

## Features

# Yoga—The Original Philosophy: De-Colonize Your Yoga Therapy

By Shyam Ranganathan

When someone comes to a therapist seeking help, what's the disease and what's the actual person? Without an answer to these two questions, healers are not in a position to help. They might actually cause more injury by mistaking the disease for the person. The end result would hence be mutilation instead of healing. On Yoga's account, this confusion is rooted in a first-person confusion about what it is to be a person. If we ourselves do not have skill in distinguishing between persons, such as ourselves, and impersonal things, such as diseases, then we will not be able to regulate ourselves in a healthy manner—confusing ourselves with the disease. This confusion not only promotes illness but also leads us to pathologize what is healthy and to encourage what is not healthy.

### Yoga the Philosophy

Yoga the philosophy is over 2,500 years old and is among the oldest philosophical contributions from what we today call South Asia and what Europeans called “India.” In ancient India, there was only one school of philosophy called “Yoga” (that I will refer to with a capital Y to distinguish the philosophy of Yoga from the practice of yoga). This school of philosophy prescribed many practices, and these practices and the philosophy were *modularly* incorporated in contrary schools of philosophy, such as Buddhism and Jainism. But these were not different kinds of Yoga; they were yoga practices employed to different philosophical ends. In time, as a function of colonialism (which began in India in the 1100s CE), these yoga practices were separated from Yoga the philosophy. Once things called yoga are disconnected from Yoga, they can be used for various colonizing ends. Add to this branding, and you get a diversity of styles of yoga: all marketing.

The chief goal of colonialism is to delegitimize indigenous moral philosophical reflection so that the project of colonization will seem natural and needed. The idea that there is no single philosophy that is Yoga, just different kinds of yoga, is an artifact of Western colonialism. This project is sustained by an activity that is called interpretation: explanation by way of what one believes. If we were to defer to what everyone believes about yoga, we would find that they have different sets of beliefs identifying different matters, all of which they call yoga. The main problem with this approach is that it is not reasonable: Reasons and their support for conclusions are not reducible to what one believes. Therefore, the widespread employment of beliefs as a means of understanding is a problem (which, incidentally, Yoga criticizes). My approach has been to understand the history of logical disagreements in philosophy, and this shows that there is only one such position called Yoga.<sup>1</sup> This Yoga with the capital Y is systematically articulated in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra and can be found in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

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Yoga answers the central question of what we are, but in answering this question it provides us a self-therapeutic response: In Yoga what it is to be a person is to have an interest in one's own healthy functioning, which is the ideal of Sovereignty or Lordliness—what is called *Ishvara*. Hence, one cannot understand oneself without also healing oneself by way of devotion to this ideal. Devotion to this ideal involves self-challenges that require acting so as to be free and unencumbered by the past (*tapas*) while also clearly owning one's values—values that structure one's future (*svadhyaya*). This ideal of Ishvara is both unconservative and self-governing; the practice of Yoga is devotion to this ideal. In this article I will explore Yoga's basic theory, its analysis of trauma and self-therapy, and its implications for caring for others.

### Yoga's Basic Theory

Imagine a world where we are constantly under pressure from forces of nature—called *devas*—that can bring about death or disease if we do not find ways to mollify them. Such pressures create hunger, burn calories in our body—thereby creating an energy deficit—and then demand to be fed again to stave off starvation. It's a world where disease sets in with little chance of relief unless we do something to please the forces of nature. This world of natural forces also provides hard lessons about safety and punishing consequences for failing to keep up with external pressures. Those who do not learn their lessons and fail to accommodate the forces of nature by honoring and performing rites that give the forces of nature their due set themselves up for cumulative misfortune.<sup>2</sup>

### The Vedas and Natural Determinism

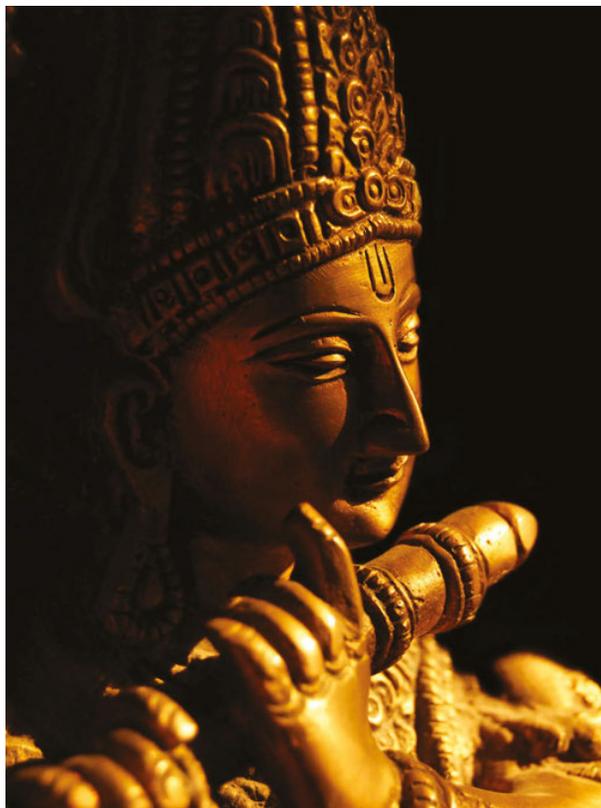
This was the worldview of the very ancient Indo-European peoples of South Asia, a people who recorded this view in their corpus of knowledge called the Vedas (approximately 1500–500 BCE). The perspective in the early part of this corpus was that the world is an interaction of natural determinism where people such as ourselves have to make room for ourselves to survive by pleasing the forces of nature. A universe of natural forces is not really a universe friendly to us, so death and disease are apparently inevitable. From a therapeutic standpoint, such a system makes no room for healing—it only makes room for deferring and transferring bad outcomes. For instance, the bad outcome of death and disease because of natural pressures to eat can be put off by inflicting an untimely end on a nonhuman animal in a sacrifice; then the sacrificers could eat the

results of the sacrifice, thereby putting off their own death by starvation and their own diseases from nutritional deficiencies. The cost of this victory was more death and suffering. The people who put off death and disease by harming and eating other animals didn't solve the problem of death and disease; they just put off their death and disease by inflicting it on others.

Moreover, to many of the Vedic, Indo-European peoples involved in this project of putting off problems by inflicting them on others this also appeared wrong and unfair.<sup>2</sup> If death and disease are bad enough for me to want to do something drastic to avoid them, then death is also bad for the sacrificial victims upon which it is inflicted. And the sacrificial victims have done nothing wrong to us; they are just unfortunate pawns in our efforts to avoid death and disease. So on top of death and disease being bad, there is something deeply unjust in transferring them onto innocent victims. The violence necessary to please the forces of nature didn't really provide a solution to the problems that people were experiencing; it merely constituted rites (*samskaras*) of pathological coping.

Several alternatives were proposed by various philosophers at the end of the Vedic period. One position, called *Sankhya*, simply accepted the Vedic world view but collapsed the various forces of nature into a singular force of nature, *prakriti*, and claimed that while we must acknowledge the reality of a diversity of persons (*purushas*) to account for a diversity of perspectives, persons are mere spectators with no influence (*Sankhya Karika*, 67). Buddhism adopted the Vedic world view that what transpires is a function of interdependent forces (*pratityasamutpada*)—a doctrine known as “dependent origination”—but claimed that problems arise by conceptualizing ourselves as external perspectives rather than mere functions of the natural world. According to this view, ridding ourselves of a concern for our own individuality enables us to take charge of actions that allow for future, beneficial states free from discomfort (*dukkha*).

Our ethical practice means that we no longer support external oppressive relationships and that we work on an environment where people have an opportunity to explore their own personhood.



## Yoga as Devotion to Ishvara: Sovereignty

Yoga departs from both options. First, within the precepts of Yoga, Buddhism is incorrect for depicting pain, injury, or discomfort as the basic problem that we ought to avoid. While these are all bad, according to Yoga they are symptoms of personal dysfunction, not the actual problem. And so we must take ourselves seriously as people who transcend our challenges and yet have a responsibility to deliberate and choose; otherwise, we allow ourselves to be identified with the barrage of external influence that constitutes injury. Second, Yoga departs from *Sankhya* by rejecting the idea that we are

mere spectators. This is because buying into the description of oneself as a mere spectator outside of all possible events is an actual choice we have: There is no necessity for us to believe it. That it is a choice to model oneself as a mere spectator shows that choosing is the more basic feature of what we are. And as choosing is the more basic feature of who or what we are, we have the ethical responsibility to influence and organize what we can experience to avoid being mere victims of circumstance (*Yoga Sutra* 1.2–4). [Note: All citations of sutras in this article are from *Patanjali's Yoga Sutra: Translation, Commentary, and Introduction*<sup>3</sup> and will be cited as “YS book.sutra(s).”]

This is why Yoga as the practice of yoga is essentially a devotional practice to Ishvara (Sovereignty). Ishvara is the abstract ideal of what it is to be a person and encapsulates the conditions under which people thrive unhindered by either past or present activity (*YS* 1.24). This renders Ishvara unconservative (*tapas*)

in every way: not bound by past choices, beliefs, or practices. So the state of Ishvara is also free from past and present affliction. This allows Ishvara to be a position of self-governance (*svadhyaya*). Devotion to Ishvara constitutes practicing unconservatism and self-governance (*YS* 2.1), and this allows people to move away from the past into a future of their own making.

One reason that Yoga is deeply misunderstood is that most people do not appreciate that Yoga constitutes an important fourth ethical theory. All ethical theory is a story about some right choice or procedure or some good outcome or value. The familiar ethical theories in the Western tradition (also found in the South Asian tradition) are Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism, and Deontology. Virtue Ethics claims that the goodness of the virtuous agent leads to right action. Theism, a version of Virtue Ethics, claims that God is the ultimately good agent, and as we are not nearly as good, we have to listen to God's preferences to know what to do. Consequentialism (e.g., Buddhism) claims that there are good ends that justify the

means. (Buddhists, for instance, identify this good end as defined by an absence of discomfort, and this end justifies Buddhist practices that are a means to this end.) Deontology, in contrast, holds that there are good things to choose and do, and that whatever ends arise are justified by the right considerations or choices.

Yoga is the opposite of Virtue Ethics: Working on the right leads to the good. It is unique in defining the right thing to do as something that happens within a devotional practice to the ideal of right doing. The good is just the perfection of this practice. As an example, consider what is involved in learning how to play music. On Yoga's account, one must devote oneself to the procedural ideal of Music, the Ishvara of music. The right thing to do in this context of devotion to Music is to practice music. At first one will not be very good at the practice. However, over time, as one continues to be devoted to this ideal, Music, one starts to instantiate and exemplify this ideal oneself. One will start to perform music as something that is closer to the ideal of Music—closer than one was able to perform previously at less advanced states of practice. There is no extra thing that is music aside from the perfection of the practice of devotion to Music. But in all cases of Yogic devotion, whether devotion to the ideal of Music, the Ishvara of music, or the ideal of being a person, Ishvara, the devotee takes on the responsibility of figuring out what it is to be sovereign, or the master of their own life, via this devotion.

Healing is hence an outcome of a life lived differently: Life lived not in service to the selfish representation of oneself (true or not) but in devotion to an idealization of what it is to be a person.

Learning, healing, and growing are completely the yogi's own problem; they cannot be faked and there are no shortcuts to be had by merely listening to what others tell us. This ideal of right doing defines what it is to be a person; it offers us insight into the common challenges and solutions of people regardless of their biology. Sex, gender, race, species are no longer ways we understand our essence: These are aspects of our life that must be brought under our own control as practitioners. For instance, this would consist of exercising our sexuality, gender, or species as a way to interact with ourselves and others *as persons*, and not as naturally or socially coercive events. Moreover, we no longer see that inflicting our problems on others (as the Vedic sacrificers did) is any kind of solution. Rather, the problems of life, all symptoms of personal dysfunction, are hindrances to living on one's own terms. The essence of such injuries is selfishness (*asmita*): the construction of a limited account of the self in terms of personal experiences. Regaining our autonomy (*kaivalya*) requires a switch to an ethical model of existence (*dharmameghasamadhi*—YS 4.29–34). And the ethical life according to Yoga is one lived in devotion to unconservatism and self-governance.<sup>4</sup>

## A Yoga Analysis of Trauma

It is quite ironic (and absurd) that many feel the need to bring being “trauma-informed” into the title of Yoga education. That's like the vacuous “chai tea” moniker (“chai” being the Hindi word for tea). This is no doubt part of the drift between ordinary ideas of what “yoga” is—completely detached from the tradition of Yoga philosophy—and yoga. In acknowledging the distinction between two kinds of explanations—a natural (*prakriti*) explanation for events, which accounts for things by way of external pressure, and a personal (*purusha*) explanation that accounts for people in terms of their own choices and activities—Yoga allows us a principled account of injury and trauma. Trauma and injury arise when people are not determining their own lives but are, instead, influenced from the outside. Injury is a perceptible, lingering mark of this external influence. It is easy to see the problem simply in terms of the specific injury or insult. But the problem is the dynamic, which changes the script from one in which we are in charge of our life, as we should be, to one where we are the passive recipient of good and bad luck. We can focus on the specific injury, but unless we address the dynamic, the problems will fester and reoccur. Could making responsible choices avoid injury from outside forces? Of course. That's why we distinguish between responsible behavior and irresponsible behavior. Irresponsibly driving a car leads to injury. Responsibly driving a car avoids injury.

## External Influences and Responsibility

But is every injury a result of irresponsibility? If I'm assaulted by someone else, does that mean that I was irresponsible? I think people have difficulty understanding the argument at this point because they equate being responsible with being blameless, and they assume that there is only one alternative, being irresponsible, which is being at fault. This is what arises when one assumes a Virtue Ethics perspective (the opposite of Yoga), which treats responsibility as an outcome of a good character, and configures the opposite in terms of having a bad character that leads to irresponsibility. But in addition to being responsible and being irresponsible, there is also being *not-responsible*. When one is not-responsible for something, one isn't necessarily to blame for it. However, being not-responsible is a problem for oneself, if responsibility is about being in control. We can be not-responsible for many things, and thereby blameless, but then also not in control.

If I am assaulted, then my assaulter, as someone who inflicts unprovoked violence on me, is irresponsible. This act of irresponsibility then transfers an injury to me, for which I am *not-responsible*. But this is part of the problem, according to Yoga. Now this part of my life is something I am not-responsible for, meaning that, in this case, I am not in control. But what of unexpected organic problems with the body, which are a function of genetics? Here too, the sickness is something I am not-responsible for. And yet, this not-responsibility characterizes that aspect of my life. Put this way, taking responsibility seriously is the opposite of victim blaming: Insofar as I am not-responsible for my injuries, I am not to blame. But that's still a problem for me as someone who has an interest in being responsible. Such external influences that create contexts in which people are not responsible are treated as the natural world in Yoga,

the world where moral concepts of choice and responsibility cannot always explain what's going on. It's a world that can deliver consequences of choices, but not according to what is in our interests (YS 4.2). Accessing the power to rectify one's life, to reinstate the space we need, called *kaivalya* (YS 4.34), is about reinstating ethical boundaries in our life (YS 4.29). It's about making choice and responsibility the dominant explanation of our life. Understanding how we can move on from injury requires appreciating our interaction with the natural world, which is the external, nonethical influence with which we must contend.

### **Vrtti: Conquering Mental Influences**

In the very earliest philosophical accounts of Yoga, and as preserved in the Yoga Sutra, our mind, body, and senses are not exactly us: They are, on their own, natural influences, but by the practice of yoga, we join (*yuj*) them together into an integrated whole that thereby reflects the choice and responsibility of ourselves as persons as written of in the Katha Upanishad. When we are well, there is no mind or body that we identify with or are identified with: It's just us as an autonomous person. Hence, for instance, when your friend comes over to visit, it's not her body or her mind that is visiting; it's she who is visiting. When we are ill, our mind, body, and senses are fragmented influences on our life. In this case, an injured friend who presents to us will be identified with a body or mind that is injured.

According to the Yoga Sutra, our mind is the closest aspect of the natural world to us as persons, and it is hence mental influences—*vrttis*—that we need to conquer. (Patanjali devotes much of the first book of the Yoga Sutra to this topic.) Hence, the Yoga Sutra begins by defining and identifying Yoga as the responsible engagement with thinking. In the absence of that practice/skill, we identify with what we can contemplate and are thereby influenced by what we contemplate. But it is really us, in giving up the responsibility to organize our relationship to what we contemplate, that empowers what we contemplate to influence us—and how it influences us is the very attitude that we have as we relate to the thought, passively.

The trickiest examples of such *vrttis* are a function of mental representations of ourselves that we form in pivotal moments. These representations seem to be like us, but because we passively relate to these representations via various attitudes, these representations are thereby also imbued and charged with *how* we feel about them. So if we are angry with the representation, the representation reflects

back anger to us. If we are sad with the representation, the representation reflects back sadness to us. This combination of our attitude and the representation creates a powerful psychological force. The Yoga Sutra uses the term “*samskara*” for these forces—a term otherwise used to talk about rituals. But these self-representations also constitute *asmita* (selfishness) that conflates our view and experiences with who we are. It's easy to miss the point of this diagnosis: Problems on Yoga's account are not psychological—rather, they are personal, and lack of responsible engagement with our experiences has actual impacts on our embodied state.

### **Self-Identification and Trauma**

This false sense of self, what the Yoga Sutra calls *asmita*, or the conflation of the self with its contingent perspective, is treated as a fact about the self that the person not practicing Yoga employs to understand themselves. We might think that understanding yourself in terms of a representation is not necessarily bad—that it all depends upon the representation. If I represent myself in terms of some elevated status or the good times I've had, then it seems that I am operating with a positive sense of self. It's only the representations born of trauma that are bad. But according to the Yoga Sutra, any such understanding via self-representation is an injury to the self. In these cases, the person identifies with something external to them (an event or a perspective on the world); this identification with something external constitutes a self-locking tie with the event and the external world, undermining a person's freedom to explore their own unconservatism and self-governance.

In effect, even identifying with positive experiences can constitute a trauma. For example, consider the case of someone who enjoys a certain privilege. In his paper “*Racism as Self-Love*” published in the *Radical Philosophy Review* in 2019, the philosopher Grant Silva, PhD, explores the phenomenon of racist White people being racist not because they hate Black people, but because (they believe) they love themselves as White people. Dr. Silva's example is amenable to a Yoga analysis. In this case, a racist White person who doesn't hate Black people identifies with their own representation as a “White” person within a world structured by White supremacy—a political order that affords advantages to White folks unavailable to Black folks. It leads people (his non-Black students, he notes) to cross the street to avoid walking by a Black man out of a (professed) concern for their own safety. In a world structured by White supremacy, being White is as good as it gets. But according to Yoga,



this self-identification with being White within a racial hierarchy constitutes a trauma, for people thereby internalize the external power structure and then act as though their own interests depend upon maintaining this structure. Any diversity or alternative (like the innocent Black male walking down the street) is experienced as a threat. So what might be viewed as a very favorable position to be in (at the top of a racial hierarchy) becomes the source of anxiety and frustration if people identify with it.

Moreover, this identification will then be the source of further violence and political efforts to maintain the status quo that hurt the people who have bound themselves with this political order and everyone else. Through the lens of the Yoga Sutra, renouncing this identification with the external political order is not only ethically important but also a key step in one's own healing, for in renouncing identification with an oppressive political order, one no longer acts to preserve it. Further, one is also no longer traumatized by having to maintain it.

### Yoga's Solution to Trauma and Injury

The Yoga Sutra's word for trauma and injury is "*klesha*": affliction. Some mental influence (*vrittis*) or actions (*karmas*) are afflicted, others are not. The activities of Ishvara are not. *Klesha* can characterize our relationship to ourselves. When we are in a state of affliction, our mind is employed to generate stultifying representations of ourselves that tie us to difficult relationships and events. This also explains the possible intransigence of physical injury. Chronic suffering is certainly bad enough, but self-representation as a person defined by that injury can also prevent healing. This identification means that a person may act as though they have a vested interest in maintaining that state of injury as a matter of self-preservation and self-identity.

### Healing Through Integration and Sovereignty

Doing away with false identities is the very heart of the practice of yoga. We shed these identities not by pretending that they are false; what the representation depicts about us may even be accurate as a depiction of our contingent state. So if we are depressed, our self-representation as a depressed individual will accurately depict us as depressed. Similarly, if we have a bodily injury, our self-representation as someone so injured will also be accurate of our contingent state. What these identities do not do, though, is depict us accurately as per our devotion to Sovereignty. We aim to deflate the importance of those representations as we fill our lives with new and different activities, which in time will make these contingent depictions of our mental or physical state false. This focus prioritizes *abimsa* (the disruption of systemic harm) ahead of *satya* (truth). It also allows us to right our relationships with others to ensure that no one is



deprived of what they need (*asteya*) and personal boundaries are respected (*brahmacharya*) while not reifying such representations (*aparigraha*) (YS 2.30). On a personal front, we do this by engaging in Yoga, which is the *integration* of the various aspects of our identity (mind, body, senses) into a coherent whole that represents our interests as persons. In effect, Yoga is about fixing a problem by doing something different. Here, the devotion to Ishvara is the ideal antidote: It leads us away from focusing on our self-representations and toward thinking about practicing sovereignty. This devotion to Ishvara, which itself exemplifies the disruption of harmful regularities, followed by social acts that allow others what they need, with personal boundaries respected and no new issues generated, brings the tandem benefit of the healing of our relationship with ourselves and the healing of our relationships with others.

Unpacking this devotion—by practicing the self-challenge of unconservatism (*tapas*) while owning one's own values and choices via self-governance (*svadhyaya*)—builds strengths and capacities that we may have lacked prior to practicing yoga. Healing is hence an outcome of a life lived differently: life lived not in service to the selfish representation of oneself (true or not) but in devotion to an idealization of what it is to be a person.

Some of this work can be deeply analytical. Patanjali's Yoga Sutra is arguably the first manual of a psychoanalytic theory: Current pathologies are a function of choices and responses to experiences. The creation of egotism out of such events can and should be traced back to its origin (a point in time when such an identification was possible and actualized) and then abandoned "in its subtle form"—that is, abandoned in principle (YS 2.9–10). But the origins of these mental influences are our past decisions, which we keep with us, and it's up to us to critically examine such decisions and renounce any that do not serve our interests (YS 2.12–13). In general, any identification with an experience or event will be a problem. Getting over this self-involvement with one's own representations makes room for positive and genuine social relationships. This is in part what is involved in one's devotion to Ishvara.

## Yoga's Principles of Self-Therapy for Others: A New Starting Point

The basic strategy of Yoga is a devotional practice to Sovereignty defined by unconservatism and self-governance. This work constitutes disrupting systemic harm (ahimsa) to make room for social facts (satya) characterized by people having what they need (asteya) and their personal boundaries respected (brahmacharya) while not generating further baggage and hoarding (aparigraha). This work is a universal obligation (YS 2.30–31). It's not simply what you or I should do; it is what all people should do.

But how are we to help others if they themselves are too injured or in trauma to be much help to themselves? It would seem that Yoga is primarily a philosophy of self-therapy and does not offer much for helping others. This mistaken conclusion assumes that when we ourselves practice the ethics of Yoga, we are not having a therapeutic impact on others. Not so. Our ethical practice means that we no longer support external oppressive relationships and that we work on an environment where people have an opportunity to explore their own personhood (their own unconservatism and self-governance); thus, our own practice is a way to offer therapeutic services to others. Our own effectiveness as therapists would hence depend on our own success at practicing Yoga ourselves. After all, what are we practicing but our own self-healing? **YTT**

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