvation by knowledge, respectively.

One might add, as an aside, that from the 900-odd references to Yoga in the Mahâbhârata, there are only two mentions of asana, posture, the third limb of Patañjali's system. Neither the Upanisads nor the Gîtâ mention posture in the sense of stretching exercises and bodily poses (the term is used as "seat" rather than bodily postures), and Patañjali himself only dedicates three brief sutras from his text to this aspect of the practice.

The reconfiguring, presentation and perception of Yoga as primarily or even exclusively asana in the sense of bodily poses, then, is essentially a modern Western phenomenon and finds no precedent in the premodern Yoga tradition. From this rich and fertile post-Vedic context, then, emerged an individual called Patañjali whose systematisation of the heterogeneous practices of Yoga came to be authoritative for all subsequent practitioners and his system eventually reified into one of the six schools of classical Indian philosophy. It is important to stress here that Patañjali is not the founder or inventor of Yoga, the origins of which, as noted above, had long preceded him in primordial and mythic times. Patañjali systematised the pre-existing traditions and authored what came to be the seminal text for Yoga discipline. There was never one uniform school of Yoga, or Ur-Yoga (or of any Indic school of thought for that

matter): there was a plurality of variants, and certainly different conceptualisations of meditative practices that were termed Yoga.

For example, while Patañjali organises his system into eight limbs, and the Mahâbhârata, too, speaks of Yoga as having eight "qualities", as early as in the Maitrî Upanisad of the 2nd century B.C.E., there is reference to a six-limbed Yoga, as there is in the Visnu Purâna. Along similar lines, there are various references to the twelve yogas and seven dharanas found in the Epic Mahâbhârata. Yoga is thus best understood as a cluster of techniques, some more and some less systematised, that pervaded the landscape of ancient India. These overlapped and were incorporated into the various traditions of the day such as the jñana, knowledge-based traditions, providing these systems with a practical method and technique for attaining an experienced-based transformation of consciousness. Patañjali's particular systematisation of these techniques was in time to emerge as the most dominant, but by no means exclusive, version.

Indeed, internal to his own text, in his very first sutra, atha yoga anusasanam, Patañjali indicates that he is continuing the teachings of Yoga (the verbal prefix anu indicates the continuation of the action denoted by the verb), and the traditional commentators certainly perceive him in this light. In point of fact, the tradition itself ascribes the actual origins of Yoga to the legendary figure Hiranyagarbha. Moreover, evidence that Patañjali was addressing an audience already familiar with the tenets of Yoga can be deduced from the Yoga Sûtras themselves. For example, on occasion, Patañjali will mention one member of a list of items followed by "etc.,", thereby assuming his audience to be familiar with the remainder of the list. But, in short, because he produced the first systematised treatise on the subject, Patañjali was to become the prime or seminal figure for the Yoga tradition after his times, and was accepted as such by other schools. To all intents and purposes, his Yoga Sûtras were to become the canon for the mechanics of generic Yoga, so to speak, that other systems

tinkered with, and flavoured with their own theological trappings.

As with the reputed founders of the other schools of thought, very little is known about Patañjali himself. Tradition, first evidenced in the commentary of Bhoja Râja in the 11th century C.E., considers him to be the same Patañjali who wrote the primary commentary on the famous grammar by PâG ini, and also ascribes to him authorship of a treatise on medicine. There is an ongoing discussion amongst scholars as to whether this was likely or not, but there is not much to be gained by challenging the evidence of traditional accounts in the absence of alternative evidence to the contrary that is uncontroversial or at least adequately compelling.

Patañjali's date can only be inferred from the content of the text itself. Unfortunately, as with most classical Sanskrit texts from the ancient period, early Sanskrit texts tend to be impossible to date with accuracy, and there are always dissenters against whatever dates become standard in academic circles. Most scholars seem to date the text shortly after the turn of the common era, (c. 1st – c. 2nd century C.E.), but it has been placed as early as several centuries before the common era. Other than the fact that the text does not postdate the 5th century C.E., the date of the Yoga Sûtras cannot be determined with exactitude.

The Sûtra writing style is that used by the philosophical schools of ancient India (thus we have Vedânta Sûtras, Nyâya Sûtras, etc.). The term "sûtra," (from the Sanskrit root su, cognate with "sew") literally means a thread, and essentially refers to a terse and pithy philosophical statement in which the maximum amount of information is packed into the minimum amount of words. Knowledge systems were handed down orally in ancient India, and thus source material was kept minimal partly with a view to facilitating memorisation. Being composed for oral transmission and memorisation, the Yoga Sûtras, and sûtra traditions in general, allowed the student to "thread together" in memory the key ingredients of the more extensive body of material with which the student would become

thoroughly acquainted. Thus, each sûtra served as a mnemonic device to structure the teachings and facilitate memorisation, almost like a bullet point that would then be elaborated upon.

This very succinctness – the Yoga Sûtras contain about 1200 words in 195 sûtras – and the fact that the sûtras are in places cryptic, esoteric and incomprehensible in their own terms points to the fact that they served as manuals to be used in conjunction with a teacher. Therefore, it is an unrealistic (if not impossible) task to attempt to bypass commentary in the hope of retrieving some original pure, pre-commentarial set of Ur-interpretations

Knowledge systems in ancient Indian were transmitted orally, from master to disciple, with an enormous emphasis on fidelity towards the original set of Sûtras upon which the system is founded, the master unpacking the dense and truncated aphorisms to the students. Periodically, teachers of particular prominence wrote commentaries on the primary texts of many of these knowledge systems.

Some of these gained wide currency to the point that the primary text was always studied in conjunction with a commentary, particularly since texts such as the Yoga Sûtras were designed to be unpacked because they contain numerous sûtras that are incomprehensible without further elaboration. One cannot overstress, therefore, that our understanding of Patañjali's text is completely dependent on the interpretations of later commentators: it is incomprehensible, in places, in its own terms.

In terms of the overall accuracy of the commentaries there is an a priori likelihood that the interpretations of the Sutras were faithfully preserved and transmitted orally through the few generations from Patañjali until the first commentary by Vyâsa in the 5th Century C.E. Certainly, the commentators from Vyâsa onwards are remarkably consistent in their interpretations of the essential metaphysics of the system for over fifteen hundred years, which is in marked contrast with the radical differences in essential metaphysical understanding distinguishing commentators of the Vedânta school (a Râmânuja

or a Madhva from a Sankara, for example). While the 15th century commentator Vijñânabhiksu, for example, may not infrequently quibble with the 9th century commentator Vâcaspati Miúra, the differences generally are in detail, not essential metaphysical elements. And while Vijñânabhiksu may inject a good deal of Vedântic concepts into the basic dualism of the Yoga system, this is generally an addition (conspicuous and identifiable) to the system rather than a reinterpretation of it. There is thus a remarkably consistent body of knowledge associated with the Yoga school for the best part of a millennium and a half, and consequently one can speak of "the traditional understanding" of the Sûtras in the premodern period without overly generalising or essentialising.

The first extant commentary by the legendary Vyâsa, typically dated to around the 4–5th century C.E., was to attain a status almost as canonical as the primary text by Patañjali himself. Consequently, the study of the Yoga Sûtras has always been embedded in the commentary that tradition attributes to this greatest of literary figures. Practically speaking, when we speak of the philosophy of Patañjali, what we really mean (or should mean) is the understanding of Patañjali according to Vyâsa: it is Vyâsa who determined what Patañjali's abstruse Sûtras meant, and all subsequent commentators elaborated on Vyâsa. The Vyâsa Bhâsya (commentary) becomes inseparable from the Sûtras; an extension of it. From one sutra of a few words, Vyâsa might write several lines of comment without which the sutra remains incomprehensible. Vyâsa's commentary, the Bhâsya, thus attains the status of canon, and is almost never questioned by any subsequent commentator. Subsequent commentators base their commentaries on unpacking Vyâsa's Bhâsya – rarely critiquing it, but rather expanding or elaborating upon it. It is this point of reference that produces a marked uniformity in the interpretation of the Sûtras in the pre-modern period.

The next commentary is called the Vivarana, attributed to the great Vedântin Sankara in the 8th – 9th century C.E. It has remained unresolved since it was first questioned in 1927

whether the commentary on the Yoga Sûtras assigned to Sankara is authentically penned by him. The next best known commentator is Vâcaspati Misra, whose commentary, the Tattvavai Sâradî, can be dated with more security to the 9th century C.E. Vâcaspati Miúra was a prolific intellectual, penning important commentaries on the Vedânta, Sâmkhya, Nyâya and Mîmâmsâ schools in addition to his commentary on the Yoga Sûtras, and was noteworthy for his ability to present each tradition in its own terms, without displaying any overt personal predilection.

A fascinating Arabic translation of Patañjali's Sûtras was undertaken by the famous Arab traveler and historian al-Bîrunî (973–1050 C.E.), the manuscript of which was discovered in Istanbul in the 1920's. Roughly contemporaneous with al-Bîrunî is the 11th century King Bhoja, poet, scholar and patron of the arts, sciences and esoteric traditions, in whose commentary, called the Râjamârtanð"a, there are on occasion very valuable insights to be found. In the 15th century, Vijñânabhiksu wrote a most insightful and useful commentary after that of Vyâsa's, the Yogavârttika. Vijñânabhiksu was another prolific scholar, noteworthy for his attempt to harmonise Vedânta and Sâmkhya concepts.

In the 16th century C.E., another Vedântin, Râmânanda Sarasvatî, wrote his commentary, called Yogamaniprabhâ, which also adds little to the previous commentaries. But there are valuable insights contained in the Bhâsvatî by Hariharânanda Âranya, written in Bengali, from a context nearer our own times, a standpoint exposed to Western thought, but still thoroughly grounded in tradition. While many other commentaries have been written, these are the primary commentaries written in the pre-modern era.

The commentaries written in the modern period, many of which have made massive adjustments to modernity or the sensitivities of the Western market, are beyond the scope of this discussion, which limits itself to classical Yoga philosophy. The Yoga Sûtras is divided into four padas, chapters. The first, samadhi pada, defines Yoga as the complete cessation of all