

Introduction to the Yoga Sutras

Historical background

[2148 words]

As with many texts of a spiritual tradition, there is considerable debate among scholars as to the date and the composition of the Yoga Sutras. Peter Connolly looks at some of these debates (Connolly p 139). Scholar's guesses range from the fourth century BC to the fourth century AD. There is also debate as to whether Patanjali was a single person, or actually more than one person.

Not only is there debate about the dating of the material in the Yoga Sutras, but also there is debate about the composition. The Yoga Sutras are divided into four books. Some academics argue the Yoga Sutras form a unified work. Others that it is a unified work apart from the ashtanga section. Others that it is in two parts – Books 1 to 3 and separately Book 4. Others that Book 1 is the main part and the rest were later additions.

Buddha is believed to have lived and taught mostly in the north eastern part of ancient India sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE. There are conflicting theories over whether the Buddha was influenced by the yogic tradition or vice versa. There is also debate as to whether the concepts in the Yoga Sutras came out of the Sankhya Karikar or the Upanishads.

Whatever their origin, the Yoga Sutras remain one of the central texts of Yoga. They come out of a time when teaching was by word of mouth, rather than by the written word. A *sutra* is an aphorism, or principle - a brief, pithy statement that was intended to be memorised and repeated. They were typically difficult to interpret, and they were usually taught alongside commentaries.

With all of these varying opinions, along with the different philosophies and teachings prevalent in that region at that time and uncertainties as to what was influencing what, along with linguistic and translation issues, and cultural reference issues - it is not so easy to winkle out what these texts actually mean. All of the commentators and translators will be bringing their own world-view perspectives to this work as well. This is the bubbling pot of philosophical soup from which we are trying to extract some coherent meaning.

Format of the Yoga Sutras

In the Yoga Sutras, there are 195 (or 196) aphorisms divided into four chapters or '*pada*'. These four Books or Padas are:

1. Samadhi Pada: This is about what yoga is and what it is aiming at. It explores the different aspects of Samadhi, different kinds of knowledge, different kinds of concentration and spiritual practice (abhyasa) and gives us a clue about the process and consequence of introspective contemplation.
2. Sadhana Pada: This is about yoga and about practising it. It explores the obstacles to progress (kleshas). It explores the way of practising the discipline (sadhana) and the eight (asht) limbs (anga) of yoga, together with the effects and consequences of this practice.
3. Vibhuti Pada: This is about the powers or accomplishments. It explores the last three of the eight limbs (all three together called samyama) and the possible achievements (siddhis or psychic

powers). It explores this in a context of bringing tranquillity to the mind and purity to the consciousness - leading to a state of perfection (kaivalya).

4. Kaivalya Pada: This is about liberation or absoluteness. It explores the characteristics of mind, and of consciousness (atman or purusha), and how they relate. It explores how these are affected by spiritual practice (sadhana) leading to a full awareness of pure consciousness – and the freedom and bliss that goes with it.

The Essence of the Yoga Sutras

Here I am not trying to summarise all of the Yoga Sutras. Rather to highlight some main concepts and principles. Hopefully, it will mean that there is some degree of familiarity with the terms when you encounter them when reading the text

I think what the Yoga Sutras are all about is described at the very beginning, stating what yoga is. Chapter 1 verse 2 [1:2] states, “*Yoga citta vritti nirodaha*” - ‘yoga’ is the absence or control (nirodaha) of these *vritti*. You can think of each thought that you think as a ripple or wave (vritti) in the consciousness or in the fabric of the mind-stuff (chitta). So ‘yoga’ is being able to be completely still in your head-space, or to have control over your thinking.

There are two really significant concepts that you find in the Yoga Sutras. Actually, these are not specific to the Yoga Sutras. You encounter these words and concepts in many texts, the Upanishads, Sankya, the Bhagavad Gita. The first is that of ‘*Purusha*’ or ‘Atman’ or Seer. In 2:20, we see that, “purusha or atman is pure consciousness”. It is unchangeable, was never created and is unchanged by death. On the other hand there is ‘*prakriti*’ which is of stuff that was created. Our bodies are of prakriti, so too all of the material world. Our real essence, that part inside us that is aware of our own thinking, that is purusha. We look at our bodies and think ‘that is me’. We look at all of the attributes of our being in this body and think, ‘all of this makes up me’. The Yoga Sutras say this is invalid or wrong or in ignorance. In 2:23 we see, “the atman or purusha is identified with prakriti.” We think we are the body, we identify with prakriti, and we have lost the distinction between the awareness and that of which the awareness is aware. This identification [2:24] is caused by ignorance (avidya). In 4:25 “the man of discrimination, or one who sees the distinction between mind and purusha, ceases to see the mind as purusha”. This concept of avidya is another central concept of the Yoga Sutras, together with what to do about it. This ignorance is [2.5] to regard the impermanent (anitya) as permanent or eternal (nitya), the impure (asucho) as pure (suchi), the painful (dukha) as pleasant (sukha), and the non-Atman (anatmasu) as the Atman.

This ignorance is dispelled or removed [2:26] by working towards discrimination (viveka).

Another significant concept in the Yoga Sutras is to do with the obstacles or afflictions [2:3] (kleshas) that impede our progress toward enlightenment. There are various obstacles. The sense of ‘I’ (asmita) that makes me see myself as a separate individual, separate from you. We look at the world around us, we see things, we identify things as yours and mine. I want to hang on to my stuff

(attachment - raga). We feel things. We desire some things, we have an aversion (dvesha) to other things. We act and we cling to life (abhinivesah). These obstacles or kleshas all have their roots in ignorance. There are a number of verses detailing the kleshas, and what is required to remove them.

Avidya is destroyed [2.26] by awakening discrimination (viveka) and this can be done via the practice of the Eight Limbs (*asht* = eight, *anga* = limb) [2.28]. This is one of the core teachings of the Yoga Sutras - what the Eight Limbs are and how to practice them. These can be summarised:

1. The various forms of abstention from evil-doing (yama) or basic rules of good conduct. These are [2.30] abstention from harming others (ahimsa), from falsehood (satya), from theft (asteya), from promiscuity (brahmacharya), and from greed (aparigraha).
2. The various observances or commitments (niyama), 2.32 The niyamas (observances) are purity (saucha), contentment (samtosha), mortification or accepting pain (tapa), study (svadhyaya) and devotion to God (Isvarapranidhanani)
3. Posture (asana)
4. Control of the prana (pranayama)
5. Withdrawal of the mind from the sense objects (pratyahara)
6. Concentration (dharana)
7. Meditation (dhyana)
8. Absorption in the Atman (samadhi)

Concentration (dharana) [3.1] is holding or binding the mind to one place. Meditation [3.2] (dhyana) is an unbroken flow of thought toward the object of concentration. Samyama [3.4] is the practice of combining these last three anga - concentration (dharana), meditation (dhyana) and absorption (Samadhi) - upon one subject. There are numerous ways of practising samyama with various effects. In its highest form [3.55] correct application of samyama leads to real discriminative knowledge (viveka) and then there is no trace of avidya. At this point [3.56] the tranquil mind is pure and there is perfection or liberation or kaivalya. Also with this you are free, no more birth, no more death.

Two other concepts need a mention. Karma refers to the principle of the inevitable consequence of action. We cannot escape the consequences. Every thought and every action has a consequence. Good actions lead to good or pleasant consequences. Bad actions lead to bad or unpleasant consequences. In this perspective we are responsible for what is happening to us in our lives – not random chance, not anyone or anything else. We are. To me, this feels like justice. Karma, as a concept, sits beside reincarnation. We are born with an allotted karma that determines much of our life journey. We have a bucket full of karma generated in previous lives. During this life we think and act, and that creates more karma that goes into the bucket. All of this needs to be accounted for, and we continue in the cycle of birth and rebirth until it is. In 2.12 “the cause or root of a man’s latent tendencies have been created by his past thoughts and actions. These tendencies or karmas will bear fruit both in this life and in lives to come”. Also, 2.13 “So long as the cause or root (mula) exists, it will bear fruit – such as rebirth of a species, with its appropriate life span (ayuh) and the

experiences of pleasure and pain (bhoga). One of the aims of yoga practice is to empty this bucket of karma. This leads to freedom from birth and rebirth (mukti).

So, through avidya, we identify with the vritti. As we continue to act and think, the vritti develop channels or tendencies (samskaras), and these remain and build up. It is these samskaras, these karmas, these effects of our own thinking and acting both now and in past lives that is the underlying cause of the births we take, both the life we are currently in and future births. Not only are these the cause of the births we undergo, but also of the pain and pleasure experienced in those births. So, caught up in avidya with vritti unchecked, we think and we act. The consequence of this is that we remain in the cycle of birth and rebirth, this Wheel of reincarnation, this state of discomfort (dukha). This is a depiction of the fundamental problem that 'yoga' aims to fix.

The vritti are controlled [1.12] by practice (abhyasa) and by non-attachment (vairagya). These abhyasa are concentration type practices. There are various kinds and degrees of effort with differing effects. The end aim of this practice is nirbija Samadhi, [1:51] this wipes out all samskaras and effects of samskaras. At that point you are free, no more birth, no more death. These concentration abhyasa need to be done in conjunction with vairagya. In its highest form [1.15,1.16] vairagya is self-mastery, and you are no longer disturbed by the distracting influences within or around you. Hence the abhyasa and vairagya together address the production of and identification with the vritti.

Another key element of the Yoga Sutras relates to Ishwara. In 1:24 we read, "Ishwara is a special kind of Being, untouched by ignorance or affliction (klesha) and the products of ignorance, not subject to karmas or samskaras or the results of actions (vipaka)." You could translate Ishwara as God or the Divine. In 1:23, concentration as a spiritual practice can also be attained through devotion to Ishwara (ishwara pranidhanam). This leads to discussing the concentration techniques of mantra (a word or phrase) and japa (the practice of repeating that mantra) [1:27 and 1:28].

The end result of this practice is liberation or kaivalya. At this point [4:34] the Atman shines forth in its own pristine nature, as pure consciousness. There is no more ignorance (avidya), there are no more obstacles (kleshas), there is no more birth and rebirth.

In Conclusion

This very broadly, depicts some of the main concepts and principles of the Yoga Sutras, some of the issues and what is to be done about them, where these practices lead and why you might want to start this journey. There are many threads and concepts not mentioned here. The Yoga Sutras are one of the main texts of yoga available to us today and they contain much deep wisdom. I think it is useful to read it and understand what they are saying as much as possible. Then, hopefully take the next step and incorporate it into how you live your life (shrada).

Very much in a nutshell - the yoga of the Yoga Sutras is about scrubbing your soul until it shines. Have you experienced that shining light and bliss of a pure, unfettered soul yet? No? Then keep scrubbing.

Bibliography

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