

Towards Knowing Ourselves: Classical Yoga Perspective *

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Self-knowledge, at first glance, seems to be naturally and easily accessible to each of us. We commonly believe that we need much less effort to understand ourselves than to understand the world. In this article, the author uncovers the fallacy of this popular view referring to the fundamental conceptions and philosophical ideas of the classical yoga. She tries to demystify our deceptive self-understanding explaining the definitions of ignorance (avidya), I-am-ness (asmita), desire (raga), aversion (dvesha) and fear of death (abhinivesha) following the oldest yoga treatise. The article then goes on to discuss briefly how we can make use of our limited, incorrect self-knowledge as far as we are aware that it needs to be transcended. In the final part of the article, the issue of self-discipline consisting basically in cultivation of detachment and the practice of meditation is addressed.

The system of classical Indian yoga, which is one of the oldest philosophical schools, has largely influenced Indian thought as a whole. There can be no doubt that yoga begins its quest—a quest to change people and their behaviour, and not, as some other systems of philosophy, to change merely the way they think—with an effort to understand one’s self. Interestingly, European tradition has equally been guided for centuries

by a noble ancient Greek imperative ‘Know yourself!’ (*‘gnothi seauton’*), but in the course of the development of Western philosophy, the emphasis has been placed rather on theoretical than practical aspects of self-understanding. At first glance, it may seem that self-knowledge is naturally and easily accessible to each of us, and that we need much less effort to understand ourselves than to understand the world. This kind of intuition is

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clearly supported by the general model of education we receive; we spend years studying different aspects of so-called ‘objective reality’ while automatically neglecting our own mental life, our own subjectivity. Even if one happens to ask oneself ‘Who am I?’, most often one satisfies oneself with a quite superficial or conventional answer, like ‘I am a handsome 40-year-old male’, ‘I am a responsible householder’, ‘I am a generous and loving husband’ or ‘I am a successful businesswoman’.

Well, is there any other self-knowledge we can gain, and why do we actually need that knowledge at all? Patañjali, the author of the *Yogasutras* (c. A.D. 300), the oldest and most eminent work of the yoga philosophical system (henceforth YS), offers some interesting answers and suggestions worthy of deep consideration.¹ He opens his treatise with a kind of definition of yoga, which is, according to him, the best method leading to the ultimate goal of human life—*moksha*, that is, liberation from every kind of suffering and illusion. ‘Yoga is the restraint of the fluctuations in the mind’, he says.² This restraint, *nirodha*, is in order that the self, called *purusha*, *drashtri* or *atman*, may shine forth. Thus, yoga is a matter of stopping the *having* of the fluctuations in the mind. However, the questions remain: what is this ‘having’ and what are these ‘fluctuations’? Patañjali says that restraint of the fluctuations is obtained through eight-limbed yoga, leading to the eighth element of this yoga, which is full concentration, contemplation, mindfulness or meditative ecstasy (*samadhi*).³ It is common to talk as if these eight limbs of Patañjali’s yoga are eight things to do. However, clearly they are not. For contemplation is not a thing to do, but rather a thing to achieve. Nor is it quite correctly called a ‘thing’. It is Patañjali’s word for the goal of yoga, which is achieved or reached when we effect a total detachment from all mind fluctuations or mind things. Briefly, Patañjali’s eightfold method aiming at

complete self-knowledge is his understanding of the way to the final liberation that he calls ‘aleness’ or ‘isolation’ (*kaivalya*). Then, as we read in YS.I.3, there is abiding in one’s properly understood true-nature (*svarupa*).⁴

But how far are we now from that final point? Moreover, why does our present self-knowledge not allow us to get rid of suffering? In our everyday life, we tend to identify ourselves with things (*vrittis*)⁵ presented in our mind, with our sensations, emotions, volitions, cognitions, fantasies, expectations or memories. When a friend of mine passes away, I feel sad, and my sadness seems to be a part of myself as I cannot distinguish my self from my overwhelming depressing emotion. The same happens when I want something intensely; my strong desire, craving for possessing or doing this or that absorbs me totally, so that I am ready to give up other wishes that oppose my present will, even though some time before I considered them to be the prior ones. All my conscious experiences that belong to me are mistakenly taken as the constituents of my self because in my average state of mind, which is naturally scattered and hard to concentrate,⁶ I am not able to distinguish myself from all of them. Although they are short-lasting, contrary to what I consider to be my true self, and although they come and go taking different positions around the core of my conscious life, I find it very difficult, or hardly possible, not to identify myself with the mental, emotive and affective content of my consciousness. Thus, I am inclined to think that my true nature is nothing but my ego-consciousness: *I am what I feel*, *I am what I want* or, more precisely, these are my desires that make me who I am. However, as long as I keep identifying myself with the fluctuations of the mind, the cognitive error of mistaking extrinsic (psycho-physical) identity for intrinsic (spiritual) is continually reinforced. Yoga teachings and the appropriate form of pedagogy it applies seek to establish our identity as the true

self (*purusha*), or seer, and to ‘dismantle’ the mechanism of misidentification due to which we remain deluded, confused and never fully satisfied. Therefore, Patañjali formulates a practical and transformative ‘path’ of yoga in which self-knowledge (*jñāna*), as an integral aspect of yoga theory and practice, can have profound implications for human life in this world.

The complicated, multi-step process of destroying the mechanism of misidentification starts with the moment of realization of the fact that our present self-knowledge is far from sufficient and does not give us good prospects for a fully satisfactory life. In other words, we cannot even start the process of self-improvement and spiritual growth before recognizing our actual self-knowledge as limited, incorrect and strongly influenced by ignorance. In fact, spiritual ignorance (*avidya*) is the primary affliction, being the origin of all other afflictions, including our mistaken identity as finite, egoistic self or ‘I-am-ness’ (*asmita*). Ignorance is also at the root of three other afflictions: attachment or desire (*raga*), aversion (*dvesha*) and the desire for continuity or the instinctive fear of death (*abhinivesha*).

To the question, ‘Why is our present knowledge not valid cognition?’, Vyasa, the oldest commentator of YS, answers: ‘Because it is cancelled by valid cognition.’⁷ Just like seeing the moon reflected in the river as a double is refuted by seeing that it is in fact a single moon, so conceiving myself as an honest, responsible person is refuted by realizing that nobody who knows me well is ready to trust me and consider me a good man.

Before we set to uprooting and eradicating ignorance (*avidya*) we should first be aware what it actually is. In his YS II.5, Patañjali gives its most general definition: ‘Ignorance is seeing the non-eternal as eternal, the impure as pure, dissatisfaction as pleasure, and the non-self as self.’⁸ Various forms in which ignorance can manifest

itself show clearly that the stereotypical opposition between the emotive/affective and rational/cognitive aspects of our personality cannot be maintained any longer. This brings forth an integral view of the mind. It is in this frame in which the picture emerges that *samsaric* identity is not possible without I-am-ness, attachment, aversion and the desire for continuity or fear of extinction, and that these afflictions govern the mind of the individual and perpetuate the wheel of the *samsara*—the never-ending cycle of rebirth. The compulsive forces of attachment, aversion and desire or fear cannot be uprooted and discarded unless our egocentric identity is weakened. Thus, the ultimate transcendence of all the afflictions (*kleshas*) is the objective of yoga praxis. It is worth noting and remembering that intensity and variety of the afflictions are conditioned by our individual and collective *karman*.

There are five types of ignorance distinguished by Patañjali.⁹ The first—*asmita*, sometimes called darkness (*tamas*)—includes the error of misidentifying the physical body and psyche with the self, or spirit. Both our body and psyche are the products of nature, or matter (*prakriti*) which cannot be identified with our true self, unchangeable and pure. According to the ‘common view’ or ordinary person’s point of view, in the moment of experiencing an extreme joy, anger, sadness or desire, one seems to be the same with one’s emotions and one feels strongly attached to all the pleasures one can enjoy through experiencing the world as a female or male body-mind complex. I am ignorant in that sense that I have an identity dependent upon possessing the objects of experience. *Asmita* or selfishness manifests whenever I think ‘this is mine’, no matter if I indicate a thing, body, person, worldly success or power. Does it mean that any kind of ambition or aspiration to have things is bad as such? It is certainly not! The point is that we should not confuse our material, worldly objectives with

self-development or realization of our true self. Moreover, we should not mix our natural need for well-being with the endless greed for having more and more.

Desire (*rāga*) is another manifestation of ignorance. I desire the objects of my immediate pleasure. Desire is constant longing for pleasure. I am ready to make great efforts to multiply my pleasures. Sometimes I do not mind even cheating my clients, colleagues, wife, husband, or myself, to intensify my pleasure. It seems I risk so much because I hope that enjoyment may be repeated, prolonged or perpetuated forever and, what is perhaps more important, it is definitely worth doing things I consider not quite fair myself. This kind of self-deception we commonly accept while dealing with our own search for pleasure, and satisfaction finds its complementary supplement in another form of *avidya*—that is *dvesha*, or aversion. I have an aversion to specific objects, persons or situations that have caused me pain or any other kind of dissatisfaction. I feel I have a right to hate them, or even punish those who have somehow prevented my enjoyment or disturbed me in achieving my objectives. However, aversion just like other forms of my incorrect self-understanding, is nothing but ignorance and never leads to improvement of one's life and well-being. What it brings is further suffering and self-deception only. Ignorance can also take the form of desire for continuity (*abhinivesha*) and the instinctive fear of the death of this body that I am. More universally, one can say it is the form of attachment to oneself, namely to one's present self-identification, one's own image patiently elaborated throughout all these years since birth. It comes up when we are afraid of losing our social or financial position, our professional status, and when we simply cannot accept our aging. And here is the paradox of our false self-identification: we are deeply convinced that our true self is permanent and immutable but at the

same time we make the wrong assumption that it is equivalent to our body-mind complex. Obviously, these two intuitions cannot avoid contradiction.

All the above examples of so-called self-knowledge make us self-confident but, in fact, they prevent us from any personal growth. Thus, ignorance is that kind of self-knowledge that makes you convinced that you know what you really and truly are and that you have become all that you ever could have become. This self-conceitedness (*svarasa*) announces the restraint of any development—intellectual, personal or spiritual. Nevertheless, such limited self-knowledge does not need to be completely useless. On the contrary, as far as we know who we are, but at the same time are aware that this self-understanding is relative, transcendable and much influenced by our previous experience and many personal shortcomings, we can determine our will efficiently by directing our efforts towards the right goal.

To make this endeavour truly fruitful, the oldest classical yoga exponent prescribes undertaking a special kind of self-discipline. Basically, it consists of the cultivation of detachment, or dispassion, and the practice of meditation,¹⁰ in addition to acquiring, under proper guidance, knowledge of the ultimate truth and reflecting upon it. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the aim of classical yoga is not quite the same as that of Upanishadic yoga. It is not union here, but rather dis-union, separation or, as I have already mentioned, dis-identification of my true self from all that I am wrongly used to regarding to be myself.¹¹

In what sense, one may ask here, can the cultivation of detachment and the practice of meditation prove to be useful in our everyday life? Especially, if we do not aspire to become yogins or monks. Why should an average man, hardworking and busy doing his job, bother with practising yoga at all? Well, simply because none can afford to

lose the chance to make one's life more satisfactory and meaningful. To put it in the shortest way: while cultivating detachment and minimizing our greed we are much more likely to appreciate what we have now and to share with others more easily what is at our disposal. When practising meditation we do not leave our problems aside or neglect our worldly duties but rather make our mind one-pointed (*ekagrata*)¹² and more concentrated on the particular object of our interest or the activity to be done here and now.

The yoga discipline suggested by Patañjali comprises what are described as the eight 'limbs' or stages of yoga. They are self-restraint (*yama*), observance (*nivama*), right posture (*asana*), regulation of the vital energy (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*), steadying the mind (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*) and contemplative absorption (*samadhi*).¹³ Its purpose as a whole is to assist man in the spiritual journey from the narrow personal view to the larger vision that brings with it freedom. This eightfold discipline may be discussed in two main stages. Let us start with the more advanced stage and then concentrate on the first one that we all can and should start with.

The second stage of the discipline, consisting of six items, is for the specific cultivation of the power of mental concentration. Its details being somewhat technical, I shall refer here only to its broad features. Of these six items, the first three are devised to secure control of the physical frame with a view to facilitate the control of mind. They refer, as I have already noted, to the right bodily posture, regulation of breath and the withdrawal of the senses from their respective objects. The succeeding three, called the inner limbs, assist in achieving direct, but gradual, mastery over the ever-fitful mind.¹⁴ Any object may be chosen for meditating upon in this stage; only a gradation of them is recommended in order that the more subtle may come after success has been attained

in contemplating the less. When such control over the mind has been established, the disciple turns to direct meditation on his/her true nature. This is the culminating stage of yoga, which leads to the 'truth-bearing' knowledge discussed above.

The first stage is concerned with the right direction of the will and represents the attainment of the good distinguished from the true. More particularly, it relates to the cultivation of virtues comprised in the first two steps of non-injury (*ahimsa*), truth-speaking (*satya*), abstention from stealing or misappropriation of others' property (*asteva*), avoiding wrong sexual activity or celibacy (*brahmacharya*) and the dis-owning of possessions (*aparigraha*).¹⁵ The latter is positive, and includes purity—physical, mental and ethical (*shauca*)—contentment (*samtosha*) that is enjoying whatever one has, right aspiration (*tapas*), study of the texts encouraging to spiritual growth (*svadhyaya*) and, last but not least, devotion to God (*Ishvara-pranidhana*).¹⁶ These are collectively, so to say, the ten commandments of yoga. It is on this pre-eminently moral foundation that any yogic training should rest, if it is to be fruitful; and the mere practice of breath-control or of yogic postures is spiritually of little avail. Without such a foundation, there is no possibility of seeing the whole truth of one's own nature or attaining final freedom. He, on the other hand, who lays that foundation securely, even though he may stop short of it, will have achieved much.¹⁷ The keyword for this stage of the discipline is non-selfishness. Man must overcome the egoistic, selfish impulses in him that are the source of so much evil in the world. The non-selfish attitude thereby attained is described as dispassion or detachment (*vairagya*) and its cultivation is recommended in order to awaken the spiritual will.¹⁸

Among the good results caused by the application of the yoga method of self-understanding is the realization of the threatening power of our ignorance, freedom from permanent dissatisfaction

and a gradual increase in the harmonization of all the relationships we are involved in—in family, work, and in society. That is why Patañjali's message may

still be of valuable help for any contemporary man looking for well-being and a better understanding of himself.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The author of the present article refers to the translation of YS by Ch. Chapple and Yogi Anand Viraj, *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali: An Analysis of the Sanskrit with Accompanying English Translation* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1990). All the Sanskrit terms used in the text are given in a simplified transliteration so as to avoid the diacritical signs.
2. YS. I.2. Ibid., 33.
3. YS. 11.3; 1.46–51; IV.29–30. Ibid. 54–56, 57–58, 119–20.
4. YS. 1.2; IV.34. Ibid., 33, 122.
5. According to Patañjali, the fluctuations of mind are fivefold: valid cognition, error, conceptualization, sleep and memory. YS. 1.6–11. Ibid., 34–36.
6. YS. 1.30–31 Patañjali enumerates several common distractions of the mind: sickness, dullness, doubt, carelessness, laziness, sense addiction, false view, non-attainment of a state of concentration, and instability. Ibid., 45–46. In other words, anything that prevents the *yogin* from cultivating meditation is considered as an obstacle, be it physical illness or psychic disorders. Cf. also Feuerstein's commentary on YS. 1.30 in *The Yoga-Sutra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary*, trans. G. Feuerstein (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1989), 46.
7. Vyasa's *Yogabhashya* 1.8. Cf. J.H. Woods, *The Yoga-System of Patañjali: On the Ancient Hindu Doctrine of Concentration of the Mind* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988. First published in 1914), 24.
8. YS. 11.5. Cf. *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali: An Analysis of the Sanskrit with Accompanying English Translation*, trans. Ch. Chapple and Yogi Anand Viraj (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1990), 58–59.
9. YS. 11.6–9. Ibid., 59–60.
10. YS. 1.12. Ibid., 36–37.
11. The term 'yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit *yuj*, which has been variously interpreted by different schools of Indian philosophy. One of these meanings implies a union or an assimilation of two seemingly different entities, while the other meaning of *yuj* implies a disunion of seemingly similar things.
12. YS. III.11–12. Ibid., 84–85.
13. YS. II.29. Ibid., 69–70.
14. YS. II.7. Ibid., 82–83.
15. YS. II.30–31; II.35–45. Ibid., 70–71, 73–77.
16. YS. II.32. Ibid., 71.
17. M. Hiriyanna, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000. First published in 1948), 123.
18. YS. I.15–16; III.50. Cf. *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali: An Analysis of the Sanskrit with Accompanying English Translation*, trans. Ch. Chapple and Yogi Anand Viraj (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1990), 38–39, 103.