

Free Joy: Enquire Within



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by Jane Wiesner

Self understanding
through the insight
of Patanjali

‘If you can control the rising of the mind into ripples, you will experience Yoga.’

PATANJALI, YOGA SUTRAS

For thousands of years the wisdom of yoga has captivated our hearts. What is it about this ancient art that we find so rewarding? If we take a look into the heart of yoga we find it has much to offer. Sure, there are the physical benefits of working with our own body resistance and the yoga movements and poses that not only strengthen and tone the body but also massage the body's internal organs, re-oxygenate the blood and improve the posture. There are the therapeutic and calming benefits of meditation (*dhyana*) and yogic breathing (*pranayama*) as well as the deep relaxation of the Corpse Pose (*Shavasana*). But apart from all of this, yoga has something even more precious to offer us. For, although often grounded in the physical, yoga is very much about the mind.

Classical yogic texts such as the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali take ancient yogic wisdom and offer it to us as a recipe for healthy, happy living. Patanjali's *sutras*, which are short aphorisms on connected themes, show us ways to experience true inner peace and joy. In fact, Dr Georg Feuerstein refers to the *Yoga Sutras* as a 'psycho-technology' – a system of knowledge promoting health, self-discovery and psychological wellbeing.

The chaos of human history, along with the obvious complexities of human nature, tell us that although we have conquered many obstacles our greatest challenge lies in understanding ourselves. In spiritual traditions, the *self* identity (ego identity) must be transcended in order for us to move to the *Self* identity (purusha or pure spirit). But this transition or change is often misunderstood. The emphasis has been placed on altruism when, in truth, this change is much more profound. Its attainment necessitates a radical shift in our sense of consciousness; a shift that embraces the seer, the transcendental self within us.

In classical yoga, the seer is like the mirror of the mind and for it to reflect without distortion the mind must be free from the fluctuations of consciousness. The *Yoga Sutras* (1:2) state that: "Yoga is a restriction of the fluctuations of consciousness." The goal of yoga is to de-clutter the mind and this is usually achieved through meditation, which restricts the modifications of mind-stuff by stilling the flux of mental activity, creating a peaceful mind. When we are able to go beyond the self and eliminate the subliminal reactors generated from past events, then we touch the true Self within us.

The *Yoga Sutras* discuss the eight limbs of yoga, which include meditation, breathing techniques, postures and the ethics of yoga. Patanjali likens the concepts of selflessness and selfishness to pleasure and pain respectively – suggesting that if our actions become too selfish and self-obsessed we lose our ability to empathise and identify with others. The irony is, this kind of tunnel vision only serves to cause us pain. By being self-involved and ignoring the needs of others we inevitably deny ourselves the pleasure derived from the self-respect born from positive social contact.

Patanjali, in his *Yoga Sutras*, deals first and foremost with perspective – how we see the world. The sutras teach that there are basically two ways we can experience perspective – objectively or subjectively.

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This may sound simple, but when you think about it, Western society's attempts to teach us 'objectivity' (sometimes through pious or fundamentalist beliefs) can end up just causing us pain, guilt and confusion. True objectiveness is not about self-condemnation, self-degradation, blame and accusation, but instead is about being insightful, aware and free from deceptive judgements, assumptions and criticisms. It is about exposing the myths that construct our thinking and, in turn, giving us a deeper level of mental understanding.

Patanjali claims that the totality of the mind has three aspects. The first, *manas* (lower mind), is our desiring mind; the part of the mind that really wants that piece of chocolate. Sigmund Freud would refer to this as our primal drive – the instinct or

desire to gain pleasure and avoid pain. *Manas* can block the liberation of the mind by binding us to sensory objects. The second part of the mind, *abamkara* (the 'I' maker, or ego), reflects our identity. It is who we see ourselves to be, based on our experiences and history. The third part of the mind is *buddhi*, the wisdom faculty. *Buddhi*, the deepest aspect of the human psyche, is the discerning part of the mind – our higher mind. *Buddhi* infinitely connects us to the universe. It is our intuitive mind.

Patanjali explains that our suffering comes from ignoring the wisdom of *buddhi* and being governed by the conflicts manifested by *ahamkara* and *manas*. For example, when we emotionally regurgitate old wounds, mentally reliving past events, or when we resort to negative habits like

overeating, gambling, drug-taking etc. we are ignoring the inner wisdom of *buddhi*. In other words, *buddhi* wisdom would have us reject judgemental beliefs and self-destructive behaviour.

How do you achieve *buddhi* wisdom? You can achieve this state through meditation and through mindfulness (becoming an observer of thoughts). Over time, meditation frees the mind from the psychological burdens of anxiety. And one of the goals of Patanjali's yoga is to teach you how to dwell in the *buddhi* state by becoming an *observer* of thoughts rather than a *reactor* to circumstances. This doesn't mean that you cease to function as an individual, nor does it mean that the other parts of the mind disappear. It just means that you will become wiser and more discerning in the way you live your

Yoga practice gives you techniques such as meditation, breathing and asana (the physical postures and movements) as working tools to create health, vitality and inner strength. After practising yoga for some time you will undoubtedly find that the outside world has less power over your emotions. Yoga will teach you to emote from a place of peace and discernment. That's not to say that you will become cold and unfeeling. But rather than blaming anyone or anything else for your feelings, your feelings will be owned completely by you.

life and less dominated by your past life and the negative attachments of the ego personality. Your perspective will become less subjective and more objective - you will learn to live in the present rather than being prompted by past judgements and sensory enticements.

Albert Ellis's Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) is based on much the same concept of the mind. In fact, Ellis claims that REBT arose from his study of philosophy, in particular, Eastern philosophy. REBT suggests that by understanding the things that 'push our buttons' and by having effective methods of dealing with life's obstacles we become immune to negative emotions. Ellis recognises our need for psychological liberation and his therapeutic techniques teach us how to achieve it.

Where REBT helps by teaching you to rationalise your way through each situation, yoga works in two ways. Yogic philosophy, like REBT, teaches you to think on a higher level, where thoughts are not coloured by past prejudice or judgements. Yoga practice gives you techniques such as meditation, breathing and *asana* (the physical postures and movements) as working tools to create health, vitality and inner strength. After practising yoga for some time you will undoubtedly find that the outside world has less power over your

emotions. Yoga will teach you to emote from a place of peace and discernment. That's not to say that you will become cold and unfeeling. But rather than blaming anyone or anything else for your feelings, your feelings will be owned completely by you. But remember: effort brings reward. The more often you practise yoga, the greater your rewards - emotionally as well as physically.

I believe that my beautiful dog Barney, who recently passed away, reflected the essence of yoga. Barney's big, brown eyes had a depth of understanding that seemed immeasurable. His love glowed with pure acceptance and faith. Perhaps the key to my precious dog's 'yogic state' is found in the fact that he never felt unloved. Human beings, on the other hand, often have to deal with various forms of disapproval and it is how we learn to deal with disapproval that ultimately determines who we think we are. Yoga helps us to dig down deep beyond the negative aspects of life and find the inner essence of our being - the joy within us. We learn to approve of ourselves.

I truly believe that, contrary to many beliefs, it is not a crime to love and approve of ourselves. Without a deep and abiding respect for our own self, how can we even begin to love others? How can we become the Self we aspire to be? Jean Paul Sartre, the French existentialist, once said that we

invent ourselves. Sartre believed that we create a mental image of who we are based on our internal dialogue and our relationship with the world. He also claimed that we have a universal responsibility to relate to ourselves and to treat others with the deepest respect and dignity. Sartre concluded that, in essence, no 'thing' or no 'one' can control our thoughts unless we allow it to happen. This notion of liberated thought brings us back to Patanjali, who teaches us that: "As the mind, so the man; bondage or liberation are in your own mind."

The ultimate goal of Patanjali's yoga is the liberation of the mind. As we have discussed, there are a number of things we can do to create the 'yogic' mentality. First and foremost there's meditation. Meditation is thought of by some in the West as a catalyst for psychoanalytic catharsis - ridding us of the unconscious, subliminal thoughts that prompt us to react over-emotionally. Through meditation we find a magic silence that permeates our being. In this inner quietness and stillness there is infinite peace and tranquillity. In order for us to touch this peace we need to live a yogic existence - practice, practice, practice... And, by practice I'm not just talking about the physical - I'm also speaking of abiding by the ethics of yoga, being mindful and meditating regularly.

Sure, in the reality of life it's not easy to feel totally serene all the time. There will be plenty of times when you feel like you're teetering on losing it, but if you become a meditator those times will get fewer and further between. If you persevere with meditation and perhaps seek out the knowledge of yogic tradition, you will inevitably learn coping mechanisms that free you from the bondage of your own mind and help you to think with much more clarity. And ultimately this yogic path will lead you to the state of *samadhi* (ecstasy or bliss); one's identification with the Transcendental Self - pure liberation. Nonetheless, if this goal is too much to hope for we can at least achieve liberation from negative thought patterns.

Finding happiness and being liberated from suffering is something we all want. The American *Declaration of Independence* is a profound and important historical document. In it there is a statement that every person has the right to "life, liberty

and the pursuit of happiness.” Unfortunately, human nature being as it is, we often have difficulty in freely and openly pursuing our own happiness – altruism demands that we sacrifice our wants and needs in order to help others. But the irony is that our happiness is the very best gift we can give others. When we truly experience happiness we glow from inside out and we share our joy with everyone around us. Have you ever seen the Dalai Lama frown? His happiness has given the world so much joy.

The pursuit of happiness is not something to be ashamed of. It’s the way we *define* happiness that causes us grief. When we attach our happiness to objects, we give away our psychological freedom. Gautama the Buddha once said that bliss is our natural state of being. But, like the layers of an onion, we cover our true essence with barriers constructed from anxiety; invisible armour that we unconsciously hope will protect us from our fears. Yoga helps us to shed our fears and anxieties; it helps us to liberate our thinking – to be happy.

In sutra 1:33, Patanjali gives us sound advice for ensuring happiness in our relationships when he suggests that happiness is a peaceful mind and this cannot be achieved if we react negatively to others. Patanjali says that the key to successful relationships lies in applying the following four key principles when dealing with particular types of people – friendliness (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), delight (*mudita*) and disregard (*upekshanam*). With happy (*sukha*) people, act with friendliness; with unhappy (*dubkha*) people act with compassion; with virtuous (*apunya*) people, act with delight and with wicked (*vishayanam*) people, act with indifference or disregard.

To explain this further, let me put it this way. When we act friendly to happy people we do away with jealousy; when we act with compassion with unhappy people we let go of impatience and our behaviour helps them heal; when we act with delight with virtuous people we let go of envy. And, by disregarding wicked people we distance ourselves from negativity and harm. It’s not that we don’t care, nor does it mean that we turn our back on helping to prevent this kind of wickedness on a collective level. It just means that when faced with a situation – one on one – such as road rage, we don’t

buy into it; we don’t allow ourselves to get immersed in other people’s anger or rage. According to Patanjali, if you control the way you react to others you control your own peace of mind.

Apart from philosophical models and meditation techniques, other ways Patanjali teaches us to achieve liberation and samadhi are through deep and repetitive breath control practices (*pranayama*) and the focused practise of postures (*asana*). Patanjali states that where the mind goes, the *prana* (energy or life force) follows. What this means is that our thoughts affect our breath and our

quite understandable. Anger takes place in the primitive (limbic) area of the brain. This part of the brain is responsible for the sympathetic response of the autonomic nervous system creating the ‘fight or flight’ response. Many of us are running on this fight or flight response daily and our actions and reactions reflect this. According to Dr Ian Gawler, because of the way we internalise stress we are often left in a physical state of unresolved tension and this stressed state causes enormous wear and tear on the body. If left in this state for too long we would eventually just wear ourselves out.

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breath can influence our thoughts. When we are agitated our breathing becomes heavy and when we are relaxed our breath settles, sometimes even slowing to a state of natural, automatic retention (*kumbhaka*). In sutra 1:34, Patanjali states that “when you regulate the breath you regulate the mind.”

When you experience the utter calmness of controlled breathing, meditation and other forms of yoga practice it becomes easier to control your responses to life and you learn not to react from an emotive or illogical place. I personally believe that it would almost be a feat of magic to make a person angry when they first come out of an intensive yoga practice. Scientifically, the restfulness and repose of a yogic state is

The fight or flight response is nature’s way of prompting us to act or flee in the event of a threat. When this physical reaction takes place the body adapts by initiating an intense, reactive phase where it biologically prepares to either run away (take flight) or stand up and fight – digestion ceases, adrenaline pumps through the body, the heart speeds up and accordingly the blood races, the muscles tense in preparation for action and the body generally goes into ‘danger mode’.

When we meditate, practise asanas or just generally wind down, the body goes into the opposite state – the para-sympathetic response. This response creates balance in the body. It returns the body to a harmonious state: the muscles relax, the

breathing eases, the heart rate slows and the body's internal system functions without obstruction. This state is called homeostasis and this physically calming process can be induced by practising yoga.

While discussing physicality, let's refer back to Albert Ellis's Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) which was mentioned earlier. It is interesting to note that another comparison between Patanjali's teachings and REBT is that yoga has the ability to influence our emotions and feelings by working with physical movements and actions. Ellis claims that human beings don't just think – they *think, feel* and *act* in an integrated response to stimulus. By using the psycho-technology of yoga we can work with the body and the breath to create a change in mood – to change our feelings. Instead of approaching problems from a purely psychological perspective, like we might do while undergoing conventional therapy, with physical yoga practice we work backwards. Instead of emotional to physical we work from physical to emotional. By changing our physical state we can change our psychological state.

In short, Patanjali suggests that your entire outside world is based on your thoughts and mental attitude. In other words, your world is basically your projection and subject to your perception. When you are faced with a dilemma, you can control the way you see the situation. According to Patanjali, proper use of yoga techniques and the study of its philosophy has the power to liberate you from ingrained reactions and the unconscious programming of learned responses. Yoga can help to set you free. Yogic philosophy teaches that your heart and your mind are in your own hands; happiness is inherently yours. Yoga can show you how to live in the moment and, from the perspective of consciousness itself, the moment is all we really have.

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