

# THE YOGA SŪTRAS OF PATAÑJALI

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who is white and has a thousand heads, to that Patañjali, I offer obeisances.<sup>106</sup>

ततो द्वन्द्वानभिघातः ॥ ४८ ॥

*II.48 tato dvandvānabhighātaḥ*

*tataḥ*, consequently, from this; *dvandva*, by the opposites;  
*anabhighātaḥ*, not afflicted

**From this, one is not afflicted by the dualities of the opposites.**

By mastering posture, says Vyāsa, one is not overcome, *anabhighāta*, by dualities, *dvandva*, such as hot and cold. This language of transcending such dualities is very common in the Vedānta tradition (for example, *Gītā* VI.7; XII.18). Hot and cold (and all shades in between) represent the spectrum of sensations of the body, so this *sūtra* indicates that once *āsana* is mastered, one loses all awareness of the sensations of the body. The mind can now be focused elsewhere in meditation without being distracted by the body. Hariharānanda notes that upon mastering *āsana*, a state of calmness is experienced in the body, which allows for a detachment from the body's sensations such as hunger and thirst. In other words, the purpose and perfection of *āsana* indicated by Patañjali are when one loses all awareness of the body and, consequently, its sensations. It is a preliminary ingredient in a far larger undertaking.

तस्मिन् सति श्वासप्रश्वासयोगतिविच्छेदः प्राणायामः ॥ ४९ ॥

*II.49 tasmin sati śvāsa-praśvāsayor gati-vicchedaḥ  
prāṇāyāmaḥ*

*tasmin*, that; *sati*, is attained; *śvāsa*, inhalation;  
*praśvāsayoḥ*, exhalation; *gati*, movement; *vicchedaḥ*,  
regulation;  
*prāṇāyāmaḥ*, breath control

**When that [*āsana*] is accomplished, *prāṇāyāmaḥ*,  
breath control, [follows] . This consists of the  
regulation of the incoming and outgoing breaths.**

Patañjali now moves on to the next limb of *yoga*, *prāṇāyāma*, but we can note that the first phrase of the *sūtra*, *tasmin sati* (known in Sanskrit grammar as a *sati saptaṁī*, a locative absolute construction), indicates that this is to be undertaken while *āsana* is being perfected. Similar phrases introduce several of the other limbs as well (II.53; III.2). One can thus argue for a consecutive interdependence among the limbs, each one presupposing that the *yogī* is cultivating and mastering the previous ones. Most important for aspiring *yogīs*, one cannot bypass the *yamas* and *niyamas* and expect to be able to fix the mind in the serious and prolonged meditation of the subsequent limbs of *yoga*. Without cultivating the *yamas* and *niyamas*, the mind will not manifest the requisite state of *sattva*, without which there can be no meditation and thus no serious practice of *yoga* as defined by Patañjali. It is *rajas* and *tamas* that provoke the *vitarkas*, the thoughts, tendencies, or urges contrary to the *yamas* and *niyamas* (II.33–34), and it should be very clear by now that the higher goals of *yoga* cannot be attained while *rajas* and *tamas* are prominent in the *citta*.

*Prāṇāyāma* as breath control is an ancient practice that can be found in the old Brāhmaṇa texts.<sup>107</sup> Vyāsa explains that the *śvāsa* from this *sūtra* is the intake of air from the outside, and *praśvāsa*, the exhalation of air from the stomach. He defines *prāṇāyāma* to be the suspension, or absence, of both—in other words, the suspension of breath. Since Patañjali speaks of a type of suspension of breath as the fourth type of *prāṇāyāma* in II.51, the commentators clarify that here Patañjali is implicitly referring to three other types of breath suspension, *gati-vicchedaḥ*: *recaka*, where breath is suspended after *praśvāsa*, exhalation; *pūraka*, where breath is suspended after *śvāsa*, inhalation; and *kumbhaka*, the simultaneous suspension of both.

Hariharānanda, however (while accepting the definition given by the other commentators), states importantly that there is more to the *prāṇāyāma* referred to here than just these techniques,

some of which receive attention in the fourteenth-century *yoga* manual *Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā*. He stresses that concentration on one's object of meditation has to accompany the practice of *prāṇāyāma*. One must clear the mind of *vṛttis* in conjunction with suspending the breath, not just devote oneself to suspending the breath alone. In his commentary to the next *sūtra*, he notes that *yogic prāṇāyāma* in turn, done properly, reciprocally helps to arrest the *vṛttis* of the mind and make it one-pointed. Thus this practice can lead the mind toward *samādhi*. In any case, without such arresting of the mind, *prāṇāyāma* is not *yoga* but merely a physical feat. He further notes that in *samādhi*, the breath becomes imperceptible, or even wholly suspended.

बाह्यभ्यन्तरस्तम्भवृत्तिः देशकालसंख्याभिः परिदृष्टो दीर्घसूक्ष्मः ॥५०॥

*II.50 bāhyābhyantara-stambha-vṛttiḥ deśa-kāla-saṅkhyābhiḥ  
paridrṣṭo dīrgha-sūkṣmaḥ*

*bāhya*, external; *ābhyantara*, internal; *stambha*, restrained, suppressed; *vṛttiḥ*, movements; *deśa*, place; *kāla*, time; *saṅkhyābhiḥ*, and number; *paridrṣṭaḥ*, is manifest; *dīrgha*, long; *sūkṣmaḥ*, subtle

**[*Prāṇāyāmaḥ*] manifests as external, internal, and restrained movements [of breath] . These are drawn out and subtle in accordance to place, time, and number.**

Vyāsa defines the external, *bāhya*, of this *sūtra* as when there is no flow of breath after exhalation; internal, *ābhyantara*, when there is no flow of breath after inhalation; and restrained, *stambha*, as the simultaneous cessation of both (the commentators specify that these refer to the *recaka*, *pūraka*, and *kumbhaka* suppressions mentioned in the last *sūtra*<sup>108</sup>). *Vṛtti* means anything that turns or revolves and thus can apply to breathing, as in this verse, or anything else, in addition to the churnings of thought. The movement, *vṛtti*, of breath ceases, he notes, just as water shrinks and contracts from all sides and evaporates when it is sprinkled

on a heated stone. The breath remains within the body when it ceases to move in and out, adds Vācaspati Miśra (like motionless water filling a jar, says Rāmānanda Sarasvatī).

Moving on to the second part of the *sūtra*, all these different types of breath restraint are regulated by place, *deśa*, that is, the surface area that is reached by the breath, says Vyāsa. He understands time as the seconds of duration of these cessations of the flow of breath, and number as how many sequences of inhalations and exhalations are restrained, and whether they are mild, middling, or intense in nature. The commentators elaborate on this schema. In terms of place, the surface area covered by breath is either external or internal. The external range of breath here is measured by a piece of cotton or blade of grass placed at a certain distance—a hand span or twelve fingers—from the nose to see at what point it is moved by the breath. The internal range of breath is measured from the soles of the feet to the head and can be sensed like “the touch of an ant.” In *kumbhaka*, breath ceases in both these spheres. This external and internal range or surface area of breath constitutes Patañjali’s place.

Time, *kāla*, refers to the differing durations of each individual exhalation, inhalation, and retention, and is calculated by *kṣaṇa*, a unit that is taken here to correspond to a quarter of the time it takes to blink the eye (but see III.52 for a more metaphysical definition). *Prāṇāyāma* is regulated by the number of *kṣaṇas* involved in the restraint, etc., of the breath. Number, *saṅkhyā*, is the number of repetitions, or rounds of each cycle of inhalations, exhalations, and retentions at one sitting. Time differs from number, says Vijñānabhikṣu, in terms of the method used in calculation. Number is determined by *mātrā*. Vijñānabhikṣu quotes a verse<sup>109</sup> that states that a *mātrā* corresponds to a single clap of the hands, the opening and closing of the eyes once, or the utterance of a phoneme (for example, the *ga* sound in *yoga*), Vācaspati Miśra takes a *mātrā* to correspond to the time it takes to rub one’s kneecap three times and then snap one’s fingers. According to Vijñānabhikṣu, twelve *mātrās* are the unit used for *prāṇāyāma*. He prescribes drawing in the breath through the right nostril for the duration of sixteen *mātrās* and, once the lungs are full, holding the breath for sixty-four *mātrās*, after which one

exhales for the duration of thirty-two *mātrās*. This is to be accompanied by meditation on the *om mantra*.

Vācaspati Miśra and Vijñānabhikṣu also differ in their understanding of Vyāsa's mild, middling, and intense demarcations. Vācaspati Miśra takes mild to be thirty-six *mātrās*, middling twice that, and intense thrice that amount, whereas Vijñānabhikṣu quotes the *Kūrma Purāṇa* (IX.32) in which mild is understood as twelve *mātrās*, middling as twenty-four, and intense as thirty-six.<sup>110</sup> Hariharānanda recommends the internal chanting of *mantras* as an alternative to the various *mātrā* techniques, using the repetition of a certain number of *mantras* to demarcate the duration of the periods separating inhalation, exhalation, and suppression.

The common denominator of all this is simply that some consistent system of time demarcation is used in *prāṇāyāma*. By practice, says Vyāsa, these restrictions of breath become drawn out, *dirgha*, and subtle, *sūkṣma*. In other words, say the commentators, one can increase the duration of these intervals of breath restraint so that they become more and more prolonged and imperceptible in terms of the movement of air (such that with practice cotton wool does not move even when placed at the tip of the nose, specifies Hariharānanda).

बाह्याभ्यन्तरविषयाक्षेपी चतुर्थः ॥५१॥

## II.51 *bāhyābhyantara-viṣayākṣepī caturthaḥ*

*bāhya*, external; *ābhyantara*, internal; *viṣaya*, the sphere, range; *ākṣepī*, surpassing; *caturthaḥ*, the fourth

**The fourth [type of *prāṇāyāma*] surpasses the limits of the external and the internal.**

The fourth, *caturthaḥ*, type of *prāṇāyāma*, says Vyāsa, refers to the total suppression of breath and so, like the *kumbhaka* mentioned previously, also involves the cessation of inhalation and exhalation. Vijñānabhikṣu calls it *kevala-kumbhaka*, pure *kumbhaka*. In his *Yogasāra* commentary, he quotes the *Bṛīhan-*

*nāradiya Purāṇa* as referring to it as *śūnyaka*. The commentators are not overly helpful in clarifying the precise difference between the third type of *prāṇāyāma*, *kumbhaka*, and the fourth type, *caturthaḥ*. As is the case with so much in the *sūtras*, it is clear that these are techniques to be experienced by practice rather than understood intellectually. Vyāsa states that the third type of suppression is brought about by a single effort, whereas the fourth takes place gradually with prolonged effort. Apparently, *kumbhaka* is performed independently of the suppression of breath in *recaka* and *pūraka* that utilizes the system of measurements; it is thus limited in duration. *Caturthaḥ*, in contrast, says Vijñānabhikṣu, involves an extension of the cessation of breath that occurs after exhalation and inhalation in *recaka* and *pūraka* that is not determined by time and number, and the adept of this stage of *prāṇāyāma* can maintain the suppression of breath at will, even for a month or a year. It thus surpasses the other three stages of *prāṇāyāma*. One might also suppose that in this state the body is being maintained by the internal circulation of *prāṇa* rather than any external flow of breath.

Accounts of suspending the functions of conventional breathing are fairly standard throughout the ascetic Yoga traditions of ancient India. In the Pāli Buddhist tradition (*Majjhima Nikāya* I.121ff), the Buddha describes his own experiences with stopping breathing, and similar accounts are found in Jain literature (*Uttarajjhayaṇa* 29).<sup>111</sup> The *Gītā* also speaks of *prāṇāpānau samau*, the equalizing of the incoming and outgoing breath (V.27), and the practice plays a central role in the *Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā* (II.74ff; IV.112). Hariharānanda mentions that he knew of someone who could remain buried alive for ten or twelve days as a result of his ability to restrain the breath, and even the great philosopher of modern times, Dasgupta, claimed to have witnessed a *yogī* remaining in a state of suspended animation for nine days, without intake of food or drink, and devoid even of heartbeat.<sup>112</sup> Accounts were also documented during the colonial period, such as the case of one Haridas, buried alive in 1837 in the Lahore court of Rāja Runjeet Singh, with extensive precautions taken against fraud, all of which was documented by

Sir Claude Martin Wade.<sup>113</sup> The Yoga tradition has long been full of accounts of *yogīs* who have suspended their breath and been buried alive for prolonged periods and then exhumed alive, at which time they reactivated the normal breathing processes. (Indeed, related phenomena have recently attracted some degree of scientific attention.<sup>114</sup>)

In its beginning stages, *Vijñānabhikṣu* continues, this fourth type of *prāṇāyāma* is accompanied by sweating; in higher stages, by shivering; and in advanced stages, by a feeling of “flooding.” When mastered, one attains mystic powers such as the ability to fly and go anywhere at will. He cites Dhruva from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (IV.8ff) as an example of someone who had mastered this type of *prāṇāyāma*. The Dhruva story is well-known in the Purāṇic tradition: Offended by his co-mother, who would not allow him to climb on the lap of his father the king, Dhruva is advised by his own mother, the neglected co-wife of the king, to practice austerities and worship the supreme Lord Viṣṇu if he wished to sit on the lap of his father. Dhruva is given further directions by the sage Nārada for specifically how to meditate and worship Lord Viṣṇu, and these include the practice of *recaka*, *pūraka*, and *kumbhaka*, and meditation on the *mantra* “*om namo bhagavate Vāsudevāya*.”

Although he was only five years old, the boy betook himself to the forest and practiced severe austerities with a view to attaining an audience with the supreme Lord Viṣṇu. Worshipping the Lord as he had been directed, the lad ate some simple fruits only every third day for the entire first month of his austerities; for the second month, he abstained from all food except for withered grass and leaves consumed every sixth day; for the third, he renounced all food and subsisted only on water drunk every ten days; for the fourth, his only form of sustenance was air inhaled every fourteen days, and then every fifteen days. It is here that Dhruva’s story becomes relevant to this *sūtra*: Suppressing the breath for fourteen or fifteen days at a time indicates a mastery of the “fourth” type of *prāṇāyāma* noted by Patañjali in this *sūtra*. For the fifth month Dhruva refrained from all activities whatsoever, including breathing (thereby extending this particular process of *prāṇāyāma* to its maximum extent), stood on

one leg in some variant of the *ekapāda-vṛkṣāsana* [tree] pose, and focused exclusively on Lord Viṣṇu.

Because of his complete absorption on the Lord of the universe, Dhruva's personal condition emanated out and pervaded the whole universe, such that all other beings also became deprived of breath. We can note here, given that the topic is the subject of much of the [next chapter](#), that this process by which the *yogī* absorbs the qualities of the object of meditation by absolute unflinching absorption on that object is called *saṁyama*. In this case, since Viṣṇu is the supreme soul pervading the entire universe, Dhruva became as if one with Viṣṇu due to his complete mental absorption on Viṣṇu, and thus his own personal condition of *kevala-kumbhaka* pervaded the entire universe.

Although the boy's worship and meditation were tinged with personal motive, Viṣṇu was nonetheless moved by the incredible determination of the lad, appeared before him, purified his heart of all desires (*kleśas*), and bestowed various boons upon him. A further example from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* of a *yogī* who had mastered the techniques of *prāṇāyāma* is described in II.54 below.

ततः क्षीयते प्रकाशावरणम् ॥५२॥

## II.52 tataḥ kṣīyate prakāśāvaraṇam

*tataḥ*, then; *kṣīyate*, is weakened; *prakāśa*, illumination;  
*āvaraṇam*, covering

**Then, the covering of the illumination [of knowledge]  
is weakened.**

*Prakāśa*, illumination, as we know from II.18, is a synonym for *sattva*. The covering of illumination, *prakāśa-āvaraṇa*, says Vyāsa, is ultimately *karma*, and this is destroyed by the practice of *prāṇāyāma*. He quotes a verse that speaks of *karma* as the “net of great illusion” that covers *sattva* and impels one to commit immoral deeds. *Karma*, we recall, consists of actions that are all recorded in the *citta* as *saṁskāras* and that fructify at the appropriate time, conditioning one to act in certain ways. *Karma*

is in this sense synonymous with the storehouse of *saṁskāras*, which trigger the behavioral patterns and preconditioned attitudes, perspectives, or responses to the world, such as the immoral deeds mentioned by Vyāsa. It is a net of illusion because, like a net with many knots, when the myriad *saṁskāras* fructify, they channel awareness away from its source and absorb it in conditioned patterns of behavior (the *sattva* of the mind forgets the true nature of the *puruṣa* and becomes enamored by the objects of the senses, says Vijñānabhikṣu). Pursuing these sense objects, additional *karma* is produced, and thus the mind remains further trapped and entangled in this net of action and reaction. In this sense it is *karma* that sustains ignorance, the covering of knowledge, the misconception that the body and senses are the true self.

Although, technically, only knowledge can ultimately destroy ignorance, says Hariharānanda, it is only when the covering of *karma* is weakened that knowledge can shine forth unobstructed. This covering of *karma* is weakened, says Vyāsa, by the practice of *prāṇāyāma*. He quotes a verse that “there is no greater ascetic practice than *prāṇāyāma*, from which defects are purified and the light of knowledge shines forth.”<sup>115</sup> Manu, too, states that from the performance of *prāṇāyāma* accompanied by the repetition of the *om̐ mantra*, “the impurities of the sensory powers are burnt away, just as the defiling impurities of metal ore are burnt away in the heat of the furnace” (VI.72).

धारणासु च योग्यता मनसः ॥५३॥

### *II.53 dhāraṇāsu ca योग्यता मनसाḥ*

*dhāraṇāsu*, for concentration; *ca*, and; *yogyatā*, fitness, competency; *manasaḥ*, mind

**Additionally, the mind becomes fit for concentration.**

*Manasaḥ* is used here rather than *citta*, as it is the specific aspect of *citta* that interacts with the senses, and awareness must now make a transition from the sensory involvements of *prāṇāyāma*

and the next limb, *pratyāhāra*, to the transsensory stage of *dhāraṇā*, concentration.<sup>116</sup> *Dhāraṇā* is the sixth limb of *yoga*, which will be discussed shortly. The commentators assume this *sūtra* to be self-explanatory and have little to add. For the mind to be able to fix on an object of concentration, it must be *sattvic*, that is, *rajas* and *tamas* must be minimized. Bhoja Rāja says that once freed from its defects by these breathing techniques, the mind can remain fixed wherever it is directed; in other words, the correct performance of *prāṇāyāma* prepares the mind for concentration, the preliminary stage of meditation and ultimate *samādhi*. Again, the sequential nature of the limbs is indicated in this *sūtra*. But one more step is required before the mind can successfully undertake the practice of *dhāraṇā*, concentration; this is the fifth limb of the next verse.

स्वविषयासंप्रयोगे चित्तस्य स्वरूपानुकार  
इवेन्द्रियाणां प्रत्याहारः ॥५४॥

*II.54 svaviṣayāsamprayoge cittasya svarūpānukāra  
īvendriyāṇām pratyāhārah*

*sva*, their own; *viṣaya*, sense objects; *asamprayoge*, not coming into contact with; *cittasya*, of the mind; *svarūpa*, nature; *anukārah*, imitation, resemblance; *iva*, as if; *indriyāṇām*, of the senses; *pratyāhārah*, withdrawal  
***Pratyāhāra*, withdrawal from sense objects, occurs when the senses do not come into contact with their respective sense objects. It corresponds, as it were, to the nature of the mind [when it is withdrawn from the sense objects] .**

Patañjali now introduces the fifth limb of *yoga*, *pratyāhāra*, which is when the senses do not come into contact with the sense objects, *svaviṣaya-asamprayoga*, a practice referred to as early as the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (VIII.15). This is accomplished through the mind: When the mind is under control, says Vyāsa, the senses are automatically under control; they do not need to be restrained