

# Rethinking Pātañjala Yoga Through the Concepts of Abhyāsa and Vairāgya

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**Abstract** This paper offers a close reading of Patañjali's Yogasūtra through the concepts of abhyāsa and vairāgya, “repetitive practice” and “dispassion,” drawing on Patañjali's classical commentators and on Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya's “Studies in Yoga Philosophy,” an (almost) forgotten chapter of his corpus. I open with a critical examination of Patañjali's citta-vṛtti scheme, his attempt of “mapping” the contents of consciousness. Thereafter, I discuss the “procedure of yoga,” based on the mutual operation of abhyāsa and vairāgya for the sake of nirodha, cessation of the vṛttis, or “movements” of consciousness. A close analysis of Patañjali and his commentators indicates that both abhyāsa and vairāgya are depicted as consisting of a strong reflective dimension. This is to say that the radical meditative act of “emptying” the consciousness of its objective content is in fact a rational conclusion of the mind, as it reflects upon itself. This reflection is both sensitive to the “limitedness” of the objective world and “receptive” to the silent presence of the “unlimited” selfhood beyond, which Patañjali, following the Sāṃkhya tradition, refers to as puruṣa. It is implied here that the yogic act of disengagement from the worldly and objective (conveyed by the notions of pratyāhāra, vairāgya, and kaivalya) is as much an act of will (emphasized and “taken forward” by Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya), as it is an act of self-sacrifice. Finally, the analysis offered here reveals substantial “philosophical threads” in the Yogasūtra, a text which is usually considered as too “practical,” or “therapeutic,” or “spiritual,” to be “really” philosophical.

**Keywords** Pātañjala Yoga · Abhyāsa · Vairāgya · Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya · Consciousness · Freedom

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I cannot think of a more contradictory statement to Descartes' *Cogito Ergo Sum* than Patañjali's *Yogaś Citta-Vṛtti-Nirodhaḥ*. The former statement is from Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* (1644); the latter from Patañjali's second or third century *Yogasūtra* (YS).<sup>1</sup> Descartes, along the same lines with Aristotle's vision of man as a "rational animal," perceives the thinking faculty, the cogito, as the essence of the human person. Patañjali's position is altogether different. For him, the citta-vṛttis, or "movements of consciousness," are not merely an external layer of one's self and identity but in fact an obstacle on the way to realizing one's svarūpa or "real essence."<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the implications of Descartes' mahāvākya,<sup>3</sup> according to the author of the *Yogasūtra*, the "I am-ness" of each and every one of us can only be revealed when the mental faculty is "switched off." But, Descartes works not just as a pūrvapakṣa to Pātañjala Yoga. There is a deep common denominator between the French philosopher and the *Yogasūtra-kāra*. "I shall now close my eyes," Descartes writes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641),

I shall stop my ears, I shall call away all my senses, I shall efface even from my thoughts all the images of corporeal things, or at least (for that is hardly possible) I shall esteem them as vain and false; and thus holding converse only with myself and considering my own nature, I shall try little by little to reach a better knowledge of and a more familiar acquaintanceship with myself.<sup>4</sup>

This is to say that Descartes does not merely raise the question of self-identity (who am I?) but searches for an answer, just like Patañjali of the *Yogasūtra*, "within" ("I shall stop, call away, efface" every instance of "externality"). As far as their initial question, and their direction of investigation, namely introversive investigation of the mind by the mind itself, Descartes and Patañjali share a similar path, or method, even if each of them reaches an entirely different conclusion about the (dis)connection between the "I think" and the "I am."

Patañjali opens his treatise, with a detailed citta-vṛtti, or mental activity "map," consisting of pramāṇa, viparyaya, vikalpa, nidrā, and smṛti (valid knowledge, invalid knowledge, verbal construction, sleep, and memory). The blurred line between pramāṇa and viparyaya, in Patañjali's scheme, is intriguing. Both notions refer to phenomenal knowledge, valid and invalid

<sup>1</sup> I work with the *Yogasūtra* text as it occurs in Sri Narayana Mishra (1998) and Swami Hariharananda Aranya (2012)

<sup>2</sup> YS 1.3: Hence (when mental activity ceases), the seer is established in his "real essence" (tadā draṣṭuḥ svarūpe 'vasthānam). [Unless stated otherwise, the translations from Sanskrit are mine].

<sup>3</sup> Mahāvākya—By referring to Descartes' famous statement as mahāvākya, "great sentence," a phrase which "belongs" to Śaṅkara's "tat tvam asi," my intention is not just to argue that both sentences are culturally significant, each in its own context, but also that Descartes' maxim, like Śaṅkara's, has a transformative quality. Śaṅkara's sentence, extracted from the sixth chapter of the *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* is supposed to enable the listener to cut through the veil of avidyā and to transcend the "phenomenal I." Descartes' sentence has had enormous impact on Western formulations of self-identity, emphasizing the importance of, and encouraging the identification with the thinking faculty, with the "I think." It is not about transcendence of one's phenomenal existence as in Śaṅkara, but about the definition of one's phenomenal existence primarily in terms of thinking, marginalizing every other aspect.

<sup>4</sup> Descartes (1911) Third Meditation, p. 12

respectively, and implied is a sense of reversibility between the two: what is considered as “valid knowledge” today can become “invalid” tomorrow, and vice versa. Since both *pramāṇa* and *viparyaya* refer merely to the phenomenal realm, for a metaphysician like Patañjali, there is no essential difference between the two. Another interesting feature of the scheme is the independent status of *vikalpa*. Swami Hariharananda Aranya (in P.N. Mukerji’s translation) explains that,

Vikalpa is a kind of useful knowledge arising out of the meaning of a word, but having no corresponding reality.<sup>5</sup>

This is to say that *vikalpa*, or verbal construction, refers to that which “exists” only in language. As against *śabda* (or *āgama*, as Patañjali puts it in YS 1.7), i.e., reliable testimony, which is one of the constituents of *pramāṇa* (together with *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*, i.e., sense-perception and inference), *vikalpa* is *vastu-śūnya*, namely objectless or referenceless. “You can call it pure abstraction,” Mukund Lath told me.<sup>6</sup> On *vikalpa* as a category of its own in Patañjali’s scheme, Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya (henceforth KCB) writes that,

Vikalpa is the presentation of an unreal not as real (which would be *viparyaya*), nor as unreal (which would be *pramāṇa*), but as though it were real, i.e., as appearing as real. The appearance of a content is itself a content, and the *vṛtti* referring to this secondary content is *vikalpa*.<sup>7</sup>

Patañjali’s subtle analysis of the cognitive terrain is revealed here, as he notices language uses which fall out of the inverted categories of *pramāṇa* and *viparyaya* and creates the separate category of *vikalpa* for them.<sup>8</sup>

The last two categories in Patañjali’s *citta-vṛtti* scheme are *nidrā* and *smṛti*, sleep and memory. Memory is the basis of the “phenomenal I.” Self identity, in the worldly sense, is based on continuity which is maintained by memory. Nevertheless, paradoxically, memory cannot “remember” the essence, the *svarūpa*, that which Patañjali—following the Sāṃkhya tradition—refers to tentatively (since language for him is always, necessarily, tentative) as *puruṣa*.<sup>9</sup> To “remember” *puruṣa*, or more precisely oneself as *puruṣa*, memory (in the conventional sense of the word) has to be suspended. Patañjali defines memory as,

conservation [or non-destruction, *asaṃpramoṣa*] of an object experienced in the past (YS 1.11)<sup>10</sup>

And, B.K. Matilal explains that,

<sup>5</sup> Aranya (2012) p. 28

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, September 2015

<sup>7</sup> Bhattacharyya (2008) p. 263

<sup>8</sup> It would be an interesting exercise to read closely the different examples given by Patañjali’s commentators to the language uses which belong to the category of *vikalpa*. The first example given by Vyāsa is “*Caitanya* (consciousness) is the nature of *puruṣa*” (*caitanyaṃ puruṣasya svarūpamiti*). For him, this sentence is a tautology. Thus tautology can be listed as the first instance of *vikalpa*, at least according to the *Bhāṣya-kāra*.

<sup>9</sup> YS 1.16, 1.24, 3.36, 3.50, 3.56, 4.18, 4.34

<sup>10</sup> YS 1.11: *anubhūta-viṣaya-asaṃpramoṣaḥ smṛtiḥ*

Memory is nothing but a reproduction of some previous experience [... but] the causal conditions which produced the previous experience are not necessary for this reproduction.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that it is “nothing but a reproduction,” or the “pastness” inherent in memory, as G.J. Larson puts it,<sup>12</sup> is the reason that except for the Jainas (and their position, as Matilal shows, is hard to defend), no other Indian school of philosophy accepts memory as a *pramāṇa*, which explains why memory too is given an independent rubric by the *Sūtra-kāra*. Vyāsa, Patañjali’s *bhāṣya-kāra*,<sup>13</sup> distinguishes (in *Yogasūtra-bhāṣya* [YSb] 1.11) between two types of memory: *bhāvita* and *abhāvita*, imagined and actual. The former category, in his formulation, refers to dreaming, the latter to the waking state. Since dreaming is included in *smṛti*, or memory, *nidrā* stands for dreamless sleep.

In YS 1.10, Patañjali writes that,

Sleep is mental activity based on the experience of something that does not exist (*abhāva-pratyaya-ālabhanā vṛttir nidrā*).

Aranya and T.S. Rukmani<sup>14</sup> explain that the notion *abhāva* (which I translated as “something that does not exist”) projects *nidrā* as negation (*abhāva*) of both waking and dreaming, or in other words, as dreamless sleep. Vyāsa writes that upon waking up even from *nidrā*, i.e., dreamless sleep, one reports “I slept well, my mind is calm, my awareness is clear,” or “I slept poorly, my mind is dull, being unsteady it wanders,” or “I slept in deep stupor, my limbs are heavy, my mind is tired and lazy as if it was stolen.”<sup>15</sup> What Patañjali’s foremost commentator tries to tell us is that even though it seems that “nothing happens” in dreamless sleep, the fact is that “something” does happen. If one reports that he slept well, or slept poorly, it is an indication that subterranean cognitive processes, psychological, or *saṃskāric* (from *saṃskāra*), continue to buzz underneath the mute surface. It is therefore not yet the yogic silence (*nirodha*) aspired for, which covers both *vṛtti* and *saṃskāra*, mental content and psychological undercurrents. Another feature, which prevents dreamless sleep from being considered as the yogin’s “ultimate destination,” is the fact that it is not volitional. Dreamless sleep “happens to you.” One goes to sleep without knowing if and when he will “fall into” dreamless sleep. “Like the dream state,” KCB brings the point home,

<sup>11</sup> As quoted in Larson (1993) p. 375

<sup>12</sup> Larson (1993) p. 376

<sup>13</sup> Vyāsa is the author of the *Yogasūtra-bhāṣya*, or at least, this important commentary is ascribed to a scholar by this name, about whom, just like Patañjali, we know literally nothing. Most scholars believe that he was Patañjali’s contemporary or lived shortly after him. Philipp Maas, the praiseworthy compiler of a critical edition of the first chapter of what he refers to as *Pātañjala Yogasāstra*, namely Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* and Vyāsa’s commentary together, argues that Patañjali and Vyāsa are two names of a single author, who assembled *sūtras* from different sources (Buddhist, *Sāṃkhyan*, *bhakti sūtras* on *Īśvara* etc.) and commented upon them. See Maas (2010).

<sup>14</sup> Aranya (2012) p. 30; Rukmani (1981) p. 80

<sup>15</sup> *sukham aham asvāpsam prasannaṃ me manaḥ prajñāṃ me viśāradīkaroti duḥkham aham asvāpsam styānaṃ me mano bhramaty anavasthitam gāḍhaṃ mūḍho 'ham asvāpsam gurūṇi me gātrāṇi klāntaṃ me cittaṃ alasaṃ muṣṭitaṃ iva tiṣṭhatīti* (YSb 1.10). Text and translation are Rukmani’s (ibid.)

dreamless sleep is a state in which the self has no control over itself, not a state to which the self rises by a continuous effort.<sup>16</sup>

Based on the short synopsis of the citta-vṛtti scheme provided here, I want to argue that Patañjali's consciousness map is knowledge-oriented. Each of the rubrics expounded by him and discussed here provides a certain type of knowledge, whether valid, invalid, merely lingual, or reproduced by memory. The karmic-saṃskāric residue which gurgles under the surface in dreamless sleep amounts to depth memory, consisting of "primordial" consciousness materials and transgressing the otherwise knowledge centricity of the vṛtti-scheme. Patañjali's "grand project," in my reading, is about going beyond the scope of knowledge, which is the scope of the "I think"; the very I think, that for him excludes any sense of I am-ness. Patañjali's "going beyond knowledge" project culminates in YS 4.29. It is implied here that in the last few yards before kaivalya as his "finishing line," the yogin needs to renounce (or to become uninterested, akusīdaḥ, in) prasamkhyāna or—as Aranya explains—omniscience. This is "the last temptation of the yogin." The yogin is required to sacrifice his knowledge or in a treatise which opens with a phrase such as yogaś citta-vṛttnirodhaḥ, knowledge as such. Knowledge is a powerful temptation, as the biblical myth about "the tree of knowledge" (ets hada'at, in *Genesis*, chapter 2) also indicates.

Patañjali's prescribed remedy for a consciousness afflicted with "thinking" and "knowledge" is made of two ingredients: abhyāsa and vairāgya, "repetitive practice" and "dispassion."<sup>17</sup> In the remaining of the paper, I will look into this remedy and attempt to unpack the concepts of abhyāsa and vairāgya, the cornerstones of Pātañjala-yoga as a therapeutic procedure.

Abhyāsa—literally: repetition, repetitive practice or exercise, discipline, use, habit, custom—is the mechanism which creates the phenomenal aspects of human existence, or the "day in, day out." Like the citta-vṛttis, or "movements of consciousness," abhyāsa can be kliṣṭa or akliṣṭa: outgoing, object-centered, worldly, or on the other hand ingoing, objectless, trans-phenomenal, meditative. Patañjali focuses on the latter, i.e., on introversive abhyāsa. According to him,

abhyāsa is the effort to achieve stability [of "empty," motionless mind]. (YS 1.13)<sup>18</sup>

He further writes that,

it is firmly grounded if performed attentively and ceaselessly for a long period of time. (YS 1.14)<sup>19</sup>

In YSb 2.15, Vyāsa speaks of bhogābhyāsa, or "worldly abhyāsa," as the (fatal from a yogic point of view) procedure which "grounds" the human person in the phenomenal realm through avidyā, which he originally defines as viṣaya-sukham, or "enjoyment of objects." That which seems in the short, "phenomenal-run," as enjoyment, Vyāsa identifies as a long, "yoga-run," duḥkha, or suffering. If worldly repetitiveness, through which the saṃsāra-web is

<sup>16</sup> Bhattacharyya (2008) p. 26

<sup>17</sup> YS 1.12: The cessation of these (vṛttis) is accomplished through repetitive practice and dispassion (abhyāsa-vairāgyābhyāṃ tan-nirodhaḥ)

<sup>18</sup> YS 1.13: tatra sthitau yatno'bhyāsaḥ

<sup>19</sup> YS 1.14: sa tu dīrgha-kāla-nairantarya-satkāra-āsevito dṛḍha-bhūmiḥ

constantly weaved and re-weaved, is referred to by the famous commentator as bhogābhyāsa; then the yogic alternative, repetitive as much as its worldly counterpart is, but directed inwards, can be referred to as yogābhyāsa. This is to say that as far as his abhyāsa, or the effort that he puts into his practice is concerned, the yogin walks on familiar grounds. He is a “doer,” devoted to his “doing” as much as any other doer is, even if the purpose of his repetitive practice is trans-phenomenal, or more than worldly. Through abhyāsa, the yogin endeavors to uproot inveterate patterns, by repeatedly practicing their opposite. His challenge is to “change direction,” to introvert the outgoing movement of the mind, to overcome the solid habit of turning toward objects. The problem that Patañjali seems to be dealing with is that the human person is totally unacquainted with an objectless mode of consciousness. One “meets” and “creates” his world through repeated acts of objectification. De-objectification is Patañjali’s prescription for the “duḥkha patient,” and the challenge he sets up for the yogin. The question is how to metamorphose a “consciousness-default,” which one is not just thoroughly used to, but which enables him “to participate” in the world. Patañjali suggests practicing “the opposite” of that which has become the default. Yogābhyāsa as “the opposite” of bhogābhyāsa loosens the “hermetic grasp” of the latter. It is a counter-force, so to say, intended to “neutralize” the power of the extroversive force. In YS 2.33 Patañjali gives us a glimpse of his method of “cultivating the opposite” (pratipakṣa-bhāvana):

To stop thoughts which contradict the yamas, one should cultivate their opposite.<sup>20</sup>

The immediate context of the present sūtra is Patañjali’s discussion of the yamas, his list of primary ethical precepts, from ahiṃsā (non-violence) to aparigraha (non-possessiveness). When a thought contradicting any of these precepts arises, the yogin is advised to cultivate its opposite. But cultivating the opposite of a thought such as “I want to kill him,” does not mean to produce a counter-thought in the form of “I do not want to kill him” or “I want to befriend him.” Instead, “the opposite” according to Patañjali, is to reflect upon the consequences of “contrary thoughts,” namely thoughts about violation of the ethical precepts. Or in Patañjali’s own words (in YS 2.34),

To cultivate the opposite is [to reflect upon the fact] that thoughts which contradict the yamas, such as violent thoughts etc., whether executed, planned to be executed or even approved, whether driven by greed, anger or delusion, whether mild, moderate or intense, result in endless suffering (duḥkha) and ignorance (ajñāna).<sup>21</sup>

When a “contrary thought” (as the paradigm of every klišṭa-vṛtti, i.e., intentional, or outward-facing “consciousness movement,” which for Patañjali is inherently “afflictive”) arises in him, the yogin should “confront it” with sober reflection upon its inevitable consequences. Vyāsa comments (in YSb 2.33) that the human tendency to reproduce “contrary thoughts,” even after reflecting upon their painful implications, is like the dog’s impulse to lick his own vomit. His stunning remark means that yogic reflection has to be repeatedly “produced” against “contrary thoughts” as long as they

<sup>20</sup> YS 2.33: vitarka-bādhane pratipakṣa-bhāvanam

<sup>21</sup> YS 2.34: vitarkā hiṃsā-ādayaḥ kṛta-kārita-anumoditā lobha-krodha-moha-pūrvakā mṛdu-madhyā-adhimātrā duḥkha-ajñāna-ananta-phalā iti pratipakṣa-bhāvanam.

arise. But it is also a pessimistic observation about the deeply-rooted human obsession with “externality,” and the inclination to always return to the familiar, to replicate the default, “disgusting” and infected with *duḥkha* as it may be.

At this point, I am reminded of Ramana Maharshi, the famous mystic, or for our sake yogin, who in one of his numerous question-answer sessions clarifies the concept of *abhyāsa* or more precisely *yogābhyāsa*. Ramana suggests that,

The passage from *pravṛtti* to *nivṛtti* [from object centrality to objectlessness at the level of consciousness] is possible through *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya*, and it works, but takes time.<sup>22</sup>

Using the yogic notions of *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya*, the renowned Advaitin, famous for his *sādhanā*-less teaching, seems to encourage his present interlocutor to follow a prescribed yoga path (“it works,” he says), of which he speaks in terms of a process (“it takes time”). Patañjali too emphasizes the processual dimension of *abhyāsa*, measuring it (in YS 1.13-14) in terms of time and effort (*kāla* and *yatna*).

Maharshi further tells his interlocutor that,

The mind so used to turning outwards cannot be introverted so easily. It is difficult to restrict a cow used to feed on grass in open meadows to its own cowshed. Even if the owner seduces the cow with delicious grass and fabulous fodder, she will first refuse, then eat a little, but her tendency to look for food elsewhere will not be uprooted so easily. If the owner repeatedly seduces the cow, she will slowly become habitual to the cowshed. Thereafter, even when unleashed, she will no longer wander. Such is also the case with the human mind.<sup>23</sup>

The “owner of the cow,” if I may read Ramana Maharshi’s illustration through the *Yogasūtra*, is *puruṣa*. Patañjali himself refers to *puruṣa*, the “selfhood beyond,” as the “owner” (*svāmin* in YS 2.23, *prabhu* in YS 4.18) of *prakṛti* in the first instance, of the *citta-vṛttis* in the second. However *puruṣa* is inactive by definition.<sup>24</sup> Therefore “he” cannot “seduce the cow,” or introvert the mind. The mind itself, through its own effort, needs to become free (i.e., empty) of any outer, objective content, in order to “isolate” *puruṣa*.<sup>25</sup>

What would motivate a cow to stay in the cowshed if her owner is absolutely passive? The answer is that something in the superficiality of phenomenal existence is

<sup>22</sup> I found this question-answer session in Hebrew translation in the book *Awareness and Deathlessness: Questions and Answers with Ramana Maharshi* (1935–1939), Gal Publishers, Tel Aviv, 1994. I translate Maharshi’s words from Hebrew into English. Despite the “long distance” (Tamil to English, English to Hebrew, Hebrew back into English), I feel that Ramana’s point is not (totally) “lost in translation,” especially since he uses a simple (but profound) illustration to elucidate the notion of *abhyāsa*. It should be noted that the context of Ramana Maharshi’s discussion is not necessarily Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*. The notions of *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya* also occur in *Bhagavadgītā* 6.35.

<sup>23</sup> Ramana Maharshi, *Ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> *Sāṃkhya-kārikā* (SK) 19: *tasmāc ca viparyāsāt siddham sāksitvam asya puruṣasya kaivalyaṃ mādhyaṣṭhyaṃ draṣṭṛtvam akartṛbhāvaś ca* (Therefore, since [*puruṣa* is] the opposite [of the unmanifest], it is established that *puruṣa* is a witness, possessed of isolation or freedom, indifferent, a spectator and inactive). Larson 1979, pp. 261–2. The translation (including the square brackets) is his.

<sup>25</sup> I’m writing “to isolate *puruṣa*,” having in mind the term *kaivalya* (literally “isolation”), depicted in SK 19 as one of *puruṣa*’s “inherent traits.”



supposed to hint at the possibility of transcending it. This superficiality resonates in the notion of *duḥkha*, or “suffering,” which pervades, according to “*mokṣa* thinkers” such as Patañjali, every aspect of phenomenal existence. The physical (or biological), mental, psychological, social and cultural aspects are all prone to suffering. The world and the worldly are inherently mixed with suffering. But if *duḥkha* is identified as such, i.e., as a dance (I draw on Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s simile in *Sāṃkhyakārikā* 59),<sup>26</sup> repeating itself again and again, birth after birth, limited, monotonous, incapable of touching “the essence”; then, the mind—rooted as it is in *duḥkha*—can and should develop the urge “to switch itself off,” as to allow something else, unknown, unknowable (at least through the mind) to be de-concealed; de-concealed rather than revealed, since it is always there, unnoticeable as long as the mind constantly “moves.” The movement (*vṛtti*) of the mind excludes the stillness of *puruṣa* or the stillness which *is* *puruṣa*.

It is therefore up to the mind itself “to stop.” This is the “stoppage” (*nirodha*) of which Patañjali speaks at the very beginning of his treatise.

In his pedagogic handbook *Upadeśa-Sāhasrī* (“A Thousand Teachings,” Up-Sā), Śāṅkara writes an imaginary dialogue between guru and śiṣya, teacher and student. Here, the teacher is the *ātman*, or for our sake *puruṣa*,<sup>27</sup> and the student who aspires “to reach” the *ātman*, the “selfhood beyond,” is the *manas*, the mind, equivalent for the sake of our discussion to Patañjali’s *citta*. In the course of this fictional (and full of humor) dialogue, the *ātman* tells the *manas*:

O mind, it is appropriate for you to be silent (calm, tranquil)! (Up-Sā 19.2)<sup>28</sup>

The idea is that the “noisy mind” rules out the silence of the *ātman* or, again, the silence which *is* the *ātman*. Only when the mind ceases, the *ātman* can shine forth. Indeed, the word *śama* (in Śāṅkara’s formulation), pertaining to “silence,” “calmness,” and “tranquility,” also means “cessation.” At this junction, Śāṅkara and Patañjali meet.

In *Yogasūtra-bhāṣya* 1.14, Vyāsa suggests that if performed attentively (*sat-kāra*), *abhyāsa* has the capacity of restraining *vyutthāna-saṃskāras*, namely karmic impressions, or psychological dispositions, which activate the consciousness in an external, object-centered mode. The phrase *sat-kāra*, Vyāsa explains, refers to *abhyāsa* performed through *tapas*, *brahmacarya*, *vidyā*, and *śraddhā* (heating practices, celibacy, knowledge, and certainty that *citta-vṛtti-nirodha* is attainable). Of these four components, *tapas*, *brahmacarya*, and *śraddhā* are mentioned by Patañjali<sup>29</sup>; the notion of *vidyā* (knowledge) does not occur in the *Yogasūtra* text. I stick to my position that Patañjali aims at an “act of will” in which the consciousness “turns itself off,” knowledge of

<sup>26</sup> SK 59: *raṅgasya darśayitvā nivartate nartakī yathā nṛtyāt, puruṣasya tathātmānaṃ prakāśya vivivartate prakṛtiḥ* (As a dancer ceases from the dance after having been seen by the audience; so also *prakṛti* ceases after having manifested herself to *puruṣa*). Larson, *ibid.* p. 273; the translation is his.

<sup>27</sup> I am not delving into the differences between the Upaniṣadic-Advaitic notion of the *ātman* and the Sāṃkhya-Yoga notion of *puruṣa*. Despite the obvious differences, such as the oneness of the *ātman*, as against the manyness of *puruṣa* (*puruṣa-bahutva*), both notions refer to a metaphysic essence or selfhood, transcending the phenomenal, worldly self.

<sup>28</sup> Up-Sā 19.2: *tataś ca yuktaḥ śama eva te manaḥ* (Swami Jagadananda 2001, pp. 288–289)

<sup>29</sup> *Tapas* is listed both as a component of *kriyā-yoga* in YS 2.1 and as one of the *niyamas* in YS 2.32 and YS 2.43; *brahmacarya* is listed as one of the *yamas* in YS 2.30 and YS 2.38; *śraddhā* is mentioned as one of the means of attaining *asaṃprajñāta samādhi* (“trans-cognitive” *samādhi*) in YS 1.20; regarding *śraddhā*, Vyāsa beautifully writes (in YSb 1.20) that it protects the *yogin* “like a good mother” (*jananīva kalyāṇī*).



whatever kind included. However, this act of will is based on a certain understanding. It is a logical conclusion of a rational analysis. In this respect, knowledge that will be finally “burned” in “the great fire of yoga” (and terms such as *tapas* and *brahmacarya* evoke a sense of cleansing by fire, or “inner fire”) is employed in the process of yoga, like a piece of wood used to push every other wooden piece into the fire, that is also thrown at the very end into the flames. *Vijñānabhikṣu*, in tune with YS 1.20, suggests that *śraddhā*, *vīrya*, *smṛti*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*—namely certainty, power, mindfulness,<sup>30</sup> (*saṃprajñāta* or “cognitive”) *samādhi* and “yogic insight” (born of meditation)—are the preconditions of *sat-kāra*, or attentive yoga practice. *Prajñā*, or “yogic insight,” can be seen as replacing and as conveying *Vijñānabhikṣu*’s understanding of *Vyāsa*’s *vidyā* or “knowledge.” *Prajñā* stands in sheer contrast to *avidyā*, namely to “phenomenal knowledge” that cannot distinguish between the altogether different from one another *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*.<sup>31</sup> The author of the *Yogasūtra-bhāṣya-vivarāṇa* (the *Vivarāṇa*) writes that,

abhyāsa is the practice of means of yoga such as *yama* and *niyama* [primary and secondary ethical precepts], etc.<sup>32</sup>

All three commentators—*Vyāsa*, *Vijñānabhikṣu*, and the author of the *Vivarāṇa*—focus on preparative procedures, which are intended to support and maintain *samādhi*, i.e., yogic meditation. These procedures include initial meditative practices (such as *smṛti* in the sense of *dhyāna*, and *saṃprajñāta samādhi*) and prerequisite ethical conduct. The latter category includes the “cleansing procedures” of *tapas* and *brahmacarya*. For the author of the *Vivarāṇa*, *abhyāsa* is *yama-niyamādi* (“ethical precepts etc.”). The phrase “etc.” implies that for him, *abhyāsa* refers to *Patañjali*’s *aṣṭāṅga-yoga*, of which *yama* and *niyama* are the first two *aṅgas*, or limbs. In my reading, the precepts listed here, from *ahiṃsā* (non-violence, the first particle of the *yama* list) to *īśvara-praṇidhāna* (“surrender to *īśvara*,” or “to god,” the last particle of the *niyama* list), are aides of meditative introversion, intended to unravel the yogin’s involvement in the world. In this context, non-violence, for example, is not practiced for the sake of creating a better society but to facilitate an uninvolved, monadic, “yogic isolation.”

*Vyāsa* suggested (as we saw above) that attentive performance of *abhyāsa*, or “yogic practice,” has the capacity of subduing *vyutthāna-saṃskāras*. We examined (at least some of) the implications of this prescribed attentiveness (comprised in the phrase *sat-kāra*). Now, I want to focus on *abhyāsa* as signifying “yogic work” at the level of the *saṃskāras*. In YS 3.9, *Patañjali* writes that,

When *vyutthāna-saṃskāras* [that activate the consciousness in external, object-centered mode] are overpowered, and *nirodha-saṃskāras* [enabling the consciousness to turn inwards and to abandon “externality” of any kind] emerge,

<sup>30</sup> *Smṛti* is initially memory. However in YS 1.6 *Patañjali* lists memory among the *vṛttis* or mental activities which the process of yoga aims at stopping. *Vācaspati*śra therefore suggests (Mishra 1998, p. 62) that in the present case, the term *smṛti* is synonymous with *dhyāna*, a preliminary state of meditation which paves the way to *samādhi*. I translate *dhyāna* (and *smṛti* in the sense of *dhyāna*) as “mindfulness.”

<sup>31</sup> See YS 2.5: *anīya-aśuci-duḥkha-anātmasu nīya-śuci-sukha-ātma-khyātir avidyā* (*avidyā* is misidentification of the impermanent as permanent, the impure as pure, the painful as joyous, and non-selfhood as selfhood).

<sup>32</sup> *yama-niyamādi-yoga-sādhana-anuṣṭhānam-abhyāsa-iti* (Rukmani 2001, p. 77)

this is nirodha-pariṇāma [nirodha-transformation], characterized by [increasing] moments of cessation [i.e., of “no-mind”].<sup>33</sup>

The notion of nirodha, “yogic cessation,” which refers in YS 1.2 to the citta-vṛttis, is extended here as to apply to the sub-vṛtti saṃskāra level. The term pariṇāma pertains to the transformative process (described in YS 3.9–12), which takes place at this subterranean consciousness level in the course of meditation. It is implied that in the meditative state called nirodha-pariṇāma, vyutthāna-saṃskāras are “overpowered” (abhibhava), to the extent that nirodha-saṃskāras can emerge. The task of the yogin is to “weed” the “seeds of externality” and to “nourish” the “seeds of introversion.” Following Vyāsa’s hint in YSb 1.14, I want to read the “inner yogic work” at the saṃskāra-level as abhyāsa, even if none of the commentators (Vyāsa, Vācaspatiśra, the author of the *Vīvarāṇa*, Bhojarāja,<sup>34</sup> and Vijñānabhikṣu) uses this term explicitly. Among these, Vijñānabhikṣu suggests that the overpowering and nourishment of vyutthāna and nirodha saṃskāras, respectively, take place gradually (krameṇa). I see resemblance between Vijñānabhikṣu’s “krameṇa” and Patañjali’s “dīrgha-kāla-nairantarya” or “persistency for a long period of time,” the phrase which he uses to convey the meaning of abhyāsa (in YS 1.14).

Having touched on abhyāsa, and having introduced the method of “cultivating the opposite” as the crux of yogābhyāsa, yogic abhyāsa, I want to move on and unpack the complementary notion of vairāgya. Patañjali works with vairāgya as concept and ideal in two stages. First he writes (in YS 1.15) that,

Vairāgya is thirstlessness with regard to objects seen and heard, arising from vaśikāra-saṃjñā [conscious control of one’s inclination to objects].<sup>35</sup>

And second, he adds (in YS 1.16) that, Ultimate vairāgya is thirstlessness toward the guṇas, arising from the vision of puruṣa [puruṣa-khyāti, or in fact from the vision of oneself as puruṣa].<sup>36</sup>

In the first stage, with reference to “lower vairāgya” (apara-vairāgya, as against para-vairāgya or “ultimate dispassion”),<sup>37</sup> the key-term is saṃjñā. This is to say that the notion of vairāgya conveys a sense of reflection about one’s inclination to the objective world, reflection which enables the yogin (as in the case of “contrary thoughts”) to move in the “opposite direction,” in this case, away from objects and objectification. In this respect, the commentators from Vyāsa onwards speak of worldly (“seen,” namely grasped by the senses) and other worldly (“heard,” namely explicated in the scriptures) objective temptations. In the latter category, Vyāsa mentions svarga (“heaven”), as well as yogic states such as “bodilessness” (videha) and “merging into prakṛti” (prakṛti-laya).<sup>38</sup> KCB

<sup>33</sup> YS 3.9: vyutthāna-nirodha-saṃskārayor abhibhava-prādur-bhāvau nirodha-kṣaṇa-citta-anvayo nirodha-pariṇāmah

<sup>34</sup> Pātañjalayogadarśana with the Rājamārtaṇḍa of Bhojarāja et al. (1930)

<sup>35</sup> YS 1.15: dṛṣṭa-ānuśravika-viṣaya-vitṛṣṇasya vaśikāra-saṃjñā vairāgyam

<sup>36</sup> YS 1.16: tat-param puruṣa-khyāter-guṇa-vaitṛṣṇyam

<sup>37</sup> The commentators distinguish between “apara” and “para,” “lower” and “ultimate” vairāgya. See for instance Vācaspatiśra (TV 1.16 in Mishra 1998, p. 52) and the author of the *Vīvarāṇa* (Rukmani 2001, p.80)

<sup>38</sup> See YS 1.19: bhava-pratyayo videha-prakṛti-layānām ([In the case of] “bodiless” and “merged into prakṛti” yogins, [samādhi] occurs from birth [hence the “path” depicted by Patañjali becomes redundant]).

reads the notion of *vaśīkāra* (in his “Studies in Yoga Philosophy”<sup>39</sup>) as implying “free conquest of desire.” He is thus in one mind with the classic commentators that “*vairāgya* is not mere desirelessness.”<sup>40</sup> The freedom of disengagement, for him, is the heart of the matter. It is an act of will, a conscious resolution. Yoga, according to him, is all about “willing,” as he puts it. It is about freedom in the realm of action (action and will are two sides of the same coin), parallel to freedom in the complementary realms of knowledge and emotion.<sup>41</sup> In (the non-Euclidean) geometry of freedom, parallels do meet.

In YSb 1.15, Vyāsa explains that “lower *vairāgya*,” rooted in *vaśīkāra-saṃjñā*, is *anābhogātmika* (of the nature of absence of phenomenal, or objective experience) and *heyopādeya-sūnyā* (free of attitude of abandoning or obtaining). *Vairāgya* is thus projected as an existential position of sheer detachment. Vācaspatimiśra suggests that the phrase *anābhogātmika* pertains to absence of experience even while in contact with objects.<sup>42</sup> This is to say that *vairāgya*, in his reading, is inner detachment “indifferent” to whatever takes place externally. It is hinted here that genuine detachment can only be “measured” or “tested” in contact with objects. Along the same lines, the author of the *Vivarāṇa* resembles consciousness in a state of *vairāgya* to a transparent crystal (*sphaṭika*), which is no longer “colored” by the objects around it.<sup>43</sup> The commentators further suggest that *vairāgya* as detachment is the natural result of the capacity of seeing the defects (*doṣas*) of an object. A sensitive yogic gaze cuts through appearances and weakens one’s attraction to objects.<sup>44</sup> KCB, synoptic as ever, therefore writes that if *abhyāsa* is the “positive exercise of freedom,” then *vairāgya* is the “negative annulment of unfreedom.”<sup>45</sup>

The *abhyāsa-vairāgya* twosome occurs not just in the *Yogasūtra* but also in the *Bhagavadgītā*. In BG 6.35, Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna (referred to here as Kaunteya, Kuntī’s son):

The mind is undoubtedly hard to control and restless, but it can be controlled by *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya*.<sup>46</sup>

Śāṅkara, the famous commentator of the text, explains that *vairāgya* is thirstlessness (*vaitṛṣṇya*) to enjoyment (*bhoga*) of desirable objects, seen or unseen, which is a result of repetitive practice of seeing their faults (*doṣa-darśanābhyāsāt*). His analysis is in tune with Patañjali’s commentators. Śāṅkara adds that a “thread of pleasure” binds the human person to objects. *Vairāgya* he sees as signifying the termination of the human

<sup>39</sup> KCB’s “Studies in Yoga Philosophy” (unpublished in his lifetime) is included in his collected essays *Studies in Philosophy* (1958, 2008) edited by his son Gopinath Bhattacharyya. It is the text of one of his last lecture series and is hardly referred to by those who write on KCB’s philosophical work. They usually focus on his earlier writings on Emmanuel Kant and Advaita Vedānta, as well as on his acclaimed essay “The Subject as Freedom.” The important place of “Studies in Yoga Philosophy” in KCB’s corpus is yet to be highlighted.

<sup>40</sup> Bhattacharyya (2008) p. 303

<sup>41</sup> KCB works with freedom in the realm of knowledge through Advaita-Vedānta and Sāṃkhya. He thinks of freedom in the emotive realm through Rasa aesthetics. And through Pātañjala-yoga and Kant’s philosophy, he conceptualizes freedom in the realm of action.

<sup>42</sup> *Tattvavaiśārādī* 1.15 (Mishra 1998 p. 62)

<sup>43</sup> Rukmani (2001) p. 79

<sup>44</sup> See for example Vijñānabhikṣu (Rukmani 1981, p. 98), who quotes an unknown source, or paraphrases a general saying, according to which *doṣa-darśanena vaitṛṣṇyam bhavati* (it is the observation of a flaw, or a defect, which leads to thirstlessness).

<sup>45</sup> Bhattacharyya (2008) p. 306

<sup>46</sup> BG 6.35: *asaṃśayaṃ mahābāho mano dumigrahaṃ calaṃ | abhyāseṇa tu kaunteya vairāgyeṇa ca grhyate ||* (see Śrīmadbhagavadgītā Śāṅkara-bhāṣya, 1976)

pattern of involvement in the world through so-called pleasant experiences. These experiences are “so-called” rather than “really” pleasant, since they create bondage. For Śankara, just like Vyāsa (in YSb 2.15), pleasure (*sukha*, *bhoga*) belongs to and in fact determines the phenomenal human existence as *duḥkha*. To seek pleasure (in the worldly sense of the word), Vyāsa suggests (still in YSb 2.15), is like running away from the sting of a scorpion just to be bitten by a snake. *Vairāgya*, for him, is the antidote for the poisonous inclination to the objective world.

With regard to *para-vairāgya*, Vyāsa explains (in YSb 1.16) that “ultimate dispassion” is not born of “seeing” the *doṣas*, the defects of an object, but rather *puruṣa-darśanābhyāsāt*, i.e., through the repetitive effort (*abhyāsa*) to “see” *puruṣa*, or oneself as *puruṣa*. In “lower *vairāgya*,” detachment is the “logical conclusion” of the superficiality or the “on-the-surfaceness” of the objective realm. It is therefore “negative” in essence. “Ultimate *vairāgya*,” on the other hand, is “positive” in the sense that—if I may use Isaiah Berlin’s famous distinction<sup>47</sup>—it is “freedom to” (*puruṣa*), rather than “freedom from” (the *doṣas* and the objects which “carry them”). Moreover, *para-vairāgya* is “deeper” than its “lower” counterpart in the sense that detachment, at this stage, is not toward objects but toward the *guṇas* or the “forces behind” each and every object. In this respect, the author of the *Vivaraṇa* reads the *guṇas* as the “cause” (*kāraṇa*) of the object. Vyāsa further speaks of “ultimate dispassion” in terms of “knowledge” or reflection, referring to it as *jñānaprasāda-mātram* (“entirely purified awareness”). *Vācaspatimīśra* reads the term *prasāda* as referring to *sattvic* consciousness devoid of *rajas* and *tamas*, enabling the *yogin* to discriminate between the *guṇas* (as the core of *prakṛti*) and *puruṣa*.<sup>48</sup> The next level, he continues to suggest, is detachment toward knowledge itself, which is the prime characteristic of *dharma-megha-samādhi*, the final meditative stage before *kaivalya*.

If the concept of *saṃjñā* in Patañjali’s definition of “lower *vairāgya*” transforms in “ultimate *vairāgya*” into *jñāna*, then according to the commentators, even this “discerning knowledge” has to finally be abandoned. KCB summarizes the long commentarial tradition, and writes that,

[Ultimate-*vairāgya* is] detachment not only from the object of the mind, but also from the mind itself as object, from the mind even in its final actual state of *viveka* [...] There is no knowledge except through *vṛtti*, and freedom though achieved through knowledge, is freedom from knowledge itself; freedom as the super-conscious activity of the mind to stand like the self, to be and not to know.<sup>49</sup>

Patañjali sets up a strategy intended to “stop” or “suspend” mental activity. It includes, we saw above, an ethical base which supports meditation as the heart of *yoga*, meditation in which consciousness gradually becomes “empty” or “purified” of objective content. *Yogābhyāsa*, or *yogic abhyāsa*, pertains to a conscious, volitional inverted-operation at the consciousness-level, which “opposes” its conventional-intentional *modus*. For Patañjali, “emptiness” is the “natural” state of consciousness.

<sup>47</sup> Berlin (1969)

<sup>48</sup> Mishra (1998), p. 52; the three *guṇas* or “forces”, which “activate” *prakṛti*, namely *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, are referred to by Patañjali (in YS 2.18) as *prakāśa* (brightness), *kriyā* (action) and *sthiti* (inertia).

<sup>49</sup> Bhattacharyya (2008) pp. 303–304

In YS 2.54, which touches on *pratyāhāra*, “withdrawal of the senses” (the fifth limb of yoga in the *aṣṭāṅga* scheme), Patañjali writes that,

*Pratyāhāra* is a state in which the sense organs as if follow the “real nature” (*svarūpa*) of the mind by disconnecting themselves from their objects.<sup>50</sup>

And in the consecutive *sūtra* (YS 2.55), he adds that,

(*Pratyāhāra*) results in absolute control over the senses.<sup>51</sup>

The notions of *pratyāhāra* and *vairāgya* are interrelated. The former refers to disengagement at the level of the senses, the latter at the level of the mind. In both cases, Patañjali speaks of a sense of control (*vaśyatā*, *vaśīkāra*). *Vairāgya*, we have seen, is about development of aversion to the worldly and objective and allowing the “vision of *puruṣa*” (*puruṣa-khyāti*, in *para-vairāgya*) to shine forth. *Abhyāsa* and *vairāgya* alike are depicted by Patañjali as consisting of a reflective dimension (“cultivating the opposite” by way of reflection in *yogābhyāsa*, *saṃjñā* in Patañjali’s formulation of “lower *vairāgya*” and *jñāna* in Vyāsa’s gloss of “ultimate *vairāgya*”). This is to say that the act of “emptying” the consciousness of its objective content is in fact a rational choice of the mind as it reflects upon itself. The “twist,” as I tried to show through Ramana Maharshi, is that the consciousness has to empty itself. It is as much an act of will (as emphasized by KCB) as it is an act of self-sacrifice.

Verse 62 of the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā*, the root-text of the *Sāṃkhya* tradition, the “sister tradition” of *Pātañjala-yoga*, suggests that,

No one is bound, no one released. Likewise, no one transmigrates [or “belongs” to the *saṃsāric*, worldly cycle]. Only *prakṛti*, in its various forms, transmigrates, is bound and is released.<sup>52</sup>

This is to say that the whole process of yoga takes place in the realm of *prakṛti*, or more precisely, if we take our discussion of the *Yogasūtra* into account, in the consciousness. Bondage and release, malady and cure, are all “here” and do not affect *puruṣa*’s silence-within-silence realm beyond. Therefore, *Vijñānabhikṣu* (in his commentary of YS 4.34, the final verse of the *Yogasūtra*) speaks of two parallel *kaivalyas*, namely *prakṛti*’s and *puruṣa*’s. *Prakṛti*’s *kaivalya*, or “disengagement as freedom,” is a matter of accomplishment. It is the outcome of the procedure of yoga, discussed above through the correlating notions of *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya*. The other *kaivalya*, *puruṣa*’s *kaivalya*, is not a matter of accomplishment. It is always there, primordially there. It is not an end (in both senses of the word) like the *kaivalya* of *prakṛti*, of the consciousness, but more of a “source,” or an “origin,” finally unclouded.

<sup>50</sup> YS 2.54: *sva-viśaya-asamprayoge cittasya sva-rūpa-anukāra iva-indriyāṅgāṃ pratyāhāraḥ*

<sup>51</sup> YS 2.55: *tataḥ paramā vaśyatā-indriyāṅgāṃ*

<sup>52</sup> SK 62: *tasmān na badhyate 'addhā na mucyate nā 'pi saṃsarati kaścit, saṃsarati badhyate mucyate ca nānāśrayā prakṛtiḥ* (Larson 1979, p. 274; the translation is his, the square brackets are mine).

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