

Restraining the Yoga Police

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This essay was inspired by the question ‘*what is yoga?*’ Texts describe the answer in many different ways, so generalisations are often misleading. Yoga is best defined in context. However, one common theme across yogic traditions is inward focus. This is often said to lead beyond the mind, and its personalisation of existence. As a result, the basic aim is self-inquiry, deconstructing illusions about identity. Ironically, many defenders of traditional yoga – as well as its critics – are often more focused on what other people do. Definitions of yoga are used as a way of imposing norms, and attempts to enforce them amount to censure by ‘the yoga police’. Drawing on quotations from yogic texts, the essay argues that policing others in the name of authenticity is itself the epitome of ‘unyogic’ conduct.



The subject of yoga is vast, but there are limits to what can be said about it. No attempt to define it can cover all aspects. However, there's a general consensus in texts that the meaning of yoga is a meditative state beyond the mind. Or in other words, to paraphrase Patañjali: "*Sit down and shut up!*"

I should probably do that. It seems a lot simpler. There's not much to add. If we fast-forward a thousand years from the *Yoga Sūtras* to the fifteenth century *Hathapradīpikā* (1:66), it says talking about yoga won't help you succeed at it. To be honest, succeeding at yoga in traditional terms sounds radically different to modern priorities. It's not about postures that look good on Instagram – more like renouncing worldly life.

We often hear about Patañjali's yoga in terms of its objective of *stilling the mind*. Yet the ultimate goal (as explained in *Yoga Sūtras* 1:16, 2:25, 4:34) is *detachment from matter*, which sounds disembodied, or basically dead. Again, the *Hathapradīpikā* (4:107) says something similar: “*The yogi who is completely released from all states and free of all thoughts remains as if dead. He is liberated. Here there is no doubt.*”

Unsurprisingly, we don't hear that message in modern marketing. It's hard to sell people workshops on spiritual suicide. Of course, there's no need to interpret such things literally – or to go all the way like an Iron Age ascetic. A few verses later, there's a subtler description (*Hathapradīpikā* 4:109): “*The yogi in samādhi knows neither smell, nor taste, nor form, nor touch, nor sound, nor himself, nor others.*”

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Although that still sounds fairly otherworldly, it's essentially a flashback to the *Katha Upanisad* (6:10–11), which gives the earliest definition of yoga in practical terms – as restraint of the mind and the senses to focus within. That same basic framework appears again and again in traditional texts. You hear it in the *Mahābhārata* (12:294.14–17), where someone “engaged in yoga” is said to be “motionless like a stone ... He neither hears nor smells nor tastes nor sees; he notices no touch, nor does [Note: his] mind form conceptions. Like a piece of wood, he does not desire anything.”

Of course, no more craving gets rid of a problem causing suffering. But do we aim to be pieces of wood? And if we're not doing that, are we not “doing yoga”, whatever that means? More to the point, is yoga something to do, or the outcome of doing it? Or do we have to stop doing things so it arises, as described in the commentary on *Yoga Sūtras* (1:1)? Ascetics of old were trying to solve a problem in the mind, which gets in the way of the underlying clarity of *samādhi*.

To over-generalise massively, the state of yoga is beyond time and space. This makes it hard to describe in conceptual terms. Yet at the same time, that's not the whole story. Other texts teach more practical versions. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (2:50) couldn't really be further from sitting like a stone – it says: “Yoga is skill in action.” Without getting sidetracked by the history behind that, it's clearly a contrast.

And that's kind of the problem. It's hard to be clear what yoga means because of all the exceptions. There are many traditions and they often disagree about methods and outcomes. Looking up the word *yoga* in the *Monier-Williams Sanskrit dictionary*, there are dozens of entries, and very few of them have anything to do with what we think of as practice – unless our practice is “magic”, or “equipping an army” by harnessing chariots. Even references to joining things together – the basis of “union” – are confusing. What's connected to what? And is connection the answer, or the source of the problem – as it is for Patañjali (*Yoga Sūtras* 2:17), whose aim is to isolate consciousness from matter?

Yoga is not a monolithic system. We often hear about Patañjali's *sūtras* because they're the roots of the *Yoga Darśana*. But there are also other schools of philosophy with different perspectives. Śāṅkarācārya, the influential founder of Advaita Vedānta, ripped Patañjali to pieces. In his commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanisad* (1:4.7), Śāṅkara asks: “Should sup-

pression of the fluctuations of the mind be practised, because it has a different purpose from the Self-realisation generated by the sayings of the Vedas, and because it is enjoined in other texts? [Note: i.e. the *Yoga Sūtras*] *No, because it is not considered a means to liberation...*”

He also says Patañjali's theory is flawed, because it's based on duality borrowed from Sāṃkhya, which describes the separation of *Purusa* and *Prakṛti*. To quote his *Brahma Sūtra* commentary (2:1.3): “By the rejection of the Sākhya tradition, the Yoga tradition too has been rejected. That is because contrary to revealed texts, the Yoga school teaches that primordial nature is an independent cause... even though this is taught neither in the Vedas nor among the people.”

So, what do we make of that? Should yoga mean *oneness* – like the underlying unity of *Ātman* and *Brahman*? But what would that imply for devotional yoga if a deity is separate and has to be worshipped? What about Buddhist yoga, where there's no Self to merge into anything else? How about Jain yoga? Sūfī yoga? Make-your-bum-look-good-in-swimwear yoga? Can we ever pin anything down if there's so much variety?

The meaning of yoga depends on the *context*, and contexts change. Objectives change too – and we each have our own. There are so many methods that none can be “right” to the exclusion of others. There's also no way to return to the “one true yoga” – a pristine state before it all got corrupted. No such purity ever existed. Throughout the history of practice, ideas have been exchanged across different traditions. They've been copied and pasted from one text to another. But that doesn't mean that anything goes – or that anything is yoga because someone says it is.

It's probably worth asking if there's anything yogic about getting drunk, or contorting with goats while they pee on your mat, to cite two recent trends. Does either help with inward focus – let alone with the goal of transcending the mind? Both of these objectives are mentioned in texts because they cut through confusion about who we are. And in many ways, the essence of yoga is self-inquiry.

Repeatedly, traditional texts say resolving confusion is what sets us free. So who are we really? Should we be trying to be “someone” with millions of followers on social media? Or should we fight back on Facebook, saying those who do that

are imposters? Is it yogic to criticise others, while promoting yourself – and potentially your business – as more purist? Regardless, that's the *modus operandi* of the “yoga police” – people who like telling other people what to do, while not always doing those things themselves.

I should probably clarify that I'm not against judgements. Patañjali says they're essential. “*The means to liberation is uninterrupted discriminative discernment*,” we read in *Yoga Sūtras* (2:26). It's really important – not just in his system – to learn to distinguish one thing from another. It's also important to put things clearly. So I'll go ahead and say it: I think that the yoga police are “unyogic”.

Not that this explains much in itself. It's really just the flip-side of asking the question ‘*what is yoga?*’ If that can be answered, there's also the opposite, which is ‘unyogic.’ Again, to be clear, I'm not saying it's wrong to say some things are wrong. Abuse tends to thrive unless people speak out, and drawing boundaries is part of a healthy approach to relationships. What bothers me is self-righteous posturing – lecturing others about what is and isn't yoga.

Unfortunately, many people do that. I should probably stop before I do it myself. But having started, I might as well finish. Since yoga is self-inquiry, it's an introspective process. Even if Patañjali says it can show us the minds of others (by means of the *siddhi* in *Yoga Sūtras* 3:19), most of us find our own minds to be quite enough trouble.

No matter how refined one's discernment, it's hard to be sure what's happening in someone else. I can't tell from outside if another person knows what yoga is – or whether they're engaged in it. I can only really focus on removing my illusions, which get in the way of my own mental clarity. Hectoring others about missing the point isn't going to help with that.

Right and wrong can be slippery categories. They sound black and white, but they're full of grey areas. How we define them is a personal matter, like the meaning of yoga (even if its ultimate outcome is impersonal). Besides, telling others they're wrong rarely changes their minds. And in any case, who says we're right, and not deluding ourselves with more self-serving stories?

The *Upanisads* have an all-purpose remedy for misunderstanding. One should focus on the universal presence in all

beings. “*It is one's Self which one should see and hear, and on which one should reflect and concentrate*,” says the *Brhadāraṇyaka* (2:4.5). “*For by seeing and hearing one's Self, and by reflecting and concentrating on one's Self, one gains the knowledge of this whole world*.”

It can be hard to see how to apply this. Early texts teach few techniques. “*Which of these is the Self?*,” asks the *Aitareya* (3:1–2), before dismissing all the options as mental processes. “*Is it that by which one sees? Or hears? Or smells odours? Or utters speech? Or distinguishes between what is tasty and what is not? Is it the heart and the mind? Is it awareness? Perception? Discernment? Cognition? Wisdom? Insight? Steadfastness? Thought? Reflection? Drive? Memory? Intention? Purpose? Will? Love? Desire?*”

The answer is no. It's beyond all that, and beyond description. Therefore, says the *Kausītaki* (3:8): “*It is not the mind that a man should seek to apprehend. Rather, he should know the one who thinks*,” a silent observer behind the mind. Unfortunately, it's hard to “*perceive the perceiver*,” to quote Yājñavalkya in the *Brhadāraṇyaka* (4:4.15). “*Rare is the man who knows it*,” agrees Death in the *Katha* (2:7). It's much easier to mount one's high horse and condemn other people.

Having said that, I do think it matters to try and define what yoga is – and by extension what it's not. So let's sum things up. The highest proof of knowledge in yogic terms is direct perception. It seems very clear where to focus attention – on a witnessing presence that transcends thought. So we're back where we started: *sit down and shut up!*

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