

Introduction to Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali

Balaji Thiruvengadasamy

Dedicated to all the philosophers, artists and scientists - professional and otherwise. Without their tireless and courageous introspection, the world would be a much poorer place.

0. Preface

Yoga is a four letter word. It means different to different people even if all those people are in spiritual pursuit. Added to this are the plethora of other colloquial usage (for example, Yoga also means “luck”). May be, this is why Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali (YSP) start with a precise definition of Yoga.

YSP is a rigorous and self-contained text on Yoga. It is the equivalent of a graduate text on Yoga. It has no religious or caste references. It, remarkably, does not contain any reference to Vedas or Upaniṣads. It is also gender neutral. More importantly, YSP is not an ethical or moral treatise. It is just about Yoga. The Yoga of YSP may help you become a better individual (in an ethical or moral sense). It may even help you become more religious. It may help you become a better tennis player or a student. However, the original goal is liberation from bondage (in the widest sense of the word).

This is an introduction to YSP that is light on metaphysics. Whatever little that is included is relegated to the Appendix. The core principles of YSP is still relevant and useful within a modern scientific understanding of the world. Whatever your favourite model of the world is, the fundamental question remains the same: Suffering is inescapable; what can we do about it? YSP answers it one way and gives tips to put it in practice.

I hope this rendering conveys those core principles with as little dilution as practicable.

Balaji
April, 2017

1. What is Yoga?

Yoga is suppression or stopping of fluctuations of the mind (mental processes).

yogaḥ citta vṛtti nirodhaḥ - Sūtra 1.2¹

What does it mean? Does it mean suppression of all mental processes? Is it even possible? Does being in coma an example of being in Yoga? If only some processes are suppressed, then what are they?

Is this suppression forever or only temporary?

Vyāsa, in his commentary, clarifies that Yoga is Samādhi i.e. a type of meditation.

What is Samadhi?

Samadhi is a type of intense concentration or meditation, where only the object of meditation shines forth in the mind as though devoid of the thought of even the meditator's own self.

tad eva arthamātra nirbhāsaṁ svarūpa śunyaṁ iva samādhiḥ - Sūtra 3.3

What do we get from such intense concentration? Samādhi aids in perception of an object for what it is, without coloured by one's own biases, conditioning, pre-conceived notions, etc. In other words, correct knowledge devoid of delusion.

What it is NOT: it is not a blank state or some eternal blissful state of mind. It is a controlled state of concentration applied with the specific purpose of understanding an object. So, a single minded infatuation (for example, frequently towards a member of the opposite sex common among teenagers) is not Yoga. Nor is the state of stupor induced by intoxicants or drugs.

The Yogin is in total control of the process.

One gets to such intense state of concentration through stages. First is Dhāraṇa - *a state of intermittent focus, where the mind is fixed on an object.*

deśa bandha cittasya dhāraṇā - Sūtra 3.1

Here, the mind may be filled with thoughts related to the object under focus. Dhāraṇa, through practice, evolves into Dhyāna - *an uninterrupted state of concentration, where the mind is occupied with a single thought or mental modification.*

tatra pratyaya ekatānatā dhyānam - Sūtra 3.2

Dhyāna eventually leads to Samādhi, the highest state of concentration on an object. This *process of applying these stages of concentration to acquire correct knowledge of an object is called Saṁyama.*

trayam ekatra saṁyamaḥ - Sūtra 3.4

¹ Throughout this text the Sūtras and their corresponding English translation are presented in italics. The English translation immediately precedes the Sūtra in original Sanskrit form.

By repeatedly applying Samyama on various objects (tattvas, in the case of Samkhya) one develops spiritual knowledge necessary for liberation or Self-realisation.

2. Why Yoga?

The world is under constant change. We change. Our likes and dislikes change. What gave pleasure to us in the past may not give the same pleasure now and later.

Everything seen, thought or done leaves an impression in the mind. This impression is called Saṁskāra. If a particular action brings pleasure, we tend to repeat the same action. Repetition makes Saṁskāra stronger. After a while, a habit develops and we tend to repeat the action even if it brings pain.

From these observations, Yoga Philosophy concludes that there is a seed of suffering in everything. Suffering is inescapable.

parināma tāpa saṁskāra duḥkhaiḥ guna vṛtti virodacca duḥkham eva sarvam vivekinaḥ
- Sūtra 2.15

What can we do then? One straightforward solution is *to avoid suffering that is yet to come.*

heyam duḥkham anāgatam - Sūtra 2.16

How can we do that? *Through cultivating correct knowledge or discernment (Viveka) about the world.*

viveka khyātiḥ aviṣṭavā hānopāyaḥ - Sūtra 2.26

Viveka develops through correct understanding of the world around us. Viveka helps us make optimal decisions so that unnecessary suffering is avoided.

Is mere knowledge sufficient? No! For example, that the knowledge of smoking is injurious to health might not stop one from smoking. We need to be “established” in it so that our thoughts and actions are grounded on discernment all the time. Hence, the emphasis of practice in Yoga.

How do we develop viveka? *Three methods to acquire correct knowledge - direct perception, inference and authoritative testimony.*

pratyakṣa anumāna āgamāḥ pramānāni - Sūtra 1.7

Samādhi is an example of direct perception. Therefore, Yoga is a means to acquire Viveka.

Inference (logic), while essential, has limitations. Critical reasoning operates within the boundary set by our ego. We avoid asking uncomfortable questions.

Testimony has pitfalls too. It can all too easily embrace the fallacy of appeal to authority. A testimony must stand up to critical examination and not rest solely on authority.

What is opposite of Viveka? Avidya (delusion, incorrect perception) is the opposite of viveka. It is regarding temporary as permanent, not-self as eternal self, dirty as clean and suffering as happiness.

Avidya manifests mainly as egoism (e.g. I am the body), attachment (to pleasure), aversion (to pain) and fear (of death). These afflictions or negative patterns of behaviour result in

sub-optimal decisions in daily life and ensnare us in the never ending cycle of suffering. These afflictions are called Kleśas.

Kriya Yoga is a set of practices that suppress and remove these afflictions and bring about an attitude conducive to concentration. *These practices fall under three broad categories - austerities, study of spiritual and philosophical texts and a special type of meditation called Īśvara Pranidhāna.*

tapah svādhyāya Īśvara pranidhānāni kriyā yogaḥ - 2.1

Kriya Yoga is essentially habit re-engineering. We saw that we are essentially a bundle of habits (Saṁskāras). The goal is to remove those that hinder concentration and instil those that are conducive to concentration (i.e. bring about tranquility and stability of mind).

How do we do that? *We let good habits handle bad habits.*

tajjaḥ saṁskāro'nya saṁskāra prati bandhi - 1.50

The Yogin accomplishes this by saturating daily life with actions that do not leave behind binding Saṁskāras. Overtime the negative habits, with dwindling attention, are starved out.

3. How Yoga?

3.1 Principles of Practice

Intense one pointed concentration presupposes supreme control of body and mind (senses and organs). *Such control can be achieved through practice and detachment.*

abhyāsa vairāgyābhyām tannirodhaḥ - Sūtra 1.12

But, what exactly is practice? *Practice is exertion to bring stability or tranquility of mind.*

tatra sthitau yatno'bhyaṣaḥ - Sūtra 1.13

What is detachment? *Mind losing all desire for earthly and heavenly objects is detachment.*

dṛṣṭānuśravika viṣaya vitṛṣṇasya vaśīkāra samjñā vairāgyam - Sūtra 1.15

Key ingredients of a successful practice: *Conviction (arising out of clarity), energy and constant recollection brings about Samādhi.*

śraddha vīrya smṛtiḥ samādhi prajñā pūrvaka itareṣām - Sūtra 1.20

One needs to be absolutely convinced of what one is after and why. This can only come about through study and contemplation. Only such a conviction can sustain the long and arduous training with energy and intensity. Constant recollection keeps the objective in mind all the time (i.e. mindfulness).

3.2 Accessories to Yoga

Practice of accessories to Yoga removes impurities (of the body and the mind) and achieves the necessary control and stability of body and mind, paving the way for Viveka.

yogānga anysthānād aśuddhi kṣaye jñāna diptiḥ viveka khyāteḥ - Sūtra 2.28

These accessories are also popularly knowns as the eight limbs of Yoga.

yama niyama āsana prānāyāma pratyāhāra dhāraṇa dhyāna samādhayo aṣṭāvaṅgāni - Sūtra 2.29

Practice of these accessories:

1. develops patterns of thinking and action that are conducive to achieving intense concentration
2. destroys those patterns that are not conducive
3. develops stability of body and
4. helps with “energy” or “prana” management

Yama, Niyama, Āsana, Prānāyāma and Pratyāhāra are essentially practices for instilling physical and psychic “hygiene”.

3.3 Honor Code

Yama comprises five kinds of restraints: non-violence, truth, non-stealing, celibacy and abstinence from greed.

ahimsā satya asteya brahmacarya aparigrahāḥ yamāḥ - Sūtra 2.30

The restraints are practiced to the extent they promote non-violence. For example, if telling truth will result in injury to other beings, then the Yogin is advised to stay silent. Ahimsā is a practice of gradation. Vyāsa observes that the mere act of living causes injury to other beings. Therefore, the Yogin, through practice of Kriya Yoga, minimises his activities and avoids unnecessary harm to other beings. Practice of Ahimsā is likely to bring inconveniences to life (e.g. dietary restrictions). In fact, the ancient Indian epic Mahābhārathā considers Ahimsā as the foremost tapas (austerity).

All the restraints should be practiced regardless of time, place, circumstances and duty.

jāti deśa kāla samaya anavacchinnāḥ sārva bhaumāḥ mahā vṛtam - Sūtra 2.31

Why such sweeping restraints? Because everything is connected! It would be impossible to rein in one's mind at will to achieve intense concentration if one is in the habit of telling lies or behaving greedily or being a slave of the senses. Every act and thought leaves an impression in the mind and has the potential to become a habit.

Niyama comprises five kinds of observances: cleanliness (of body and mind), contentment, austerities, self-study and Īśvara Pranidhāna (a type of contemplation of a special type of eternal Self known as Īśvara).

śauca santoṣa tapaḥ svādhyāya Īśvara pranidhānā niyamāḥ - Sūtra 2.32

From the striving for cleanliness comes aversion to one's own body and its contact with others.

śauca svāṅga jugupsa paraiḥ asamsargaḥ - sūtra 2.38

Why and how does such aversion arise? Because the body gets unclean quickly and it needs to be cleaned again.

Note that the Yoga Sūtras is not a moral or ethical treatise. Its objective is to explain how to achieve Yoga i.e. Samādhi. Therefore, the main objective of Yama (restraints) and Niyama (observances) is to corral Yogin's mind so that new habits that are harmful to one pointed state are avoided.

3.4 Foundation for Contemplation

Long periods of uninterrupted intense concentration is possible only when the Yogin can sit comfortably without pain and discomfort. *Sitting posture for meditation should be comfortable and steady.*

sthira sukham āsanam - Sūtra 2.46

Steadiness and comfort can be achieved through relaxation of effort and contemplation on the infinity (or endless).

prayatna śaithilya ananta samāpatti bhyām - Sūtra 2.47

T Krishnamacarya, arguably the father of modern Hatha Yoga, recommends contemplating on breath. One's breath is endless relative to one's life. So meditating on breath is a means to achieve perfection in Āsana.

How do we know we have mastered a posture for meditation? *The yogin in such a posture is not affected by heat, cold, pain, pleasure, bodily discomforts, etc.*

tato dvandva anabhiḡātaḥ - Sūtra 2.48

This is a good indicator of proficiency in Āsana.

Being in such a posture, suppression or restraining of the movement associated with inhalation and exhalation is Prānāyāma.

tasmin sati śvāsa praśvāsayoḥ gati vicchedaḥ prānāyāmaḥ - Sūtra 2.49

What do we get from Prānāyāma? *The mind through intense practice of cocentration on breath, attains fitness for Dhāraṇa, the beginning stage of Samādhi.*

dhāranāsu ca योग्याता manasaḥ - Sūtra 2.53

Note that this Prānāyāma is different from that described in Hatha Yoga texts. Prānāyāma is one of the accessories to Yoga in as much as it is practiced to make the mind one pointed. In other words, breath is a means to produce stability and focus. Breath control without Dhāraṇā is not Prānāyāma.

4. Techniques for Stability of Mind

An important source of disturbance of mind is interaction with other people. Patañjali suggests certain attitudes we should adopt when dealing with certain kinds of people. In particular, *we should be unconditionally friendly towards people who are happy (no matter who they are); kind towards people who are suffering (even if they are our enemies); joyful towards people who do virtuous deeds (e.g. even towards a crook donates money to a good cause) and indifferent to or overlook the vicious deed.*

maitrī karunā muditopekṣānāṁ sukha duḥkha punyāpunya viśayānām bhāvanātaḥ citta prasādanām - Sūtra 1.33

It is interesting to note the specificity of the attitudes. Patañjali does not say that we should love everyone. Loving a vile person is very difficult and is likely to produce tensions in mind and hence jeopardise the stability needed to train for Samādhi. A more robust strategy is to overlook the vile act and pity the person committing the vile act since that person is likely to suffer the consequences of his act.

The mind can also be stabilised by controlling the exhalation and refraining from breathing after exhalation.

prachardana vidhāranā bhyam vā prānasya - Sūtra 1.34

This Sūtra should be read in conjunction with other Prānāyāma Sūtras (2.49-2.51). The emphasis is on restraining of breath out as it has the effect of arresting the mind's activities and making the mind one pointed (with attention on breath).

One can also achieve stability by contemplating about or visualising a mind that is not attached to objects and hence free from disturbances. This could be the mind of an enlightened person.

vīta rāga viśayam vā cittam - Sūtra 1.37

Visualisation plays an important role in Yoga Sūtras. One can consider Īśvara Pranidhānā as a visualisation method in relation to Sūtra 1.37. In this case, the object of visualisation and contemplation is a special type of eternal Self or Puruṣa, designated as Īśvara. Īśvara is the eternally liberated, omniscient Puruṣa. Since Īśvara was always liberated there is no history of any taint from bondage and hence a perfect object for meditation. If we are using some other mind as the object of visualisation and contemplation, it is possible that reference to that mind's past life in bondage could arise and be an obstacle to achieving stability.

Īśvara is (and was always) designated by the symbol OM.

tasya vāchakaḥ pranavaḥ - Sūtra 1.27

Īśvara Pranidhānā is practiced through reciting OM and contemplating/visualising its meaning i.e. the eternally liberated Puruṣa, Īśvara.

tajjapas tadartha bhāvanam - Sūtra 1.28

5. Liberation

Liberation or Kaivalyam is the ultimate goal of Yoga. Yoga is just a tool to develop the discriminative knowledge that aids the Yogin in renunciation, which in turn leads to liberation.

What is liberation? What are we liberating ourselves from?

Actions (based on virtue or otherwise) lead to experience (pleasure or pain). Experience creates latent impression in the mind and lead to attachment (in case of pleasure) and aversion (in the case of pain). These attachments and aversions influence our behaviour, thus perpetuating the cycle of suffering.

The Yogin abstains from actions that result in attachment and aversion. Renunciation or Vairagya ultimately is about reducing one's activities to the bare minimum required.

There is also another perspective. Yoga Philosophy conceives the phenomenal world as composed of three attributes or Gunas. The Tamas Guna characterised by sluggishness and inertia, Rajas by agitation or activity is called Rajas and Sattva by calmness and clarity. Since the mind conceives the world, these three fundamental mental states or Gunas can be used to conceptually describe the world. Every object, including the mind, has a particular (dynamic) balance of Sattva, Rajas and Tamas.

A mind dominated by Tamas or Rajas is unlikely to perceive and evaluate things clearly and accurately. Naturally, this incorrect perception will lead to actions resulting in bondage and suffering. On the contrary, a mind dominated by Sattva will perceive and evaluate things correctly and is unlikely to commit actions resulting in bondage and suffering. In other words, such a mind is established in Viveka. Sattva and Viveka are one and the same. One cannot come about without the other. Therefore, *liberation comes about when the mind is perpetually established in Sattva. Such a mind resembles the eternal Self or Puruṣa.*

sattva puruṣayoḥ śuddhi sāmye kaivalyam - Sūtra 3.55

Sūtra 3.55 and Sūtra 2.26 state equivalent perspectives on liberation.

Appendix. The World According to Yoga

Saṁkhya, the oldest of the Indian philosophical systems, is essentially the core of the Yoga Philosophy. It is dated to be as old as 1000 BC. While some say that Saṁkhya is the wisdom (theory) and Yoga is the practice (application), Yoga Sūtras include a self-contained summary of the key philosophical principles. The philosophical component essentially provides a model of the world. The objective is to understand the workings of the world, which in turn aids in liberation.

The “reality” according to Yoga Philosophy is composed of two principles: the Knowable (dṛṣya) and the Knower (dṛṣṭa). Note these are abstract principles or constructs, not in the same sense of subatomic particles making up atoms, which in turn make up the molecules and so on.

The Knowable are the objects of the phenomenal world - the elements (gross and subtle) and the organs (of the perception, senses and action). These have three qualities (Gunas) - sentience (Sattva), activity (Rajas) and inertia (Tamas). The purpose of the objects is to provide experience and liberation.

prakāsa kriyā sthiti śīlam bütendriya ātmakam bhoga apavarga ārtham dṛṣyam - Sūtra 2.18

Saṁkhya Philosophy divides the Knowable into 23 different categories, from the gross to the subtle and from the external to the internal. These categories are called Tattvas.

At the core is Prakṛti or Pradāna, a sort of primordial, un-manifest matter, where the three Gunas - Sattva, Rajas and Tamas - are in equilibrium. This Prakṛti principle is uncreated i.e. always in existence.

Disturbance of this equilibrium results in the manifestation of the world through various objects. First Buddhi (or I-sense or pure intellect) arises. It mutates to Ego and then to organs of perception (the Mind or Manas), senses (Hearing, Smelling, Touching, Tasting and Seeing) and various bodily actions (Speech, Locomotion, Generation, Excretion and Grasping). These organs interact with and perceive the gross elements of Earth, Water, Space, Air and Heat through the subtle elements such as Light, Sound, Touch, Smell and Taste.

Saṁkhya is essentially the ancient equivalent of atomic Physics. Unlike the modern version, realisation of the Tattvas are meant to help the Yogin lose interest in the mundane. As an example, perception of wine as a mere gross object with certain attributes (water, light, smell, etc) is unlikely to result in hankering after it.

The Knower principle is also referred to as Self, Consciousness or Puruṣa. *The Knower is pure consciousness. Though it is pure, the modifications of the Buddhi (i.e. thoughts, conceptions, etc) are witnessed by the Knower as an onlooker.*

dṛṣṭā dṛṣimātraḥ śuddhopi pratyayānupaśyaḥ - Sūtra 2.20

There are Philosophical systems that do not invoke the concept of Self or Knower. They assume that the mind is the ultimate reality and there is nothing beyond the mind. Some even consider the phenomenal world as an illusion played out in the mind.

However, Yoga Philosophy contends that the existence of Puruṣa principle is a logical necessity. Some of the arguments for the existence of Puruṣa are as follows. From our ability to introspect it is clear that the mind itself is conceived or illuminated. Who (or what) illuminates the mind then? It cannot be the mind itself as it will lead to problems. For example, who then witnesses that mind, which is witnessing? If we say that a part of the mind witnesses another part then, when the mind perceives an object, is it that part of the mind witnessing it or the other part recalling this part having witnessed it in the past?

Also, the Puruṣa principle needs to be unchanging or immutable i.e. always witnessing. The mind may at times choose not to perceive other objects e.g. in deep sleep. However, the mind is always illuminated by the Knower. It is impossible to imagine a scenario, where a thought or a conception existing without the Knower to witness.

Therefore, existence of Puruṣa cannot be denied.

There are also innumerable Puruṣas, each corresponding to a mind. Existence of mind implies Puruṣa in bondage. Existence leads to experience. From experience, Saṁskāras are accumulated and manifested in a continuous cycle of birth and rebirth in different forms. When a mind achieves liberation (for example, through Yoga all the Saṁskāras are extinguished), Puruṣa is isolated and there is no rebirth.

It follows, from the ever existing and uncreated nature of Prakṛti, that Puruṣas have been liberated from time immemorial. The oldest of them, the Puruṣa who was liberated before any other Puruṣa is known as Īśvara. By definition, Īśvara has always been liberated and for that reason, there is no history of any blemish or shortcoming attached to Īśvara. Thus, Īśvara is the perfect object for meditation!