Raja Hatha
Yoga’s Path to Liberation

As in Buddhism, the true goal of yoga is liberation from ego and suffering. Yoga becomes a complete spiritual path, says CHIP HARTRANFT, translator of the Yoga Sutra, when we join the familiar postures of hatha yoga with the meditative practices of raja yoga.

TRANQUIL AND MOTIONLESS, the ascetic sits in a simple posture. As each breath flows in, he experiences its sensations, relaxing any effort to control or improve anything. With each exhalation, he observes a new stream, each ripple of feeling a fresh occasion for surrender. Even so, thoughts, feelings, and identifying concepts repeatedly erupt, centered around the same dualistic notions: self/other, past/future, like/dislike, success/failure. Once noticed, though, they recede.

The meditative path, samadhi, begins to emerge as the ascetic continues to sit. Sustained at first by intention, it sharpens until the need to train it gives way to effortless mindfulness and equanimity. Abruptly, in a timeless instant of cessation, nothing remains to obscure the unconditioned. An unshakable realization arises: all things—mind, body, nature—may be known, but are empty of a knower. There is an ennobling security in this understanding that
Although tradition claims Patanjali was an important grammarian of the second century BCE, more recent scholarly investigations have revealed several illustrious Patanjalis. The author of the Yoga Sutra lived hundreds of years later, it would appear. This seminal text was probably composed between 100 BCE and 300 BCE, but it is now clear that most of its teachings are even more ancient, based on oral traditions from at least a millennium earlier. They concern contemplative practices prevalent both before and after the time of the Buddha.

In fact, if we look back to a time before the Buddha, there is evidence that an inwardly focused meditative tradition existed among some indigenous peoples of the Indian subcontinent a millennium or more earlier. This practice tradition was quite different from the externally directed spirituality of the Aryan tribes that infiltrated from the northwest. This more external form of spirituality came to dominate the area and its cultures during the first several centuries of the second millennium BCE.

Although initially overshadowed during the Aryan influx, the inward-focused meditation tradition was more than hardy enough to survive the cross-cultural assimilation that unfolded over the next millennium. By the seventh or eighth centuries BCE, this introspective sensibility was everywhere evident in the widespread phenomenon of wandering ascetics, or sramanas. Rejecting Vedic authority, with its relentless sacrifices and rigid hierarchies of race, class, and gender, untold numbers of men and women dropped out of conventional society and went forth into homeless spiritual seeking. They “inner sacrificers,” ranging from hara austerity to blissful meditation, also began to inform post-Vedic brahmanical teachings such as the Upanishads.

The thread that united most of these early yogas was their intense focus on self-liberation from suffering. Whether meditative trance, philosophical inquiry, naturalistic observation, extreme morality, or self-mortification, almost all the various approaches operated from a belief that it must be possible for individuals to shake the bonds of misperception that shackled them to an unending cycle of birth and death. Since one’s salvation lay not in a relationship to external gods but in overcoming ignorance, one had to transform oneself and one’s own perceptions. Even as ascetics clustered around charismatic and compelling seekers like the Buddha and the Jain Mahavir, the prevailing ethos was self-empowering. Regardless of background, liberation was within one’s grasp. What we usually misperceive as an unbroken, simultaneous flow we call “reality,” “self,” and “other.” This makes it almost impossible to distinguish between mind and matter, or between events and our reactions to them. So, our patterns of perception and volition are largely determined, automatic, and nearly inescapable.

The meditative intentions that move yogis down this natural path to tranquility are twofold. First, yogis train themselves to keep returning to the point of focus and sit with it. This intention, called abhyasa (“sit facing”), is the basis for sustained practice and begins with witnessing the current stream of bodily sensations. As yogis keeps noticing and returning from distraction, they quickly come face-to-face with conditioned habits of thought and reaction. No matter how numerous or overwhelming these distractions, though, they always dissolve. As they continue to practice, yogis may soon begin to sense a developing aptitude for remembering the focus, a power that starts to grow stronger than the penchant for forgetting. As this aptitude is cultivated and concentration—samadhi—begins to coalesce, yogis will require even occasional, subtle prompts to direct and train awareness on the object, and the need even for these will drop away as samadhi ripens.

If meditation is to move from doing to being, the other intention one must keep in mind is softening. Again and again, the yogi unclenches, relaxes his psychosomatic grip on the moment, and allows events to be just as they are. Success is proportionate to one’s willingness to let each new impulse to control or improve simply appear, bloom, and fade. As a result, it becomes ever clearer that each bodily contraction was conditioned by a mental contraction, arising from desire, aversion, or simply holding a self-image in mind.

How to Do, How to Be

Under ordinary circumstances, this illusion of a me navigating myself through a world of bodily sensations is impenetrable. But when attention is focused on the processes of body and breath, which orient the yogi in what Patanjali calls yoga, or “yoking,” consciousness begins to settle spontaneously and become transparent and reflective, like the ocean growing calm.
The yogi realizes how much of mental life has been engaged in reorienting for stimulation and gratification, and how attaining them never produces anything like a lasting happiness. This perceptual re-education, called vairagyā, or “non-reacting,” involves entrusting oneself to one new experience after another. As each fresh agitation or stab of resistance is recognized and permitted to settle, one unexpectedly notices that familiar triggers of disturbance no longer have any effect. A profound equanimity has quietly developed.

**Yoga’s Eightfold Path**

Like most yogis of his time, Patanjali appears to have been deeply inspired by the Buddha’s teachings, and the Yoga Sūtra clearly owes much of its organization and thrust to Buddhist traditions. Patanjali’s path diverges from earlier, non-Buddhist models by adopting the well-known structure of the Buddha’s eightfold path, or attanga-magga, reconfiguring it to be more explicitly about developing dhyāna, or in Pali, jhāna.

**YAMA**

The first of yoga’s eight aspects or “limbs” is yama. In five pithy lines, Patanjali lists “disciplines” that address the yogi’s relationship to the world. These depart from the customary precepts—likely familiar to the yogi already—not only to inspire but to offer benchmarks for progress:

- Being firmly grounded in non-violence creates an atmosphere in which others can let go of their hostility.
- For those grounded in truthfulness, every action and its consequences are imbued with truth.
- For those who have no inclination to steal, the truly precious is at hand.
- The chaste acquire vitality.
- Freedom from wanting unblocks the real purpose of existence.

**NIYAMA**

The second limb of yoga is niyama. These five types of discipline are more internal, yoking different aspects of the yogi’s personal sphere to the process of realization:

- With bodily purification, one’s body ceases to be compelling, likewise contact with others.
- Purification also brings about clarity, happiness, concentration, mastery of the senses, and capacity for self-awareness.
- Contentment brings unsurpassed joy.
- As intense discipline burns up impurities, the body and its senses become sufficiently refined.
- Self-study deepens communion with one’s personal deity.

**PRANAYAMA**

With mental images of the body-as-entity starting to dissolve, the yogi can observe a similar progression unfold with energy, or prāna, conceptualized as “breath” in the fourth limb. Becoming attuned to the flow, phase by phase, reveals ever-subler patterns of reaction and resistance that would otherwise trigger more unconscious, automatic patterns. So, pranayama is “breath control” that develops the more the yogi stops controlling, just yoking to the process and letting it ripen is enough to cause the breathlessness of prāna to drop away, leaving a luminous or vibratory distillation of consciousness, called nimitta, or “characteristic sign,” in Buddhist teaching on jhāna. When absorption, or dhyāna, fully ripens to its fourth stage, there no longer remains any sense of breathing at all (another phenomenon attested to in the buddhādharma):

- With body effort relaxing, the flow of inhalation and exhalation can arrive at a standstill; this is called breath elongation (pranayama).
- As the movement patterns of each breath—inhalation, exhalation, halt—are observed as to duration, number, and area of focus, breath becomes spacious and subtle.
- In the fourth dhyāna, the distinction between breathing in and out falls away.
- Then the veil lifts from the mind’s luminosity.
- And the mind’s potential for concentration can be tapped.

**PRATYAHARA, THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE SENSES**

Through observing one’s consciousness of body and breath, energies become distilled into a vibrant epiph enam that completely unifies attention. This temporally neutralizes the power of external phenomena to distract the yogi:

- When consciousness intensifies by uncoupling from external objects, the senses do likewise; this is called withdrawal of the senses (pratyahara).
- Then the senses reside utterly in the service of realization.

Although this factor is listed fifth, pratyahara signals the ripening of all six meditative limbs, as might already have been gleaned from asana and pranayama.

**DHARANA, DHYANA, AND SAMADHI**

Whatever type of object-field has taken center stage, the progression is the same: the more collected and purified the mind becomes, the less hospitable its environment becomes for the usually unconscious patterns of physical and mental contraction. The final three limbs of yoga are a continuum where all names, concepts, psychomagical images and volitions come to subside, after which only a phenomenon’s bare processes remain:

- One-pointedness (dhārana) locks consciousness on a single area.
- In meditative absorption (dhyāna), the entire perceptual flow is aligned with that object.
- When only the bare qualities of the object shines forth, as if formless, samadhi has arisen.

**Discrimination and Freedom**

As the eight factors of yoga mature in samadhi, it starts to be clear that consciousness does not really know, but is merely a display being known. The discriminating insight (viveka) that recognizes this difference is not an idea but something that must be directly seen. This is the crack that will cause the everyday misidentification (avidyā) of consciousness (citta) with pure awareness (puruṣa) to shatter:

- As soon as one can distinguish between consciousness (citta) and awareness (puruṣa), the ongoing construction of the self ceases.
- Consciousness, now oriented to this distinction (viveka), can gravitate toward freedom—the fully integrated knowledge that awareness is other than unfolding nature.

This completely non-discursive yoga terminates in the direct insight that suffering is nothing more than an artifact of consciousness. Unconditioned knowing, whether afterward conceived in a divine (divina) or individual (puruṣa) scale, is untouched by change, uncolored by suffering, free of self-qualities.

One who regards even the most exalted states disinterestedly, discriminating continuously between pure awareness...
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and the phenomenal world, enters the final stage of integration, in which nature is seen to be a shower of irreducible experiential states (dharma-megha).

This realization extinguishes both the causes of suffering and the cycle of cause and effect. Once all the layers and imperfections concealing truth have been washed away, insight is boundless, with little left to know.

Then the seamless flow of reality, its transformations colored by the fundamental qualities of nature (gunas), begins to break down, fulfilling the true mission of consciousness.

One can see that the flow is actually a series of discrete events, each corresponding to the merest instant of time, in which one form becomes another.

Freedom is at hand when the fundamental qualities of nature, each of their transformations witnessed at the moment of its inception, are recognized as irrelevant to pure awareness; it stands alone, grounded in its very nature, the power of pure seeing.

Though awareness has been designated as “purusa” and linguistically cast as an entity, it is not even an “it,” being naturally of a different order (kaivalya) than the birth, identity, thoughts, and experience the yogi had previously confused it with. Although most inherited and acquired personal attributes will continue to some extent, they are joined by the post-cessation knowledge that they are mere processes. Even though spinning like juggler’s plates, held up by the momentum of some earlier push, they’re doomed to topple before long.

Thus, the yogi has not become free from anything. Awareness was already free, awaiting recognition from a purified consciousness. Not unlike the power in Dorothy’s ruby slippers, the path to awakening is waiting within us, ready to appear when mind is brought together with some aspect of unfolding reality and yoked to it persistently enough for the dizzying dramas of self to dissipate. The yogi now feels an unprecedented security in the impersonal and impermanent: there’s no place like home.

Mat and Cushion: The Yoga Continuum

If Patanjali dropped in on a yoga class today, he might not recognize very much of it as yoga. His yogic path moves directly from the pulsating world at large to the subtlest, most ineffable aspects of experience. The terminus of this path is consciousness stilled to cessation, leaving at least an instant of unconditioned knowing. This doesn’t happen very often in downward dog pose, or any of the other familiar moves we undertake in yoga rooms around the world.

So, when we’re on the mat are we really doing yoga? Yes, even if not in a way that brings us to the brink of liberation. It’s no accident that dynamic hatha yoga has become the most popular style in the world; it’s not only accessible but very powerful. For many people in our cerebral modern age, physical movement is a far more welcoming portal to concentration and mindfulness than “sokk” sitting. Even if they generally lie beyond the threshold of stillness necessary for the terminal stages of samadhi, the techniques of “energy yoga” can quickly expose much of our conditioned mind-body patterning and lay a channel for us to flow toward sitting.

Working with prana vividly reminds us that dharma practice has always been susceptible to intellectualization, or dryness, even though the Buddha, like Patanjali, taught an experiential yoga grounded in the energy stream and pointed to the liberation inherent in knowing it at the most elemental level.

As in sitting meditation, it is difficult to perform a yoga pose without unconsciously striving to feel good, or improve the self, or prolong life. Grasping and delusion follow us wherever we go, and thus both sitting and hatha yoga can become new, specialized arenas for perpetuating dukkha, suffering. Patanjali, like the Buddha, recognized that the causes of suffering arise from not recognizing the emptiness of the identity one is striving to enhance. Thus, any movement toward insight and freedom must confront the insidious bodily and mental clinging of which the self is made. As the fifteenth-century sage Swatmarama flatly observed:

When there’s hatha without raja yoga, or raja yoga without hatha, no perfection is possible. So, practice them both, together, till fruition.