

# yoga and psychology

LANGUAGE, MEMORY, AND MYSTICISM



HAROLD COWARD

yoga and psychology

SUNY series in  
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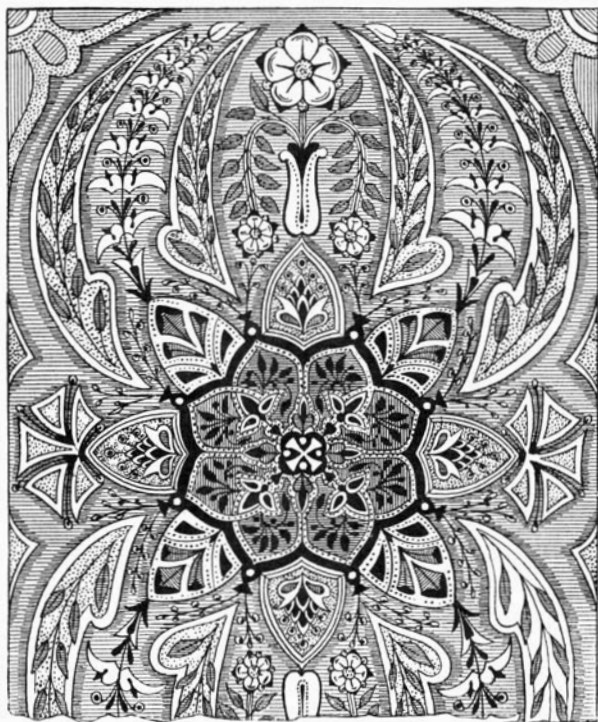
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*to*

PROFESSOR T. R. V. MURTI

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# preface

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Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* (c. 200 CE), the classical statement of Eastern Yoga, are foundational for Hindu, Jaina, and Buddhist theology, philosophy, and spiritual practice. This book explores the fundamental contribution of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* to the philosophy of language and theology of revelation of Bhartṛhari (c. 600 CE) in part I, and in part II analyzes where Western psychology (Freud, Jung, and Transpersonalists such as Washburn, Tart, and Ornstein) have been influenced by or reject Patañjali's Yoga. The part II analysis results in a key insight, namely, that there is a crucial difference between Eastern and Western thought with regard to how limited or perfectible human nature is—the West maintaining that we as humans are psychologically, philosophically, and theologically limited or flawed in nature and thus not perfectible, while Patañjali's Yoga (and Eastern thought generally) maintains the opposite. Indeed, for Yoga and the East, we will be reborn over and over until, through our yogic religious practice, we overcome our finite limitations, such as individual egos, and achieve union with the divine. Different Western responses to this Eastern claim are detailed in part II from complete rejection by Freud, Jung, and John Hick to varying degrees of acceptance by transpersonal psychologists such as Washburn, Tart, and Ornstein.

The lines of analysis in parts I and II have been gradually maturing over the past twenty years. The argument in part I that Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* were fundamental to Bhartṛhari's philosophy of language did not appear in my earlier books on that topic—*The Sphota Theory of Language*, Motilal Banarsidass, 1980, 1986, 1990, 1996, and *The Philosophy of the Grammarians*, Princeton University Press, 1990—because I was not completely sure of my scholarship on the point. My thinking was tested out in two early chapters of a 1976 Twayne book on Bhartṛhari that remained relatively obscure, circulating mainly among literature of India scholars. My thinking was further developed and tested in a 1985 article published in the *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, which is little known outside India. As a result of feedback from these earlier publications and some revision, I am now confident of my scholarship on Patañjali's Yoga contributions to Bhartṛhari, which I have put together com-

pletely for the first time in part I. Chapters 3 and 4 are based on chapters 1 and 2 in my book *Bhārṭṛhari* © 1976 G.K. Hall.

In part II, my thinking on how Patañjali's Yoga has influenced Western psychology, and how a fundamental disagreement about human nature has appeared through that analysis, has developed and been tested in articles published in *Philosophy East and West*, a chapter from my SUNY book (*Jung and Eastern Thought*, 1985), and a new chapter on the transpersonal psychologists. All of this writing has been reworked a couple of times to highlight the major point of difference between Patañjali's Yoga and Western thinking on the limits of human nature—an insight which has only gradually clarified itself in my thinking but which I am now ready to engage fully. That this point, central to part II, is timely is evidenced by John Hick's most recent book, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oneworld, 1999) in which he devotes chapters 15 and 16 to dismissing Eastern claims of union with the divine as “metaphorical” rather than “literal” in nature. In my view, this is an unfair reductionism of Eastern claims, which are also shared by some Western mystics, by taking Kant's view of the limits of human nature and experience to be absolute. My position is that good comparative scholarship requires that we examine such claims within the presuppositions of their own worldviews, and that there is no “theological or philosophical helicopter” that will get us above all biases or presuppositions so as to determine which are absolute or right and which are wrong. Therefore, as scholars we must remain critical but open. It is this debate that is at the root of the disagreement as to the limits of human nature between Yoga and Western psychology, philosophy, and theology.

Taken together, parts I and II represent a culmination of my thinking on the significance of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* over the past 25 years. It is the Yoga book I have wanted to write since I spent two years in Banaras (Varanasi) in 1972 and 1973, reading the *Yoga Sūtras* line by line in traditional guru-sishya style with my teacher, Professor T. R. V. Murti. (My book on Murti will appear in *The Builders of Indian Philosophy* series published by Manohar in 2002.)

I wish to thank Vicki Simmons for her assistance in the preparation of this book.

# introduction

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*Yoga* is a very popular word in the West these days. From exercise programs to meditation training, yoga teachers abound in most communities of Europe and North America. In bookstores the self-help sections contain numerous “yoga” titles. In most cases these modern presentations of yoga are updated versions of some aspect of the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali, the basic presentation of the Indian Yoga school dating from 200 to 300 CE.<sup>1</sup> Among the classical schools of Indian philosophy, the Yoga school has been widely accepted as foundational as far as psychological processes are concerned. In this book we will show the role Yoga played in the classical Indian philosophy of language of Bhartṛhari, examine Yoga’s influence on Carl Jung’s psychology, observe parallels with Sigmund Freud’s conception of how memory works, and study the impact of Yoga on transpersonal psychology. From a comparative perspective, it is noteworthy that during the past decades contemporary philosophy and psychology have refocused attention on “mind”<sup>2</sup> and “consciousness”<sup>3</sup>—topics that occupied the central focus in Yoga theory and practice. Thus the comparative explorations with Western psychology are timely.

## YOGA IN INDIAN THOUGHT

Within Indian thought, conceptions such as *karma* (memory traces from previous actions or thoughts) and *saṃsāra* (rebirth) are taken as basic to all Jaina, Buddhist, and Hindu schools. So also there are certain common conceptions about the psychological processes of human nature (e.g., the existence of cognitive traces or *saṃskāras*) which are seen to exist in and through the specific differences of the various schools as a kind of commonly understood psychology. Jadunath Sinha supports this contention in his finding that the psychological conception of yogic intuition (*pratibhā*) is found in all schools with the exception of the Cārvāka and the Mīmāṃsā.<sup>4</sup> Mircea Eliade states that Yoga is one of the four basic motifs of all Indian thought. T. H. Stcherbatsky, the eminent Russian scholar of Buddhism, observes that Yogic trance (*samādhi*) and Yogic courses for the training of the mind in the achievement of *mokṣa*

or *nirvāṇa* appear in virtually all Indian schools of thought.<sup>5</sup> Probably the most complete presentation of this traditional Indian psychology is to be found in the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, and it is from this source that the following overview is presented.<sup>6</sup>

Yoga starts with an analysis of ordinary experience. This is characterized by a sense of restlessness caused by the distracting influences of our desires. Peace and purity of mind come only when the distractability of our nature is controlled by the radical step of purging the passions. But if these troublesome passions are to be purged, they must be fully exposed to view. In this respect, Yoga predated Freud by several hundred years in the analysis of the unconscious. In the Yoga view, the sources of all our troubles are the karmic seeds (memory traces) of past actions or thoughts, heaped up in the unconscious, or storehouse consciousness, as it is called in Yoga, and tainted by ignorance, materialistic or sensuous desire, as well as the clinging to one's own ego. Thus, it is clear that traditional Yoga psychology gives ample recognition to the darker side of humans—the shadow consciousness.

At the ego-awareness level of consciousness, Yoga conceives of human cognition on various levels. There is the function of the mind in integrating and coordinating the input of sensory impressions and the resurgent memories of past thoughts and actions (*saṁskāras*). These may all be thought of as “learned” if we use behaviouristic terminology. Then there is the higher function of the mind in making discriminative decisions as to whether or not to act on the impulses that are constantly flooding one's awareness. This discriminative capacity (*buddhi*) is not learned but is an innate aspect of our psyche and has the capacity to reveal our true nature. This occurs when, by our discriminative choices, we negate and root out the polluting passions (*kliṣṭa karmas*) from our unconscious until it is totally purified of their distracting restlessness—their pulling and pushing of us in one direction and then another. Once this is achieved by disciplined self-effort, the level of egoic consciousness is transcended, since the notion of ego, I or me, is also ultimately unreal. It is simply a by-product of my selfish desiring. Once the latter is rooted out, the former by necessity also disappears, and the final level of human nature, pure or transcendent consciousness, is all that remains.

According to Yoga, transcendent consciousness is not immaterial but is composed of high-quality, high-energy luminous material (*sattvic citta*). Since all egoity has been overcome, there is no duality, no subject-object awareness, but only immediate intuition. All experience is transcendent of individuality, although this is described differently by the various schools of Indian thought. The Hindus, for example, overcome the subject-object duality by resolving all objectivity into an absolute subject (i.e., *Brahman*). The Buddhists seem to go in the opposite direction and do away with all subjectivity, leaving only bare objective experience (i.e., *Nirvāṇa*, which may be translated as “all ego and desiring is blown out”). For our present purpose, the metaphysical speculation, although interesting, is not important. What is significant is that Yoga psychology finds the essence of human nature to be at the transcendent level of consciousness, where ego and unconscious desires have been excised. The various kinds of Yogic meditation are simply different practical disciplines, or therapies, for removing conscious and unconscious desires, along with the accompanying ego-sense from the psyche.