

## INTRODUCTION TO THE YOGASŪTRA-S OF PATAÑJALI

The word Yoga is much used around the world, but is Yoga generally well understood? This may be doubtful. The media praises its ability to make people more relaxed or more flexible. For the general public and even in the eyes of many Yoga teachers, Yoga is synonymous with a set of postures involving a certain amount of contortion.

The most ancient text of Yoga is the Yogasūtra-s of Patañjali; it talks about Yoga in the best and the most comprehensive manner. To this day, it remains the most remarkably clear and precise treatise on the human psyche. It shows that Yoga practice can deeply transform one's mental functioning, for the purpose of living in harmony with others and within oneself, thus helping one on the path of universal spirituality.

It is usually said amongst scholars that the Yogasūtra-s were composed a few centuries before our common era, but many signs indicate that Yoga was in existence several millennia before that.

Patañjali did not "invent" Yoga; he merely (so to speak) globally synthesized the forms of Yoga which flourished at that time.

From the very beginning (sūtra I.1) he indicates that Yoga was transmitted from generation to generation (anūsāsanam). This is not, therefore, a recent theory, but the expression of experiences repeatedly verified throughout centuries.

Yoga is a system open to all: Hindu, non-Hindu, believer, atheist and agnostic. We can be on a Yoga path without necessarily embracing the idea that God is the creator. The path of devotion is only recommended to those for whom it is suitable. Patañjali's Yoga is at the same time rigorous, tolerant and accessible to all sincere seekers.

The text is composed of one hundred and ninety-five aphorisms (sūtra-s) grouped into four chapters. When it is understood properly and applied correctly, Yoga is a precious aid for human and social evolution. It suggests that a reflective, respectful behavior, a responsible outlook and a peaceful way of performing actions pave the way towards harmony amongst men and a constructive future.

We know very little about Patañjali. A few legends try to shed some light on his mysterious life. A well-established tradition purports that once upon a time, chaos reigned on earth because men were unskilled in communication, afflicted with multiple physical ailments and great mental disturbance.

Some wise men settled down to meditate and begged for help from higher forces. A special envoy was sent, half man, half snake. "Patañjali" means "the one who came down (pat) into pleading hands in the shape of a vessel (añjali)".

The following invocation salutes him:

yastyakvārūpamādyam prabhavati jagataḥ anekadhā anugrahāya prakṣīṇakleśarāśiḥ  
viṣamaviṣadharāḥ anekavakraḥ subhogī sarvajñānaprasūtiḥ bhujagaparikarāḥ pṛitaye yasya  
nityam devohīśaḥ sa vo'vyāt sitavimalatanuḥ yogado yogayuktaḥ

"To the one who relinquished his primary form to become an incarnation in this world, to purify mankind and diminish their sources of suffering (kleśa-s). He possesses antidotes for

these poisons. From his many faces and hoods he brings forth knowledge. He is the Lord of an assembly of snakes [who are] ever ready to fulfil his wishes, because he is eternal, he holds the light. Let him who is tranquil and flawless protect us. He possesses [mastery of] Yoga, he gives Yoga."

Another classical invocation highlights Patañjali's contribution in three areas:

yogena cittasya padena vācām malaṁ śarīrasya ca vaidyakena |  
yo' pākarottaṁ pravaraṁ munīnām patañjalim prāñjalirānato'smi ||

"I salute Patañjali, highest among the seers, who has given us Yoga to eliminate imperfections in the mind, [Sanskrit] grammar (Pada) to eliminate imperfections in language, and medicine (Vaidya) to eliminate imperfections in the body."

The text on Yoga is written in sūtra style. The word sūtra is usually translated as "aphorism", but it also means "thread". From sūtra to sūtra, following the thread of a logical succession of ideas, we are led to unravel the fabric of Yoga. The concision of sūtra rendition makes it easy to chant; this is an excellent way to memorize and understand them, yet this brevity also brings the need for a commentary. The serious study of any text written in this format will sustain a relationship between teacher and student for many years.

To be called sūtra, a text should possess the following qualities:

- a) Alpākṣaram: few (alpā) letters (akṣaram), words or phrases: concision is the primary characteristic of sūtra-s. In the Yogasūtra-s there are less than two hundred such phrases, some of which are extremely short (three words only). But the teachings are vast, insightful and comprehensive.
- b) Asandigdham: non-ambiguous: the topic is handled with precision. When Patañjali introduces a new concept (such as the mind, posture, or mastery of the breath) he goes straight to the point, developing it in just a few aphorisms (definition, and, at times, method and results).
- c) Sāravat: "pregnant with meaning": Patañjali brings out the essence of the concept (sāra stands for essential), he does not digress or get sidetracked. The longer we meditate on the aphorisms, the more they reveal themselves. Concepts are explained without detours, going straight to the heart of the matter.
- d) Viśvato-mukham: "multi-faceted world": teachings are relevant and useful in all places and at all times (viśva: multiple, universal; mukham: face, facet). This is a universal message directed at a wide range of people. Sūtra-s study is not reserved to a particular "caste" or privileged elite; the concepts introduced here are universally applicable and valuable for Indians and Westerners alike, without discrimination. The Yogasūtra-s was relevant 2000 years ago, it was relevant in the Middle Ages, and it is still relevant today.
- e) Astobhyam: "as it is" (asti). Patañjali is not laying out an abstract theory but tangible facts and experiences verified by many generations of yogin-s for centuries before him.
- f) Anavadyam: spoken with dignity, without bravado. Unappealing, indecent or degrading techniques are not mentioned here. No obscene or vulgar words are used. Teachings are conveyed with elegance and respect for every audience.

To summarize, "the seer who understands aphorisms describes them as concise, non-equivocal, pregnant with meaning, universal, straight to the point and expressed in the right words."

Patañjali divides the one hundred and ninety-five sentences into four chapters.

I. Samādhi-padaḥ, the chapter about complete absorption or blissful delight. The first chapter comprises fifty-one aphorisms and lays the foundations (lakṣaṇa): Yoga, the mind, complete absorption...

According to Vyāsa, (the first commentator on the Yogasūtra-s and one of the greatest), this chapter is addressed to the seeker with a stable mind, who is capable of fixing his attention on one object without being distracted.

The field of action is the mind (citta); the Yoga process brings together practice and detachment (abhyāsa-vairāgya); the principal requirement is faith and commitment (śraddhā); a special path is laid out, of devotion and surrender to the Divine (īśvāra).

But despite the seeker's many qualities, the path is not always smooth; obstacles (antarāya-s) do come up. Patañjali kindly offers many solutions.

Through the re-establishment of mental clarity, the yogin obtains limitless powers of understanding, until the ultimate level of absorption (nirbīja-samādhi) is attained.

II. Sādhana-pādaḥ, the chapter about the path.

The second chapter includes fifty-five aphorisms and explains the "means" (upāya-s). Not everyone enjoys the same mental clarity as the seeker in chapter I, far from it! Patañjali explains the process: we must be prepared to undertake a work of purification (kriyā-yoga) on a daily basis in order to go from darkness to light. This is the way we gradually reduce the sources of afflictions (kleśa-s). We are reminded that every action bears fruits, manifesting promptly or slowly, but surely. Suffering (duḥkha) that is not yet caused can and must be avoided (s.II.16). As for the pain to come, we must be prepared for it, so as not to be out of our depth when it occurs.

- a) The symptom (heya) is suffering (duḥkha), which must be avoided.
- a) The cause (hetu) is ignorance (avidyā), mother of other sources of afflictions (kleśa-s).
- b) Cessation (hāna) of the above is the goal: liberating isolation (kaivalya).
- c) The means (upāya) is Yoga, principally the eight limbs (Aṣṭāṅga-yoga) introduced in the second half of chapter II.

III. Vibhūti-pādaḥ, the chapter about developments.

The third chapter is composed of fifty-five aphorisms and presents the results (phala-s) of Yoga practice. Patañjali highlights the various possibilities and extraordinary potentials of meditation, but only if we have sufficient mastery in concentration (dhāraṇā), meditation (dhyāna) and complete absorption (samādhi).

The mind then goes through a series of transformations that enable it to fix itself upon any object, any particular field of knowledge or action, any direction in meditation. However, this skill comes with a risk: faced with so much choice, we may become scattered. But the seeker

with a sincere aspiration to reach Yoga's ultimate purpose knows how to choose the right method and leave out the others.

A long series of examples is given: special aptitudes, mastery of the mind, knowledge of the past and future, special communication, knowledge of the deeper self, exploration of the stars, mastery of the physical body, etc. Dangers remain, though: of falling under the spell of these "powers", of allowing self-satisfaction to become overwhelming, of growing attached to these manifestations.

The enlightened seeker has no wish to achieve knowledge and powers. He is only interested in unlimited discrimination, so that he may then enjoy total and permanent clarity. Once the tendency to agitation (rajas) and darkness (tamas) is mastered, he is surrounded by perfect light and transparency (sattva); he has knowledge of what is, and of what is not.

#### IV. Kaivalya-pādaḥ, the chapter about liberating isolation.

There are thirty-four aphorisms in chapter IV. It presents the specific aspects (bheda-s) of Yoga compared with other classical Indian philosophies (darśana-s). Here Patañjali describes a number of fundamental concepts that make Yoga such a special choice. He explains the deep changes that can happen in the mind when a relationship or connection has been formed. When this mind is in a state of meditation, it communicates with other minds and can influence them to change positively while remaining "free of side effects". These teachings are about pedagogy, the role of the teacher and his or her influence on the student, etc.

This chapter clearly reasserts the reality (sat) of nature and experiences from the perspective of Yoga: reality for the one who is living it, albeit a reality that is constantly changing (pariṇāma). At the very moment it is perceived, an item or experience is only a snapshot of a permanently evolving situation.

Whether this reality is actual or personal is another matter. Objects and things exist (sat) independently from the observer. When several observers see a different thing while looking at the same object at the same time, it is because each person's mind "reads" it differently. In other words, our perception of the world and its contents does not depend solely on the object itself, it also relates to the state of mind at the moment of perception.

As for changes, they can only be properly grasped by a deep unchanging consciousness (puruṣa), just as we can only appreciate the value associated with numbers (1, 2, 3...) in reference to the notion of "zero" or "none".

This stable and luminous entity is constantly alert and observing mental contents. Through the four chapters Patañjali has named it "the Deep Self", the "Inner Self" (puruṣa), the "Essence" (ātman), "the Seer" (draṣṭā), "that which sees" (dṛg), the "Master" (svāmī), the "Lord" (prabhu), "Pure Consciousness" (cit), etc., depending on the context.

The fourth chapter concludes with a description of the mind's (citta) evolution in the service of Pure Consciousness (cit), up to the final stage of liberating isolation (kaivalya), a perfect and permanent independence or autonomy.