

Reading the *Yoga Sutra* in the Twenty-First Century

MODERN CHALLENGES, ANCIENT STRATEGIES

CHAPTER I

In the United States, where an estimated seventeen million people regularly attend yoga classes, there has been a growing trend to regulate the training of yoga instructors, the people who do the teaching in the thousands of yoga centers and studios spread across the country. Often, teacher training includes mandatory instruction in the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali. This is curious to say the least, given the fact that the *Yoga Sutra* is as relevant to yoga as it is taught and practiced today as understanding the workings of a combustion engine is to driving a car.

So the question that must be asked is: why? Why should a string (this is what the word *sutra* means in Sanskrit, the language of the *Yoga Sutra*) of 195 opaque aphorisms compiled in the first centuries of the Common Era be required reading for yoga instructors in the twenty-first century? What could an archaic treatise on the attainment of release through true cognition possibly have to do with modern postural yoga,

that is, the postures and the stretching and breathing exercises we call yoga today (about which the *Yoga Sutra* has virtually nothing to say)? The obvious answer, many would say, is in the title of Patanjali's work: what could the *Yoga Sutra* possibly be about, if not yoga?

Yoga has been a transnational word for over two hundred years. The French missionary Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux equated the “yogam” of India’s “yoguis” with “contemplation” in the mid-1700s (although his writings were not published—plagiarized is a more accurate term—until 1816). In his 1785 translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the British Orientalist Charles Wilkins did not provide translations for the words “Yog” or “Yogee,” for reasons that will become clear later in this book. “Der Joga” has been a German word for well over a century, “il yoga” an Italian word, and so forth. Of course, yoga was originally a Sanskrit word, so one would think it would suffice to open a Sanskrit dictionary to know what yoga is. Since its publication in 1899, Sir Monier Monier-Williams’s *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* has been the standard reference work to which both first-year language students and seasoned scholars have been turning for translations of Sanskrit words. And what is it that we find when we turn to the entry “yoga” in this work? Weighing in at approximately 2,500 words, it is one of the longest entries in the entire dictionary, taking up four columns of print. Seventy-two of those words describe the use of the term “yoga” in the *Yoga Sutra*. They read as follows:

† Application or concentration of the thoughts, abstract contemplation and mental abstraction practiced as a system (as taught by Patanjali and called the Yoga philosophy; it is the second of the two Samkhya systems, its chief aim being to teach the means by which the human spirit may attain complete union with Isvara or the Supreme Spirit; in the practice of self-concentration it is closely connected with Buddhism).¹

There is at least one error in this definition, which I will return to later, but first, more on the general meaning of yoga. (Throughout this book, I will capitalize the word “Yoga” when I am referring to Yoga as a philosophical system, whereas I will use the lowercase “yoga” for all other uses of the term.) In keeping with the organizing principles of dictionaries of this type, Monier-Williams begins his yoga entry with its earliest and most widely used meanings before moving into later and more restricted usages. In this ordering, his definition of Yoga appears only after a long enumeration of more general meanings, which, reproduced here, read like a list that Jorge Luis Borges might have dreamed up for his “Library of Babel”:

Yoga: the act of yoking, joining, attaching, harnessing, putting to (of horses); a yoke, team, vehicle, conveyance; employment, use, application, performance; equipping or arraying (of an army); fixing (of an arrow on the bow-string); putting on (of armour); a remedy, cure; a means, expedient,

device, way, manner, method; a supernatural means, charm, incantation, magical art; a trick, stratagem, fraud, deceit; undertaking, business, work; acquisition, gain, profit, wealth, property; occasion, opportunity; any junction, union, combination, contact with; mixing of various materials, mixture; partaking of, possessing; connection, relation (in consequence of, on account of, by reason of, according to, through); putting together, arrangement, disposition, regular succession; fitting together, fitness, propriety, suitability (suitably, fitly, duly, in the right manner); exertion, endeavor, zeal, diligence, industry, care, attention (strenuously, assiduously) . . .

Before we leave Sir Monier behind, it should be noted that postures, stretching, and breathing are found *nowhere* here (although they are alluded to in his definition of Hatha Yoga, in a separate entry). With this, let us return to our original question of why it is—when the “*Yoga Sutra* definition” of yoga is not a particularly early or important one, and when the contents of the *Yoga Sutra* are nearly devoid of discussion of postures, stretching, and breathing whereas dozens of other Sanskrit works with “yoga” in their titles are devoted to those very practices—that instruction in the *Yoga Sutra* should be compulsory for modern-day yoga instructors?

We may begin by placing this modern appropriation of Patanjali’s work in its historical context. Since

the time of its composition, the *Yoga Sutra* has been interpreted by three major groups: the *Yoga Sutra*'s classical Indian commentators; modern critical scholars; and members of the modern-day yoga subculture, including gurus and their followers. A fourth group, conspicuous by its absence, should also be mentioned here. For reasons that we will see, the people traditionally known as "yogis" have had virtually no interest or stake in the *Yoga Sutra* or Yoga philosophy.

A clear fault line divides the groups just mentioned. On the one hand, modern critical scholars, who read the *Yoga Sutra* as a philosophical work, concern themselves nearly exclusively with the classical commentators and their readings of the work's aphorisms. On the other, there are the adherents of the modern yoga subculture, who generally read the *Yoga Sutra* as a guide to their postural practice, but whose understanding of the work is refracted not through the classical commentaries themselves, but rather through Hindu scripture. Here, I am speaking primarily of the great *Mahabharata* epic and the Puranas ("Antiquarian Books"), massive medieval encyclopedias of Hindu thought and practice. As such, these parallel universes of interpretation converge on but a single point; that point being what Patanjali termed the "eight-part practice" (ashtanga-yoga), his step-by-step guide to meditation. However it turns out that the two constituencies nonetheless have diverged over even this small point, in the sense that the classical commentators and critical scholars have judged this to be the least signifi-

cant portion of the *Yoga Sutra*, while the modern yoga subculture has focused almost exclusively on the eight-part practice. As we will see in the next chapter, most scriptural accounts of the eight-part practice actually subverted Patanjali's teachings, contributing to the virtual extinction of Yoga as a viable philosophical system by the sixteenth century. Then, through a series of improbable synergies, Yoga rose from its ashes in the late nineteenth century to become a cult object for much of the modern yoga subculture.

Unlike the *Mahabharata* and the Puranas, which are anonymous compilations of ancient Hindu sacred lore, the classical commentaries on the *Yoga Sutra* are "signed" works by historical figures. Most scholars believe that the earliest among these, a certain Vyasa, wrote his commentary within decades of the appearance of the *Yoga Sutra*. However, others argue he lived as many as six hundred years after Patanjali: we will revisit the question of Vyasa's dates in the final chapter of this book. The *Yoga Sutra's* other major commentaries date from between the ninth and sixteenth centuries; however, no commentary was written in defense of the Yoga system after the twelfth century, which may be taken as a tipping point following which the school began to fall into decline (apart from a limited Yoga "revival" in south India, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries).

We know from their writing that the great classical commentators were brilliant, immensely cultivated in-

† individuals possessed of a thorough grasp of India's traditional treasury of knowledge. Nearly all were philosophers and schoolmen who, writing in the Sanskrit medium, sought to unpack the meaning of Patanjali's aphorisms and defend their readings of its message against the claims of rival thinkers and schools, of which there were many. In addition to educating their pupils in royal courts, brahmanic colleges, hermitages, temples, and monasteries, they would have also taken part in debates on the great questions of the time, carrying forward a practice that dated back to the Vedas (ca. 1500–1000 BCE), the most ancient sources of Hindu revelation. This we know because many of their commentaries retain a debate format, setting forth their adversaries' perspectives in order to subsequently rebut them with their own arguments. Debates could be lively affairs in these contexts, "philosophy slams" whose victors were often rewarded with wealth, position, and glory.

Every great text in India has been the object of one if not several such commentaries. Generally speaking, these are highly technical treatises that analyze the terms and concepts presented in original scriptures such as (for Hindus) the Vedas, Upanishads, *Bhagavad Gita*, and major philosophical works. Here, the mark of a good commentator is his objectivity, his ability to dispassionately make his points about a text in the light not only of the language of the text itself but also of other commentaries that have preceded his own. As

such, commentaries are, in addition to being transcriptions of contemporary debates, conversations with their past, where earlier points of discussion are analyzed through careful precedent-based argument. While outright innovation is a rarity in classical commentary, changing philosophical and real-world contexts make for gradual shifts in the perceived meanings of the words and concepts being interpreted, such that over time—and here I am speaking of hundreds, if not thousands of years—the commentarial “big picture” of a given work is gradually altered, sometimes beyond recognition.

One finds a similar situation in Western legal traditions, in what is known as judicial review in the United States. Judicial review assumes that the principal sources of the American legal system—English common law, the Magna Carta, and most importantly, the Constitution—form a living tradition in which judicial precedents are reinterpreted in the light of changing real-world contexts. Fundamental concepts, such as “free speech,” “citizenship,” and the “right to bear arms,” are constantly being tested and retested through judicial review, changing even as they remain the same. As with Patanjali’s work, there is no way to go back to the “original intent” of the framers of the Constitution, which is irrelevant in any case, because their world was not the same as ours today. In many respects, critical Yoga scholars are the modern-day homologues of the classical commentators whose works they study.

Over the past forty years in particular, critical scholarship on Yoga has become a growth industry in the American and European academies. In order to be taken seriously in the academy, the critical scholar must work with primary source material, which in the case of the *Yoga Sutra* has meant not only the sutras themselves but also other Sanskrit-language works on Yoga and allied philosophical systems, and, most importantly, the work's classical commentaries. Here, critical Yoga scholarship primarily consists of the painstaking task of parsing the ways that the words and concepts of the *Yoga Sutra* have been interpreted over time, in order to tease out patterns of influence and change. Then follows the process of the critical review of scholarly ideas in academic colloquia and through journal articles, book reviews, and so forth.

† A significant number of mainly North American Yoga scholars have also been practitioners of yoga, and many if not most of these were first drawn into the study of the *Yoga Sutra* through their personal practice. Quite often, their readings of the *Yoga Sutra* will fall somewhere in between those of nonpracticing critical scholars and members of the broader yoga subculture. One count on which these scholar-practitioners tend to disagree with their nonpracticing colleagues concerns the importance of Vyasa to a correct understanding of the *Yoga Sutra*. Vyasa was not only the earliest but also by far the most widely quoted of all the classical *Yoga Sutra* commentators. In fact, the great

majority of extant *Yoga Sutra* manuscripts contain not only the work's 195 aphorisms but also Vyasa's original interlinear commentary, appropriately called "The Commentary" (*Bhashya*). That our text should require a "skeleton key" is immediately apparent to anyone who would attempt to read its aphorisms: the sutras are so compact and obscure as to be incomprehensible without accompanying explanation. To begin, Patanjali uses several technical Sanskrit terms in ways that are unique to the *Yoga Sutra*. What is more, the language of the sutras is often closer to what has been termed "Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit"—that is, the Sanskrit of the early Mahayana Buddhist scriptures of the first centuries of the Common Era—than to the classical Sanskrit of nearly every Hindu scripture and commentary. †

Further complicating matters is the fact that there are only four verbs in the entire work! This is where Vyasa's commentary proves to be a precious resource. Complete sentences require verbs, and Vyasa helpfully supplies the missing verbs and a great deal more. This is not an entirely unprecedented situation. In India, the aphoristic style of sutra-type teachings have traditionally been employed as mnemonic devices for reciting and recalling to memory the central tenets of a given philosophical or religious system. However, without the complement of a living guru's teaching, or, failing that, a written commentary, the aphorisms often remain impenetrable. It would appear that they †

were enigmatic to the *Yoga Sutra*'s classical commentators as well. As such, nearly every commentary on the work is actually a subcommentary, that is, a treatise that comments on Vyasa's "authorized" interpretation rather than on Patanjali's work itself.

Vyasa's commentary on the *Yoga Sutra* was not, however, entirely neutral or transparent, since he in fact based it on the metaphysics of a different, but related, philosophical system known as Samkhya. This has had an incalculable effect on how people have read the *Yoga Sutra*, because they have actually been reading it through the lens of Vyasa's Samkhya-inflected commentary. So it is that much of what readers take to be the *Yoga Sutra*'s basic vocabulary—the words Purusha (literally "the Man" or "Person," but often translated as "Spirit"), Prakriti ("Nature, Matter, Materiality," a feminine word in Sanskrit), buddhi ("intellect"), and ahamkara ("ego")—are virtually absent from Patanjali's work but omnipresent in Vyasa and well over a thousand years of succeeding commentary and scholarship. Edwin Bryant has summarized the situation in the following terms:

† So when we speak of the philosophy of Patanjali, what we really mean (or should mean) is the understanding of Patanjali according to Vyasa: It is Vyasa who determined what Patanjali's abstruse *sutras* meant, and all subsequent commentators elaborated on Vyasa . . . It cannot be overstated that

Yoga philosophy is Patanjali's philosophy as understood and articulated by Vyasa.²

To give but a single example of the bedeviling problems the *Yoga Sutra* presents for anyone who would try to penetrate its meaning, we may look at the ways in which people have translated its all-important second sutra into English. This, Patanjali's compact definition of Yoga, is composed of four words: yoga-citta-vritti-nirodha. As usual, there are no verbs in this sutra, so we are in the presence of an apposition: yoga = citta + vritti + nirodha. While "citta" has a wide range of meanings in early Sanskrit, the most adequate non-technical translation of the term is "thought." As for "vritti," it means "turning," and is related to the -vert in the English words introvert ("turned inward") and extrovert ("turned outward") as well as invert, subvert, pervert, revert, and so forth. Nirodha is a term meaning "stoppage" or "restraint" in Sanskrit. A simple translation of yoga-citta-vritti-nirodha should then read something like "Yoga is the stoppage of the turnings of thought." But simple is not the first word that comes to mind when looking at the ways people have read this or the other sutras of Patanjali's work. By way of illustration, here is a sampling of twenty-two from among the many, many English translations—by critical scholars, yoga gurus, and everyone in between—of those four words. Note that with four exceptions (translations 8, 10, 15, and 17), the word order of the English translations is yoga-nirodha-vritti-citta:

†	a.	b.	c.	d.
	*1. Concentration (yoga)	is the hindering	of the modifications	of the thinking principle.
	*2. Yoga	is the suppression	of the functions	of the thinking principle.
	*3. Yoga	is the restriction	of the fluctuations	of the mind-stuff.
	*4. Yoga	is the shutdown	of the processes	of the mental capacity.
	*5. Yoga	is the cessation	of the turnings	of thought.
	*6. Yoga	is the stilling	of the modifications	of the mind.
	*7. Disciplined meditation	involves the cessation	of the functioning	of ordinary awareness.
	*8. We become whole	by stopping	turns.>>	<<how the mind
	*9. Yoga	is the cessation	of movements	in the consciousness.
	*10. Yoga	is the ability to direct	toward an object and sustain that direction without any distractions.>>	<<the mind exclusively
	*11. Yoga	is the cessation	of [the misidentification with] the modifications	of the mind.
	*12. Yoga	is the inhibition	of the modifications	of the mind.
	*13. Yoga	is to still	the patternings	of consciousness.
	*14. Yoga	is the restriction	of the fluctuations	of consciousness.
	*15. Yoga	is preventing	from going around in circles.>>	<<thought

†	a.	b.	c.	d.
	*16. Yoga	is the control	of thought-waves	in the mind.
	*17. Yoga	is the restraining	from taking various forms.>>	<<of the mind-stuff
	*18. Yoga happens	when there is stilling (in the sense of continual and vigilant watchfulness)	of the movement	of thought—without expression or suppression—in the indivisible intelligence in which there is no movement.
	*19. Yoga	is the restraint	of the fluctuations	of the mind.
	*20. Yoga	is the stilling	of the changing states	of the mind.
	*21. Yoga	is the icy silence	of post-disintegration.	
	*22. Yoga	is the control	of the (moral) character	of thought.

Among all of these, it is the fifth, by Barbara Stoler Miller, that comes closest to the “literal” reading of the words in this aphorism. While others may be read more as interpretations than translations, one might be inclined—in an information age in which opinion is so often confused with knowledge—to mix and match different columns in the hope of reaching some

sort of consensus, a “Patanjalian definition of Yoga by committee.” So, for example, one could, by combining $a_9 + b_{21} + c_{11} + d_7$, come up with the following: “Yoga is the icy silence of the [misidentification with] the modifications of ordinary awareness.” Taking another tack, $a_{12} + b_4 + c_{22} + d_{15}$ would yield “Yoga is the shutdown [of] the [moral] character of thought from going around in circles.” On the basis of this not entirely scientific exercise, it is safe to conclude that Patanjali’s prose opens the way for a cacophony of interpretations sufficient to blow out the eardrums of even the most earnest of seeker every time he or she seeks

† to find authentic meaning in its sacred chants. Perhaps Swami Shankarananda came closest to the point in a poem he wrote, which appears in the preface to Hariharananda Aranya’s excellent *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*:

To catch the mind and keep it still,
Is no small problem for my porous will;
As many times as I shut it down,
Unceasing thoughts on me rebound
In youth I tried through alcohol,
To ease my stress and cool my gall;
In later years I turned to grass,
The effects were good—but did not last.
At last with failing hopes I turned,
To Eastern paths, and my soul yearned
To scale the mystic heights of bliss.
Alas, no easy message this.

And now with age and turmoil weary,
All that's left me is this query:
Will heart break or mind implode,
Before my vrittis do nirode.

Given its robust commentarial and critical history and the high esteem in which it and its author are held by scholars, devout Hindus, and the modern-day yoga subculture in both India and the West, one might assume that the *Yoga Sutra* has been, like the Bible for Christians and Jews, a perennial Indian “classic.” As will be shown in the chapters that follow, this has not been the case. For several hundred years prior to its “discovery” by a British Orientalist in the early 1800s, the *Yoga Sutra* had been a lost tradition. As a result, scribes had stopped copying *Yoga Sutra* manuscripts (because no one cared to read them) and instruction in Yoga philosophy had been dropped from the traditional Hindu curriculum (because no one cared to recite or memorize the sutras).

In the wake of this long hiatus, the “recovery” that followed the text’s rediscovery was a tortured process, generating much sound and fury, often signifying nothing, as its many modern interpreters projected their fantasies, preconceptions, hopes, dreams, and personal agendas onto Patanjali’s work in unprecedented ways. As a result, the *Yoga Sutra* has been something of a battered orphan for the better part of the last two centuries, often abused by well-meaning or not-so-well-meaning experts and dilettantes, mystics

and pragmatists, reformers and reactionaries who have seized upon it as a source of political, intellectual, or symbolic capital.

Much of the balance of this book will be devoted to tracing the fractured history of these modern appropriations and contestations, which have carried the *Yoga Sutra's* legacy across the oceans and over the snowy peaks of the Himalayan Shangri-la, zigzagging between Kolkata, London, Berlin, Varanasi, Chicago, New York, Chennai, Mysore, Los Angeles, and many, many, places in between. Most curiously—and this is what sets the *Yoga Sutra* and its philosophical system apart from every other Indian school—is that this is not the first time that Patanjali's work has been carried far beyond the borders of the Indian subcontinent. This had already occurred in the tenth and eleventh centuries, when extensive *Yoga Sutra* commentaries were written in Arabic and Old Javanese. When one adds to these the ever-growing number of *Yoga Sutra* translations, commentaries, and studies currently being published in seemingly every language on the planet (Japanese, Estonian, Turkish, and Polish, to name a few), the picture that emerges is of something entirely new: an Indian scriptural and philosophical tradition that is truly cosmopolitan, embedded in every part of the world, even if only recently rediscovered in the land of its birth. However, before we turn to these non-Indian appropriations of the *Yoga Sutra*, we must first situate Patanjali's work and its original Indian readers in their ancient and medieval contexts.