



All rights reserved. No part of this article may be reproduced or copied in any form, without prior written consent of the author. Kausthub Desikachar asserts the moral right to be known as the author of this article.

---

## **Patanjali Unplugged**

**by Kausthub Desikachar**

jeudi 4 mars 2010, à 01:38

Despite the fact that he was a key figure in the evolution of some of the most fundamental systems of Indian philosophy, *Patanjali* remains interestingly both mysterious and ubiquitous at the same time. While the origins of his birth and early childhood does remain a mystery, what is even more unknown is how relevant and important his contributions have been in the organization of key disciplines that influence every aspect of our life. This article not only serves as an ode to the great master, but also has been written with an intention to raise awareness on his life and timeless contributions.

### **Adisesa to Patanjali: The Mythical tale**

Folklore in the country attributes *Patanjali* to be an incarnation of *Adisesa*, the sacred serpent, on whom Lord *Visnu* is supposed to be eternally meditating. The setting is classic. It is worthwhile to understand this, as it greatly contributes to the allure of *Patanjali*. Beneath the eternal ocean is *Lord Visnu*, who is couched on *Adisesa*, in a restful yet meditative state. By his side is his consort *Lakshmi*, who gracefully resides by the lord. *Garuda*, the giant eagle, also the vehicle of *Visnu* stays patiently at a distance, ready to take the master anywhere he wishes. From the navel of *Visnu* rises a beautiful lotus, on which is seated the four headed god of creation, *Lord Brahma*. Apart from serving as the bed of the lord, *Adisesa* also carries the earth on his head, which he is balancing wonderfully, so as to not disturb its residents.

While this is the scenery at *Vaikuntha* (heaven), the scene amongst the residents of the world was very different. It is believed that long ago, there was a time when residents of the world were undergoing severe suffering in the three domains of life. They were having disease in the body, disturbance in the mind, and trouble in communication. With all three of the main faculties being affected in such a manner, the world seemed to be plagued with suffering, and was beginning to welcome the approaching apocalypse.

People desperately approached the few wise ones remaining at the time, and asked them for help. The belief is that these few wise citizens prayed to *Lord Visnu*, who is the protector of the world, and asked for help. While doing so, they had their hands in the *Anjali Mudra* position. This position is where the two palms are brought together, in such a manner that it takes shape as if it were a bowl, onto which something special would be received. Their prayers were heard by *Lord Visnu* residing in his abode, who decides to send *Adisesa* as his envoy of hope to save the world. The myth goes that this *Adisesa* drops into the hands of the sages, who were praying with their hands in the *Anjali Mudra* position. Thus the name *Patanjali*, the one who fell (pat) into the the *Anjali* position.

On earth it is believed that *Patanjali* assumed a form which was half serpent, half human. He had a thousand serpent heads, while from the neck below as human in form. It is also believed that he had four arms, one each carrying a conch, a disc and a sword, while the fourth arm assumed a mudra called the *abhaya mudra*.

While it may sound complicated to comprehend this mythological story, when looked closely beneath the surface, it has much relevance and meaning, especially considering the contribution of *Patanjali*. This will be explored a bit more in detail towards to later part of this article.

### **Patanjali - The Human**

Despite having such mythical stories surrounding his origins, it is quite logical to assume that *Patanjali* must have actually been a human being, who lived on this planet. It is convention in India to elevate extra ordinary human beings to godly status, thus enriching their magic. *Patanjali* was no exception. Considering his fabulous contributions in such key and diverse fields, that freed a lot of people from illness, he would have gained enough of a following who were eager to have his status elevated, whether he himself would have wanted it or not. Having said that, many questions still remain. Who was *Patanjali*? Who were his parents? Who was his teacher?

Although there is tenacious debate among several Indologists about the precise period of *Patanjali*, one of the more commonly accepted views is that he was born sometime between 150-200 BCE. It is believed that *Patanjali's* father was the great sage *Atri*, and his mother was *Anusuya*. This conclusion comes out of the fact that some have referred to him as '*Atreya*', which can mean, son of *Atri*. Consistent with this theory, he is supposed to have had two brothers as well, *Dattatreya* and *Durvasa*.

In another light, It is also believed that *Patanjali* was a *svayambhu* (self manifested), who sought the great *yogini Gonika*, to be his adopted mother. This

is why *Patanjali* is also found to be referred to as "*Gonikaputra*", which means "son of *Gonika*." The idea that he was self incarnate could probably mean that he probably did not know who his parents were, or maybe even that he was an orphan.

So one way or another, there is very little that is known about the actual life story of *Patanjali*. Some history about him had been compiled in a text called *Patanjali Caritam*, written by a 17th century *yogi* called *Ramabhadra Diksitar*. The text however is not so easily available now a days.

### **Patanjali, the "shrink"**

One of the greatest contributions of *Patanjali*, for which he is primarily known for, is his work on the doctrine of *Yoga*, the *Yogasutra*. He was the first one to systematize the teachings of *Yoga* through this text, that became the reference for every succeeding *yogi* till the present day. But what is presented in the *Yogasutra*, and the theory it postulates may be of a big surprise to the average modern day yoga practitioner. While much of the modern day practitioners associate yoga to be a physical practice, especially subjecting the body into weird contortionist positions, the *Yogasutra* presents yoga to be more of a discipline for the mind. In this mind centered philosophy, *Patanjali* advocates a mind over matter approach, to enhance our well being, be it through health, healing or spirituality.

Most of the *Yogasutra* is in fact presenting ideas on understanding the mind, disciplining the mind, and exploring its higher potentials. Thus it can be said without even a reasonable shade of doubt that *Patanjali* was probably the first psychologist or psychoanalyst. However limiting yoga to only the mind domain would be a great disrespect, as *Patanjali* understood clearly that the human domain had many layers that were inter-connected, all of which could influence and be influenced by the mind. This is why he presents a range of tools that can be used to affect every domain of our complex human system in a positive and useful manner. So he was one of the first to put forward the "psycho-socio-physio-respiratory" centered approach to life and spiritual transformation. Even in today's times, where advances in technology can make these measurable, the concept sounds complex, the idea that such a concept was presented in the time of *Patanjali*, thousands of years ago is indeed remarkable. While we can get overwhelmed by this idea, we may also get distracted from the idea that this giant leap in philosophical thinking could also have easily been a trigger for much of the healing and spiritual traditions that came afterward.

## **Dr. Patanjali**

It is often a strong belief that *Patanjali* was also the author of an *Ayurvedic* treatise. There are references of this fact in certain later texts that attribute him to *Ayurveda*. For example, the 11th c. text on *Caraka Samhita* by *Cakrapani*, and the 16th c. text *Patanjalicarita* ascribes to *Patanjali* a medical text called the *Carakapratisamskritah* (now lost) which is apparently a revision (*pratisamskritah*) of the medical treatise by *Caraka*. So not only was he involved in the teachings of the mental domain, but also was a qualified doctor in the traditional Indian system of medicine, *Ayurveda*. This mastery is often visible in the *Yogasutra* too, where he presents wonderfully powerful aphorisms that highlight his mastery in understanding the complex human body at various domains.

However his work on *Ayurveda* is not of such significance now a days, which may be attributed to a few reasons. Firstly, it could well be that his works on *Ayurveda* were lost, and hence there is not the possibility to explore and understand his text. Also so many other *Ayurvedic* texts are present in the Indian pantheon of teachings, that have obtained a lot of popularity. These include but are not limited to, *Astanga Hrdaya*, *Caraka Samhita*, and *Susruta Samhita*. Secondly, it is also quite possible that his work on *Yoga* was so significant and that being known as a master of *yoga*, took precedence over his other achievements in other fields. This may especially be the case since he was the first one to organize the *yoga* teachings, and hence is often regarded as the founder of the *Yoga Darsana*.

## **Patanjali, the grammarian**

It is widely acknowledged that *Patanjali's* work on *Sanskrit* grammar is so significant, especially to interpret the complex *Panini Astadhyayi*, which is the original text expounding the grammatical rules of the *Sanskrit* language. Titled *Mahabhasya* (the great commentary), *Patanjali's* work is one of the major early expositions on *Panini's* work, through which he brings out some of the more finer aspect of *Sanskrit* language. A key idea being the concept of *Sabdapramana*, through which he emphasizes this most ancient of languages, the word's meaning is hidden within the word itself, rather than being outside of it. Through this he establishes the strong link between the word and its meaning, which is inherent rather than being acquired from outside the word. What is truly amazing is that he describes this concept very beautifully in the *Yogasutra's* as well, when he talks about the strong relationship between *sabda*, *artha* and *pratyaya*.

His mastery of the *Sanskrit* language is very evident not in the *Yogasutras*, which is presented in the *Sutra* form, a kind of text that is usually very stingy

with words. His choice of words are so precise and often uses intricately delicate structures in constructing the *sutras*, which not only explain the meaning of the aphorism, but also provides layers of meanings. For example, he uses atleast 6 different words to represent the mind, each with a subtly different meaning, that not only confirms that his understanding of the mind is phenomenal, but also his ability to express this wisdom.

It is for such reasons, that almost every college of *Sanskrit* studies refers to *Patanjali's Mahabhasya* as one of the key texts for understanding the ancient language.

### **Patanjali, the split personality!!!**

In the historical tradition of Indian teachings, there are many kinds of texts that were created on the myriad topics available. There are the kind known as *Sutra*, which are texts presented as aphorisms. *Yogasutra*, *Brahmasutra*, *Kamasutra*, and *Bhaktisutra* are a few examples of these kind of texts. There are some others known as *Bhasya*, which are commentaries. *Mahabhasya*, *Vyasabhasya* etc. are some of the key texts that are in this format. Still others are of the style known as *Vyakhyana*, or elaborations. *Patanjali's* work on *Ayurveda*, and some of the *Ayurvedic* texts are prime examples of these. Some of the later works were also known as *Sastras*. For example *Dharmasastra*, *Moksasastra* etc. The definitions of these differences was often based on the kind of language and communication style these teachings were expressed through.

The authors of the *Sutra* kind of texts were called *Sutrakara*, while those of the *Bhasya* kind were called *Bhasyakara*. Those who expounded their work through elaborations were known as *Vyakhyanakara*, while the authors of *Sastras* were *Sastrakara*. What is interesting is that some of the greatest sages of Indian history were usually only one kind. For example *Jaimini* was only a *Sutrakara*, as he only authored the *Mimasa Sutra*. *Sankaracarya* was a *Bhasyakara*, who wrote beautiful commentary on *Vedantasutra*. But, *Patanjali* is one of those rare exceptions who was not only a *Sutrakara*, but also a *Bhasyakara* and *Vyakhyanakara*.

So not only was his field of expertise spanning different subjects, but his personality was so diverse that he presented each of these in a different style. This is yet another credit to his wonderful genius.

## Larger than Life

While it is unfathomable that one man could do so much work, history has often pointed out that such rare exceptions do surface from time to time. And in the Indian tradition, this is a regular feature with some of the great *yogis* of yore. What is often an accompanying feature of such genius, is that the followers honor them and elevate them to a godly status, whether the individual themselves want it or not. It is quite conceivable that this happened to *Patanjali* also, maybe during his own life, but most certainly after.

This is where the idea that he was an incarnation of *Adisesa* surfaces back. People in the past often believed that such wonderful work could not have been possible without a divine hand. Hence when the arena of divine beings took shape in the polytheistic tradition of India, some *yogis* found *Adisesa* to be the best metaphor for representing *Patanjali*.

In the metaphor presented earlier, if looked at it at a more practical level, *Visnu* who is presented as the lord of the world, could represent the consciousness that is the master of the world, which includes body, breath, mind, emotions etc. The sea, beneath which he is resting, represents the layers of the mind, which is often wavering at the surface level, but often tranquil in the deeper dimensions. The consort *Lakshmi* represents the good qualities that the consciousness brings, like truth, ethics, morality etc, which are key aspects in our daily life. The four-headed *Brahma* who is seated on the lotus arising from *Visnu*'s navel, represents knowledge of every kind. Knowledge exists because one is conscious, and hence is presented as an offspring of the consciousness. *Garuda*, the eagle represents the vehicle of consciousness, which is the aspect of learning. While knowledge is an important thing, it is learning that translates knowledge into action, and hence the traveling bird, which allows one to journey on in life through practical wisdom. Then what does the endless snake *Adisesa* represent, which is not just the bed of *Visnu*, but also the sustainer of the world?

*Ananta or Adisesa* is a metaphor for the breath, which is not only vital to life, but is also strongly linked with the consciousness. Where there is consciousness, there there is breath, and this is exactly the metaphor of the snake. The consciousness rests on the eternal flow of breath, which in turn sustains life. This is probably why *Patanjali* was referred to as an incarnation of *Adisesa*, as breathing is very central to mind, health, and communication. Since he produced beautiful texts on the three domains, the subsequent *yogis* could have conjured up this idea.

Let us try to understand the form of the half human, half serpent, in which he is now represented and honored. The thousand heads of his unique form represents the multiple contributions he has given to help us alleviate illness and suffering.

The conch that he holds in one hand represents the concept of sound, or the metaphor for oral tradition. Hence it represents that his teaching is something that is transmitted through a teacher through dialog and communication. The sword represents the symbol of warding off obstacles that may come in the journey, while the mace represents fighting of our own dark forces during the spiritual journey. The disc that he holds is a symbol of light or clarity which removes darkness or ignorance. The gesture of *abhaya* is representative of the concept of having no fear when embarking on such a journey, and no fear when the journey is over.

## Conclusion

There is a lot of debate between indologists, whether it is the same *Patanjali*, who worked on all these topics. While the discussion is good for intellectual gymnastics, the tradition in India lays importance to the reference of source teachers or *Purvacaryas*, as they are so called. And most of the *Purvacaryas* highlight this through a verse that is often quoted in this context, through which they conclude that it was indeed the same *Patanjali* who brought out the three precious works on *Yoga*, *Ayurveda* and *Sanskrit* grammar.

*yogena cittasya, padena vācāṃ, malaṃ śarīrasya ca vaidyakena* □  
*yo'pākarottaṃ pravaraṃ munīnāṃ patañjaliṃ prāñjalirānato'smi* □

So in conclusion, while the myth surrounding *Patanjali* endures, his contributions in diverse fields keeps his spirits alive even to this present day.



The statue of Patanjali that is in the courtyard of the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, Chennai, INDIA