



Raja Hatha

Yoga's Path to Liberation

As in Buddhism, the true goal of yoga is liberation from ego and suffering. Yoga becomes a complete spiritual path, says **CHIP HARTRANFT**, translator of the *Yoga Sutra*, when we join the familiar postures of hatha yoga with the meditative practices of raja yoga.

TRANQUIL AND MOTIONLESS, the ascetic sits in a simple posture. As each breath flows in, he experiences its sensations, relaxing any effort to control or improve anything. With each exhalation, he observes a new stream, each ripple of feeling a fresh occasion for surrender. Even so, thoughts, feelings, and identifying concepts repeatedly erupt, centered around the same dualistic notions: self/other, past/future, like/dislike, success/failure. Once noticed, though, they recede.

The meditative path, *samadhi*, begins to emerge as the ascetic continues to sit. Sustained at first by intention, it sharpens until the need to train it gives way to effortless mindfulness and equanimity. Abruptly, in a timeless instant of cessation, nothing remains to obscure the unconditioned. An unshakeable realization arises: all things—mind, body, nature—may be *known*, but are empty of a *knower*. There is an ennobling security in this understanding that

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BY ERIC FIELD

पतञ्जलियोगसूत्र

“The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali” in Sanskrit

no experience nor experiencer is ultimate, but is only a dewdrop perched on a web of contingencies—*dhar-mas*—glistening for a moment before evaporating.

Does this sound to you like the wandering ascetic Gotama awakening under the Bodhi tree? In fact, this account depicts the ancient Indian sage Patanjali, and describes how he and his followers practiced yoga.

This might be a little surprising, not only to Buddhists but to most yoga students today, who may be wondering where their own yoga, with its stretching, deep breathing, and perhaps a little perspiration, fits in. Setting aside the clichés familiar from movies and advertising, we must acknowledge that even for many of its most devoted and accomplished adherents, “doing yoga” primarily means pouring the energies of body and breath into a series of postures that range from soft to strenuous.

Few are aware, though, that this dynamic approach was developed mostly in the last millennium and is the still-evolving baby in the yoga family. Its tenth-century creators called it *hatha yoga*, meaning “forceful” or “energy” yoga, to distinguish it from the “royal” or “highest” path, *raja yoga*—the cultivation of *samadhi* laid out by Patanjali nearly a thousand years earlier in the *Yoga Sutra*. The oldest surviving *hatha* text, dating from the fifteenth century, insists that *raja* and *hatha* are related and meant to be practiced side by side.

This becomes clear not only at the deep end of the yoga pool, but also in the shallows where most of us first dip a toe or two. Yoga does promise—and can quickly deliver—a smorgasbord of enhancements to flexibility, strength, health, and beauty, as well as the possibility of meeting new people in a relaxed environment with few pressures and even fewer clothes. However, it is the peaceful glow that a yoga practitioner is sure to feel even after the first class that usually brings people back. This ineffable sense of contentment, clarity, and presence can awaken us to the possibility of something far greater. What may spring originally from the desire to enhance oneself can be transmuted over time into a quest for what lies beyond the self and its desires. It is then that yogis begin to tap the ancient, meditative roots—more accessible in Buddhist practice than yoga at present in the West—and seek to draw on their enormous stores of knowledge.

Trunk, Roots, Branches

Although tradition claims Patanjali was an important grammarian of the second century BCE, more recent scholarly investigations have revealed several illustrious Patanjalis. The author of the *Yoga Sutra* lived hundreds of years later, it would appear. This seminal text was probably composed between 100 BCE and 300 BCE, but it is now clear that most of its teachings are even more ancient, based on oral traditions from at least a millennium earlier. They concern contemplative practices prevalent both before and after the time of the Buddha.

In fact, if we look back to a time before the Buddha, there is evidence that an inwardly focused meditative tradition existed among some indigenous peoples of the Indian subcontinent a millennium or more earlier. This practice tradition was quite different from the externally directed spirituality of the Aryan tribes that infiltrated from the northwest. This more external form of spirituality came to dominate the area and its cultures during the first several centuries of the second millennium BCE.

Although initially overwhelmed during the Aryan influx, the inward-focused meditation tradition was more than hardy enough to survive the cross-cultural assimilation that unfolded over the next millennium. By the seventh or eighth centuries BCE, this introspective sensibility was everywhere evident in the widespread phenomenon of wandering ascetics, or *sramana*. Rejecting Vedic authority, with its relentless sacrifices and rigid hierarchies of race, class, and gender, untold numbers of men and women dropped out of conventional society and went forth into homeless spiritual seeking. Their “inner sacrifices,” ranging from harsh austerity to blissful meditation, also began to inform post-Vedic brahmanical teachings such as the *Upanisads*.

The thread that united most of these early yogas was their intense focus on self-liberation from suffering. Whether meditative trance, philosophical inquiry, naturalistic observation, extreme morality, or self-mortification, almost all the various approaches operated from a belief that it must be possible for individuals to shake the bonds of misperception that shackled them to an unending cycle of birth and death. Since one’s salvation lay not in a relationship to external gods

but in overcoming ignorance, one had to transform oneself and one’s own perceptions. Even as ascetics clustered around charismatic and compelling seekers like the Buddha and the Jain Mahavira, the prevailing ethos was self-empowering. Regardless of background, liberation was within one’s grasp.

Ironically, the spreading tent of Hinduism eventually came to enclose the unorthodox praxis of yoga, linking Patanjali to Visnu and installing his teaching as one of Hinduism’s six orthodox philosophical perspectives, or *darsanas*. Yoga, however, is primarily a path rather than a philosophy, and the *Yoga Sutra* is more road map than treatise. It is often forgotten that Patanjala-yoga shares not only the same basic meditative approach but also the spirit of independence of the Buddha’s path, rejecting spiritual authority based on revealed texts like the *Vedas* or residing in any one class or gender. Even as the Hindu traditions—eventually including *hatha yoga*—came to regard the *Yoga Sutra* as the essential expression of yogic truth, the radical nature of its meditative roots has largely been buried by the intervening centuries and layers of tradition.

What Is Yoga?

Patanjali begins the *Yoga Sutra* by defining yoga and the universal misperception it resolves:

Yoga is to still the patterning of consciousness. Then pure awareness can abide in its very nature. Otherwise awareness takes itself to be the patterns of consciousness.

Stilling reveals something generally not seen (*avidya*) by human beings: that what actually *knows* nature in all its manifestations is a timeless, subjectless, unconditioned awareness. Although the mind can imagine and express this awareness as having both a divine universal (*isvara*) and individual (*purusa*) perspective, knowing is not an entity or point of view at all. It lies beyond the reach of the mind and its insistence on location, orientation, temporality, and attributes.

What is important for a suffering being to realize is that it is this imperturbable witnessing that knows—and not one’s perceptions, feelings, or thoughts. Every one of these conscious experiences issues from body-mind phenomena that are in constant flux. When the pure, unchanging awareness of *purusa* is mistaken for these shifting contents of body or mind, we do not see things as they are.

This is the great discovery of the ancient Indian yogis: though our bodies and their surroundings may be real,

all we can actually know of them are representations appearing as consciousness, *citta*. Each distinct display, also called *citta*, is a fleeting shadow play involving one of the six types of phenomena: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile feelings, or thoughts. Even though separate and sequential, these *cittas* unfold so rapidly that we usually misperceive them as an unbroken, simultaneous flow we call “reality,” “self,” and “other.” This makes it almost impossible to distinguish between mind and matter, or between events and our reactions to them. So, our patterns of perception and volition are largely determined, automatic, and nearly inescapable.

How to Do, How to Be

Under ordinary circumstances, this illusion of a *me* navigating *myself* through a seamless *life* is virtually impenetrable. But when attention is focused on the processes of body and breath, which orient the yogi in what Patanjali calls *yoga*, or “yoking,” consciousness begins to settle spontaneously and become transparent and reflective, like the ocean growing calm.

The meditative intentions that move yogis down this natural path to tranquility are twofold. First, yogis train themselves to keep returning to the point of focus and sit with it. This intention, called *abhyasa* (“sit facing”), is the basis for sustained practice and begins with witnessing the current stream of bodily sensations. As yogis keep noticing and returning from distraction, they quickly come face-to-face with conditioned habits of thought and reaction. No matter how numerous or overwhelming these distractions, though, they always dissolve. As they continue to practice, yogis may soon begin to sense a developing aptitude for remembering the focus, a power that starts to grow stronger than the penchant for forgetting. As this aptitude is cultivated and concentration—*samadhi*—begins to coalesce, yogis will require only occasional, subtle prompts to direct and train awareness on the object, and the need even for these will drop away as *samadhi* ripens.

If meditation is to move from doing to being, the other intention one must keep in mind is softening. Again and again, the yogi unclenches, relaxes his psychosomatic grip on the moment, and allows events to be just as they are. Success is proportionate to one’s willingness to let each new impulse to control or improve simply appear, bloom, and fade. As a result, it becomes ever clearer that each bodily contraction was conditioned by a mental contraction, arising from desire, aversion, or simply holding a self-image in mind.

The yogi realizes how much of mental life has been engaged in reconnoitering for stimulation and gratification, and how attaining them never produces anything like a lasting happiness. This perceptual re-education, called *vairagya*, or “non-reacting,” involves entrusting oneself to one new experience after another. As each fresh agitation or stab of resistance is recognized and permitted to settle, one unexpectedly notices that familiar triggers of disturbance no longer have any effect. A profound equanimity has quietly developed.

Yoga's Eightfold Path

Like most yogis of his time, Patanjali appears to have been deeply inspired by the Buddha's teachings, and the *Yoga Sutra* clearly owes much of its organization and thrust to Buddhist traditions. Patanjali's path diverges from earlier, non-Buddhist models by adopting the well-known structure of the Buddha's eightfold path, or *attanga-magga*, reconfiguring it to be more explicitly about developing *dhyana*, or in Pali, *jhana*.



OM: Seed syllable of the absolute

YAMA

The first of yoga's eight aspects or “limbs” is *yama*. In five pithy lines, Patanjali lists “disciplines” that address the yogi's relationship to the world. These depart from the customary precepts—likely familiar to the yogi already—not only to inspire but to offer benchmarks for progress:

Being firmly grounded in non-violence creates an atmosphere in which others can let go of their hostility.

For those grounded in truthfulness, every action and its consequences are imbued with truth.

For those who have no inclination to steal, the truly precious is at hand.

The chaste acquire vitality.

Freedom from wanting unlocks the real purpose of existence.

NIYAMA

The second limb of yoga is *niyama*. These five types of discipline are more internal, yoking different aspects of the yogi's personal sphere to the process of realization:

With bodily purification, one's body ceases to be compelling, likewise contact with others.

Purification also brings about clarity, happiness, concentration, mastery of the senses, and capacity for self-awareness.

Contentment brings unsurpassed joy.

As intense discipline burns up impurities, the body and its senses become supremely refined.

Self-study deepens communion with one's personal deity.

Through orientation toward the divine ideal of pure awareness, isvara, one can achieve samadhi.

ASANA

As with the Buddha's, Patanjali's meditation begins with the body. No elaborate movements are recommended in the third yogic limb, merely a simple sitting posture in which one can relax all physical effort. In fact, *asana* derives from the root *as*, which means “to be” and also can connote “sitting here.” With sustained practice, the first benchmark of concentration occurs, as the stream of body sensations is recognized as indivisible from the rest of nature. As even beginning meditators can attest, the harsh polarities of self/other and pleasure/pain begin to soften:

The meditation posture (asana) should embody steadiness and ease.

This occurs as all effort relaxes and the first attainment (samapatti) of samadhi arises, revealing that the body and the infinite universe are indivisible.

Then, one is no longer disturbed by the play of opposites.

As this first meditative practice makes clear, yoga's eight elements should not be thought of as progressive, like rungs on a ladder, but more as limbs that must interact to carry one forward on the path. Each can mature to the point of transformation, as here *samadhi*, the eighth limb, blooms directly from *asana*, the third.

Of course, many modern treatments of the *Yoga Sutra* have been written by hatha yoga masters understandably inclined to interpret Patanjali's words “stable” and “easy” as referring to the firmness and softness of dynamic postures like triangle pose. Just a few minutes into sitting meditation, though, it becomes clear that the relaxation of effort Patanjali is advocating leads to the discovery of increasingly subtle degrees of contraction, which then can be released as well. As if by themselves, extraordinary qualities of steadiness, composure, and bodily pleasure begin to arise. The Buddha appears to have used similar words to describe this process.

तदा द्रष्टुः स्वरूपेऽवस्थानम्

PRANAYAMA

With mental images of the body-as-entity starting to dissolve, the yogi can observe a similar progression unfold with energy, or *prana*, conceptualized as “breath” in the fourth limb. Becoming attuned to the flow, phase by phase, reveals ever-subtler patterns of reaction and resistance that would otherwise trigger more unconscious, automatic patterns. So, *pranayama* is “breath control” that develops the more the yogi stops controlling. Just yoking to the process and letting it ripen is enough to cause the breathness of *prana* to drop away, leaving a luminous or vibratory distillation of consciousness, called *nimitta*, or “characteristic sign,” in Buddhist teaching on *jhana*. When absorption, or *dhyana*, fully ripens to its fourth stage, there no longer remains any sense of breathing at all (another phenomenon attested to in the buddhadharma):

With bodily effort relaxing, the flow of inhalation and exhalation can arrive at a standstill; this is called breath elongation (pranayama).

As the movement patterns of each breath—inhalation, exhalation, lull—are observed as to duration, number, and area of focus, breath becomes spacious and subtle.

In the fourth dhyana, the distinction between breathing in and out falls away.

Then the veil lifts from the mind's luminosity.

And the mind's potential for concentration can be tapped.

PRATYAHARA, THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE SENSES

Through observing one's consciousness of body and breath, energies become distilled into a vibrant epiphenomenon that completely unifies attention. This temporarily neutralizes the power of external phenomena to distract the yogi:

When consciousness interiorizes by uncoupling from external objects, the senses do likewise; this is called withdrawal of the senses (pratyahara).

Then the senses reside utterly in the service of realization.

Although this factor is listed fifth, *pratyahara* signals the ripening of all six meditative limbs, as might already have been gleaned from *asana* and *pranayama*.

DHARANA, DHYANA, AND SAMADHI

Whatever type of object-field has taken center stage, the progression is the same: the more collected and purified the mind becomes, the less hospitable its environment becomes for the usually unconscious patterns of physical and mental contraction. The final three limbs of yoga are a continuum where all names, concepts, psychosomatic images and volitions come to subside, after which only a phenomenon's bare processes remain:

One-pointedness (dharana) locks consciousness on a single area.

In meditative absorption (dhyana), the entire perceptual flow is aligned with that object.

When only the bare qualities of the object shines forth, as if formless, samadhi has arisen.

Discrimination and Freedom

As the eight factors of yoga mature in *samadhi*, it starts to be clear that consciousness does not really *know*, but is merely a display *being known*. The discriminating insight (*viveka*) that recognizes this difference is not an idea but something that must be directly seen. This is the crack that will cause the everyday misidentification (*avidya*) of consciousness (*citta*) with pure awareness (*purusa*) to shatter:

As soon as one can distinguish between consciousness (citta) and awareness (purusa), the ongoing construction of the self ceases.

Consciousness, now oriented to this distinction (viveka), can gravitate toward freedom—the fully integrated knowledge that awareness is other than unfolding nature.

This completely non-discursive yoga terminates in the direct insight that suffering is nothing more than an artifact of consciousness. Unconditioned knowing, whether afterward conceived in a divine (*isvara*) or individual (*purusa*) scale, is untouched by change, uncolored by suffering, free of self-qualities.

One who regards even the most exalted states disinterestedly, discriminating continuously between pure awareness

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Above: “Yoga is to still the patterning of consciousness.”

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and the phenomenal world, enters the final stage of integration, in which nature is seen to be a shower of irreducible experiential states (dharma-megha).

This realization extinguishes both the causes of suffering and the cycle of cause and effect.

Once all the layers and imperfections concealing truth have been washed away, insight is boundless, with little left to know.

Then the seamless flow of reality, its transformations colored by the fundamental qualities of nature (gunas), begins to break down, fulfilling the true mission of consciousness.

One can see that the flow is actually a series of discrete events, each corresponding to the merest instant of time, in which one form becomes another.

Freedom is at hand when the fundamental qualities of nature, each of their transformations witnessed at the moment of its inception, are recognized as irrelevant to pure awareness; it stands alone, grounded in its very nature, the power of pure seeing.

Though awareness has been designated as “purusa” and linguistically cast as an entity, it is not even an “it,” being naturally of a different order (*kaivalya*) than the birth, identity, thoughts,

and experience the yogi had previously confused it with. Although most inherited and acquired personal attributes will continue to some extent, they are joined by the post-cessation knowledge that they are mere processes. Even though spinning like juggler's plates, held up by the momentum of some earlier push, they're doomed to topple before long.

Thus, the yogi has not become free *from* anything. Awareness was already free, awaiting recognition from a purified consciousness. Not unlike the power in Dorothy's ruby slippers, the path to awakening is waiting within us, ready to appear when mind is brought together with some aspect of unfolding reality and yoked to it persistently enough for the dizzying dramas of self to dissipate. The yogi now feels an unprecedented security in the impersonal and impermanent: there's no place like home.

Mat and Cushion: The Yoga Continuum

If Patanjali dropped in on a yoga class today, he might not recognize very much of it as yoga. His yogic path moves directly from the pulsating world at large to the subtlest, most ineffable aspects of experience. The terminus of this path is consciousness stilled to cessation, leaving at least an instant of unconditioned knowing. This doesn't happen very often in downward dog pose, or any of the other familiar moves we undertake in yoga rooms around the world.

So, when we're on the mat are we really doing yoga? Yes, even if not in a way that brings us to the brink of liberation. It's no accident

that dynamic hatha yoga has become the most popular style in the world; it's not only accessible but very powerful. For many people in our cerebral modern age, physical movement is a far more welcoming portal to concentration and mindfulness than “cold” sitting. Even if they generally lie beyond the threshold of stillness necessary for the terminal stages of samadhi, the techniques of “energy yoga” can quickly expose much of our conditioned mind-body patterning and lay a channel for us to flow toward sitting.

Working with prana vividly reminds us that dharma practice has always been susceptible to intellectualization, or dryness, even though the Buddha, like Patanjali, taught an experiential yoga grounded in the energy stream and pointed to the liberation inherent in knowing it at the most elemental level.

As in sitting meditation, it is difficult to perform a yoga pose without unconsciously striving to feel good, or improve the self, or prolong life. Grasping and delusion follow us wherever we go, and thus both sitting and hatha yoga can become new, specialized arenas for perpetuating *dukkha*, suffering. Patanjali, like the Buddha, recognized that the causes of suffering arise from not recognizing the emptiness of the identity one is striving to enhance. Thus, any movement toward insight and freedom must confront the insidious bodily and mental clinging of which the self is made. As the fifteenth-century sage Svatmarama flatly observed:

*When there's hatha without raja yoga, or raja yoga without hatha, no perfection is possible.
So, practice them both, together, till fruition. ♦*