
*Exploring an ancient teaching
on liberation*

Seeing

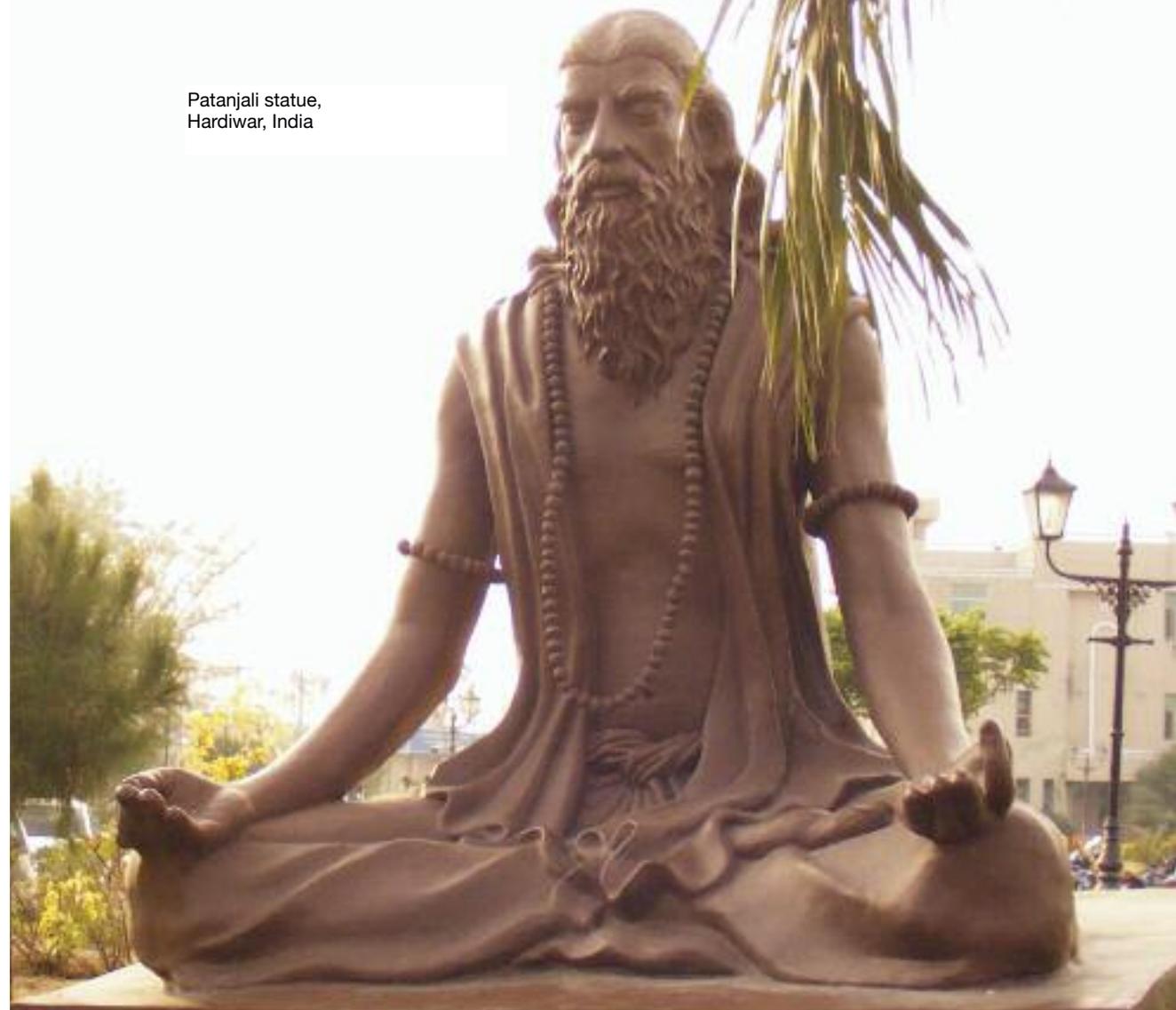
and the Yoga Sutra

Dolphi Wertenbaker

THE YOGA SUTRA of Patanjali is the foundational and earliest text on yoga. Dating from about the fifth century BCE, it reflects an oral tradition in existence long before. The Yoga Sutra defines yoga as a state of sustained voluntary attention (YS 1:2). Many practices are suggested; however, an individual is meant to follow one. The ultimate goal of yoga, Patanjali says, is freedom or independence (*kaivalya*) of seeing (YS 2:25).

Freedom of seeing. This is such a striking concept: what does it mean? Why freedom of seeing rather than freedom of the seer? Patanjali speaks of a fundamental confusion and entanglement between the perceiver and the perceived, intrinsic to human nature, and the cause of our suffering (YS 2:17). He says that the experiences of life are given us so that we might learn to distinguish perceiver and perceived (YS 2:18, 23). According to *Samkhya*, the system of thought commonly

Patanjali statue,
Hardiwar, India



accepted in Patanjali's time, in every living being there is something unchanging called *purusha*. Everything else is *prakriti*. Purusha represents the "master" in ourselves. Prakriti, according to Patanjali, has a dual role: to be experienced, and to help towards liberation (YS 2:18). Among the synonyms for purusha is *drashata*, the perceiver. Thus, what Patanjali calls the perceiver is an aspect of this something deep inside that never changes (and does not die). Other synonyms for purusha, or the perceiver, show that it is pervasive throughout the being (*atma*), gives life (*jeeva*), and is the energy behind

knowing (*chit*). These ideas take us to a subtle realm. Ordinarily, we think of what is perceived as external and the perceiver as ourselves. Science has elucidated a great deal about how perception takes place: the functioning of the sense organs and the many levels of processing in the brain. Yet, for Patanjali, all of this, no matter how fine, is still in the realm of prakriti. The perceiver is other.

The perceiver is by nature free and independent. Not so the seeing, because the seeing passes through our mind and senses (YS 2:20). The perceiver is of a different order from both the perceived

and the instrument of perception. The instrument of perception is ourselves—body and mind. We think we distinguish perceiver from perceived, e.g., I am not that chocolate; or perceiver from instrument, e.g., I am not my body; or even: I am not me. Yet that is not how we live. Furthermore, we all know of the blind spot in our vision, yet we never notice it: the mind routinely fills in what is missing. This is true metaphorically as well. Patanjali says that when we are in the state of yoga, the perceiver appears and we see reality as it is (YS 1:3). Otherwise, what we see are the projections of our own mind, which we take for reality (YS 1:4). The implications are important for our lives, because how we see determines our understanding, which is the basis for action.

How do we move towards true perception? In the beginning, Patanjali says, our “seeing” is a mixture of memory and imagination (YS 1:42). In Sanskrit, memory refers to everything we know from the past, along with habit and cultural conditioning. In order to have a clear perception of a chosen object, memory must be completely purified of its own content (YS 1:43). Rarely this happens in a moment of epiphany; more often a process is involved. For example, if I want to understand breathing, at first there is the image of everything I have been taught about lungs, and various personal associations. Gradually, if I return to the study again and again, I may have a direct perception of a kind of subtle circulation throughout the body. For Patanjali, the functioning of the mind must remain intact, yet not bring in extraneous material.

The fundamental problem, according to Patanjali, is *avidya*, a kind of “non knowing.” He defines this as taking things for their opposites, for example mistaking the temporal for the eternal, or non-self

for self (YS 2:5). We live our lives as though we would live forever: this is *avidya*. We are not generally aware of *avidya*, but we can recognize its offshoots, especially false identification, ego, reactivity, and fear. Under the influence of *avidya*, we go about our lives in ways that get us into trouble. Thus, *avidya* leads to suffering. Yet this suffering is what motivates us to do something. Recognizing our pain and our true situation is the first step on the path of wisdom. The moments of recognition create a sense of space, a foretaste of the freedom of seeing.

If yoga is a state of sustained attention and its purpose is freedom of seeing, what is the path of yoga? Patanjali lays out an eight-part path. First is a set of ideals in our attitude toward others: non-violence, telling the truth, not stealing, faithfulness in relationship, and non-grasping. Second, in our attitude toward ourselves: cleanliness, contentment, effort, self-study, surrendering the results of action. The virtues are familiar, yet for Patanjali, the purpose is not salvation or goodness. The purpose is to help cultivate a certain quality of mind. Then, there is *asana* or work with the body, what we generally think of as yoga in the West. The aim here is to develop the qualities of stability and ease (YS 2:46). Then there is conscious breathing, which results in a turning inward and a lifting of the “veils which obscure our inner light” (YS 2:52, 54). Finally, concentration is possible, and then the deeper states of meditation. The essence of the eightfold path is also contained in a single practice, the yoga of action. Here, one tries to bring to all the actions of life three aspects: effort, self-inquiry, and an open attitude about results (YS 2:1).

Patanjali says that states of attention and disturbance fluctuate in us from moment to

moment. Furthermore, what is present in a part of us tends to spread throughout the whole system (YS 3:9). This is why thoughts and feelings affect health and also why doing something with the body affects the mind and emotions. For example, I may be upset by some offensive interaction with someone, and unable to shake the agitation. Yet if I do a short practice with yoga postures, I might feel much lighter about it afterward. Similarly, attending to one’s breathing may change everything.

In Samkhya thought, the states we experience, like all *prakriti*, are made up of three qualities, called *gunas*. The *gunas* are: *rajas* (expansion, movement), *tamas* (mass, rigidity), and *sattva* (illumination, lightness). What is essential for perception is predominantly *sattva* *guna*. We ourselves can be thought of as the “container” in which perception takes place. The *guna* quality of this container is affected by everything in our lives, including food,

thought, activity, and so on. In order for perception to be true, this “container” must have an appropriate *guna* quality. The practices of yoga take us in this direction, using a variety of approaches.

Ultimately, Patanjali speaks of change in ourselves occurring indirectly. He describes what needs to happen as being like a farmer who simply opens a gate in his irrigation system to let water flow (YS 4:3). We do not bring the water where it needs to go, nor even command it to go there. Through the practice of yoga, somehow an obstacle is removed and the water is allowed to flow.

In a similar way, freedom of seeing can appear.

Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra shows that the difficulty we have in seeing clearly and freely is part of being human. Moreover it is the cause of suffering. However, the means to free our seeing are also inherent in our nature. |

