

## Meditations on Yoga

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It was a pleasant surprise when I got a message from Robert asking me whether I could give a talk on yoga to the IWC. I have always looked up to this organization as an oasis of sanity in a world which at times appears to have gone astray. So, I consider it an honor to have been asked to speak at this venue.

I believed that yoga has always been a practice that promoted a culture of peace and nonviolence and benevolence towards all living beings. It is an attempt to pull us out of our egotistic and individualistic bubble towards a higher goal of seeing unity in all of creation. As the Gita says a yogi will “look with an equal eye on a brahmin possessed of learning, a cow, an elephant, or a dog or even a dog eater.” So how can a yogi differentiate between a German and a Jew or a Russian and a Ukrainian or a Hindu and a Muslim. So as Yoga gains acceptance and popularity in the world, hopefully as a world culture, it will undoubtedly promote nonviolence and magnanimity amongst nations and people of all regions and religions and belief systems.

With that let us get into a little introduction to the two texts that seem to best to define the practice and purpose of Yoga namely the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali and the Bhagwat Gita and examine how a study of the two is likely to promote the aims of this organization. If time permits, we will give a brief account of those responsible to transmit that knowledge to the United States and the West.

- In the earliest compositions of the *Rg. Veda* itself the ancient sages had started questioning the foundations of existence or ‘reality’. In its creation hymn the Veda asked who the creator of the universe was and suggested that it was “Tat” or ‘That’ which existed before all that we know and all that we do not, and before everything and nothing as we understand it. All have come out of ‘That’ which was beyond the comprehension of men. In later Upanishads this concept was extensively expanded with the conclusion in the famous saying “*Tat tvam asi*” or “That thou art”. Everything in this Universe was an expression of That, Most of the Hindu philosophical systems were an attempt to understand the reality of “That” and yoga was an attempt, experientially, to realize “That”.

In Vedanta, the philosophical tradition of the Upanishads, the trace of the that all-encompassing Brahman is said to be expressed in each jiva, or individual living

entity, as *atman*, or *Purusha* variously translated as the Self or Soul or inner Spirit. This microcosm is thus a reflection of the macrocosm. The purpose of yoga in Vedanta, was to liberate the *atman* from the embrace of *jiva* and *Prakriti* or primal nature and allow it to yoke with *param-atman* or the supreme spirit or Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. And for those who were not theists too, it was seen as a practice to liberate them from coils of earthly existence.

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At the time of the two texts, Yoga Sutra and the Gita, which were possibly in their final form around the beginnings of the common era, there already existed in India six orthodox schools of philosophy, or visions of reality, called *Darshana*, founded by the ancient sages, as well as the heterodox schools of Jainism, Buddhism and the Charavaka.

Of the six orthodox schools of philosophy the first two, Purva Mimamsa and Uttara Mimamsa or Vedanta, were strongly theistic, the next two, Sankhya and Yoga, emphasized the existence of an inner “Self” and the last two, Nyaya and Visheshikha, the one on logic and the other on the nature of matters and their properties, were comparatively more rational and materialistic. They all, though, acknowledged the authority of the *Vedas*. The Sankhya system, however, though it accepts the concept of an inner spirit, or *Purusha* as it terms it, does not go beyond to connect it to any universal phenomenon. In the Yoga Sutra the role of a Supreme Purusha, or Person, is acknowledged but not emphasized as an essential feature. Devotion to the Lord was a way to liberation but not the only way. The objective in Yoga Sutra was to disassociate the Purusha or Atman from the embrace of Prakriti so that it realizes its own independent nature and rests in solitude or Nirvana. In the Gita, which is based on Vedanta, the Lord is both Universal and personal and Yoga provided many paths to salvation by yoking one to the Divine, the path chosen being dependent on the nature of the person, or rather, the dominant qualities in one’s nature.

- Of the two heterodox systems, Jainism accepts the possibility of an individual spirit but not of any Supreme Being whereas Buddhism does not mention either

and both are clearly non-theistic. The way of yoga, in one form or another, is utilized by all these differing systems and whereas it is acceptable to them as means to liberation, they differ as to its ends. Thus, the final goal of yoga is visualized differently in each one of these philosophical systems. For the Jains it is Kaivalya or solitude, for the Buddhists it is Nirvana or Enlightenment, to the Vedantins it is Moksha or Liberation leading to an attachment with the Deity or complete absorption in the Universal Consciousness, Brahman. For all of them though it is liberation from the seemingly endless cycle of birth and death and all of them believed in a moral code called *Dharma*.

- **The *Sankhya* system**

The Yoga system of Indian Philosophy, is considered by scholars to have evolved as a corollary of the *Sankhya* system of Kapila, formed around 1200 BCE, the latter providing the principles while the former the practice towards Self Realization.

In Sankhya, which literally means count, the system tried to enumerate all phenomena by numbers. Thus, human experience of the world is described in this system as being constituted of 25 elements, the first being the subject termed *Purusha* or person, and the other 24 are the objects of its experience. *Purusha* is the immortal Self in all beings and *Prakriti*, or primal nature is the everchanging world of experience.

1. *Purusha* ( The Person or Self or Inner Spirit ) that experiences the following:
2. *Prakriti* ( Primal nature ) - manifested by the three '*gunas*' or qualities such as Rajas that is dynamic and positive, Tamas that is static and negative, and Satvic that is balanced and moderate.
3. *Mahat* or *Buddhi*- Intellect
4. *Ahamkara* - Egoism
5. *Manas* - The mind
  
- 6– 10 - The sensory organs: eyes, ears, tongue, skin, nose.

11 – 15 - The motor organs: hands, legs, mouth, excretory and reproductive organs.

16- 20 - The subtle elements: sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell.

21-25 - The gross elements: earth, water, air, fire and ether (space).

Aim: *Purusha* detached from *Prakriti* attains *kaivalya* or enlightened solitude.

- Purusha is immortal, a permanent witness to all there is. Prakriti or Nature is ever changing, subject to modifications of time and space and is never static. Purusha uses Prakriti to experience this 'samsara', or the world, but enmeshed in it he loses his sense of separateness. It is only when, through yogic meditation or other means, one realizes one's independent status as an actor and knows he or she is merely playing a role, and recognizes Nature as a mere fleeting experience, that freed from this trance, One gains '*nirvana*' and Prakriti having been 'seen as transient', withdraws. In other words when we realize that we are really the inner Self, which has been embodied by Nature and not part of Nature itself, we attain liberation and Nature ceases to have any hold on us. All yoga since the time of Kapila was an attempt to experience this connection between Purusha and Prakriti and ultimately to dissociate the two so that Purusha could then be free to rest in tune with one's own true Self, independent of the effects of Samsara. Nature is like a movie or a play that exists only for our transitory experience, to be enjoyed and not to be mistaken for reality.
- In Sankhya realization was complete when Purusha realized its independent status. To the theists, or Vedantins, the self or atman would then merge or at least be attached to Param-atman or the Supreme Self, in what is termed as Moksha or liberation. To the non-theists, such as the followers of the Buddha, it would be akin to *Nirvana* or enlightenment, and to the followers of the Jaina tradition it would be the attainment of a state of '*kaivalya*' or solitude. Yoga accepted the concept of Purusha and Prakriti from Sankhya but went further and provided a path to liberation by the prescription of an actual practice by which such liberation could be attained. The path of Yoga was thus seen as the way to Self-realization in all these systems.

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There are many practices of yoga that have since been prescribed. The sutras of Patanjali provide the way of meditation. The Gita, from the epic Mahabharata, gives four paths to liberation including meditation. The Kundalini system of yoga, coming from a different and possibly non-Vedic tradition, provides its own unique path to transcendence. In it, Shiva, as the universal consciousness, and Shakti as the primal energy take the place of Purusha and Prakriti.

In this talk we will cover some of the basic features of two texts, elements of yoga philosophy as described in the *Gita*, which is embedded in the sixth volume of the epic Mahabharata, and the aphorisms on Yoga contained in the text, *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali. Both these texts, written possibly over two thousand years ago have remained, along with their many translations and commentaries, an everlasting spring of yogic knowledge and wisdom. And so, we will try to uncover some of the features of two texts.

### **Yoga Sutra of Patanjali or *Ashthanga* yoga.**

- Yoga as a system of meditation and mortification of the body to attain transcendence over one's nature had existed for centuries prior to Patanjali's Yoga Sutra or aphorisms on Yoga. There is some evidence of it in some of the seals found in Indus Valley that go back 5000 years. It has been referred to in the Vedas as well as in some of the Upanishads as also in a text depicting a dialogue between the ancient sage Yagyavalkya and Gargi, a female adept, possibly around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. The only available record of that ancient treatise on yoga is in much later texts from around 500CE. The Yogasutra of Patanjali, however, is the earliest complete text or manual of the system that has survived the ages and preserved in its original form, it is available for our study.
- The pithy aphorisms are only 195 in number, divided into four *pada* or parts or sections. The first part lays out the general principles of meditation and describes the conditions under which the yogi's self-identity is absorbed into pure

consciousness. The second is a prescriptive manual of *Kriya* yoga or disciplines to follow and *Ashtanga* yoga or a procedure of yoga with eight 'anga' or limbs of the practice and delineates the requirements for each of the first five that deal with our physical nature. The third *pada* or part defines the psychic nature and requirements of the final three limbs of yoga that lead to *samadhi* or absorption, the final phase in a meditative practice. It also lists the supra-normal or supernatural powers or *siddhis* that one can attain by the practice with the warning that they should never be used with egotistical purposes in mind. The fourth *pada* or section of the Manual deals with the attainment of transcendence and discusses the situation of the yogi in this final phase of the practice. Here one attains a state described as being in a 'meditative cloud of virtue'. One might conclude, in brief, that the Sutras provide a passage from the gross to the subtle and finally to the supreme state of awareness. Chris Chappell calls yoga a continuing process of "progressive subtilization of one's focus, which is directed away from the gross manifestations of *chitta vritti* (fluctuations of the mind-stuff) to the most sublime aspect of prakriti". For this Patanjali provides in the Sutras "myriad paths to the goal and several descriptions of the goal once it has been achieved."

- Little is known of Patanjali himself. It is not clear whether he is the same person as the one who wrote a classic text on Sanskrit grammar in 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. In that he wrote of Greek soldiers in some of his examples and so might have lived around 150BCE when the Bactrian Greek king Menander ruled parts of the Punjab. Some scholars disagree with this and put a later date around 200CE when he might have composed the Sutras. Some even suggest that he is the same person as Vyasa who wrote a commentary on the Sutras. In Hindu Vaishnava Mythology he is seen as an avatar of the cosmic serpent Seshanag who lies coiled in the Milky Way and seats the Lord Vishnu. Here he is then said to have taken a human birth as Patanjali to show the people a way to their salvation at the feet of the Lord.

- The *Sutra*, or threads, themselves are short, pithy summarized statements of the teachings. In view of the short and concise nature of the aphorisms it has always needed detailed explanations and interpretations. They have therefore attracted various commentaries throughout the ages starting with one by Vyasa, mentioned earlier, around the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>. century CE. Later centuries produced works by Vachaspati Mishra (900-980 CE), Bhoja Raja (11<sup>th</sup>. century), Vigyana Bhikshu (16<sup>th</sup>. century) and others including Swami Vivekananda in the 19<sup>th</sup>.century who gave it the name Raja Yoga and published it from New York. Now we have many more translations and commentaries on the Sutras including one by Christopher Isherwood and Swami Prabhavananda of the Vedanta Society, a popular one by Swami Satchidananda, and recently one by our own Chris Chapell of Loyola Marymount University.

Here we will look at some of the basic elements of Patanjali's teachings on yoga.

- Part 1. *Samadhi Pada* - On Contemplation / Meditation

In the first three aphorisms themselves Patanjali lays down the definition and purpose of Yoga:

1.1 Now, the regulations of Yoga.

1.2 Yoga is the restraint of the fluctuations (*Vrittis*) of the mind-stuff *Chitta*).

This term (*Chitta*) would include the mind, the ego, and the intellect.

1.3 Then the Seer (Self) abides in one's own true nature. (As *Purusha*)

1.4 At other times, the Seer is enmeshed and is identified with the fluctuations or expressions of the mind stuff as a part of nature. (As *Prakriti*.)

This implies that when one is able to control the modifications, fluctuations or expressions of one's ego, intellect or the mind, so that they are still and without any movement, then one can rest in one's elemental *Purusha* being. So, the basic purpose of yogic meditation is to reach that state of stillness in the mental faculties. In a state of absolute peacefulness, the mind, undisturbed and quiet, attains to a state of solitude or nirvana in touch with

one's true nature. At other times, according to Patanjali, we are entangled with the ever-changing flow of thoughts and feelings that are a product of nature. Often the mind is seen as the waters of a lake. If the surface is disturbed by waves, one is unable to see deep within. Once the waters are calm and still and clear one can see its depths without hindrance. In the calm mind one becomes aware of one's true nature, the Self or *Purusha* or *Atman*. In a mind devoid of all disturbances and clear as a crystal one will be able to comprehend one's true nature and rest in it.

- Continued practice and effort with non-attachment is needed to control such fluctuations of the mind. These occur, according to Patanjali, due to various causes, such as knowledge, misconception, delusion, sleep, and memory. (1.6) When disturbed by negativity Patanjali asks us to seek the opposite or positive thoughts to negate the effects of the former.
- He then lays down the pre-conditions for meditation which are the steadfast practice and non-attachment or freedom from desires. (1.12)  
Disentanglement with the *gunas* or attributes of nature would lead to the realization of one's true Self or Purusha. (1.16)
- Practice can be slow, medium or intense according to Patanjali. By dedication to the Supreme Spirit, Ishwara or God, one can reach *Samadhi*, the final goal of meditation. This process is aided by the chanting of 'Aum' that represents the cosmic vibrations of Universal Consciousness and helps remove obstacles to the practice. It is also aided by friendliness to the contented, compassion to the suffering, delight with the virtuous and disengagement with the unrighteous. (1.23,28 & 33)
- With controlled breathing, absorbed, unattached, focused as desired, the quiet mind becomes like a clear crystal with no differentiation between the knower, knowing and the known. The meditating mind, the process of

meditation and that which is meditated upon merge into one homogeneous phase. The mind in such a state is likened by him to a translucent luminous crystal. (1.41)

Patanjali then lists some of the types of meditation.

- *Sampragyata* Samadhi or conditioned contemplation is meditation upon an object that results from reasoning, reflecting, and rejoicing with an ego untainted by desire.

With continued practice when one reaches a stage when thought ceases and only the impressions from the past '*samskara*' remain in the mind it is called *Asampragyata Samadhi* or unconditioned contemplation. (1.17,1.18)

- One begins the practice of meditation focused on an object or idea and as the practice gains strength one reaches the stage where the form and name of the object or idea loses coherence, and one is absorbed without any distinction between the subject and object of meditation. In the latter all previous 'seeds', impressions and memories of the past, dissolve and only the inner Spirit or Self shines.

The final stage is called *Nirbeeja* (non-seed) *Samadhi* where even this last impression or awareness ceases. All separations vanish and the absorption is now complete. One rests now in one's own true nature, which is one's 'atman' or the Self. (1.51)

## **Part 2. *Sadhana Pada* – On Practice**

- While Pada 1 discussed the theoretical aspects of meditation this next chapter deals with the practice and is applicable for a prospective student of the yoga. This process has been named Raja Yoga by Swami Vivekananda. This section provides two methods, the first is called Kriya yoga or the preparations for meditation, and the other Ashtanga yoga or the eight limbs of a full practice.

This initial preparatory practice or **Kriya Yoga** requires steadfast discipline in pursuing its requirements of austerity, spiritual study and surrender to *Ishwara*, the chosen Lord or deity, who is a special Purusha. They are an aid in the preparation for the more arduous process of meditation to reach *Samadhi* or absorption. The obstacles to the practice according to Patanjali are ignorance, egoism, attraction or aversion, and clinging to existence.

To the discriminating endless suffering is caused by the karmic reactions of *samskara*, the nature one is born with, compounded by the three *gunas* or inherent qualities of nature, and their effects on the psyche. The root cause is the comingling of the Seer (Purusha) with the Seen (Prakriti), which is the product of the *gunas*. This is also the reason for our clinging to existence not realizing that the Self or Purusha is immortal and not a part of this fleeting existence in Prakriti.

So, the remedy is in unfaltering discriminative discernment, and that is attained by the practice of the eight limbs of yoga as defined by Patanjali.

### **Ashtanga yoga (The eight limbs of Yoga):**

- Patanjali then lists the eight limbs or parts of the yoga practice which he considers essential to reach the highest state of meditation, that is absorption or Samadhi. Chapell considers that this eight-fold path “follows a process of increasing subtilization” starting with external factors and steadily moving inwards to one’s own physical and then psychological nature.

These are: Yama (Abstinence), Niyama (observances), Asana (postures), Pranayama (control of breath), Pratyahara (withdrawal inward of senses), Dharana (concentration), Dhyana (meditation) and Samadhi (Absorption).

In the first, Yama, one drops bad habits, in the second, Niyama, one develops positive attitudes. Next one works on one’s body in Asana, and then with control of the breath, Pranayama, one begins to focus one’s mind and learn to concentrate. This is followed by Pratyahara or internalization of one’s senses or pulling the senses inwards, like a turtle withdrawing its limbs within oneself,

away from external stimulations or disturbances. The last three steps of concentration, contemplation and absorption deal with one's inner world of increasingly subtle perceptions.

- Let us look at each of these eight steps in a little more detail.

**Yama (Abstinence):** Nonviolence, Truthfulness, Non stealing, Non greed, and Contenance (2.30) According to Patanjali:

In an attitude of non-violence all hostilities cease.

In truthfulness, action and reactions become subservient.

In non-stealing, all things seem like gems.

By continence, vigor or energy is gained.

By non-coveting, all one's needs are within reach.

- **Niyama (Observances):** Purity (cleanliness), Contentment, Austerity, Self-study, and Devotion (2.32)

In purity is cleanliness of mind, speech, and body.

Contentment in one's position in life leads to unsurpassed happiness.

By austerity and perseverance impurities in the body and senses are removed.

Self-Study, reflection, and introspection brings one closer to one's ideal.

Contemplation on *Ishwara*, the Supreme Being, God, or Guru, enables *Samadhi*.

- **Asana (Postures):** Posture for meditation should be steady, firm, and comfortable for sitting for long periods of time. It should be held without restlessness and distractions. The stance should be maintained undisturbed with the spine erect. (2.46) In a later commentary Vyasa suggested twelve sitting postures for meditation.

These should not be confused with Asanas of later Hath Yoga. In Hatha Yoga Pradipika, written possibly around 800AC, around 80 asanas were prescribed, and modern yogis have raised the numbers to around 200.

- **Pranayama: (Breath control)** Control of the breath (the life force) involves, controlled in-breath and out-breath. It is regulated by time, space and numbers and is done both long and short periods. (2.49) It should be done with the mind focused on the breath. This (inhalation and exhalation) is an exercise in attention. Learning to focus the mind on the breath makes one fit for subsequent steps in concentration. In fact, contemplation on the breath is considered the easiest way to take the first steps towards meditation. Later many more exercises are prescribed for the control of the breath
- **Pratyahara (Sense withdrawal) (2.54)**

The word means restraining the senses. In other words, the senses need to be pulled in from external influences. It is a mental process of retracting all sensory attractions, to concentrate on the primary goal, which is meditation. It is closing all mental processes to the sensory world. It is in a sense an exercise of the mind over the body and is often likened to a tortoise withdrawing its limbs inwards.

“Pratyahara is a transition from control of external forms to the next three limbs that control the inner state, a movement from the outer sphere of the body to the inner sphere of the spirit.”

### **Part 3: Vibhuti Pada – On manifestations / accomplishments**

- The three remaining limbs of yoga that are more psychological than physical and are discussed in this chapter of the Yoga Sutra. From the external we now move to the world within oneself. From Sankhya perspective we are leaving the lower nature of the 20 elements and moving to the control of Chitta, which consists of the mind, the ego and the intellect. Gaining control over them is the hardest of all. How is one to do it? Patanjali provides the following three steps of meditation:

**Dharana (Concentration):** Concentration is an introspective focus on the object of meditation. It is an inner state of the conscious mind that is brought to the condition of one pointedness or singular focus on a place, object, or idea. It could be fixed on a mantra or on the breath or a part of the body or any other thing that can hold one's attention. The mind is to be fixed in its concentration and should be controlled from flitting around. (3.1)

**Dhyana (Contemplation):** Contemplation or reflection on the object of concentration. What transpires in this is a continuous flow of communication from the mind to the object of meditation. It is a "non-judgmental, non-presumptuous" observation of all aspects of the idea, or object, or feeling or concept that is being meditated upon. 'Dharana and Dhyana are integrally related', one a steady state and the other a moving process of the mind, the first is static and the other is a steady flow of pure observation. (3.2) In Dharana one is aware of thoughts, in Dhyana one is not.

An example of this is focusing on the waves lapping on a beach. At first one is focused on watching the way each wave comes and crashes against the sand or rock and then recedes, but gradually one begins to get absorbed in following the motions of the waves as a continuous flow of observation without any accompanying thoughts.

- **Samadhi (Absorption):** This last step in meditation happens when the object of meditation loses its independent form and results in unity with the mental process. The one who is meditating, the process of meditation and the object of meditation are united in one continuous flow of experience. It is a state when the separation between the subject, the process of meditating, and that which is meditated upon dissolve. The mind fully absorbed loses its independent identity and merges with the process of meditation. At this time, "the thinker and the thought process fuse with the object of the thought". The person is then said to have attained the state of *Samadhi* or absorption. (3.3)

In such a state of absorption a person is not aware of one's own separate identity. There is only oneness or unity.

- **Samyama**

When *Dharana*, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi* are performed together on a particular object or subject it is termed *Samyama*. (3.4) It happens when the three become, by long practice, part of one's nature.

Various *siddhis* or powers are obtained by *Samyama* on an object, but that occurs only after perfection in the practice. By *samyama* on different aspects of existence the *Siddhas* makes one capable of performing seeming miracles, such as the capacity to walk on water, or read the mind of others, transport oneself through space, read the past and the future and so on. But Patanjali warns that when such *Siddhis* are performed with ego the powers will not work and the yogi may have negative consequences. So, the powers when used sparingly for the benefit of others, with compassion, seem to work.

When, after mastering *samyama*, there is non-attachment even to these *Siddhis* or powers, one gains the absolute *Kaivalya*, or solitude.

#### **Part 4 : Kaivalya Pada – On Absoluteness**

- This final state of constant discriminative discernment is called *dharma-megha smadhi*, or a “meditative cloud of virtue”. Here a person would seem to be in permanent state of meditation even when going about in performing his daily duties. (4,29) This reminds one of the halo around the head of a divine being or person. It seems that such a person is forever in a sacred bubble described in the sutra as a “meditative cloud of virtue.”

Here, all effects of karma end, the *gunas* cease their transformations, *Prakriti* withdraws and *Purusha*, the immortal Self, with realization complete, rests in one's own true nature. The yogi has then attained *nirvana*. (4.34)

## Conclusion

The metaphysics of the Yoga Sutra is closely allied to the Sankhya theory of Prakriti or Primal Nature and Purusha or Self or Consciousness permeating the universe. In all living beings or Jiva, the Spirit or Purusha, is enmeshed with Nature and in a state of delusion. Patanjali accepts the *Guna* theory of Sankhya that all living beings or Jiva are constrained by the three *Gunas* or innate qualities of *Satva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas* which function in them in different proportions. *Satva* is the quality of wisdom, compassion and harmony. *Rajas* is one of passion, aggression and craving. *Tamas* is the one of ignorance, delusion and stupidity. The purpose of yoga is to move from *Tamas* to *Rajas* to *Satva* qualities and finally to transcend them all to reach liberation from their bondage. Unlike Sankhya in which knowledge alone leads to liberation, Patanjali requires a disciplined practice such as adherence to the eight limbs of yoga to attain liberation or moksha. Further whereas Sankhya clearly does not require a belief in Ishwara in its exposition, Yoga Sutra does indicate that such belief would assist and even enhance the practice of meditation. Yoga is clearly allied to Sankhya in its epistemology both requiring the *pramana* or evidence of direct perception, inference, or testimony as proof of their reliability.

The beliefs of Sankhya and even Yoga are not considered overtly theistic since they do not connect *Brahman* to *Purusha*, but they have been adapted by the more theistic Vedanta system by doing exactly that. The term *Ishwara*, or Lord, used in Yoga Sutra can be interpreted to mean a deity as also a special *Purusha* or Guru who has reached '*Kaivalya*'. In this manner the system of yoga has been adopted by Jainas and Buddhists as well as the theistic Vaishnava and Shaiva sects and the more philosophically oriented Vedantins among the Hindus. And now it is has spread outside of India among those who have a variety of non-Indian beliefs and traditions.

Finally, to end the study of the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali I quote here a passage from Christopher Chapple's book *Yoga and the Luminous*.

“The root and source of one’s anxiety and pain (dukha) are thoughts: thoughts are perpetuated because of past actions (samskaras), which are generally fraught with impurity and affliction (klesha). By applying various techniques of yoga practice, the influence of past actions slowly wears away, lessening the anxiety and pain associated with the human condition. ...For Patanjali, this reversal of the mind from outward obsessions to inward stability is the highest of all possible human achievements.”

These Yoga Sutras have become, in the last century, the primary resource for all followers of yoga across the globe. It remains the most sought-after text on yoga even two thousand years or so since Patanjali first pronounced these aphorisms for the welfare of humanity.

### **Introduction to Gita**

- It is clear that historically the yoga systems described in the Sutra were closely allied to the *shramana* and Brahmanic tradition of renunciation and asceticism. To find a more socially adaptable systems of yoga we have to turn to the book of the Gita from the epic MahaBharata. Here one is provided with methods of yoga more easily applicable to the householders or those who are required to work and as well attend to their families and domestic responsibilities. Here one can could perform yoga while still executing one’s prescribed *dharma*, or duties, in life.

### **The Gita**

Before we turn to the study of yoga in the Gita it is worth learning of the literary and spiritual context in which it is situated and of some of the concepts prevalent at the time of its composition. We had already talked of the creation hymn in the Veda where the concept of Brahman, or Ultimate Reality was proposed and referred to as "Tat". In later philosophical systems the concepts of the individual Self or Spirit referred to as Atma or Purusha was discussed. The individual being a living entity was called Jiva that functioned in Prakriti or Primal Nature and embodied an Atma or Purusha or individual Spirit or Self that appeared to be seemingly attached to each one of them.

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Human effort had to be directed by '**dharma**' or right actions. The Gita is infused with the question of 'dharma', what it is and how should it be followed. Should one give in to '**kama**' (desire) or to '**artha**' (material gain), in preference to '**dharma**' (right action) since fate is all powerful anyway? How does one distinguish between one's own *dharma* and the needs of family, community or nation? What happens when one's own view of what is right conflicts with that of the community? How is one to act (*Karma*)? These are the kind of questions the Gita deals with in great detail. **Kaama** (desire) or **artha** (acquisition) seemed to be at the root of all conflicts but only when they are pursued with *adharma*, or unrighteousness. **Dharma** was essential to lead a proper life. What is **yoga** and how does it help to follow dharma or attain **moksha**? The Gita is a practical treatise on yoga and provides different forms of yoga which are shown to be essential to achieve salvation In Gita this is also tied to the concept of grace and since it came under the influence of the theist devotees of Vishnu as the Supreme Being. By His grace all things were possible. By the grace of God or guru '**moksha**' could be instantaneous. Otherwise, one had to resort to penance, austerities and the **yoga** of meditation as means to spiritual advancement.

The **Gita** spells out other and more practical ways of yoga that would also lead to liberation. They include the way of **Karma** (actions), **Gyana**

(knowledge), **Bhakti** (devotion) in addition to the ancient way of **Dhyana** or (meditation). The ultimate Vedantic goal of yoga in the Gita, then as now, is to transcend the limitations of this '*samsara*', or earthly existence, and achieve union with 'That', the Universal Consciousness.

- The yoga of the Gita differs from the traditional yoga of asceticism and renunciation in that it is applicable to all the peoples in society, irrespective of caste or creed or gender and considers itself superior to traditional ritual while being easier than renunciation. In the Gita the three systems, Sankhya, Yoga and Vedanta come together, the first two as the tributaries and the last as the mainstream of that flowing river of knowledge.
- Though the Gita is often studied as a stand-alone text, the epic Mahabharata, of which it is a central part, serves as the context in which it was set and is therefore well worth a look. It makes clear the nature of the terrible dilemma faced by Arjuna, the hero, at the commencement of the great battle of Bharat or India. It also provides us with some knowledge of the relationship between Arjuna and Krishna the two main characters of the Gita, one playing the role of a warrior in a dreadful dilemma, questioning his own role in it, and the other as that of his friend, philosopher, and guide. In giving him advice Krishna seems to be showing all of humanity ways to handle the vicissitudes of life and to find their own paths to salvation. Metaphorically seen, Arjuna and Krishna are the two aspects in each one of us, the one caught in *samsara*, the outer world of the senses, and the other, as Gandhi describes it, the still small inner voice of reason or conscience within. Since Arjuna had to do all the fighting and Krishna remained, as his charioteer, a witness and not an active participant in the battles, giving him advice but not taking part, they could well be considered to represent Prakriti and Purusha, our innate Nature and the inner Self of the Samkhya way of knowledge, except for the fact that this Purusha here was not a totally silent witness but as a non-participating friend, philosopher and guide.

The perpetual mythological conflict between the *deva* (gods) and the *danava* (demons), the one representing 'order' and the other 'disorder', is recreated in human terms in the epic Mahabharata. Krishna, as *avatar* of Lord Vishnu, tries to correct the cosmic balance between the forces of order (Pandava) and disorder (Kaurava) who are ready to do battle. Mahatma Gandhi considered their war to be an allegorical representation of the battle within our own minds between an action that seems right and the one that is more convenient. To him, Arjuna represents each one of us, and Krishna, is the inner voice of conscience, that points to the right direction. How does one make the right choice? In the Gita Krishna teaches the ways of Yoga, (*bhakti, gyana, karma* as well as *dhyana*.) as the means to salvation. He also points to how *dharma* can be viewed in different ways in extreme circumstances.

- The real message of the Gita however begins, when at the start of the first day of battle in the Mahabharata. Arjuna asks his friend and charioteer, Krishna, to drive him to the mid- point between the two armies so that he may get a good idea of how his antagonists are arranged to do battle. Krishna drives the chariot to a location from which Arjuna could get the best view of those ready to fight him and his armies. The seriousness of the situation suddenly hits Arjuna as a bolt from the blue. Is it right to fight for mere possession of land? Is it right to kill those whom one respects as one's elders and others who are one's cousins, friends, and companions? What about their families, their elders and their women and children, who will all suffer as a consequence of war? He shudders in despair, drops his weapons, sinks to the ground, and turns piteously to Krishna for advice. Is it not better to get away from it all and lead the life of a yogi in a forest rather than commit such deadly sins, he asks? Suddenly the sounds and clamor of the armies ready to do battle fall silent. Time stands still for the next seventeen chapters of the Gita while the two friends are in deep discussion on the trials and tribulations of life and how to live in the right manner. Meanwhile all the elements of nature are held in suspense. In that deathly silence, our two protagonists, one human and the other divine, are steeped in their conversation. It is in this

context that in the Gita, Krishna, presents his doctrine of yoga as the way to negotiate the trials and tribulations of life, amid our daily battles, in preference to escaping from it all, away in the seclusion of a proverbial forest, to lead a life of an ascetic.

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- In dissuading Arjuna from his desire to escape from his duties, Krishna lectures him on four types of Yoga, *Karma* (Action), *Gyana* or *Jnana* (Knowledge), and *Bhakti* (Devotion) and also *Dhyana* (Meditation). These could be performed by lay persons and householders as distinct from the Patanjalian ‘yoga of meditation or *Dhyana*’ that required the practice of austerities and renunciation. As mentioned earlier in the talk on Yoga Sutra, *ashtanga* yoga, which required a mental discipline and seclusion, was difficult to achieve for one also engaged in the daily duties of a profession or taking care of home and family. The ways of action, knowledge or devotion were easier to acquire. The Gita stresses that yoga is for all peoples with no distinction or class or gender, caste, or creed, and is more accessible to the lay public than the path of renunciation.

### **The way of knowledge or wisdom (*Gyana* or *Jnana* Yoga )**

Krishna chides Arjuna on his conception of mortality and teaches him the distinction between then the real (immortal) Self and the unreal, transitory physical/psychological self. “The wise mourn neither for the living nor for the dead. Never was I not, nor thou, nor these kings; nor any of us will cease to be hereafter.” We are not the body that goes through childhood, old age, and death. The “embodied one” receives another body on death and it is like changing garments. Unlike the body, “That” is imperishable, indestructible, and everlasting. The “*Atman*” is neither slain nor ever slays. “This no fire burns, no

waters wet, 'This' no wind doth dry" he says. 'This' can be perceived neither by the senses nor by the mind.

- **“The state of all beings before birth is unmanifest; their middle state is manifest; their state after death is again unmanifest”. This embodied one, in the body of every being, is beyond all harm. (2.16-2.30).**

Clearly Krishna here is echoing the principles of Sankhya philosophy which states that whereas the body is a part of the ever-changing Prakriti or nature, the inner Self, or Purusha, is immortal and everlasting.

**Yoga is achieved when understanding rests steadfast and unmoved in concentration on the truth, “when a man puts away all the cravings that arise in the mind and finds comfort only from his ‘atman’, or Self, then one is established in yoga. (2.53)**

When one is trying to understand this, or investigate this idea, or studying the texts that describe this, one is performing Gyana Yoga, and when one reaches the state of realization of this, then one becomes a true ‘yogi’.

Then Krishna describes such a person:

- **A man of understanding, bereft of all cravings of the mind, finds comfort in his Self. (2.55).**

It is clear, that as in the Yoga Sutra, the confabulations of the mind are the essential cause of suffering. If one can control the mind one is at peace.

**Whose mind is untroubled in sorrows and longs not for joys, who is free from passion, fear, and wrath, who owns attachment nowhere, who feels neither joy nor resentment, whether good or bad comes his way, that man’s understanding is secure.” (2-56,57)**

That is a description of a complete *gyana* yogi or the yogi of knowledge.

- **Attachment or desire begets craving, then wrath, then stupefaction, then loss of reason and finally utter destruction. (2.63)**

So, in Krishna's view desire in the long run, if unchecked, could lead to ruin. And since desire is a product of the ego, disassociation with one's ego, through introspection, is essential to overcome desires.

**The disciplined one moving among sense objects, without likes or dislikes, free from a sense of I or mine, is at peace. (2.64,70)**

Krishna goes on to warn:

- **Lust and wrath, born of *rajo-guna* or the quality of passion, are the arch-devourers, as smoke obscures fire, they obscure knowledge and stupefy man. (3.4)**

Gunās here refer to the qualities innate in nature which are considered as three, tamas, rajas and sattva. Tamas is the static quality of ignorance, apathy, and stupidity. Rajas is the quality of passion, aggression, and acquisition. Satva is the quality of balance, peacefulness, and harmony. All living beings have these three qualities in different measures causing each person to have a distinct personality and natural tendencies.

**Controlling the self by the Self, that is subtler than the senses, the mind, and the intellect, destroy lust, the enemy. (3.42)**

This seemingly simple statement appears to be the core of Self-realization, for a Self-realized soul is not likely to identify oneself with the desires of the body.

These then are essential features of Gyana Yoga, the way of Knowledge or wisdom. In effect it is nothing other than the teachings of Sankhya in a theistic garb. The Self as *Atma* here is the Purusha of Sankhya, the difference being that *Atma* is also a ray of *Paramatma* or Brahman, the Universal Consciousness, that

is immortal, eternal, and all pervading. The Self in each one of us is the witness within but not the doer or enjoyer of our actions. The Self-realized person here achieves *moksha* or liberation and is yoked to the chosen deity or merges with the Universal Consciousness or Brahman upon leaving one's earthly life.

- **The Way of Action (Karma Yoga)**

Krishna realizes that Arjuna is a man of action, a warrior. To him “the way of knowledge or wisdom”, or renunciation, would not come naturally. It had to be preceded by a yoga closer to his natural tendencies. For this now Krishna suggests the Way of Action or Karma Yoga.

- **“Doing one’s duty with resolute determination, undeterred by the sway of feelings of pleasure or pain, loss or gain, victory or defeat, for in doing so one will not incur sin.”**

**(2.38)**

He decries the traditional belief in the performance of rituals as ‘*karma*’ to obtain some reward and suggests a higher and nobler truth.

**“Action alone is your right never to the fruits thereof. Let not your motive be for the fruits of actions, nor should you desire to avoid action. Act without attachment, steadfast in Yoga, even minded in success or failure. Even mindedness is Yoga.”**

**(2.47,48)**

These are the most quoted lines in defining the essence of Karma yoga.

- **“One gifted with an attitude of detachment frees oneself from the effects of deeds, good and bad. Be devoted to yoga. Yoga is skill in action.”**

(2.50)

Acting with skill here implies acting with dedication and with a spirit of service and not with selfish motives. If one acts for the good of a higher cause, for the country or for the environment or for some other higher ideal for the good of humanity, that will constitute Karma yoga.

**“By not undertaking an action one cannot get freedom from work, nor by the renunciation of action.” (3.4)**

Actions are in-born, one has to act as long as one lives, one way or another. That is a given truth. The point is whether one acts selflessly with wisdom or not.

**“No one can exist without action for that is born of the qualities (*gunas*) of nature (*prakriti*). That man who acts, keeping all senses under control, without attachments, performing karma-yoga, excels.” (3.5, 7)**

Actions dedicated to the work on hand, without distractions of desires and expectations, would constitute Karma yoga. A spirit of service is essential.

- **“Performing action without attachment man attains the Supreme.” (3.19)**

**“Unattached, the enlightened man should act for the welfare of humanity” (3.25)**

It is clear from above that Krishna is in favor of selfless service, like the way most volunteers perform their chosen duties. Even if one works at a job, in the performance of one’s duties, if it is done with dispassion and dedication and without the distraction or expectation of rewards, or concern for the reactions of

others, it would be a form of karma yoga. Proper actions are to be done with a proper attitude, as that of service with pleasure. Such work would give one a greater sense of inner satisfaction and peace of mind than work done with an aim for personal or material gain. Service, not profit, is the motive for a karma yogi. Unselfish dedication to a higher cause, when at work, would provide lasting pleasure and satisfaction.

### **The way of devotion – (Bhakti Yoga)**

There is no other way more natural in the human condition than love. When that love is focused on a higher power, a divine presence, or a deity of one's choice, it is sublime. It lifts one to a level of selfless existence that no other method can match. In that yogic union of the lover and the loved not even liberation or *moksha* is required. It is complete in and of itself. The Bhakti movement in India had always existed in the past but in the medieval times, when the country was often invaded it took on an extra hue. Many saints and savants in all parts of the land were singing in ecstasy of their love for the divine. Mira bai in the west, Surdas and Tulsidas in the heartland, Chaitanya in the East and many others in the South were creating love songs and poems to their personal deities enchanting all who listened to them as well. Not only Hindus but many Sufi saints of Islam also gained renown in these times. They attracted devotees of all faiths to their shrines. The teachings of Krishna on Bhakti Yoga in the Gita had now come alive. Now let us look at what the Gita itself says about the yoga of devotion.

- **“He who sees Me in all things, and all things in the Me, he is never separated from Me nor am I ever separated from him”.** (6.30)

The Me here implies the divine which is of the essence in all things. He who sees the divine in all is forever in ecstasy.

**He who, established in unity, worships Me as the indweller in all beings, that yogi abides in Me” (6.31)**

Even in a criminal or evildoer, who does not recognize it, there exist the divine essence in his innermost being. There are many stories in India of such a person being transformed from a criminal to a saint by such a revelation, including Valmiki the composer of Ramayana, who is said to have been a thief once, but a revelation of Rama, changed his life forever.

**“And among all yogis, he, who worships Me with faith, his innermost Self merged in Me, is indeed deemed by me to be the best of yogis.” (6.47)**

Whenever Krishna uses the term “Me” it could be considered as a metaphor for the divine deity of one’s choice, or God, or one’s own Self, Purusha, or the Universal Self, Brahman, or their Guru (teacher) or whomsoever they regard as an enlightened Self- realized Being. So, the Gita does not limit one to any caste or creed. It is open to all of humanity.

The “Me” here represents the deity, the Supreme Being or the ideal Purusha whom one worships as one’s own personal ideal. It can also mean all of Humanity since Krishna exists as the Self in all beings.

- **Arjuna asked Krishna whether those who worship a personal deity such as him, or those who worship the un-manifest and imperishable Brahman were the better. He replied that in his opinion, the best yogis were those who, with their minds riveted on him, worshipped him since it is harder for mortals to focus on the un-manifest. (12.2-5)**

It is clear that Krishna viewed devotion to a personal deity of one’s choice as easier to follow than one to an abstract concept of a universal unseen power, though in the end, one would realize that the personal deity, in the ultimate analysis, is a representation of the Universal phenomenon. In Sanskrit the word *sa-guna* or *nir-guna*, or with the qualities of nature or without the qualities of

nature, are the two terms to signify a personal deity and the impersonal Brahman.

**“Set your mind steadily on me, and if you cannot, then reach me by constant practice, or try constant undivided service or dedicate all to me, with mind controlled, abandon the fruit of action.”** (12.8-11)

Here he seems to combine bhakti with karma yoga. Work done as a form of devotion to a higher cause would serve the same purpose as one devoid of selfish desires. One could say that Karma yoga becomes Bhakti yoga when work is dedicated to the divine or a higher cause such as the welfare of humanity.

Swami Vivekananda considered Bhakti yoga to be essentially dualistic. The lover must have a beloved. The Bhakti yogi must have a deity to be devoted to. But there is also the view that in the ultimate stage the lover and the beloved come together. The human and the divine are united. There is a complete union or at the very least the two are yoked together. A wave can be seen as part of the ocean or as the ocean itself. To the “dvaitin” the wave and the ocean are two specific entities, but to the “advaitin” the wave and the ocean are one and the same. The non-dual or the Advaita view is that Brahman or the Divine is infused in all. ‘That’ is the sole agent of all actions, and when a person who endowed with this knowledge and faith surrenders oneself to Krishna, as a deity in embodied form, one becomes one with ‘That’, and with all desires extinguished in such a union with the Divine, one wins one’s freedom.

- **The way of meditation (*Dhyana yoga* or *Raja yoga*)**

Finally, in keeping with the existing tradition of the times, Krishna also extols the renunciation of those who, leaving the normal working life of a householder, follow the path of meditation. This would be like Patanjali’s form of yoga. He also extols those who perform work with a spirit of service, renouncing the desire for

fruits of their actions, as also performing a form of renunciation, without giving up their given duties.

He states that a yogi should neither eat too much or too little, neither sleep too much or too little. Here he clearly differs from the classical notion of a yogi as an ascetic who has renounced all the pleasures of life and has retired to a forest to live an austere life with the barest of needs. To Krishna moderation in all things was enough.

Krishna now describes a yogi in meditation:

- **One who has shut out contact with external senses, sits with gaze fixed between the brows, made equal his in-breath and out-breath, his mind, senses and reason held in check, with no desire, fear or anger, such a man of meditation is free forever.** (5.27-28)

Here again Krishna emphasizes the shedding of desires for the fruits of actions as a form of renunciation as that of an ascetic. While working in society one can still be a sage. He goes on to describe a yogi,

**One whose heart is filled with contentment of wisdom and realization, who has conquered one's senses, and to whom a lump of earth, a stone or gold seem the same, such a person is steadfast in yoga.** 6.8)

The he goes on to describe the requirements for meditation:

- **A yogi should practice meditation, concentrating on the Self, in solitude, with mind and body controlled, free of desires and of possessions.** (6.10)
- **Fixing oneself in a clean spot, one's seat neither too high nor too low and covered with grass, skin, and cloth.** (6.11)
- **There, seated, mind focused, the functions of thought and senses in control, one should practice yoga for self-purification.** (6.12)

Here again he does not specify leaving society but merely finding a secluded spot to focus on one's meditation.

- **Holding steady, body, neck and head erect, eyes fixed on the tip of the nose and not looking around. (6.13)**
- **Tranquil in spirit, free of fear, steadfast in the vow of *brahmacharya*, mind in control, the yogi should sit with his thoughts on Me, absorbed in Me. (6.14)**

By *brahmacharya* here he means one who is absorbed in the study of Brahman, as the infinite consciousness or one's personal deity, away from temptations and desires of the body.

**Keeping his mind steadfast, focused on the Self, one attains the peace of *Nirvana*, residing in Me. (6.15)**

Here he defines the external deity as identical with one's inner Self. Krishna is in each one of us, as *atman*, a trace of the imperishable Brahman.

**The Ultimate Yogi:**

**As a flame in a windless spot flicker not, even so is a union with the Self. (6.19)**

Arjuna complained that the mind is constantly swayed by restlessness. It is turbulent, strong, and unyielding. It is as hard to control as the wind. Krishna admits that the senses of the mind are wayward and difficult to control. But by disciplined and dedicated practice and renunciation one needs to master the senses.

**When the fickle and unsteady mind wanders it should be reined in and brought under the sway of the Self. (6.26)**

This is also stated in the Yoga Sutra that one requires continuous practice and effort to bring the mind under control.

**For supreme bliss comes to a *yogin*, who with mind becalmed, with passions stilled, has become one with *Brahman*. (6.27)**

**Such a yogin looks on all with an impartial eye seeing *Atman* in all beings and all beings in *Atman*. (6.29)**

**“non-violence, slowness to wrath, serenity, aversion to slander, tenderness to all that lives.. are qualities born of a divine heritage.” (16.2/3)**

One can see here the difference between the bhakti yoga and dhyana yoga the former sees all with devotion and the other looks at all with equanimity. The one sees the divine deity in all and other sees the Self in all.

The four forms of yoga mentioned above are equally applicable to all classes of people in society. Gyana yoga for the intellectual, Bhakti for the devotional, Karma for the more practical among us and Raja or Dhyana yoga for those who want a moment of peace away from the trials and tribulations of life, and all of them seem equally achievable. Or one can do a combination of the different paths based on one's lifestyle and inclinations.

The teachings of the Gita can thus be utilized by anyone in any manner suitable to his or her nature. For centuries it has inspired people in all walks of life.

Krishna

“Renunciation of the fruits of action”, Gandhi wrote “is the center around which the Gita is woven. It is the central sun around which devotion, knowledge and the rest revolve like the planets.”

How do the teachings of the Gita differ from those of the Yoga Sutra that we dealt with earlier? It is clear that Patanjali was dealing with an individual in his or her attempts to scale the highest potential of one's inner experience and, in so doing, reach the state of nirvana. The Gita, on the other hand, looked at life in society and addressed the issue of keeping ones' head above the trials and tribulations of everyday life, amid our daily battles, and still attain salvation. The

one demanded a life of austerity and seclusion. The other asked one to accept one's position in life and society and yet find a way that would best suit one's nature in the eternal quest for liberation from the bondages of 'samsara'.

At the end of the Gita, as if on a signal from Krishna, the sounds of trumpets and drums and the cries of the battlefield resume. With the Sun now ready to rise in the eastern sky the war of the Mahabharata was all set to begin. To Gandhi, however, this was an allegorical reference to our internal battle between the forces of duty and those of desire, that which is right and that which appears more attractive. To him, Krishna is the conscience, or the inner voice, in each one of us pointing to the ways of yoga.

The practice of yoga, according to Krishna, is skillful living. The different forms of yoga could cover most of what we do. It could therefore be considered as an alternative way of looking at life and living.

Later in the epic Krishna declares that “**nonviolence is the highest dharma**”.

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