

The Yoga-Sutra of Patañjali
Making Sense of the Modern Asana Practice

Today in the United States, yoga is synonymous with a particular type of physical exercise. The foundational text of the yoga practice however, the Yoga-Sutra of Patañjali, is entirely concerned with attaining states of motionless meditative absorption in order to view fundamental underlying reality. The two practices are fundamentally different, independent, and opposed. Where one is solely concerned with ultimate stillness, the other is all about movement and physical exercise. The fact is however, that the two are intimately related. What is going on here? How can this be so? To answer these questions, we will dig deep into the origins of both The Yoga-Sutra of Patañjali and the modern yoga practice.

We start with the question, what does the word yoga mean? To most Americans, yoga is a form of exercise taught at local health clubs and trendy metropolitan studios. Usually it can be found somewhere that also offers classes like Zumba, total body conditioning, and spin classes, and one would hope that a membership to such a place would grant you and your family access to the indoor pool. Attending a typical yoga class today will generally guarantee you some nice music, a friendly instructor, and a room full of people who own at least one expensive plastic mat. During the class, everyone will try their best to fit their individual bodies into a series of archetypal postures at the direction

of the teacher. The teacher's words and cues keep the class flowing along together in the posture practice, and it is not uncommon for a teacher to walk around the room correcting individual's postures and uttering words of encouragement and motivation. The newcomers will be constantly moving their heads around, eyes wide open, trying to see what everyone else is doing and (by extension) what they should be doing. By contrast, veterans to the class may go through a long series of postures without ever opening their eyes. The breath is often a central component to today's posture yoga, and teachers are fond of the words 'inhale, and' and 'exhale, and'. Breath cues are common in faster paced yoga classes where the class may change body position in conjunction with a change in the direction (in or out) of the breath. In slower classes, where postures may be held for several minutes at a time, the teacher will likely instruct the class to 'breathe into the stretch', or at least to become 'aware of the breath'. This focus on the breath is important, and we will return to it later.

The teacher will have been trained by one or more other teachers, and in the U.S., will likely have been certified to teach by an organization called the Yoga Alliance. The Yoga Alliance certifies that an instructor has completed a certain number of hours of training, and that the instructor is well versed in the liability issues that come with teaching yoga to groups of strangers. Instructors are often trained to teach different styles of yoga, some of which are copyrighted (like Baptiste or Bikram) and some of which were simply developed into a coherent style by someone in the past 100 years or so.

An individual yogi's motivations for attending a yoga class can be many and varied. Some people attend classes because they want physical results (like a better

looking, more flexible, or healthier feeling body), some attend for the positive feelings they get during and after a good class, and still others attend for innumerable other reasons. Perhaps a longing for a sense of community drives them, or a taste for the sense of accomplishment that comes from mastering any skill. Some are driven by competition, and aim simply to be better than everyone else.

Benjamin Lorr describes his experience with a group of intense, devoted asana practitioners working toward that latter goal in his recent book titled Hell-Bent. “These are practitioners” says Lorr, “who work on postures quietly in the corner until the studio owner gently asks them to put on some clothes and leave. Bodies so finely muscled, so devoid of fat that they’re basically breathing anatomical diagrams.” (Lorr, 8) Lorr believes that “almost every studio has at least one practitioner like this”, but it is not the case that all studios have someone training for what are called the “United States Yoga Asana (posture) Championships” in them. (Lorr, 8, 238)

Another motivation for attending a yoga class, which is popular with different people in varying degrees, is the motivation to access some sort of emotional or spiritual realization or benefit. It is undeniable that asana yoga has the potential to (and often does) foster one’s confidence, discipline, and acceptance, and that it can be a source of stability in an otherwise turbulent and ever changing modern American life is indubitable. Our society has problems, and many people turn to yoga for solutions. Cultivating a focus on the breath and the posture, perhaps working with an intention or mantra (‘to be more loving’ for example) and relying on one’s own strength over the course of an asana (posture) yoga class can help steady a busy mind, even if it is just for an afternoon.

This is my personal analysis of the majority of modern asana yoga, and I am confident that many are bound to disagree with at least part of it. This is because there is a relatively small but vibrant community of teachers and practitioners who practice yoga in conjunction with other life-enhancing spiritual practices, and who see the word ‘yoga’ as referring to something more meditative and traditional. In order to understand this more classical sense of the term, we must embark on an investigation of The Yoga Sutra of Patañjali.

The Yoga Sutra of Patañjali is the “chief treatise on yoga” (Besant, 1). Georg Feuerstein, arguably yoga’s foremost scholar, called it a text that “every [modern] student of Yoga should not only read but actually study” (Patanjali and Feuerstein, vii). It is generally accepted as “the foundational text of Yoga”, and dates from somewhere between 200 BCE to 200 CE. (Tola, Dragonetti, x). Little is known about Patañjali, but the influence of his Yoga-Sutra is not questioned. Patañjali’s system is often referred to as raja-yoga or royal yoga, and is famous for having 8 distinct components. These components are “restraint, observance, posture, breath-control, sense-withdrawal, concentration, meditative-absorption, and ecstasy” (Patanjali and Feuerstein, 153). The Yoga-Sutra is made up of 4 chapters, each containing around 50 aphorisms that are each about one or two English sentences long. Although the text is about 200 aphorisms long, only 3 make mention of asana (posture). One of these ‘mentions’ I have already noted—the word ‘posture’ is in the line that lays out the 8 components or limbs of yoga. The other two are thus: “The posture should be steady and comfortable” and “it (the posture) is accompanied by the relaxation of tension and the coinciding with the infinite

consciousness-space” (Patanjali and Feuerstein, 154). It is apparent from this that The Yoga Sutra of Patañjali is not really about posture yoga. So what is it about? In order to understand the sutra, we first must engage in an exploration of its underlying philosophy: that of Samkhya.

Samkhya is a dualistic system that describes the nature of existence. The idea is that the world we live in is made up of two things: Purusha or spirit, and Prakrti or matter. Prakrti is an illusion, and is composed of three different elements or strands that “encompass manifest and unmanifest reality from ‘Brahma down to a blade of grass”” (Larson and Battacharya, 68). These strands all have individual characteristics and names; these are Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. The existence of each strand is dependent on the existence of the other two. Sattva is “reflective discerning”, a light, fine, elating sense of understanding that permeates our ‘aha!’ moments (Larson and Battacharya, 69). Rajas is “prereflexive, spontaneous activity”, and Tamas is “determinate formulation”, or a dark, heavy, slow element (Larson and Battacharya, 69). These strands are constantly moving, weaving a net that traps Purusha, which can be translated as consciousness, awareness, spirit, or underlying reality. Every time we act, we experience a combination of the three strands of Prakrti, and what we think of as reality manifests. Prakrti is really an illusion though; only Purusha is the true reality. Purusha is caught in the interaction of the components of Prakrti, and when one slows down one’s actions and is still, one’s mind can conceive of Purusha as opposed to Prakrti. In other words, stilling the body and mind releases Prakrti. A metaphorical way to look at it is by thinking of Prakrti as a

turbulent pond, and Purusha as a star high above. Only when the pond is still can one see the star.

As a side note, the three strands of Prakarti correspond nicely to three distinct sets of brainwaves classified by neuroscientists today in modern western thought. Beta waves are quick waves that are normally associated with our waking consciousness and rational action, and are like Rajas in a lot of ways (see description of Rajas above). Theta and alpha waves have slightly longer wavelengths than beta waves and are associated with relaxation and light sleep, a state which certainly can be described as ‘light’ or ‘fine’, just like Sattva. Delta waves are slow waves characteristic of deep sleep. These brain waves are easily visualizable as strands, and since our brain is the center of our perception and is arguably the place where our perception of reality is formed, it is totally reasonable to draw a parallel between our brain waves and the waves that make up perceived, yet supposedly illusory, reality.

A fourth class of brain wave, the Gamma wave, is typical of meditative absorption in advanced practitioners. This wave is very quick and is characterized by a short wavelength at high frequency, and it seems that perhaps an experience of this brainwave could be correlated with an experience of Purusha. Since Purusha is not described as a string but that which is trapped by the strings, I will abstain from asserting a connection however.

At any rate, now that we understand Samkhya we can begin to understand Patanjali’s philosophy. Swami Vivekananda nicely lays out the major differences between the Samkhya system and Patanjali’s underlying system. He states that “the system of

Patanjali is based upon the system of the Sankhyas, the points of difference being very few. The two most important differences are, first, that Patanjali admits a Personal God in the form of a first teacher, while the only God the Sankhyas admit is a nearly perfected being, temporarily in charge of a cycle of creation. Second, the Yogis hold the mind to be equally all - pervading with the soul, or Purusha, and the Sankhyas do not.” (Vivekenanada, 7) In other words, Patanjali talks about how through “devotion to the Lord comes about the attainment of ecstasy” in a few of the aphorisms, and also that he says that the mind pervades (or is one with) Purusha. The latter distinction is much more significant than the former. Devotion to the lord is only one minor way that ecstasy is attained; really the way to attain ecstasy is through observance of the eight ‘limbs’, and ultimately, through meditation. Meditation allows the practitioner to experience the mind in full with complete attention, and only if Purusha and the mind are one and the same can Patanjali’s methods work in the Samkhya system. This is all Vivekenanada is saying.

Now it must be dead obvious that Patanjali’s Yoga-Sutra is worlds apart from modern commercial yoga. One is about meditative absorption aimed at experiencing bliss states and the nature of reality, the other is about being able to touch your toes. What’s up? How did Patanjali’s system become so associated with modern yoga, and what other sides of modern yoga are we missing? To answer these questions, we must investigate the roots of modern yoga.

The New York Times recently reported that “The September issue of Yoga Journal, which has the largest circulation in the field, ... [called] yoga’s “true history a mystery.” (New York Times) What the most reliable scholarship in the area suggests

however is that the origins of an asana or posture based practice came out of Tantra. Feuerstein asserts that the “rise of Tantra- in the period between the fifth and fourteenth centuries CE... led to the creation of what came to be called Hatha-Yoga, which can mean either ‘Forceful Yoga’ or ‘Yoga of the Force’. In the latter case, the ‘force’ is no other than the esoteric ‘serpent power’ (kundalini-shakti) celebrated in the Tantras.” (Feuerstein, 328) Any practitioner of modern yoga is of course familiar with the term ‘hatha-yoga’, as today the term is nearly synonymous with the asana practice.

So if hatha-yoga came from Tantra, then what is Tantra, and how does it relate to Patañjali? One modern tantric commentator named Osho lays out the basic distinction between Yogic Samkhya and Tantra. Osho believes that “Yoga is negation; Tantra is affirmation. Yoga thinks in terms of duality – that is the reason for the word yoga. It means to put two things together, to “yoke” two things together. But two things are there; the duality is there. Tantra says there is no duality.” (Osho, 21) The difference is that Samkhya is a dualistic theory where two real things (Purusha and Prakrti) make up the world, and Tantra is a non-dual theory that does not affirm the ultimate existence of anything, and values transcendence of dualism to a non-dual state of mind as ideal. This idea of transcendence becomes apparent when we continue with Osho: “The ordinary mind is being destroyed by its own desires, so yoga says stop desiring, be desireless. Fight desire and create an integration in you which is desireless. Tantra says be aware of the desire; do not create any fight, move in desire with full consciousness, and when you move into desire with full consciousness you transcend it. You are into it and still you are not in it. You pass through it, but you remain an outsider.” (Osho 19)

Any discussion of Tantra would be incomplete without at least touching on Kundalini Yoga. Kundalini Yoga aims to unleash the Kundalini energy or ‘serpent power’ trapped within all of us. The way this happens is by first envisioning one’s human body as being full of nerves (or nadis) that carry and circulate the vital breath energy throughout the body. One envisions that there are three main nadis that run vertically through the center of the body. The nadis on the left and right are used for respiration, and the vital breath or prana flows through the nostrils, down these main nadis, and then from there into all the nerves in the body. After a lengthy nadi- cleansing process and through a series of esoteric practices, the practitioner eventually develops the ability to push or force the vital breath or prana from the outer two channels into the central channel. When this happens, the kundalini energy is awakened, and great spiritual insight and power stands to be gained. The practice can be very damaging or even deadly to the body and mind if anything goes wrong, and it is generally considered a relatively dangerous practice.

It is from this Kundalini context that Hatha Yoga arose. Author and yoga instructor Linda Sparrowe notes that “*Hatha yoga*, out of which came the physical postures the Western world now embraces, first appeared in the ninth or tenth century. Despite its rather detailed and complex philosophic underpinnings, it was little more than a small and somewhat radical sect during the post-classical [post Patañjali] period. In fact, among some Hindus of the period, hatha yoga had the reputation of being nothing short of heretical in its focus on the physical and in its fascination with magical powers.

Hatha yoga's principles arose from tantra, and incorporated elements of Buddhism, alchemy, and *Shaivism* (worship of the transcendental Shiva).” (Sparrowe, 18)

Effectively, what all this means that there is another big difference between today's yoga, and Patañjali's system. The two arguably come from totally different philosophical systems. One's roots are traceable to hatha-yoga which is tantric and non-dualistic, the other's roots are based in the Samkhya system which is decidedly dualistic. How are we to resolve this?

Mark Singleton has an answer. His research suggests that the modern sort of asana practice we have today is an incredibly new phenomena. He claims that “among outsiders and practitioners alike, there is often little awareness that these modes of practice have no precedent (prior to the early twentieth century, that is) in Indian yoga traditions.” (Singleton, 21) Singleton is saying that yoga as we know it today did not even exist in India until the 20th century. This claim rests on his assertion that “the new yogic body is one that is thoroughly shaped by the practices and discourses of modern physical culture, ‘healthism,’ and Western esotericism.” (Singleton, 22) Singleton is basically arguing that yoga did not simply come to the US from India; rather, Western culture went to India, interacted with both Tantric and Patañjalian philosophies, and through that process, what we know today as yoga was created. Then that new, western influenced (or concocted) form of yoga eventually arrived back in the U.S. where it was modified further by ‘physical culture’, and marketed to the masses.

The commercialized yoga of the U.S. today is a combination of Tantric and Patañjalian ideas, and is accommodating to both philosophies. Since on the one hand we

have this modern combination-yoga, and on the other we have a more historical Tantric yoga and Patañjalian yoga, Singleton appears justified in asking us to “consider the term *yoga* as it refers to modern postural practice as a *homonym*, and not a synonym, of the “yoga” associated with the philosophical system of Patañjali, or the “yoga” that forms an integral component of the Śaiva Tantras”. (Singleton, 15)

So in the end, although the two systems of Patañjali and Tantra are totally different philosophically, they are actually united and inseparably linked by today’s modern yoga. The fusion of ideas and cultures has shaped what continues to be a continually evolving modern phenomena, and aspects of all sides the equation are visible and present. Acceptance and transcendence (sometimes of pain like for the practitioners in Hell-Bent) are important aspects of the modern practice that can be seen clearly in Tantra, and the practice emphasizing the control of the body and breath can be seen as a readily apparent modern manifestation of Patañjali’s yoga. Aspects of the other 8 limbs are present in modern yoga classes too, for instance some form of concentration is necessary for carrying through with the intricate movements, and a vestige of the idea of sense withdrawal is present for people who close their eyes and focus inward during a class. In this way, modern yoga and Patañjali’s system are intimately connected. It is true that Patañjali’s meditation practices and pure 8 limbed yoga are still totally different from modern yoga, but I believe that it is likely that at least some modern yogins and yoginis interested in the roots of modern yoga may eventually ‘discover’ these older practices and take them up, and in that way, there is a chance that everything may eventually come full circle.

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