

Introduction to Yoga Philosophy

2: Yoga Sutra of Patanjali

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Patanjali's work on Yoga, the *Yogasutra*, consists of 195 (or according to some, 194) *sutras* divided into four parts (*padas*), meaning quarters, named in sequence as *samadhi padas*, *sadhana padas*, *vibhuti padas* and *kaivalya padas*. The first and the last of these treat of the nature of the essential or immediate means (deep meditation) and ultimate object (liberation) of Yogic practice. The second part deals with the secondary level means, i. e. means leading or contributing to *samadhi*; and the third part enumerates miraculous powers resulting from the Yogic practice at an advanced stage.

The *Yogasutra* belongs to a class of literature called *sutra*ⁱ, aphorism, which is an exclusive characteristic of the Sanskrit literary tradition and is not found elsewhere in the world. It is a brief statement, with the utmost economy of words, of the essential tenets of a system. This form evolved as a mnemonic aid to the study of a system. Such a literary form could only evolve in ancient Indian tradition (of which I am too a part-product) which relied mainly on memorising the essentials of learning. We find a masterpiece of this style in Panini'sⁱⁱ *Ashtadhyayi*ⁱⁱⁱ (6th c. B.C.) which obviously cannot be the first of its kind. Other branches of learning followed suit, and in a few centuries on either side of the beginning of Christian era, we find works in *sutra* style written on a variety of subjects, – philosophical such as *Vedanta*, religious such as ritual, mundane such as erotics, and technical such as prosody. Pingala's work on Sanskrit prosody is viewed by scholars of 'combinatorics' as a successful attempt at a scheme of binary combinations which are the foundation of today's computer technology. Most of the *sutras* are composed in prose, rarely in verse.

The *sutra* style, being meant as an aid to memorise essentials of a subject, naturally depends upon detailed expositions for a comprehensive understanding of the subject. These detailed expositions were a natural sequel to the *sutra* style and were soon recognised by the name *Bhashya*^{iv}. The writers of the *Bhashyas* did not only explain the *sutras*, but also discussed issues arising from them so that a small *sutra* of a few words can generate several pages of *Bhashya*. Need for aids to understand the *Bhashyas* were felt in the course of time, and authors came forth to write commentaries on the *Bhashyas*; and it is not rare to find commentaries even on commentaries. Most of the serious ancient Sanskrit writing has evolved along these lines.

The *Yogasutra* of Patanjali is a product of this tradition and has found a worthy exponent in Vyasa (4th c. A.D.), the author of the earliest known *Bhashya* type commentary on the *Yogasutra*. Several commentaries on Vyasa's *Bhashya* came to be written during successive centuries, among which Vachaspathimishra's

Tattva Vaisharadi (9th c. A. D.), Vijnanabhikshu's *Yoga Varttika* (15th c. A.D.), and Nagesha's *Yogasutra Vritti* (18th c. A.D.) are considered the foremost. Commentaries were also written directly on the *Sutras*: King Bhoja's (12th c. A.D.) *Rajamartanda* is a conspicuous instance for its brevity and clarity. Independent treatises on the subject of Yoga, obviously founded on

Yoga aphorisms differing in style and presentation are also found, such as the *Yogasara Sangraha* of Vijnana Bhikshu. Numerous translations as well as studies of these works, and aids (such as the *Dictionary of Yoga* published by the Kaivalyadhama – an institute for the study and practice of Yoga – of Lonavla, near Pune, India) have come into existence during the last two centuries.

What are the *sutras* like? We may compare them to telegraphic messages which are worded so as to achieve maximum economy of words and, at the same time, clarity of expression. Obvious verbs and unnecessary words are omitted in such messages. (In the days of e-mail facility, this may be considered idle talk. Does anybody, except one living in a remote village provided with a Post Office, send an old-fashioned telegraph these days?) In a like manner, verbs, mostly from a root, meaning to be, are omitted in a *sutra*; and if verbal forms are used, they are put in the most common tenses and moods. Often, the need of finite verbs is satisfied by participle forms. Compound words are used wherever possible; and words that can be borrowed from an earlier *sutra* are not repeated. As a work on discursive subjects is broadly of the nature of propositions supported by reasons, the most common cases found in the *sutras* are the nominative and the ablative. This applies more or less to the commentatorial literature also. The corollary of this situation is that if interested in reading Sanskrit philosophical texts, one need not go deep into the details of grammar. Vocabulary related to the subject and most frequent items of grammar is all that is needed to study this class of texts. It is a different thing if you wish to read classical Sanskrit poetry, drama, romances etc.

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ⁱ *Sutra* < *such* to suggest.

ⁱⁱ Panini: Hailed from a place called Shalatura (cp. Lahore) in NW India, now in Pakistan. His mother's name: Dakshi (daughter of Daksha). Patanjali is also known after his mother's name, Gonika. This reflects the matriarchal form of society which is still alive in Kerala.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ashtadhyayi*: Total number of *sutras* around 4000. Yet it covers the entire Sanskrit language with its extremely complicated structure.

^{iv} *Bhashya* < *bhash* to speak, elaborate.

NOTES

Mammata's *Kavyaprakasha* is in verse form and yet as cryptic as any *sutra* work.

The nature of *Bhashya* work lends freedom to its writer so as to make it almost an original work within the broad limits of the *sutra* work. That explains why *Bhashyas* representing contradictory views came to be written on the same *sutra* work such as the *Vedantasutra* of Badarayana. The oldest extant *Bhashya* work is found in Patanjali's *Mahabhashya* (the great *Bhashya*) on Panini. It matches its name in all respects. The only other name that stands comparison to Patanjali is that of Shankara separated from the former by about a thousand years.

The chain of commentaries is sometimes compared to a series of boxes, each accommodating a smaller one.

Number of commentaries on *Yogasutra*: 17. cf List of works on Yoga system appended to *Sarvadarshana Sangraha* (BORI, 1924).

Bhoja, in his introductory verses, has a dig at the traditional commentators: All commentators are ravaging/devastating to their readers in that:

- (1) they leave out what is really most difficult in the original text, saying it is plain;
- (2) elaborate with useless long compounds what is really plain and obvious;
- (3) create confusion by extensive verbosity which is useless where employed.

This may apply even to some present-day works.