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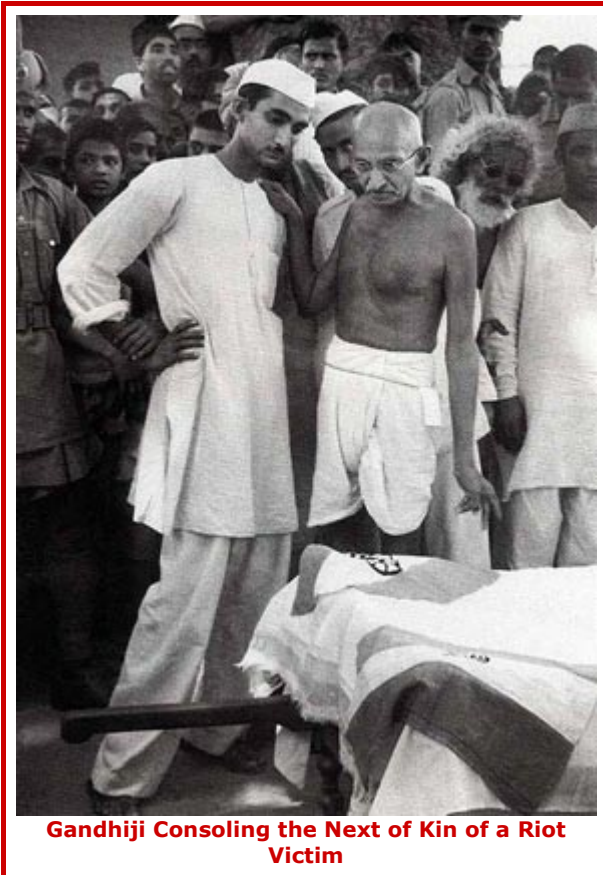
Cultivating Loneliness: The Ethical
Fragrance of Yoga

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Cultivating Loneliness: The Ethical Fragrance of Yoga

Article of the Month - February 2006



In Sir Richard Attenborough's film Gandhi, one poignant scene fails to leave the memory. The setting is somewhere in eastern India, just after the nation achieved independence (1947). Rampant rioting had broken out between Hindus and Muslims, and the worst face of humanity, seething with hatred, was visible everywhere. In this moment of madness, Mahatma Gandhi entered the city. We are shown how the violent perpetrators threw down their weapons at his feet. All the while, the great Mahatma, weak and frail, did not utter a word, but lay still, eyes alert and open, peacefully on a cot. His presence merely was reason enough for the arsonists to surrender their arms, without any residual resentment.

This deeply symbolic episode reminds one of the immortal words of Patanjali:

"When an individual is firmly established in non-violence (ahimsa), all beings who come near him also cease to be hostile." (2.35)

Patanjali is the author of the de facto text of yoga - 'The Yoga Sutra.'

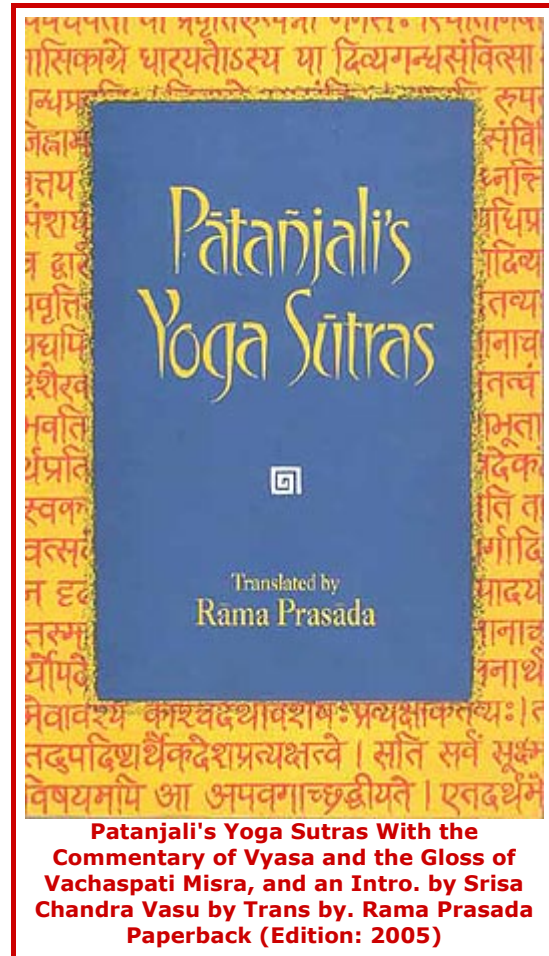
A sutra literally means a thread and according to the medieval saint Vallabhacharya: "A sutra is a string binding together many gems in a necklace."

The Padma Purana defines a sutra as following:

"A sutra should have few alphabets (alpa-akshara), an unambiguous meaning, be full of essence (sara-yukta), said only after considering all arguments for and against it, infallible and without blemish."

Patanjali's text is made up of 195 such sutras, characterized by brevity and conciseness (laghuta), giving rise to a mnemonic scheme which attempts to condense as much meaning as possible into as few words as possible. Consider for example the following:

"The pain (dukha) which is yet to come is to be avoided." (2.16)



Building a Better Future Through Present Moment Awareness

The crisp statement quoted above is simple enough. It is however, loaded with profound philosophical import, encapsulating within itself, the entire karma theory and its subtle nuances.

This sutra implies that the fruits of our former deeds have been exhausted by the suffering we have already undergone. Therefore, nothing can be gained by thinking about it. The pain we are experiencing at the present moment has already passed into the past, even as we are reading this. Hence, it is only the sorrow which is to come in the future that we can avoid, by ensuring the ethical purity of the karma we are performing now.

Patanjali's scripture not only provides yoga with a thorough and consistent philosophical basis, but in the process, also clarifies many important esoteric concepts (like karma), common to all traditions of Indian thought.



Lord Vishnu on Ananta

Patanjali himself is believed to be an incarnation of the serpent Ananta (Skt: endless), well known in Indian mythology as the thousand-headed naga who serves as a couch for Lord Vishnu and is also the guardian of the world's treasures.

Desiring to teach yoga to the world, he fell (pat) from heaven into the open palms (anjali) of a woman, hence the name Patanjali.

His many heads signify omnipresence and since yoga is a treasure trove par excellence it is but natural that he be the one to disperse it for the benefit of mankind.

The terse maxims making up Patanjali's text are divided into four chapters, representing a progressive succession on the path to enlightenment, the last being aptly labeled 'Kaivalya Pada' or the chapter of "liberation." Thus it covers the entire spiritual path from novice to final nirvana. Underlying the text is a strong ethical current, and cultivation of a positive state of mind along with virtuous conduct are both considered necessary pre-requisites for success along the yogic path.



Patanjali

Towards a Non-Violent World



We have already seen, from the example of Mahatma Gandhi, how the fragrance of one deeply established in non-violence (ahimsa), affects favorably those near him or her. This is also echoed in the incident where the Buddha, when confronted by a rampaging elephant, managed to pacify the latter by just raising his right hand. This gesture later came to be known as the Abhaya mudra (posture of fearlessness).

Literally, the word himsa means violence and the prefix 'a' negates it. Actually, its essence runs deeper and connotes a complete absence of a desire to harm others, directly or indirectly.

Violence can be of three types:

- a). Done by oneself
- b). Got done by another
- c). Approved when done by other.

Each of the above can again be of the following kinds:

- 1). Violence because of greed, for example killing of an animal for its meat and skin (lobha).
- 2). Through anger, if we feel the other has wronged us in some manner (krodha).
- 3). Through delusion (moha), thinking for example that by sacrificing animals in rituals we can acquire merit.

Ahimsa is mentioned as one of the five basic ethical precepts, which must be first cultivated for purifying and calming the mind, as a stepping-stone towards ultimate enlightenment.

These five fundamental moral instructions (2.30) are:

- a). Ahimsa
- b). Satya (Truthfulness)
- c). Asteya (Non-stealing): Not coveting what rightfully belongs to another.
- d). Brahmacharya (Celibacy)

e). Aparigraha (Non-hoarding of material objects): A few people having control over the majority of the world's resources leads to unequal distribution. Someone may own several empty mansions, even while there are many who do not have a ceiling over their heads. Similarly, godowns may be overflowing with grain even as people die of starvation in many parts of the world.

Indeed, from a point of view, all the five represent an injunction against some sort of violence or the other (often even sex is considered a violent act). No wonder, the Mahabharata extols this virtue in a grand manner:

'Ahimsa is the greatest dharma. Ahimsa is the highest self-restraint. Ahimsa is the greatest charity (dana). Ahimsa is the highest penance (tapas). Ahimsa is the highest sacrifice (yajna). Ahimsa is the greatest fruit. Ahimsa is the greatest friend and ahimsa is the highest happiness (sukham).' (Anushasanparva: 116: 38-39)

Vision of a Universal Humanity

Patanjali's is a far-sighted vision of universal humanity; a perspective much relevant to the world of today, torn apart as it is by sectarian strifes. He clearly states that the above practices are to be applied without the limitations of social or geographic conditions or any consideration of time and circumstance:

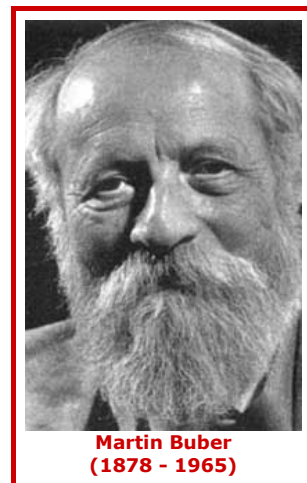
"These are universal and great vows (maha-vrata). They must be practised without any reservations as to species (jati), place, time, or sense of duty." (2.31)

Again, for example, consider the first vow of ahimsa. A fisherman may say that he would kill nobody except fish, thus limiting his violence to a particular species only. Or, another would put it thus: "I will not kill at a place of pilgrimage," or, "I will not kill on the day of Diwali since it is sacred," (time). A kshatriya (warrior) may similarly justify killing on a battlefield on grounds of duty. All of the above are unacceptable to Patanjali.

These moral attitudes are meant to bring our impulsive life under control. The desire not to harm others is an essential ingredient in cultivating a mental state recognizing the essential unity underlying all living beings, leading towards ultimate mystical union, envisaged as the final goal of yoga.

From I-It to I-Thou - Martin Buber and Patanjali's Yoga

The ethical precepts enumerated above have all a social implication, i.e. they involve a 'violence' perpetrated by one on another for selfish gains. By helping us rechannel our powerful survival instincts, these five practices enable us to outgrow our "I-ness" which according to the eminent philosopher Martin Buber is dependent on our encounters with others. He calls such a relationship, based solely on self-interest as "I-it". For him, it is desirable that such an engagement evolves into an "I-Thou" involvement, which has a higher purpose, and is a direct, non-purposeful encounter. In Buber's scheme, god is the ultimate thou (situated in our own depths according to yoga).



After first helping us transcend our ego (I-ness), by regulating our social interactions through moral discipline, Patanjali next suggests ways in which the psychophysical energy thus freed can be further harnessed to take the yogi to the next level.

If the first pentad of rules gives a positive restraint to our relationship with others, the following five (2.32), address our individuality, finally detaching the yogi from the outside world, situating him into his own, inner self:

- 1). Purification (shaucha)
- 2). Contentment (santosha)
- 3). Penance (tapas)
- 4). Self-Study of sacred texts (svadhyaya)
- 5). Surrender to God (Ishvara pranidhana)

The Results of These Five Individual Disciplines

"(Attempts towards) Physical purification leads to disenchantment with one's own body" (2.40). This is because however hard we try to cleanse it, our bodily functions are bound to generate impurity continually.

"Contentment leads to unsurpassed happiness." (2.42)

"Tapas destroys impurity and leads to fulfillment of the body and sense-organs" (2.43). The sense organs and the body both depend on the external world for their gratification. When they are thus fulfilled, and have served their purpose, the yogi has no attachment left for the world.

"Self-study leads to union with the desired deity (ishta-devata)." (2.44) Such an individual has no need for external aids to achieve his spiritual purpose.

"Surrendering oneself wholly to god leads to perfection of samadhi." (2.45) Samadhi is a state where the yogi remains super consciously absorbed, oblivious to the outside world.

Patanjali's Method of Cultivating the Contrary

Things however, are not simple. There are many distractions on the path of yoga. Patanjali suggests a solution which is almost poetic in its simplicity, but awesome in its implications:

"When bothered by distractions, opposing thoughts must be cultivated." (2.33)

"Cultivating opposing thoughts means realizing that distractions such as violence, greed etc, result only in pain and suffering." (2.34)

On our way to yogic achievement, we may be beseeched by tempting thoughts having the power to deviate us. We can be enamored by a corrupt neighbor, who has succeeded in amassing a significant wealth, while we toil away with honesty without any apparent reward. In such moments, it is helpful to think about the

extremely strong punishments scriptures lay down for those acquiring money unethically.

This is not however, a negative subjugation of mental cravings, but rather, a neutralization of distractions by cultivating equally strong thoughts and a healthy reflection that such actions eventually lead to unhealthy consequences. This is the positive impact of what Patanjali calls contrary thinking (prati-paksha-bhavana).

Loneliness - The Final Liberation

"Loneliness is the way by which destiny endeavors to lead man to himself." - (Hermann Hesse)

"Loneliness vanishes completely in the stillness." - (Paul Brunton)

Having successfully laid the ethical foundation enjoined by Patanjali, the adept is now poised towards the ultimate goal - liberation. Patanjali however, doesn't denote this culmination with conventional labels like 'moksha' or 'nirvana'. He calls it 'kaivalya,' derived from the word 'keval', meaning 'only'.

This is the detached isolation that those lucky amongst us feel in a crowd. Yoga guru B.K.S. Iyengar describes it as an absolute state of aloneness. It is living in constant communion with a higher reality centered within our own selves - the ultimate fulfillment of yogic practice.

This article by Nitin Kumar.

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