

INTRODUCTION

The aim of yoga is to eliminate the control that material nature exerts over the human spirit, to rediscover through introspective practice what the poet T. S. Eliot called the “still point of the turning world.” This is a state of perfect equilibrium and absolute spiritual calm, an interior refuge in the chaos of worldly existence. In the view of Patanjali, yogic practice can break habitual ways of thinking and acting that bind one to the corruptions of everyday life. Although the practice of yoga is much more ancient than the *Yoga Sutra*, this brief text represents the earliest known systematic statement of the philosophical insights and practical psychology that define yoga. Through the centuries since its composition, it has been reinterpreted to meet the needs of widely divergent schools of Indian yoga, for which it remains an essential text.

More broadly, yoga refers to the complex system of physical and spiritual disciplines that is fundamental to Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu religious practice throughout Asia. The meditating figures of the Buddha and the Hindu god Shiva are familiar

images in Asian religion. Sculptures show the Buddha seated in calm repose teaching his doctrine of universal compassion and the ascetic god Shiva in postures of perfect discipline. Hindu poets also evoke Shiva in his Himalayan retreat seated cross-legged and completely motionless, absorbed in pure contemplation, like an ocean without waves, the gates of his mind closed to outside intrusion as he meditates on the self within himself.¹

These descriptions suggest the physical and psychological state of an adept who follows the path prescribed in the *Yoga Sutra*. For Patanjali, physical control is only a precondition of inner spiritual perfection, which is cultivated by confronting the paradoxical nature of memory and thought itself. His analysis exposes the mechanisms whereby we construct false identities and enslave ourselves to a world of pain.

In our time, with its bewildering complexity and seductive material culture, Patanjali's system of yoga offers a set of powerful techniques for countering the tyranny of private mental chaos and moral confusion. Personal freedom is the concern normally associated with the private sphere, and morality with the public sphere. But they are inseparable. In the ancient Indian hierarchy of values, a concern with ultimate spiritual freedom is dominant, and yet the discipline that is required to achieve freedom is rooted in moral behavior, according to Patanjali.² Even though proper moral action in the world is not the goal of yoga, a great vow to live by the universal principles of nonviolence, truthfulness, avoidance of stealing, celibacy, and poverty is specified as a precondition for further yogic practice (2.30–31). The cultivation of friendship, compassion, joy, and impartiality toward all creatures, a central formula of Buddhist ethics, is also deemed efficacious for achieving the ab-

solute tranquility of yoga (1.33). The antiworldly isolation prescribed for certain stages of yoga is not the ultimate yogic state. Periods of solitude are necessary, but one need not renounce the world forever in order to practice yoga. Indian, Chinese, and Japanese thinkers have for centuries emphasized that the spiritually liberated person can be a powerful moral force in the world. Such contemporary figures as the present Dalai Lama of Tibet and the Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi exemplify this possibility.

In the Indian view, the practitioner of yoga is not a passive person, but a spiritual hero who is active and potent. A sense of what it means to be a real adept in yoga can be gleaned from the parable of the princess Chudala, an extraordinary beauty who was married in her youth to a neighboring prince and who later became his spiritual teacher. In Indian culture, it is not unusual to hear of loving couples who turn to spiritual pursuits when the pleasures of the flesh wane, nor is it rare for a woman to achieve spiritual perfection. And so it was with Chudala and her husband.³ Chudala spent all her time in study and meditation, gaining a deep calm and insight that left her husband bewildered. Against his sage wife's advice that spiritual peace was not to be found in external circumstances, he decided to renounce his kingdom and retreat to the distant forest. In his absence she ruled the country.

Through her yogic practice, Chudala had acquired great psychic and physical powers. She could take any form she chose and project it by means of her thought. She assumed the form of a young ascetic, who appeared before her husband as he wandered in the forest, and offered herself as his teacher. She instructed him in meditation and mind control, and then with-

drew to let him practice. He achieved a state of pure contemplation (*samādhi*) and annihilated the wild bird of his mind—but as a result he withdrew even further from the world.

Nonetheless, Chudala persisted, using her yogic powers to enter her husband's body and awaken him from within, coaxing him back into the mundane world. In order to instruct him further, she then assumed various guises to test the true depth of his spiritual accomplishment. Convinced that his equanimity was firm, she led him back to fulfill his kingly duties with a spiritual detachment that would benefit the world. Indeed, in the strictest sense yoga is the absolute detachment of one's spirit from the corruptions of the material world, an interior freedom from the insidious cycles of desire, anger, and delusion.

The parable is consonant with Patanjali's exposure of the multiple paradoxes in the human quest for spiritual freedom. On a simple level, the desire for freedom provides the motivation to undertake the arduous discipline of yoga, but this desire itself is a potential obstacle to freedom: it must be transcended. The quest for absolute perfection is hampered by the time-bound conventions according to which we conceptualize the human condition.⁴ To grasp the paradox of the spirit's limitation we have to pare away layers of misunderstanding, using thought to experience and overcome the limitations of thought itself. Recognizing the paradoxical nature of things is fundamental to breaking the connections between fragments of experience and obliterating the constructs of memory, which give an illusion of permanent identity to "individuals" and "events."

From Patanjali's perspective, the ultimate truth of the human condition cannot be known rationally, because this truth is elusive, and any attempt to objectify it can delude us. Within the

practice of yoga, rational knowledge is necessary in order to proceed, but this knowledge is only conditional and experimental. Even meditation and certain levels of pure contemplation are based on past experiences that leave traces, which Patanjali calls “seeds” (*bīja*; 1.41–46). Contemplation without seeds (*nirbīja-samādhi*) is a hyperconscious condition in which thought is tranquil and totally integrated, so that it leaves no seeds to mature into further thoughts. In seed-bearing contemplation, the knowledge that spirit and material nature are fundamentally distinct is acquired through rational and intuitive means, which depend on memory. When this knowledge is realized directly, without intellectual activity, however, the result is seedless contemplation. Past experiences recorded in memory have no relevance in seedless contemplation, where all thought ceases and the spirit is completely free from the material world (1.47–51).

Patanjali’s conception of freedom is related to the ancient Buddhist view that the source of suffering is the craving for permanence in a universe of impermanence, which encourages a false belief in an enduring individual self.⁵ Attachment to life is so powerful that it afflicts even those who intellectually understand the transience of all things—unless they are disciplined in yoga. However, Patanjali’s worldview differs significantly from that of the Buddhists in his belief in an idealized state of undifferentiated cosmic equilibrium between two enduring primal principles, spirit (*puruṣa*) and material nature (*prakṛti*). In this state, spirit is absolutely distinct from material nature and is free within itself. Buddhists, by contrast, insist on the absence of any enduring entity, spiritual or material.

The enigma of spiritual freedom is contained within the word *yoga* itself. *Yoga* is a Sanskrit word, cognate with the En-

glish word *yoke* with which it shares its most basic meanings. Yoga means “yoking” in the sense of spiritual discipline that requires preparatory exercises to gain control of the body, senses, and mind. It may also mean “integration,” referring to the spiritual integrity of the individual and the cosmos. In the *Yoga Sutra*, yoga refers both to a process of discipline and its goal. It is the entire process that enables one to realize a state of absolute spiritual integration, which is freedom. Freedom is thus the result of experience rather than mere knowledge; it is an enlightening realization, not a separate phenomenon that knowledge produces.

The essential assumption underlying yogic practice is that the true state of the human spirit is freedom, which has been lost through misidentification of one’s place in a phenomenal world of ceaseless change. This is the root of human suffering. Paradoxically, in yoga the freedom of spiritual integrity occurs in the act of discipline itself, which is ultimately rendered superfluous by the reality its practice discloses.

THE COMPOSITION AND CONTEXT OF THE *YOGA SUTRA*

Historical evidence regarding the authorship and the time of the composition of the *Yoga Sutra* is lacking. The dating of the text varies by centuries, but the majority of scholars consider it to have been composed around the third century A.D., a conclusion based on textual analysis of ideas common to the *Yoga Sutra* and other Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist works, including the *Bhagavad Gita*. Most would also agree not only on its status as the earliest

extant codification of yogic analysis and practice but also that the original text considerably antedates the philosophical commentary on it composed by Vyasa in the eighth century A.D.

Some students of the *Yoga Sutra* would date it as early as the third century B.C. on the basis of attempts to identify its author with the Patanjali who wrote an important Sanskrit grammatical text, the *Mahabhashya*, which dates to the second century B.C.⁶ There are also scattered references to other works attributed to an author named Patanjali. The attributions are linked by a legend that makes Patanjali (like Caraka, the author of the oldest system of classical Hindu medicine) an incarnation of the mythical serpent Ananta or Shesha, on whom the god Vishnu rests before the beginning of a new cycle of creation. This serpent took on human form in order to write under the name of Patanjali for the benefit of mankind.⁷

The legend is further elaborated to explain the name Patanjali. The author is said to have been born by falling in the form of a newborn serpent into the hands of his mother as she was offering water in worship of the sun. She called him Patanjali, from *pata*, meaning both “serpent” and “fallen,” and *añjali*, referring to the gesture of her hands cupped in worship.⁸ This story, like the story of Chudala, features a spiritually adept woman, both stories thus suggesting the Tantric dimensions of yoga. In Tantric practices, as in yoga, the norms of society are consciously overturned in order to liberate practitioners from their worldly constraints and release an explosion of energy that gives initiates extraordinary powers.

Patanjali did not invent yoga; it has its origins deep in India's past. The aphorisms of the *Yoga Sutra* text draw on various an-

cient traditions of yoga. The text also incorporates direct allusions to important philosophical and psychological ideas of ancient India, which create a foil for Patanjali's analyses.

Scholars hypothesize that some form of yoga may belong to the earliest periods of civilization on the Indian subcontinent, evidence for which comes from archaeological artifacts dating from the third millennium B.C. found in the Indus River valley. The still undeciphered written records are inscribed on seals that depict animal and human forms. Among these is a horned anthropomorphic figure surrounded by animals and seated in the cross-legged position that is a basic posture of yoga.

A suggestive reference to yoga is later found in the *Rig Veda*, the ancient collection of hymns associated with the Indo-European sacrificial cult and dating to about 1000 B.C.⁹ One hymn describes ascetics with long, streaming hair who overcome the limitations of the body (RV 10.136).¹⁰ Like the adepts discussed in the *Yoga Sutra*, they acquire enormous magical powers, such as the ability to travel through the air and know the thoughts of others.

In the middle of the first millennium B.C., Indian political and religious ferment spawned two enormous bodies of oral literature in which various forms of yoga are prominent: the teachings of the Buddha and the Hindu epic poems, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In both, yoga is defined in terms of discipline of the senses and mind that adepts practice in order to achieve access to the deeper recesses of spiritual insight and power.

The most ancient sustained expression of yogic ideas is found in the early sermons of the Buddha, who lived in the latter half of the sixth century B.C. His sermons are preserved in the oldest

collection of Buddhist texts, known as the Pali Canon. Both the “Four Noble Truths” and the “Eightfold Path,” articulated in the Buddha’s first sermon in the Deer Park, contain elements that underlie the yoga system.¹¹ The *Yoga Sutra* was certainly composed much later, but the elements that it shares with Buddhism may come from a common store of contemplative practice that was incorporated into Buddhism and developed there.¹² The important role of Buddhist technical terminology and concepts in the *Yoga Sutra* suggests that Patanjali was aware of Buddhist ideas and wove them into his system.¹³ Two striking examples are the use of the term *nirodha* in the opening definition of yoga as *citta-vṛtti-nirodha*, “cessation of the turnings of thought” (1.2), and the statement that “all is suffering (*duḥkha*) for the wise man” (2.15). *Duḥkha* and *nirodha* are crucial terms in the Buddhist doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, where they refer to the fact of universal suffering and to the means for the cessation of suffering, respectively.¹⁴

The doctrine of suffering is the core of what Buddhists believe to be the first sermon taught by the Buddha after he achieved enlightenment. In the long meditation that led up to his enlightenment, the Buddha realized that the transience of pleasure and of life itself is a constant source of sorrow, which is deepened by the human desire for permanence in a constantly changing world. He perceived that suffering could be stopped only through the complete cessation of craving. From the point of view of the Buddha and Patanjali alike, the suffering that is fundamental to the human condition is a defilement that can be removed through religious and meditative practice.

The psychology of both yoga and Buddhism focuses on freedom from worldly suffering through a liberating practice. Med-

itation and mental discipline in various forms are basic to the practice of Buddhism. The practical means to freedom has eight “limbs” in each system, of which six elements are common to both. The Buddha and Patanjali both prescribed moral behavior, control of the breath, control of the senses, celibacy, meditation, and pure contemplation (*samādhi*) that brings liberating insight into the true nature of things.¹⁵

During the same period that Buddhism was developing, a concern with yoga was expressed in early Indian epic literature.¹⁶ In the *Mahabharata*, the vast Indian epic of war between enemy cousins—a war that ends in the annihilation of both armies—the warriors acquire their supernatural powers and weapons through physical discipline and meditative practices that are akin to the practices later codified by Patanjali.

In the *Mahabharata*, the most masterful practitioner of yoga is Arjuna, the exemplary warrior and disciple of the god Krishna. In more than one episode, Arjuna performs extraordinary feats of yogic austerity to enhance his mental and physical prowess. The most famous episode does not, however, involve physical action, but rather turns on Arjuna’s participation in a mystical dialogue with Krishna. In this dialogue, known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna teaches Arjuna the varied forms of yogic discipline.¹⁷ The battlefield setting of the *Gita* is not only a physical place, but a state of mind. As the war is about to begin, Arjuna’s nerve fails at the thought of doing battle against his cousins and other family members. Krishna explains to him that it is a warrior’s duty to kill: instead of shrinking from this duty, Arjuna must learn to renounce the selfish attachment to the fruits of his actions. Krishna teaches him to discipline his thought and emotion so that he can perform the necessary action, free from

bloodlust and pain. The way to this goal is through physical and psychological discipline, concentration, meditation, and contemplative awareness.

Although Krishna's teaching agrees with that of Patanjali in emphasizing the primacy of detachment and mental discipline in gaining spiritual liberation, there are fundamental differences. In the *Gita* liberation enables one to wage the battle of life, while in the *Yoga Sutra* liberation entails an absolute isolation of the spirit from all worldly concerns. This liberation is impossible, however, without a commitment to the moral principles (*yama*) and observances (*niyama*) of the yoga system. The doctrine of the *Gita* vibrates with the imagery of mystical friendship, mental attitudes transformed through devotion, and action performed with spiritual skill and in an attitude of sacrifice. At the core of Patanjali's yoga, in contrast, is a total cessation of all mental activity and suspension of all physical action. While dedication to the Lord (*īśvara*) is referred to in the *Yoga Sutra* (1.24), *īśvara* is not a creator god. Patanjali does not furnish details, but the context suggests that he conceived the Lord as an eternal, archetypal yogi, an object of concentration for the practitioner who seeks to achieve spiritual calm. Nowhere in the *Yoga Sutra* is *īśvara* defined as an omnipotent god like Krishna in the *Gita*, who manifests himself as the Lord of Life and Death.

In the *Gita*, yoga is defined in various ways. In the second chapter, it is characterized as "equanimity" (2.48) and "skill in action" (2.50), a skill achieved only when understanding breaks through delusion and remains immovable in pure contemplation (*samādhi*). The practitioner is warned that if his mind becomes attached to the play of the senses, they can drive away in-

sight, as wind drives a ship on water (2.67); rather, he must withdraw his senses, like a tortoise retracting its limbs (2.58).

Later in his teaching, Krishna describes the discipline of the yogi in terms that are even closer to the doctrine elaborated in the *Yoga Sutra*. In the sixth chapter of the *Gita*, Arjuna responds to Krishna's definition of yoga as equanimity (*sāmya*) by protesting that such a state is an impossibility, given the condition of the mind as faltering, violent, and stubborn—as difficult to hold as the wind (6.34). In the following verse Krishna responds in words that are echoed in the *Yoga Sutra*, saying that practice and dispassion can restrain the mind.

Throughout the *Mahabharata*, the practice of mental and physical discipline, referred to as yoga, is allied with a dualistic theory of cosmic evolution known as *sāṅkhya*. These practical and theoretical ideas develop separately outside the epic context, each becoming a distinct Hindu philosophical system with its own foundation text and exegetical tradition.¹⁸ As these systems developed, Yoga philosophy became the field of practical philosophical analysis and meditative experimentation, while the Sankhya system emphasized the theoretical analysis of cosmic evolution.¹⁹

Hindu scholastic culture classifies orthodox philosophy into six systems, two of which are Yoga and Sankhya. In this classification, the philosophy and spiritual practice of the Yoga school—which has as its foundation text Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*—is regarded as a complement to the theoretical cosmogony of Sankhya.²⁰ The Sankhya text parallel to the *Yoga Sutra* is the *Sāṅkhya Kārikā*, attributed to Ishvara Krishna. It presents an abstract analysis of the constituents of phenomenal existence and the evolution of the universe out of primordial

matter.²¹ Yoga, as a code of practical discipline, is amplified by the Sankhya model of cosmic evolution, the psychological condition of the individual mirroring the Sankhya cosmogony in microcosm. The basis of spiritual liberation in the Yoga school is a profound experience of the evolutionary process whereby spirit becomes enmeshed in material nature.

Common to both systems is a universe structured in terms of two primal principles—spirit (*puruṣa*) and material nature (*prakṛti*). Both are extreme abstractions, like superstrings in modern cosmology. In its undifferentiated state, spirit is eternally inactive, while material nature evolves from within itself into the entire world of creation and destruction. The analysis presupposes an idealized state of cosmic equilibrium in which spirit exists in balance with, but isolated from, material nature. It is only when this equilibrium is disturbed that creation occurs.

Spirit (*puruṣa*) is an abstraction from the knowable world. Like a point in Euclidean geometry, spirit has no material identity except in relation to the phenomenal world. According to Patanjali, it is through ignorance that the spirit is connected to this world. Alone, it is pure consciousness, the ground of non-conceptual, spiritual knowledge.

According to the Sankhya system, all material nature (*prakṛti*) is composed of three distinct qualities (*guṇa*), which are like aspects of energy existing in potential form and actualized in innumerable combinations throughout the material world.²² The qualities are lucidity (*sattva*), the pure, clear quality of nature's perfection; passion (*rajas*), the quality of energy and motivation; and dark inertia (*tamas*), which weighs down the other two. Among the twenty-four evolutes of primal matter enumerated in Sankhya theory, Patanjali's teaching focuses

on those that must be understood in order to break open the gross and subtle fetters of thought. The relation that binds spirit to the material world is difficult to understand, since the very faculties of understanding are themselves material in nature—thought (*citta*), mind (*manas*), intelligence (*buddhi*), and ego (*ahamkāra*).²³

The thought process (*citta*) is a combination of the other three psychomental evolutes of matter. Together with the five sense organs (*indriya*), this thought process is the means whereby individual cognition and emotion function. Unlike *manas*, which is the organ of thought and with which *citta* is often misidentified, *citta*, thought, encompasses the entire mental capacity. Being part of the material realm, thought is plastic and subject to various modifications, which Patanjali characterizes as the “turnings of thought” (*citta-vṛtti*). These turnings comprise all the states of consciousness. Patanjali regards thought in the phenomenal world as ceaselessly in motion, existing only in its modifications. The goal of yoga is to still this motion and so liberate the subject from the tyranny of uncontrollable thought.

Since mind is an aspect of material nature, mental tranquility is not in itself sufficient to ensure ultimate freedom—although one can begin to realize one’s true humanity only when the mind is tranquil. But as long as the mind is muddled with wandering thoughts, it is impossible to discriminate between what is essential and what is adventitious.²⁴

In Patanjali’s view, the body and mind are physical and mental dimensions of the same material nature (*prakṛti*). However, interior nature—encompassing thought, mind, intelligence, and ego—is much more difficult to control than external nature. Physical forces are but gross manifestations of subtle

mental forces. If the subtle, internal aspects of material nature are under control, control of the gross aspects is relatively easy—which accounts for the extraordinary powers a yogi can command.

In order to penetrate the logic of Patanjali's method, it seems crucial to grasp his analysis of how spirit (*puruṣa*) becomes bound to material nature (*prakṛti*) through the workings of thought (*citta*) and the accumulation of subliminal memory "traces" or "impressions" (*saṁskāra*, *vāsanā*, *āśaya*).

The central notion here is that any mental or physical act leaves behind memory "impressions" or "traces" that can subtly influence a person's thought, character, and moral behavior. The store of memory is composed of subliminal impressions (*saṁskāra*) and memory traces (*vāsanā*), which are the residue of experience that clings to an individual throughout life and, in the Indian view, from death to rebirth. The relation between the "turnings of thought" (*citta-vṛtti*) and memory is basic to Patanjali's epistemology. When thought passes from one modification into another, the former state is not lost but rather is preserved in memory as a subliminal impression or memory trace. Thus, thought is always generating memories, and these memories are a store of potential thoughts, available to be actualized into new turnings of thought. The very habit of thinking not only generates but preserves memories, like the roots of a tuber that spread underground and produce fresh tubers which blossom in season.

Memory is crucial to the production of religious and aesthetic experience throughout Sanskrit literature. In religious and literary texts there is a recurrent association between memory and the bondage of love.²⁵ The poets based their conception of memory on established philosophical notions. Indian episte-

mologists hold that whatever we perceive by means of the sense organs leaves an impression on the mind; memory occurs when a latent impression is awakened. Indian literary theorists accordingly define memory as a recollection of a condition of happiness or misery, whether it was conceived solely in the mind or actually occurred.

In what is considered one of the key passages of Sanskrit aesthetics, the tenth-century Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta comments on what Kalidasa means by “memory” in his famous drama *Shakuntala*.²⁶ To illustrate Kalidasa’s perspective Abhinavagupta cites the final verse from the opening scene of the fifth act of *Shakuntala*, in which the poet presents a compressed version of his aesthetic of memory. The king and the court buffoon are listening to a song being sung by Lady Ham-sapadika, whom the king once loved but has since forgotten. The king muses to himself, “Why did hearing the song’s words fill me with such strong desire? I’m not parted from anyone I love.” The scene continues with this verse:

Seeing rare beauty,
hearing lovely sounds,
even a happy man
becomes
strangely uneasy . . .
perhaps he remembers,
without knowing why,
loves of another life
buried deep in his being.

Memory, then, is not a discursive recollection of past events but rather an intuitive insight into the past that transcends

personal experience, into the imaginative universe that beauty evokes.

In Patanjali's analysis, the aggregate of impressions that expresses itself in thought (*citta*) and action (*karma*) also accounts for subconscious predispositions that condition the character and behavior of an individual through many reincarnations. Thought and action thus become involved in an endless round of reciprocal causality. Actions create memory traces, which fuel the mental processes and are stored in memory, which endures through many rebirths. The store of subliminal impressions is obliterated only when the chain of causal relations is broken. But memory, reason, and even intuition have no relevance to the attainment of spiritual perfection and freedom. Liberation of the spirit is possible only when subconscious subliminal impressions are consumed and all the turnings of thought cease. In other words, the problem of freedom hinges on detachment from the perceived world of physical and mental activity. Such detachment loosens the bonds of memory that bind one to phenomenal existence, allowing one to realize the possibility of spiritual freedom.

Cultivation of mental tranquility is crucial to reversing the accumulation of psychological fetters, for only when thought is tranquil can one realize one's spiritual nature. A person whose mind is bewildered by wandering thoughts is caught in the web of those thoughts. Since thought is fundamental to the spirit's involvement with material nature, the way to extricate one's spirit is to make thought invulnerable to the chaos of mental and physical stimuli. In order to achieve such a state, one must perfect one's body and mind by conquering passionate attachment through the disciplined practice that Patanjali prescribes.

PATANJALI'S TEXT

The 195 aphorisms (*sūtras*, literally “threads”) that make up the *Yoga Sutra* outline a practical means for realizing spiritual perfection through distinct modes of discipline. In the aphorisms Patanjali seems to be refining a set of essential ideas drawn from a mass of varied material on the nature of mental discipline and spiritual freedom. Each aphorism distills in a single phrase some element of the complex “methodology” for radically rethinking one’s relation to the world and revising one’s perception of the entire structure of thought.

The *Yoga Sutra* is divided into four sections. The first deals with the cessation of thought and the cultivation of pure contemplation. The second explains the eight limbs of yogic practice and the systematic means to succeed in this practice, while the third is devoted to the last three of the limbs of this practice, an integrated discipline that gives the yogi extraordinary knowledge and powers. Finally, the fourth section explores the nature of absolute spiritual freedom, which is the ultimate goal of yoga.²⁷

The first section of the text presents a set of definitions and establishes relations among the different modes of achieving mental tranquility and spiritual liberation. The entire text is informed by the opening definition of yoga as the “cessation of the turnings of thought,” following which “the spirit stands in its true identity as observer to the world.” Patanjali then elaborates the basic methods of bringing thought to stillness, a process that allows the self to be a pure observer (*draṣṭṛ*) in relation to the visible world of phenomenal experience, without participating in it. This section also introduces two major components

of yogic practice—the cultivation of dispassion and dedication to the Lord (*īśvara*), the supreme spirit of yoga. Its main subject, however, is pure contemplation (*samādhi*), a spiritual integration that leads to absolute independence of the spirit from involvement with the material world. This independence is as paradoxical and difficult to describe as it is to attain, but those few who seem to have experienced it attest to a spiritual freedom beyond time and place.

The second section of the text presents the practical body of Patanjali's teaching, whose core is the eightfold discipline of yoga (*aṣṭāṅga-yoga*). Before going on to present details of the eightfold path, Patanjali analyzes the causes of the error and suffering that are obstacles to spiritual liberation. These forces of corruption are identified as ignorance, egoism, passion, hatred, and the will to live. Ignorance, which is the root of the other corruptions, is a misunderstanding of the interaction between the observing spirit (*puruṣa*) and the phenomenal world (*prakṛti*). It misleads us into egotistically believing in a unified self and falsely identifying spirit with matter.

Fortunately, ignorance can be eliminated by a serious commitment to living the disciplined life of a yogi. The practice of a dedicated yogi consists of eight interrelated disciplines of spiritual development that culminate in pure contemplation of one's inner truth. When ignorance is dispelled, the spirit exists as an observer to the world, free from attachment to the world's painful transience.

The third section is largely devoted to detailing the power one gains by perfecting the practice of yoga. The concentrated energy that accumulates through contemplation and spiritual control gives the yogi's thought a flexibility that allows it to

transcend the constraints of ordinary knowledge and attain limitless powers. These powers manifest themselves to the yogi in the hyperconscious state of perfect discipline (*samyaama*). The transformation that thought undergoes through concentration, meditation, and pure contemplation—the final three limbs of yogic practice, which constitute perfect discipline—enables thought to discriminate between material nature and the observing spirit. This opens one to the extraordinary powers of thought, such as knowledge of past and future, as well as of one's former births, knowledge of others' thoughts, supernormal hearing and sight, the ability to enter into other bodies, to become invisible, and to understand the different languages of humans, as well as those of animals and birds. In enumerating and describing these powers Patanjali gives us images of the mind's potential to achieve the seemingly impossible inward journey to spiritual freedom, a state beyond all boundaries and limits. Although the experience of these powers thus serves a definite purpose on the yogi's path, the temptation to succumb to their magical potency must be overcome if the yogi is to proceed toward freedom. It is as though the yogi must experience the full extent of the power of thought before being able to bring about its absolute cessation, which is the culmination of yogic practice.

This section of the *Yoga Sutra* echoes shamanic practice in some ways. However, the ultimate goal of yogic practice is not the attainment of magical powers and ecstatic states, but spiritual freedom. The emphasis placed on the shaman's instinctive ability to conjure the unseen world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits is downplayed in yoga. The miraculous powers of the shaman are within the capacity of a yogi, but they are

deemed dangerous in that they can distract one who possesses them from the goal of spiritual freedom.²⁸

Few ancient Indian philosophers take the hyperbole surrounding these powers literally. Indian myth and literature, however, are filled with stories of yogis whose powers enable them to defy the laws of nature. Their powers threaten even the gods, who use various means of seduction to control the yogis. A striking example occurs in the story of Rishyashringa, a young ascetic born of a doe in the forest and trained in yoga by his father in total isolation from human society, including the pleasures of women.²⁹ When a drought devastates the land near the forest where Rishyashringa dwells, priests instruct the king to send wily courtesans to lure the boy to the capital in hopes of harnessing his yogic energy to relieve the drought. His innocence makes him susceptible to their enticements, and he is eventually overcome by the beauty of the king's nubile daughter. His yogic energy thus released, the rains fall. Although Rishyashringa lives on in the world as a great sage, from the viewpoint of the *Yoga Sutra*, his story illustrates how vulnerable even an advanced yogi is to the distractions of the world that his own increasing powers expose.

The warning about the powers of yoga is a prelude to the fourth section of the *Yoga Sutra*, where Patanjali examines the aspects of thought and action that constitute the final obstacles to absolute spiritual freedom (*kaivalya*). This section recapitulates ideas presented in earlier sections of the text from the perspective of the omniscient observer, who is able to realize the independence of the spirit from its involvement with material nature. For the independent spirit, liberation is not the extinction of individual existence, but a potent state of calm. In the

course of his analysis of the relations among action, thought, memory, and liberating knowledge, Patanjali alludes to various ideas about causality, mainly drawn from more detailed Sankhya theories of cause and effect.³⁰

In commenting on this section, Indian writers cite variants of the parable of the lost son to explain how the yogi comes to realize the true nature of the spirit. A king's son, born into court intrigue, is abandoned in infancy and reared by outcastes, with whom he identifies himself. Through the offices of an aged minister, however, he is found and told that he is now king, and not an outcaste at all. At first, he is unable to understand, but under the minister's careful tutelage, his self-perception is changed, and he gradually comprehends what it means to be king. Likewise, the yogi can come to realize the true state of his spirit by cultivating the discrimination that allows him to distinguish between the spirit as knowing observer and the phenomenal world of material nature.

THE STYLE OF THE TEXT

The *Yoga Sutra* is written in a simple, aphoristic style, which contrasts sharply with the rhetorical complexity of the commentaries. The language is spare and often extremely technical. There is a virtual absence of metaphors, and even similes are kept to a minimum. In the *Yoga Sutra*, the aim is not to make connections but to disengage the illusory connection between the spirit and nature. The minimalist aphorisms and absence of metaphor underscore Patanjali's central point that one must transcend all relational thinking in order to realize the isolation of absolute freedom.

Although the commentators have not taken sufficient note of this, the text has an internal structure and coherence that abounds with cross-references. Each aphorism contributes to the whole, even though the interpretation of an individual aphorism often depends on the specific philosophical context in which Patanjali is making his point.

The terse, elliptical nature of the aphorisms has attracted varying interpretations of both the whole and its parts. The earliest surviving commentary is the *Yogabhashya* of Vyasa (eighth century A.D.), which is itself the subject of a study called the *Tattvavaisharadi* by Vacaspati Mishra (ninth century). Both have been translated into English, and one of the most reliable translations of them remains the 1914 version of J. H. Woods.³¹ The Vyasa commentary, which belongs to the early Indian scholastic tradition, is concerned with the philosophical meaning of the aphorisms. It was Vyasa who established the main interpretive tradition relating to the text, a tradition still followed by the majority of Indian and Western interpreters and translators. Subsequent commentaries amplify details of yogic practice that Patanjali only alludes to. As is the case with other aphoristic foundation texts, the *Yoga Sutra* has gained much of its authority within the tradition of Hindu philosophy by the weight of commentarial material attached to it, and the scores of interpretations undeniably aid us in penetrating the layers of meaning embedded in the text. At the same time, though, they often obscure Patanjali's elegant critique of the mental attitudes that bind us to suffering the vagaries of material existence.

A recently discovered, and controversial, subcommentary on Vyasa's commentary has been attributed to the great philoso-

pher of the monistic Vedanta school, Shankara, who lived in the ninth century. Even if the attribution of the commentary is inauthentic, it does attest to the interest shown by Vedanta scholars in the philosophical implications of Patanjali's ideas. As in later Vedantic interpretations, there is an emphasis on a transcendent dimension to yoga that is absent in Patanjali's philosophy of cessation and spiritual liberation. It is in fact difficult to reconcile the antimetaphorical stance of the *Yoga Sutra* with the ancient Vedantic idea—prevalent in the late Vedic hymns and the *Upanishads*—that if one discovers correspondences between apparently dissimilar things, one can understand the essence of the cosmos. Patanjali presents an incisive, radical philosophical analysis of mental discipline that seems blunted by Vedantic ideas.

Indeed, it is the radicalism of Patanjali's analysis that makes the *Yoga Sutra* so compelling. In my view, even if one cannot completely follow the system that Patanjali outlines or pursue the discipline to its fulfillment, the style and structure of the text communicate its strategy with a directness that renders it comprehensible to a dedicated reader. In a very important sense, the act of becoming aware of these issues constitutes a step on the way.

Granted, it is unlikely that any uninitiated reader can fully understand a text whose interpretation has been debated for centuries by scholars and practitioners, both Indian and Western. Within Indian tradition, the *Yoga Sutra* is an economical set of mnemonic pronouncements on the arduous course for achieving spiritual freedom, a text that is meant to be learned by heart and amplified by a teacher's guidance, although ultimately it can only be fully apprehended experientially, through

long, continuous practice. Still, if one approaches a reading of the aphorisms as a kind of experiment, there is much to be gained. Even if one is unable to understand all the details of the analysis, one can explore Patanjali's philosophical and psychological terrain—like a traveler in a strange country, exploring a new landscape and absorbing its contours before observing its details. The text can be understood on various levels of sophistication, but the core of Patanjali's worldview is apparent to any reader who will make the effort.

The goal of yogic transformation is realized in contemplative practice. The path to freedom consists of a gradual unwinding of misconceptions that allows for fresh perceptions. It is as if one were walking attentively through a forest in which one could not precisely identify every animal, bird, flower, and tree. Even so, the sounds of the various creatures, the smells of flowers and ferns, and the shapes of trees move one toward a more acute awareness of the environment, and in this process of reorientation the contours of the landscape change. The way of yoga is not a simple, linear path. Rather, it is a complex method involving a radical change in the way we experience the world and conceive the process of knowing ourselves. It gives us techniques with which to analyze our own thought processes and finally to lay bare our true human identity.