

The Yoga Sutras

The *Yoga Sutras* are ascribed to varying dates around the second century CE (Rodrigues 201). They are not recognized as the establishment of yoga, because yoga and concepts of self-discipline and meditation had been practiced for thousands of years before the writing of the *Sutras*. Buddhist texts indicate that methods of *dhyana* (meditative state) (Rodrigues 405) and *samadhi* (contemplative absorption) (Rodrigues 562) had been well established by the time of the Buddha (Dasgupta 47). Patanjali, a great Sanskrit grammarian, is sometimes credited with the creation of the *Yoga Sutras*. However, many scholars think the grammarian Patanjali was a different person.

Although Patanjali contributed greatly to the growth and doctrines of Sankhya school of Yoga, commentators like Vyasa [To read further on the commentaries by Vyasa see Baba (2005) to help clarify the explanation on the *Sutras*] concluded that Patanjali was not the originator of yoga but that he was its “editor” (Dasgupta 51). This position is reinforced when analyzing the character of the book. The *Sutras* are divided into chapters (*pada*), which leads on to believe that Patanjali was providing a system of organization to knowledge that already had a thorough foundation. The first three chapters, or *padas*, are “written by way of definition and classification” (Dasgupta 52) which indicates that this knowledge was “already in existence” (Dasgupta 52). The fourth chapter appears to be a later addition.

If the title of this great work is correctly translated it provides an intensified clarity of the purpose and direction that the *Sutras* are intended to take. Yoga, essentially meaning to “yoke” and is rooted in Sanskrit literature within the word *yuj*, (Dasgupta 44)

meaning to join and to form a union or connection (Dasgupta 43). Yoga is essentially the act of yoking and/or joining the senses. In older Upanishads the word is understood “in the sense of austerity and meditative abstractions productive of mighty achievements” (Dasgupta 43); this is consistent with the era, as the practice of austerity was popular amongst many devoted Hindus and Buddhists and several other religious philosophies. The word yoga originally applied to the control of steeds and in several sacred texts the senses are often referred to as “uncontrollable horses” (Dasgupta 44). This understanding of the word as a controlling action, or perhaps inaction, is entirely plausible, as the practice of yoga further develops to tame the senses through intense meditation and physical discipline. (Sutra meaning, “thread,” provides the organizational consistency that is needed when such a definitive work is being written. These *sutras*, or threads, help weave together the fabric of the principles and philosophies of yoga. This provides a legible and tangible blanket of knowledge that allows for expansions and meditation on specific principles to amplify one’s practice.) It is important to understand the linguistic features of the practice of yoga for it helps portray a long history that predates the creation of the *Yoga Sutras*.

Yoga cannot be learned by oneself; it is a lifelong spiritual journey that requires the guidance of a *guru* (“teacher”) (Eliade 10) to further one’s practice. A *guru* of yoga is often referred to as a *yogi* (masculine) or *yogini* (feminine) and he/she is often committed to a journey of *samsara* (rebirth) and the attainment of *moksa* or *nirvana* (Eliade 11) liberation or transcendence of rebirth. There are different Hindu schools that claim one should access or attain *moksa* or *nirvana*. Yoga is one of the six orthodox Hindu schools and is best represented by Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* and its subsequent commentaries.

Patanjali's work is framed hand-in-hand with the *Samkhya* philosophy [see Worthington V for an in depth analysis of the *Samkhya* philosophy. It is important to note and understand the six orthodox schools of Hinduism and the connection and differences interconnecting them all]. *Samkhya* and yoga are inextricably intertwined with one another and bear much resemblance to one another. It should be noted that Patanjali's work is the "coordination of philosophical material" (Eliade 16) and the physical practice, which elevates it to an almost philosophical system as opposed to a "mystic tradition" (Eliade 16).

The *Yoga Sūtras* consist of four chapters (*pada*). The first chapter is the "chapter on yogic ecstasy" (*samadhīpada*), containing fifty-one aphorisms or *sūtras*; the second called *sāhanapada*, contains fifty-five *sūtras* and is the "chapter on realization"; the third chapter, *vibhūti*, "marvelous powers" also contains fifty-five *sūtras*. When analyzing the fourth chapter it is important to note the amount of *sūtras* because it has noticeably fewer *sūtras*, suggesting perhaps it was a later addition (Eliade 13). The fourth *pada* has only thirty-four *sūtras* and is called the *kaivalyapada*, "isolation" (Eliade 13).

The first chapter, *samadhīpada*, pertains to the consciousness of the mind. It is the understanding of thought, or *vṛtti*, and how the human mind is a natural roadblock to reaching the true self. The *samadhīpada* outlines several techniques that try to harness the mind and avoid distractions. In the *samadhīpada*: (Sūtras 38) Patanjali proposes a physical guideline to obtain a mental achievement. It appears that by practicing proper breathing techniques one gains control over a sense that is almost entirely involuntary, which reinforces the union of physical and mental to obtain control and release of the constant fluidity of the conscious.

The *sadhanapada* is the “practical way” of attaining a spiritual awakening. Patanjali discusses the eight limbs of yoga [For further information on the eight limbs of yoga, visit Doran’s website] as a way of practicing union of the mind and body and dismissing obstructions to spiritual attainment. The obstacles that block the path to the attainment of union are outline in this *pada*, *sadhanapada* (Sutra 10) and illustrates that the acknowledgement of these hindrances will help dispel them. The *sadhanapada* also makes note of other branches of yoga and the importance to achieving oneness of mind and body i.e. Ashtanga yoga (meaning the eight limb practice).

The third chapter called the *vibhutipada* is an expansion on the powers that are “matured with practice.” Gaining and controlling such subtle powers leads to a state of awareness and contemplation (*samadhi*).

The *kaivalyapada* is the final stage and goal of yoga and the isolation of one’s self. This chapter essentially focuses on liberation, or *moksa*, as the yogi/yogini has learned to separate himself/herself from the bondages that obstruct true consciousness. This *pada* is, as noted, most likely a later addition to the *Sutras*, as it no longer focuses on the directional guidance, but rather it is a concluding remark on the practice and end point of a spiritual pathway (Johnston).

The *Yoga Sutras* is undoubtedly one of the most influential texts on yoga, and is influential within the Hindu tradition and for any practicing *yogi* and/or *yogini*. The composition of the *Sutras* does not mark the birth of yoga; rather, it is the systematizing of the yogic pathways towards spiritual attainment. The *Sutras* provide an organized approach towards the practice of yoga and the union between physical and mental aspects of the human body. The purpose of the *Yoga Sutras* is not to provide a narrow hallway

towards spiritual awakening; rather, it is a guide and allows for meditation and contemplation of every *pada* and physical step. This text is not self-explanatory, but the journey that the self takes with the help of the *Yoga Sutras* explains the connection between theory and practice.

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NOTEWORTHY WEBSITES ON THIS TOPIC

http://www.vogamovement.com/texts/patanjali_book1.html

<http://www.swamij.com/yoga-sutras.htm>

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/yogasutr.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga_Sutras_of_Patanjali

<http://www.srds.co.uk/begin/samkhya.htm> (Worthington V)

<http://www.expressionsofspirit.com/voga/eight-limbs.htm> (Doran)

RELATED TOPICS AND TERMS

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