

# Yoga Sutras – Liberation or Isolation?



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The Yoga Sutras were written by Patanjali around 400 CE. They are composed of four volumes written as a series of short aphorisms, and are widely considered to have been strongly influenced by both the Hindu philosophy of Samkhya and Buddhism. There is speculation that the meditative process described in the Yoga Sutras resembles the system of the eight jhanas in Buddhism. However, it is more likely that yoga was primarily intended to be a practical representation of Samkhya philosophy. The Yoga Sutras aspire to present a pure science of enlightenment. Patanjali himself was against superstitious beliefs, and as such his teachings are often considered to be atheistic or at best quasi-theistic. While he speaks about Ishvara (Shiva), he does not refer to him as a conventional Hindu god, but rather as a perfect 'purusha' – the eternal essence, that which has never fallen into bondage, an unconditionally free soul, and archetype of all yogis. Patanjali writes:

*Ishvara is the Teacher of the ancient teachers, being not limited by time.*

The term 'yoga' has commonly been bent to fit the mold of Advaita, but this does not accurately reflect its original meaning. While yoga literally means "to join together" or "to reunite," it should be clear it is not a philosophy of non-duality. The philosophy of non-duality does not express a goal of unification, but rather a desire to eliminate the illusion of duality. Yoga, on the other hand, aims at freeing purusha (soul) from bondage. It uses duality for its own positive purposes, as the essential contrast and polarity through which purusha can become conscious of its own subjectivity and reach freedom.

The work of Patanjali inspired many thinkers, but his path on its own has never become truly widespread. This may have been due to his obscure style of writing, which makes the content of the Yoga Sutras too inaccessible to become popular. Indeed, perhaps this enigmatic style was employed for the very reason that it can protect the truth from the unconscious masses. Nowadays, of course, there are many forms of 'yoga' which claim to follow the path of Patanjali, but these are mostly fairly arbitrary interpretations of very selective parts of his teaching. As examples, bhakti yoga was founded on a few short aphorisms about devotion to Ishvara; karma yoga claims its conceptual roots in certain couplets on the subject of karma; kriya yoga is based on a verse about action, and so forth.

While yoga is most commonly associated with hatha yoga or various forms of physical stretching, the practice of such asanas is not really mentioned at all in the original Yoga Sutras. 'Asana', which



is the third limb of yoga, does not mean to exercise or stretch the body. The only place asanas are directly mentioned is in the phrase "sthira sukham asanam," which means "a posture which is firm and pleasant." So Patanjali's intention in emphasizing asana was to indicate the importance of sitting meditation, not to teach methods of stretching and holding a variety of positions. Sitting in meditation was always the essence of yoga, and indeed, it is the essence of all ancient teachings geared towards self-realization.

Because of their very minimalistic style, which is more like a form of code than a practical explanation, to give a definitive interpretation of the Yoga Sutras is very difficult. As such, there have been many interpretive books written about the sutras by both Hindu masters and sages of a higher degree, including Vyasa, Adi Shankara, and Ramanuja. However, the degree to which the more accepted interpretations of yoga reflect Patanjali's original intention remains questionable. One thing is certain: the present day concept of yoga signifies something quite different to the original teachings of Patanjali. As in many areas of spirituality, it has become a diluted and highly simplified version of an ancient and profound knowledge.

### *Interpreting the Philosophy of the Yoga Sutras*

According to Patanjali, our knowledge of reality must be rooted in direct experience; otherwise the mind will proliferate concepts which, although sophisticated, can only take us further away from truth. With a grounding in the subtleties of the meditative process, we can ask: What is yoga really? Patanjali writes:

#### ***yoga citta vritti nirodha***

*Yoga is a restraining of the mind-stuff (citta)  
from taking various forms (vritti). —Vivekananda*

Or:

*Yoga is the control of the modifications  
of the mind-field. —Bharati*

Although it is difficult to find a precise translation of 'citta', it is most often interpreted as 'mind' or 'relative consciousness', while 'vritti' (literally 'whirlpool' or 'thought-waves') are its mental manifestations, or simply 'thoughts'. But are the mind and thinking really two different things?



Expressions such as “I experience thoughts in the mind” and “The mind is not thinking” suggest the mind and thoughts are different entities. But can we conceive of a mind that is not thinking at all, a mind that is something other than thought? Buddhism speaks of “the nature of the mind,” which is the non-thinking consciousness that exists beyond and independent of thought. But prior to awakening the nature of the mind, that state of consciousness has no existence – it is just conjecture.

Before our consciousness is awakened, we simply cannot separate the mind from its content. Hence, to say, “My mind is thinking” is the equivalent of saying, “My thoughts are thinking” – it simply doesn’t make sense. Let’s suppose an ordinary person were to try to discover the container of his thoughts by eliminating or suppressing them. What would he discover? Nothing – because that container of the mind, in the case of an ignorant person, is unconscious. If an ordinary person were to eliminate his thoughts, nothing would remain. Given this, it is more accurate to translate citta as ‘consciousness’, where the mind is “citta in movement” – citta-vritti.<sup>1</sup> And yet prior to its awakening, citta is not conscious of itself. It is no surprise, then, that in the Samkhya system, upon which yoga is based, the term citta does not mean ‘consciousness’, but rather the unconscious mind, or the unconscious storehouse of impressions. This is the citta of an ignorant person, which is no more than his potential to manifest thoughts.

It is important to understand that the meaning of citta is not one-dimensional and fixed – it keeps changing in relation to our evolution. As such, it can have both positive and negative connotations, depending on how conscious the mind has become in relation both to its manifestations and to itself.

When taken in this context, the meaning of “yoga citta vritti nirodha” can be reconsidered. For instance, Vivekananda interpreted it as:

*Peace can be found through yoga  
by exercising the restraint of vritti manifesting in citta.*

But can vritti be restrained without transforming citta itself? We must understand that vritti can only cease to arise when their foundation, citta, becomes conscious of itself. So a more accurate translation of the verse could be, “Yoga is the cessation (nirodha) of the fluctuations (vritti) of the

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<sup>1</sup> In yoga, ignorance is actually defined as citta-vritti – the moving mind, or fluctuating consciousness.



unconscious mind (citta)." What Patanjali is actually saying is, "Yoga is the cessation of the mental fluctuations due to *realization of the nature of citta.*" These fluctuations cannot be eliminated by means of concentration, disidentification, or control. Rather, they will fall away through the power of higher consciousness alone, where higher consciousness is citta that has become conscious of its own nature.

Upon the foundation of this understanding, the aphorism that follows makes a lot more sense:

***tada drastuh svarupe vasthanam***

*So that (tada), the original clear light (drastuh)  
of our inherent, original true nature as-it-is (svarupe), can shine through.*

Or:

*Then the seer (purusha) rests in his own (unmodified) state. —Bryant*

The restraint of vritti cannot lead directly to purusha (our pure subjectivity). The intention behind the cessation of vritti is therefore not to stop the mind (as is commonly thought), but rather to replace it with our higher subjectivity. In its unconscious condition, citta represents not only a potential to produce thoughts, but also a doorway to awakening and purusha.

We can see yoga as a rebellion against the state of ignorance. Ignorance is the prison of lower consciousness (citta-vritti) in which purusha is captured. Citta-vritti is the total identification of the mind with its content. Because the mind itself is unconscious, only its content passes over the threshold of conscious recognition. In this condition, vritti is either conscious or subconscious, while citta is in fact unconscious. This raises the question: Who begins the process of yoga if both consciousness (citta) and purusha are unconscious or dormant? The answer is that it is the higher faculty of vritti, which is 'buddhi', or intelligence. If citta is the cart, buddhi is the driver: it is the power of intention and wisdom that utilizes the content of citta to produce understanding and purpose. Buddhi is the link between the unconscious citta and purusha. It goes without saying that at the beginning our buddhi is very limited. It is not yet the true intelligence of the soul, but rather a mind which is taking responsibility and using its capacity to discriminate. True buddhi can arise only after our pure nature has been consciously realized and embodied.



## The Eight Limbs of Yoga

Structurally speaking, the Yoga Sutras present a vision of the path that is composed of the so-called "eight limbs of yoga." These are:

*1\_Yama: Abstention from wrong-doing*

*2\_Niyama: Observance of the right action*

*3\_Asana: Correct posture to align the body with meditation*

*4\_Pranayama: Control of life force energies and purification through correct breathing*

*5\_Pratyahara: Withdrawal of senses from external objects*

*6\_Dharana: Concentration upon objects*

*7\_Dhyana: Meditation with support*

*8\_Samadhi: Meditation without support*

In the next article, "Illusion of Samadhi in the Yoga Sutras," we will be contemplating the last three stages of yoga in more depth. These were defined by Patanjali as 'internal yoga' and are directly related to the process of spiritual realization. Our interest in contemplating these matters is to see how much the model of awakening presented in yoga reflects the objective nature of the path, and also to identify which elements might be missing from Patanjali's teaching. The combination of dharana, dhyana, and samadhi is also called 'samyama'. Samyama refers to the practice of entering the lower level of samadhi by passing through the stages of dharana and dhyana. Here, we can see a similarity between yoga and the eight jhanas in Buddhism, where one must follow through the sequence of the first seven jhanas each time in order to reach the eighth. It also seems to contain the element of contemplation (in some ways similar to vipassana), where a yogi is using his intelligence (buddhi) and discrimination (viveka) to disidentify further from the increasingly subtle modifications of the mind.

The first five limbs of yoga serve as a preparation for entering meditation. An adept has to develop a basic level of ethical, physical, and energetic integrity before beginning the direct work with consciousness. According to yoga, the citta of an ordinary person is corrupted, chaotic, unstable, and tainted by lower tendencies. These negatively conditioned layers of citta need to be transformed by the removal of vritti so that the pure nature of purusha can shine through unobscured. Vritti includes all of the mental modifications that are sometimes defined as 'samskaras' (latent unconscious or subliminal imprints), 'vasanas' (subtle manifestations of the subconscious), 'kleshas'



(impurities), and 'vikalpa' (imagination and conceptualization). Identification with these mental formations is the cause of 'avidya' (absence of vision, or ignorance). The first five stages of yoga are meant to help the spiritual maturation of the seeker – they are not directed at the transformation of the root of the mind. According to yoga, true transformation can only begin after becoming established in samadhi.

### *Four Levels of Samadhi in the Sutras*

The term 'samadhi' itself seems to have a dual connotation in Patanjali's writing: firstly, as the state of having embodied our pure nature, and secondly, as the base from which we reach purification and transcendence. Patanjali speaks of various stages of samadhi. They do not indicate an increasing depth of our absorption in reality, but rather the process of moving into an increasingly pure and attributeless realization of our true nature – the stripping away of our relative identity. The four main levels of samadhi that are described are: nirvitarka samadhi, nirvikalpa samadhi, nirvichara samadhi, and finally nirbija samadhi. As the stages progress, one removes the gross and then increasingly subtle levels of identification with relative consciousness. These stages of development can only begin when the yogi is free from the restless and chaotic 'monkey mind'. He is dwelling in the state of stillness, but that stillness is still tainted by impurities and various relative elements, such as self-consciousness, observation, subtle thoughts, or conceptualization. He still has thoughts, so his next step is to move beyond the conscious or semi-conscious manifestations of the mind.

**Nirvitarka Samadhi:** 'Nir' means 'without' or 'devoid of'. 'Nirvitarka' is a negation of physical awareness or dwelling on physical objects. It indicates the absence of gross identification with an object of concentration. It is a condition of absorption free from the awareness of external objects of any sort.

**Nirvikalpa Samadhi:** This stage represents the negation of conceptual thinking and imagination. Hence, nirvikalpa samadhi refers to a state in which identification with the more gross intellectual formations or types of conceptualization is eliminated; it signifies a state of absorption unsupported by any conceptual constructs. However, there are still subtle thoughts or mental states present, such as moods, senses, and feelings.

**Nirvichara Samadhi:** This stage represents our pure nature experienced in the absence of any, even the most subtle, vritti: it is formless and objectless. However, this state remains to a degree



discontinuous and tied to the 'sattva' (pure) quality of 'prakriti' (manifested existence). The first three samadhis are also called 'sabija samadhi', meaning 'samadhi with seed' – they still contain the seeds of falling into dualistic or lower states of consciousness. In sabija samadhi, one still has to employ the power of will and internal discipline to maintain the purity of one's state. The word 'seed' can be taken to signify that the samadhi exists in reference to the particular object (or 'seed') that is being transcended. Because of this, it is not fully unconditional.

The Hindu sage Vyasa offered a succinct analysis of samadhi with seed. He divided it into four distinct categories (these are not the three stages of samadhi described above, but rather an alternative elaboration on the state of samadhi with seed):

*These four samadhi-identifications have external things as their seed, so the samadhi is from-a-seed. When it is a physical object, samadhi is sa-vitarka ('sa' means 'with', hence 'with the support of a physical object') or nir-vitarka (without the support of an object); when a subtle object, it is sa-vicara or nir-vichara. So the four categories of samadhi (with seed) have been described.*

**Nirbija Samadhi:** Only in the final stage – nirbija samadhi, or 'samadhi without seed' – does one reach a condition in which no effort is needed to maintain the state. All samskaras and vasanas have been eradicated. In nirbija samadhi, purusha is totally isolated from even the most subtle influences of relative consciousness.

### *The Stages of Reaching Nirbija Samadhi*

The following explores the several stages of reaching nirbija samadhi (samadhi without seed) as described by Patanjali:

#### ***nirvicharavaisharadye adhyatmaprasadah***

*Upon attaining the clarity of nirvicara samadhi,  
there is the lucidity of the inner self. —Bryant*

Vyasa comments:





*When mind-sattva, whose nature is light, is freed from rajas and tamas, and has a clear steady flow without any veiling contamination of impurity, that is the skill of nirvicara. When this skill of nirvicara appears, there is inner clearness in the self of the yogi, which is the progressively clearer and brighter light of knowledge of the object as it really is.*

So this is a stage in which there is harmony between purusha and citta that is now experienced in its purity (sattva), but purusha is still not fully isolated in its own nature. Hence, a yogi has to exercise further discernment to go deeper into his inner self.

### ***rtañbhara tatr prajna***

*In that state, there is truth bearing wisdom. —Bryant*

Vyasa comments:

*The knowledge that appears in that clearness of the mind in samadhi has the special name of truth-bearing, in the literal sense that it brings truth alone, and there is no trace of erroneous knowledge in it.*

What is this truth-bearing wisdom? It is the deepest discrimination between our pure nature and even the most pure and subtle aspects of our relative consciousness. We can say that here the yogi has truly recognized his original essence as ‘nirguna’, non-objective, and attributeless.

### ***tajjah sanskaro nyasanskarapratibandhi***

*The samskara born of that truth bearing wisdom obstructs other samskara from emerging. —Bryant*

Vyasa comments:

*The samskara produced by truth-bearing knowledge removes the remaining deposit of the samskara of extravertism. When the extravert samskara are overcome, no ideas arising from*



*them appear. With inhibition of extravert ideas, samadhi becomes habitual. Then there is knowledge from that samadhi; from that, more samsara are laid down of knowledge, and so fresh deposit of samsara is built up. From that, again knowledge, and from that more samskara of it.*

The first thing we need to understand here is that samskaras are not only negative; there are also positive samskaras. Positive samskaras represent the positive conditionings of the subconscious. If we meditate every day, this is an expression of the positive samskaras that program our mind constructively. Patanjali speaks of using the higher samskaras to control the lower ones, and this is an indivisible part of the yogic process. For instance, if we feel anger but choose to remain detached and let it go, this is to use one samskara against the other. However, it is not always so simple, because not all that is 'negative' is meant to be renounced; hence one has to activate discriminative wisdom and discernment in order to produce the correct action. Vyasa is actually pointing to something slightly different: to those samskaras that are programmed, through our wisdom, to keep letting go of any other samskaras that arise in the mind. These positive samskaras are like the guardians of stillness; whatever arises, they create the impulse to drop it and return to a place without thought.

### ***tasyapi nirodhe sarva-nirodhan nirbija samadhi***

*Upon cessation of even those truth bearing samskara,  
nirbija samadhi, seedless meditative absorption ensues. —Bryant*

Vyasa comments:

*This suppresses not only samadhi-knowledge, but also the samskara of it, for the samskara of inhibition suppresses the samskara produced by samadhi. That there is a samskara formed in the mind by inhibition is to be inferred from the experience that the inhibition remains steady for progressively longer periods.*

It is here that things become more subtle and tricky to interpret. We need to be clear that samadhi-knowledge also contains samskara; samskara is also our very ability to identify that we are in samadhi. Samadhi does produce a mental imprint and memory of itself – a samskara. However, a



true yogi sees any mental imprint, even a positive samskara, as part of prakriti, and therefore wishes to reach complete isolation from it.

What can a yogi do to go beyond samadhi-samskara? He can introduce a new type of samskara, the 'nirodha samskara', or 'killer samskara' (the 'terminator samskara' – the one to kill them all). Nirodha samskara results in the cessation of all other samskaras. As was noted, the definition of nirodha-vritti is the cessation of mental fluctuations. Here, we are seeing the deeper application of this cessation – the ability to block all the cognitive functions of citta, including positive insight and discrimination. Nirodha samskara is to block all mental fluctuations altogether.

The final trick here is not only to drop all samskaras with the aid of nirodha-samskara, but also to dissolve nirodha-samskara in the process (to kill the killer samskara). Nirodha-samskara is not only the terminator of all the other samskaras, but also the hero who is ready to give his own life once his mission is done.

An important question here is: How can we know that we are in samadhi if we do not create samadhi-samskara? Vyasa offers a possible answer. He says:

*That there is a samskara formed in the mind by inhibition is to be inferred from the experience that the inhibition remains steady for progressively longer periods.*

What he means is that we cannot know that we are in samadhi while we are fully absorbed in it. However, we can identify that we were free of all samskaras upon emerging from samadhi by virtue of recognizing the lapse in time. While this is in some ways a valid method of verification, it cannot help us to differentiate between true samadhi and, for instance, a type of unconscious coma. So the logic he applies is not fully correct.

### *Seedless Samadhi – A Limited Freedom*

We can see from this analysis that the path of yoga seems to aim for a condition of trance, in which all of our relative faculties are suspended, rather than a natural state of being. The purpose of this trance is to manifest the complete isolation of purusha from prakriti, without even a slight trace of relative consciousness remaining, in order to experience it in its absolute perfection and purity. Even sattva (the pure aspect of waking consciousness) is to be transcended. Nothing remains but the original essence – purusha. So, what is the use of reaching such a condition if one cannot really



live it, if one's faculties are suspended and one is confined to sitting in trance-like meditation? From a certain perspective, there is no use at all.

In addition, there is a contradiction in the supposed difference between nirvichara and nirbija samadhi. Nirvichara samadhi is usually considered a sabija samadhi (with seed), while nirbija samadhi (without seed) represents the only state in which any dual tendencies or vritti are completely eradicated. However, nirbija samadhi cannot be permanent because it is a condition of trance, which is by definition temporary. Therefore, sooner or later, a yogi has to emerge from it. Because of this limitation, it is said that it is only after the death of the physical body that a yogi can reach true 'moksha' (liberation) or permanent nirbija samadhi (permanent trance). This final state is called 'videhamukti', liberation after death, as opposed to 'jivanmukti', which is liberation within the living body.

Given this, what is the actual difference between nirvichara samadhi and nirbija samadhi? They appear to be exactly the same, because one simply cannot maintain the absence of mental modifications forever. The only explanation for this paradox is that even though nirvichara samadhi is completely free from vritti and samskaras, it is still tied to the quality of sattva-citta. So if nirvichara samadhi is a combination of pure citta and purusha, nirbija samadhi is a condition where only purusha remains.

Yoga seems to be more concerned with the process of eliminating the relative than with the integration of the relative with the absolute. It teaches us that in order to reach our pure nature, we need to dissolve all the relative elements of our consciousness.

It is interesting to consider whether Patanjali taught the direct deepening of the state of samadhi or if this deepening was seen as an indirect by-product of becoming progressively free from mental modifications. Is it a progression in the depth of absorption in samadhi alone, or is samadhi a state that, once reached, is unchangeable and perfect? Is samadhi no longer evolving within itself, but rather through its further isolation from the relative? Is it just a case of removing the remaining vritti? It is never completely clear.



## Is the Arising of the Mind in Contradiction to Samadhi?

We can identify a similar confusion in the teachings of Ramana Maharishi. He said that ‘sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi’ (natural, non-conceptual samadhi) refers to the complete destruction of the mind. Prior to that, in ‘kevala nirvikalpa samadhi’, the mind can still arise. What did he mean? The term ‘kevala’ has the same root as ‘kaivalya’, which means both ‘liberation’ and ‘isolation’. Kevala samadhi is very similar to nirbija samadhi: it is a state in which purusha is fully isolated from vritti and experienced in its purity. Maharishi used slightly different language, because these stages of samadhi were interpreted differently in Vedanta and Yoga. For instance, according to Yoga, nirvichara is deeper than nirvikalpa because vikalpa is more gross than vicara. So here, the word ‘kevala’ does not imply that vasanas and the mind are still present – it implies exclusive absorption.

Whether the mind reformulates itself or does not when one emerges from this absorption is an entirely different matter. If one were able to maintain the same state having emerged out of trance-absorption, this state could also be called ‘sahaja kevala nirvikalpa samadhi’.

However, this is not really possible. The question is: Is samadhi seen as a temporary condition because it can become *tainted* at times with duality or vasanas, or is it temporary because when the mind arises one actually *loses* one’s state of absorption?

Is the arising of the mind in contradiction to being in samadhi? To offer a contradictory opinion to yoga, we can look at the Zen Buddhist approach to the mind and ‘vritti’. Zen master Hui Neng said that the idea of entirely arresting the mind is heretical. He said that there is no difference between our thoughts and mountains and rivers: they are all a natural part of reality. Not thinking and constantly cutting off one’s thoughts "of the hundred things" is what he called ‘dharma-bondage’ – it represented an extremist approach. Hui Neng said:

*If you give rise to thoughts from your self-nature, then, although to see, hear, perceive, and know, you are not stained by the manifold environments and you are always free.*

Also, Zen Master Lin Chi said that monks who sit with the idea of halting their thoughts are no more than “rice-bags” – they are not worthy of the straw sandals they wear. Lin Chi said:



*They are a bunch of baldheads who stuff themselves with rice, sitting in Chan style meditation, trying to arrest flow of thoughts and stopping them from arising, hating noise and seeking quietude. These are the practices of other ways.*

As we can see, the traditions of Yoga and Vedanta held a different view to those which were subsequently developed in the Buddhist tradition. In the former, the arising of thought is conveyed as antithetical to samadhi. This view simply makes less sense, because in nirvikalpa sahaja samadhi (non-conceptual, natural samadhi), one is supposed to be able to function normally, which obviously involves using one's mind. The truth is that any functioning of our intelligence, even when it arises from our pure nature, triggers dualistic processes. When Ramana was giving the instruction "kill the mind," he obviously did not mean it literally. But because he didn't explain what he really meant, he left others confused.

One cannot kill the mind without killing the person, killing the body. The functioning of our human mind cannot be extricated from its many relative manifestations, from its thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. The idea of eliminating all of these manifestations represents an extreme and shortsighted view that not only fails to embrace our multidimensional consciousness and existence, but somehow goes against the principle of common sense. Although we can find interpretations of the Yoga Sutras which present ideas such as the unification of the seer and the seen, they still display a lack of understanding of our complete consciousness, in which any act of intelligence or perception naturally implies duality. This is the higher duality that is experienced *from* non-duality.

The limitations of the yogic method, which saw the disidentification from, and elimination of, vritti as the main tools for self-realization, can be better appreciated through a comparison of the solutions found in Zen Buddhism some centuries later. These are expressed through the following story:

The fifth patriarch of Zen, Hung Jen, was looking for a successor. He announced that his more advanced students were to write a poem that would reflect the depth of their self-realization. The most likely candidate, chief monk Shen Hsiu, wrote the following poem:

*The body is the Bodhi tree  
The mind is like a clear mirror  
At all times we must strive to polish it*



*And not let the dust collect*

When Hui Neng – the future sixth patriarch – read this poem, he saw its limitations immediately. He then wrote his own:

*Bodhi has no tree*

*Nor has a clear mirror a stand*

*Nothing is there originally*

*So where can the dust land?*

The first poem is not incorrect; it just presents a more relative perspective of enlightenment. It refers to the gradual cultivation of the enlightened state, the need to guard our consciousness from the 'dust' of impurities and mental tendencies. Hui Neng's poem represents a higher perspective: that it is only our lower consciousness, only that aspect of our mind that is still confined to the dimension of presence, which can be tainted by dust. Instead, he reaches deeper and points to a radical insight into our absolute nature, that which exists prior to and independent of our conditioned consciousness. He says, "Bodhi has no tree," which means that enlightenment is not dependent on relative means. As for the "clear mirror" not having a stand, this means that our pure consciousness abides upon nothing. "Nothing is there originally" means that absence (the state prior to consciousness) is our true nature – so where can the dust land? Nothing can touch that which is beyond.

The path of yoga is slow and steady. An adept gradually progresses in his illumination, removing the veils and obstacles one by one, and reaching emancipation from all that is tainted and relative step by step. But the false assumption of yoga is that it is by the elimination of the relative that we reach the absolute. It fails to see that, as Hui Neng's poem suggests, our unconditional nature exists in freedom from both the absence and presence of our natural human consciousness with its inherent duality.

### *Influence of Samkhya Philosophy on Yoga*

It is quite clear that this over-concern with the elimination of the relative in order to attain the absolute was caused by the influence of Hindu Samkhya philosophy, which was dominant in India at the time the sutras were written. It is difficult to understand the Hindu perception of reality and



mysticism without having a basic knowledge of Samkhya. Samkhya is called 'realistic dualism'. It is 'realistic' because it believes in the objectivity of the material world (meaning the world is not an illusion manifested by the subject). The term 'dualism', then, does not refer to the duality between the soul and god, but rather to the duality between purusha and the manifested existence. Kapila, the creator of Samkhya, actually ruled out the existence of god. In his view, there is no need to create a concept of god as everything can be explained through natural laws. Furthermore, the idea that god created the world is a contradiction in terms because it would indicate that he is imperfect and lacking in something. So according to Kapila, the god spoken of in the Vedas is just another name for the liberated soul: an emancipated purusha *is* god.

Samkhya views reality as composed of two entirely opposite dimensions: prakriti and purusha. Prakriti is nature, the phenomenal world, and is composed of three gunas, or basic energy-qualities: sattva (purity, lucidity, and wisdom), rajas (action, or restlessness), and tamas (inaction, or inertia). Prakriti is the non-self. Purusha is the individual essence, or consciousness – the self. Because of prakriti, purusha is in bondage. Evolution is the process of seeking emancipation from prakriti and arriving at the state free from gunas (nirguna), where the pure nature of purusha is unveiled. Purusha needs prakriti in order to evolve and become conscious of itself, but its destiny is to become liberated from it.

According to Samkhya, our consciousness is composed of citta (in this case, the unconscious mind), manas (the sensory mind and subconscious mind in action, vritti), buddhi (discriminative intelligence), and ahamkara (ego-sense). Together, these elements constitute our relative consciousness, which is both a veil covering purusha and her very tool of self-liberation. Purusha, on the other hand, is our immutable, undivided pure nature. It has no parts; it is one. It is a passive principle, a witness. In itself, it does not even have buddhi (intelligence), although it does need it in order to reach liberation.

So according to this philosophy, our relative consciousness in its entirety is part of prakriti. As such, it is obvious why Patanjali conceived of it as his formidable enemy, something to be conquered and annihilated. According to some accounts, buddhi can be conceived of as the link and bridge between prakriti and purusha. Seen in this light, it is essentially the only positive aspect of prakriti – all the rest is seen as the seed of avidya. However, eventually, within the highest levels of samadhi, even buddhi must be transcended. In Samkhya, any act of intelligence is dual, and hence does not belong to the pure realization of purusha.





## Limitations of the Yogic Concept of Ahamkara

Who, according to yoga, is using buddhi (intelligence)? In both Yoga and Samkhya, ahamkara (ego-sense, or personal sense of me) is considered to be a cause of identification with illusion. Whatever arises from citta through manas is being colored by ahamkara in order to then create samskaras, or subconscious impressions. If buddhi is lowly evolved, the mind remains entirely mechanical and animalistic – it cannot serve the awakening of purusha. When buddhi is activated, one can begin to bring more discrimination into the cage of lower consciousness. In yoga, ahamkara is often depicted in negative terms, just as the term ‘ego’ is in common spirituality. However, this is an oversight because ultimately it is ahamkara that *uses* buddhi. Without ahamkara there is no buddhi, because purusha is not a *doer*; it cannot be in an active relationship with intelligence. In truth, not only does buddhi enable ahamkara to transform itself, ahamkara enables buddhi to evolve in return.

In yoga, it is implied that purusha is the one who is seeking liberation, but this is not entirely correct. In the initial stages, not only is purusha fully passive, it is completely dormant. Because of its black and white vision of reality, yoga does not pose the question of *who* actually enters the path to reunion with the nature of reality, and ironically, it is actually ahamkara who enters the path. Even though it was acknowledged that purusha needs buddhi in order to reach liberation, it was not understood that it needs ahamkara just as much, or even more.

So for instance, it is ahamkara who enters the path of yoga and who performs the practices of dharana and dhyana that it advocates. It is only at the end of the yogic path, at the stage of samadhi, that purusha comes into existence. Because yoga does not embrace the consciousness of me, it overlooks the most essential aspect of our evolution: the evolution of me (ahamkara) into its own higher self – pure me, or the soul. In Patanjali’s view, purusha exists without ahamkara as our pure, attributeless essence, or nirguna. But he failed to see that without ahamkara there can be no purusha at all.

The process of the evolution of me, the role of ahamkara and its transformation based on unification with the light of I am, was never embraced by yogic philosophy. Where in Eastern spirituality did this aversion of me, of our personal essence, come from? What went wrong?



## *Isolation from our Human Existence: A Worthy Goal?*

There is no positive conception of me in the vision of yoga, even though purusha can be seen as our individualized essence. It is not clear whether Patanjali, following the philosophy of Samkhya, is pointing to the unique essence, or soul, of each person, or to one universal purusha. The philosophical argument against the existence of one universal purusha (as is presupposed in Advaita Vedanta) is that if a single yogi were to reach liberation and destroy prakriti, there would be no purusha left to seek emancipation; when one is liberated, all are liberated. This is clearly not the case.

Samkhya stated that after one purusha is liberated, prakriti (the seen) is destroyed for that individual, but it continues to exist for other purushas. In our teaching, we would say that each of us has an individualized purusha (soul), but that soul is actualized not only through its own illumination, but also through attaining unity with the universal purusha (I am). This is an important insight, and it was not conceptualized in the path of yoga. Patanjali's concept of samadhi seems to point more to the soul's self-illumination in combination with total disidentification from the construct of mind. It does not point in any way to our actual absorption in universal reality, the beyond.

There is a very limited intention, if at all, in yogic philosophy to integrate our human consciousness and existence with our self-realization – the two are perceived to be entirely antithetical. The overall vision is not one of wholeness, but of moksha – an escape from the clutches of prakriti. What is the true goal of yoga? Is it to embody that totally isolated, non-feeling essence of consciousness, devoid of intelligence or the faculty of self-reflection? Is this really the kind of freedom we want to attain? Is this the destiny we want to fulfill, to be in samadhi and to 'kill' even the sense of knowing that one is in samadhi? How deep can we dig this hole where we can hide away from our own existence? There is something inhuman in the desire to achieve complete isolation from our human nature. That which is called 'nirbija samadhi' cannot even be maintained outside of the meditative trance – it is not our natural state. So here we arrive in another type of prison, where even after we have reached 'enlightenment', we have to wait for our physical death in order to reach permanent liberation.



## Limited Elements of Integration in the Yoga Sutras

Having said this, there is a minimal element of integration in yoga, described as occurring in the final stages of samadhi. This aspect is very limited in its practical applications, and it also throws up some contradictions and paradoxes within the philosophy of yoga itself. The bottom line is that these parts of the sutras are not very convincing, and a certain degree of reading between the lines is required to extract them. But let us take the last aphorism of the third chapter, which appears to conclude with a positive description of the higher meaning of liberation, or kaivalya:

***sattva purushayoh shuddhisamyē kaivalyam***

*Sattva and purusha same-purity equals liberation.* —Bryant

Or:

*By the similarity of purity between sattva and purusha  
comes kaivalya.* —Vivekananda

Or:

*Liberation is obtained when there is an equality of purity  
between purusha and sattva.* —Unknown

What Patanjali seems to be saying here is that liberation is not merely the function of identifying with our absolute essence and the dissolution of vritti, but also one of integrating, or unifying, the purified citta with purusha. Sattva is the guna that represents light, purity, and calm. It is still relative, because, according to Samkhya, it is one of the three qualities of prakriti. However, it reflects the highest quality of citta, and can therefore coexist in harmony with our pure nature.

However, there is a paradox here: kaivalya is attributed with a similar meaning to nirvichara samadhi. In both cases, the quality of sattva is realized. However, the difference is that in the latter, purusha is not yet isolated in its pure form – there is still a movement from the relative to absolute. In this case, however, it is implied that liberation does require a movement from the absolute to the relative in order to arrive at its final and complete form.



There is no such thing as sattva without a *something* that is *sattvic*. Purity is not an entity in itself; it is an attribute. Common translations suggest that sattva is an attribute of buddhi, meaning that after buddhi is fully purified, it reaches harmony with purusha. But sattva is actually an attribute of citta when it is fully actualized. Here, we can recall that the second aphorism of the Yoga Sutras defines yoga as “the cessation of movement in citta,” meaning citta (as opposed to buddhi) is the primary object of the transformative work of yoga. In Samkhya, buddhi is considered closer to purusha, but it is citta that is the home and foundation of buddhi. Citta is closer to purusha because it exists prior to it. No matter how subtle buddhi becomes, it is inherently dual: there is no thought, discrimination, or recognition without duality. Citta, on the other hand, contains duality but is beyond it. Citta is the container of buddhi.

As we contemplate this more deeply, we realize that the error of Samkhya is the assumption that purusha is something other than citta. There is no purusha without citta. When citta is ignorant, purusha is absent. Purusha is in fact the actualized potential of citta to realize itself. Samkhya assumes that purusha is always there, even when we live in bondage. But who is living in bondage? How can a soul be in bondage if she does not yet exist? What is called purusha is more the seed of the soul than the soul itself. Purusha is not living in bondage – our me, ahamkara, is living in bondage. In order to really understand this matter, we need to go beyond the conceptual framework of both Samkhya and yoga.

### *Reinterpreting the Journey of Purusha*

Purusha is essentially what in our teaching we call ‘pure consciousness’, which is the unity of pure me and I am. It is the meeting of the consciousness of presence and the consciousness of absence, the final depth of individual consciousness. However, the complete field of consciousness contains more elements than pure consciousness alone, the most important being conscious me and fundamental me. Conscious me is that part of the soul that enters the dimension of presence and wakefulness. Unless both conscious me and fundamental me are awakened and purified, the soul cannot be free. So if we were to reinterpret the verse above, “Sattva and purusha same-purity equals liberation,” using our terminology, we would say, “Purified and awakened conscious me (sattva), actualized as fundamental me, that is as pure as (same-purity) pure me (purusha) equals liberation.”

If we were to correct the vision of yoga, we would reorganize its concepts as follows. Purusha is our individual consciousness, our soul, born through the union of transformed ahamkara with universal



consciousness. Through that transformation, ahamkara awakens as conscious me and expands into pure me. In the process of awakening, the three dimensions of citta become realized: pure consciousness, conscious me, and fundamental me.

Pure consciousness is none other than purusha, the unity of ahamkara and I am. Conscious me, in unison with fundamental me, is the awakened aspect of ahamkara that constitutes the bridge between purusha and creation, and between buddhi and purusha. Buddhi (intelligence) reaches its final transformation by becoming pure and transparent as a result of being absorbed in purusha (pure consciousness). Here, ahamkara (the observer) is no longer arising as a mechanical feedback to manas (subconscious mind), but is blissfully operating as a creative manifestation of awakened consciousness.

This restructuring of the yogic concepts allows us to see more clearly the components that are missing in the evolutionary vision of yoga. Firstly, I am is missing. There is no mention of the doorway to universal reality; it is as if transcendence happens through the realization of individual purusha alone. Secondly, the concept of conscious me is missing. What does Samkhya really mean by ahamkara, ego-sense? It is pointing to the observer and the subconscious me (as in most cases, the observer itself is actually subconscious). In yoga, there is a process of transforming the observer through the practices of dharana and dhyana. However, it is somehow taken out of the context of the actual awakening of me and realization of the soul.

Thirdly, there is no understanding of the relationship between ahamkara and purusha, no concept of ahamkara turning its attention back on purusha. While the act of discrimination (viveka) that identifies our essence is done by buddhi, there is no buddhi without ahamkara: it is ahamkara that is using buddhi. Fourthly, there is no understanding of the relationship between citta and purusha, due to the misguided assumption that they are two different things. In reality, citta cannot be awakened without being embodied by purusha (and ahamkara) first, in the same way that there cannot be awakened citta without the actualization of purusha (and ahamkara). In the end, citta is purusha and purusha is self-realized citta.

### *Final Limitations of the Yoga Sutras*

The final aphorism of the Yoga Sutras goes:



***purusartha-sunyanam gunanam pratiprasavah kaivalyam  
svarupa-pratistha va citi-saktir iti***

*Liberation (kaivalya) is when the gunas, devoid of any purpose for the purusha, return to their original (latent) state, on other words, when the power of consciousness is situated in its own existential nature. —Bryant*

Finally, nature (prakriti), which is composed of the three gunas, becomes empty of its purpose, allowing the yogi to embody his higher consciousness fully. What was the purpose of the gunas? It was both to keep purusha in bondage and to help it reach emancipation. To go beyond prakriti does not mean it ceases to exist. It means that the yogi (purusha) does not need them any more to facilitate his self-actualization. Obviously, after liberation, prakriti and the three gunas are still there. The difference is that they no longer affect our fundamental nature. The gunas in the human consciousness of a self-realized yogi are transparent and purified, with sattva being dominant. This is freedom.

How has the yogi released himself from prakriti? Through a combination of self-knowledge, or vichara (recognizing his essential self), discrimination (viveka) between what is real and what is unreal, disidentification from, restraint of, and renunciation of vritti (the relative components of consciousness), and finally, by the power of embodying purusha. His main tool was samyama, the unity of dharana, dhyana, and samadhi, supported by the contemplation carried out by buddhi (discriminative intelligence). Through that multilayered process, the yogi reaches conscious unity with purusha and transforms his relative consciousness. The latter process included creating the power of concentration, purifying samskaras, vasanas, and kleshas, and aligning citta with the principle of sattva so that it can be integrated and reach harmony with the soul.

In his short treatise, Patanjali undertook the great project of deciphering the secrets of enlightenment and liberation. Even though yoga is not a complete path, but rather a way of looking at the mystery of human evolution, we should deeply appreciate its contribution to the science of self-realization. We should not forget that when these sutras were written, there wasn't even a concept of enlightenment in the West. There may have been great minds working in the field of philosophy, but spiritually speaking, no one had even begun to conceive of the existence of a reality beyond the mind. Contemporary Christian teachings, both esoteric and otherwise, were child's play compared to the science of yoga. During the golden age of spirituality in India, the Western world, spiritually speaking, was still barbarian. The Yoga Sutras are a work of amazing depth. Patanjali's



succinct words expressed the quintessence of his understanding, where he shared his own personal insights and experiential knowledge.

There is neither poetry nor ornament in his writings: it is all precisely to the point. The Yoga Sutras are far from being as enchanting as *Tao Te Ching*, for example, but this is exactly what makes them more practical and real. As noted, the downside of this succinct style is that the words hide their meaning as much as they reveal it. Hence, they have remained open to a wide variety of interpretations and misinterpretations. True precision in writing (and in teaching) should aim at disciplining the mind of the reader to such an extent that he is left with only two options: to understand the meaning of the words or clearly recognize that he does not understand them. The Yoga Sutras are without a doubt meticulous, but that meticulousness is deceptive – they are not precise enough. Hence, many readers and translators do not understand that they do not understand what Patanjali truly meant.

The beauty and tragedy of yoga is that one aspires to reach enlightenment through one's own will, practice, and understanding alone, but in truth, while these three elements are of the essence, unless the doorway to the universal I am is open, we are stuck in the dimension of presence. Our me can only evolve up to a certain point before it needs a higher consciousness to enter its being. The path of will is based on the assumption that by using our own resources we can reach our spiritual goal. A common approach in Buddhism is to say, "I will practice hard and reach nirvana." It is of course positive to use our own power to transform, whether through practice, inner discernment, or spiritual enquiry, but there are so many things that we cannot manifest through our own will no matter how true and sincere we are to our path.

The truth is that even if one follows all the instructions of the Yoga Sutras to the letter, one will, in most likelihood, not reach true samadhi. Only the presence of a qualified teacher can transform the path of yoga into the valid platform of spiritual enlightenment. His role would not only be to make sure that one takes all those steps correctly, but above all, to open up one's access to the inner realm. He would be the bearer of the keys to the doorways of pure subjectivity. For some reason (perhaps because he thought it was obvious), Patanjali did not refer in his work to the role of a teacher as the 'midwife' of spiritual enlightenment.

Another major limitation is the lack of a practical description of how we move from one state of awakening or samadhi to another deeper one. For instance, it is not clear how we move from



dharana to dhyana and from dhyana to samadhi. Moreover, how can we know whether samadhi is just one state or if there are several samadhis: the difference between them seems only to be dependent on the presence or absence of mental modifications, or vritti. Also, one could be in a relatively shallow state and have managed to suspend the mind entirely, while another person could be in a very deep state while having ordinary thought processes. Which person is in a higher state according to yoga? This one-dimensional concept of samadhi is one of the greatest flaws of yoga, which is surprising because this concept is at its very heart.

As we have also explored, there is no distinction made between the most fundamental layers of consciousness, such as conscious me, fundamental me, and pure consciousness. Due to this, it is very difficult to identify what kind of state one would reach through following yoga. Certainly, there is no mention of evolution into the heart, and there is no process of vertical surrender to the source. There is no clear indication of entering universal consciousness either, since the process of surrender to I am is not mentioned. So in most likelihood, it is a path that leads to a very limited awakening, unless the intervention of grace is accepted as part of the course. Without this, we could say that, according to our map, the practice of yoga would lead to the awakening of conscious me or awareness.

Yoga does not aim at the realization of wholeness. It has a concept of the soul, but only as the perfect essence of our individual existence. It does not understand how the soul evolves into the self-actualization of her multidimensional identity. This is the flaw of idealism that imposes linear projections on reality, such as, "The soul is by definition perfect, so it does not need to evolve." The process of individuation is much more complex than realizing who we are in our essence by the removal of vritti. When a baby is conceived, many elements need to be brought together for it to come into existence. Similarly, we are all impregnated with the seed of the soul and given the sacred responsibility of assuring her birth into existence. To succeed, we must have complete clarity of the nature of our purpose.

Yoga lacks the important distinction between awakening and surrender. In yoga, the term 'samadhi' actually points to awakening more than it does to absorption in reality. In addition, samadhi is usually described in negative terms, indicating more the degree to which the mind is being dissolved than the experiential depth of samadhi itself. At times, samadhi is described as how purusha experiences itself, but it is never seen in its true light – as how purusha experiences *the beyond*. As strange as it sounds, there is no beyond (universal reality) in yoga. There is prakriti and there is





purusha – the great pair, the original duality, the best friends, and the greatest foes. Yoga lacks the concept of universal subjectivity. Purusha is presumably only in relationship with itself, not with the universal I am. That's why the use of the word 'samadhi' is deceptive here. Who is getting absorbed in what – purusha in itself? This kind of absorption cannot go very deep.

In yoga, purusha is god. This is not the same as saying "I am That." It is more like "That is I." Yoga is not identifying the individual with the universal (as Advaita does). It is doing just the opposite: identifying the universal with the individual – it is absolutizing the individual. In the universe of yoga, there are many gods, because each liberated purusha becomes god. While conceptually there is nothing wrong with this philosophy, in practice it is in conflict with the principle of surrender into the innermost ground of creation, the unmanifested. Unless one recognizes the fundamental relationship of surrender between individual and universal subjectivity, how can one properly abide in meditation and grow into a true samadhi of absence and transcendence? It is not enough to know who we are; we need to know *where* we are as well.

Yoga is a path of manifesting complete isolation and alienation from both the external and internal dimensions of reality in order to realize one's immaculate core (the literal translation of kaivalya is also 'isolation' or 'aloneness'). But can we really understand who we are without taking the greater context of our existence into consideration? Everybody can identify the fact that they are separated from the world. However, to add to this the isolation of our essence from the plane of universal subjectivity is to fall into another, even more painful state of alienation. It is more painful because in order to reach this state of isolation from universal subjectivity, we must finally become conscious and begin to acknowledge our true suffering. According to yoga, the only way to cope with that suffering is to induce a type of trance, one which can numb the recognition of our pain. This may very well be the scenario common to yoga, seeing as their concept of samadhi resembles more an altered state of consciousness than our natural state, in which our suffering is acknowledged and then either transcended or integrated into our existence.

True samadhi is not isolation; it is a state of surrender. It represents our deepest possible relationship with the whole of existence, the ancient bond between the created soul and her universal parent. Whether we clearly recognize it or not, we live in the ocean of the supreme reality – the vast, infinite, fathomless beyond. To be in samadhi is to have merged with the beyond. But because it is beyond, there is no end to this merging; there is no consummation of that constantly arising state of union with the beloved. The divine is our temple, our home. The divine is the



horizon of love and mystery that we keep reaching but can never attain, for to attain it is to perish, and living is our essence. The divine is our lover and our beloved. To pass the gate of samadhi is to live in god, through god, and into god. It is to disappear and to rise in the light of his heart. Whatever caused our alienation from our eternal state of complete freedom, it is over now because we have returned. This is true yoga.

Blessings,

Anadi

*For a full glossary of terminology please visit our website [www.anaditeaching.com/glossary](http://www.anaditeaching.com/glossary)*