**The Vedānticisation of the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali: a modern appraisal**

In recent years Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra* has been promoted by many teachers and writers as the normative and quintessential text on yoga. Here’s a selection. Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, founder of a modern yoga movement of international standing, is quoted as claiming that ‘If it is not in the *Yoga Sūtra* it’s not yoga.’[[1]](#endnote-1) For Godfrey Devereux, author of *Dynamic Yoga,* it is ‘the bible of yoga.’[[2]](#endnote-2) Swami Vivekananda describes it as ‘the highest authority and text book on Rāja Yoga.’[[3]](#endnote-3) J Carrera describes it as ‘… a timeless spiritual classic whose appeal is founded on a profound and unerring understanding of the human condition.’[[4]](#endnote-4) For Wendy Doniger it is ‘essential to anyone’s understanding … of the practice of yoga.’[[5]](#endnote-5) This, then, is surely a text that every student of yoga should study. Certainly many training organisations make it required reading for their students.

Well, not everyone agrees. David Gordon White claims that ‘… the *Yoga Sutra* is as relevant to yoga as it is taught and practiced today as understanding the workings of a combustion engine is to driving a car.’[[6]](#endnote-6) Given that the *Yoga Sūtra* is primarily a soteriological text dealing with the ways in which people can escape from suffering, mainly through meditation, it has little to say on what is often called ‘postural yoga.’ So, generally, I tend to agree with White. There are, however, two caveats to that agreement.

The first caveat relates to teachers of yoga. Although they may not be teaching any kind of meditation in their classes they have, I would argue, a professional responsibility as teachers to be the best guides that they can be. Some of their students may be reading books on yoga and seek guidance from their teachers. Teachers who inform themselves, as best as they are able, about the history of yoga can help their students avoid a good deal of confusion and even distress if they can offer even a simple account of different positions taken by writers on yoga and the kinds of controversies that are generated within the field.

My second caveat has to do with different traditions within the field of modern yoga. Some, such as that developed by Krishnamacharya and his son T.K.V. Desikachar, tend to treat postural yoga as a preparation for meditational yoga, which, they argue, is best summarised by Patañjali.[[7]](#endnote-7) Within such a context it makes perfect sense for students to acquaint themselves with this text.

The general problem for many Western students who get interested in yoga and start to read about it is that they quickly encounter a variety of conflicting claims. With regard to the *Yoga Sūtra,* the understanding of Patañjali that modern Western students acquire will depend on the translation they consult and will often be shaped by the interpretations of teachers they respect. If all translations and interpretations were essentially the same then people could simply choose which versions they use on the basis of style, or presentation or other aesthetic factors. But they are not. Different translations and commentaries interpret Patañjali’s text and teachings in radically different ways. Many of the differences are profound. For example, does Patañjali teach that the seer (soul or spirit) is fundamentally different from the seen (the psycho-physical universe) or fundamentally one with it? Does he teach that the 8-limbed yoga should be understood as a progression or as a simultaneous practice? Does he require celibacy or merely fidelity to one sexual partner? Translators and commentators answer these questions in different ways, but they cannot all be accurate. These alternatives are mutually exclusive, so some of the answers must be wrong.

In this paper I will aim to offer an account of Patañjali’s teaching that is as unbiased as I can make it. Then I will engage in a critique of what I regard as the most significant pattern of distortion confronting modern students, and conclude with a few reflections on what Patañjali sans distortions has to offer modern practitioners of yoga and on the motives behind the distortions.

**The teachings of the Yoga Sūtra**

In outline, the teachings contained in the text treated as a whole are that the world from which Patañjali and his followers seek to escape is one that is permeated by suffering (duḥkha), (2.15-16). This world has come into existence because of the conjunction (saṃyoga) of two essentially distinct entities, namely prakṛti, that which is seen, and puruṣa, the seer (2.17). That conjunction is the cause of ignorance (avidyā), which is the seer losing awareness of its real nature and identifying with the ever-changing manifestations of prakṛti. This ignorance is said by Patañjali to be the fundamental cause of affliction (kleśa) as the body-mind complex with which the bound puruṣa identifies gives rise to further causes of affliction: I-am-ness (asmitā); attachment (rāga); aversion (dveṣa), and the will-to-live (abhiniveśa).

The causes of affliction exist in two modes: subtle (sukṣma) and coarse (sthūla). At the subtle level, the kleśas condition the psychological traits (vāsana) and the psychic impressions of former actions (saṃskāra). At the coarse level, they are aroused or active (udāra). In this condition they influence the states of consciousness/activities of the mind (vṛtti) that are the normal range of experience for most people. The vṛttis are:

1. valid cognition (pramāna);
2. misconception (viparyaya);
3. conceptualisation (vikalpa);
4. sleep (nidrā);
5. memory (smṛti).

These states of consciousness can be afflicted (kliṣṭa) or non-afflicted (akliṣṭa). The precise nature of this distinction is not elaborated by Patañjali and the traditional commentators offer little by way of insight. A liberated yogin would still, presumably, experience at least some of the vṛttis, and it might be that in such a case the vṛttis would be non-afflicted. 4.7 tells us, for example, that the actions (karma) of the yogin are neither black nor white. However, since the kleśas are only fully eradicated in the final stages of yogic practice (4.29-30) there is little scope for the akliṣṭa vrttis. What is clear, is that all these states of consciousness are conditioned or affected by the traits (vāsana) and impressions (saṃskāra), which, in turn, are created and modified by the character of ongoing experience. This is the cycle that maintains ignorance and hence saṃsāra.

Patañjali's main concern is to set out the elements of the way to escape from this cycle. His initial focus is the vṛttis, since these are what dominate people's awareness and all of them are conditioned by ignorance and the other kleśas. Hence, he states in 1.2 that 'Yoga is the cessation or stilling (nirodha) of the vṛttis.' The way to make the vṛttis still is to cultivate concentration of mind (dhyāna) (Y.S. 2.11). The state of dhyāna is thus the state of yoga. Once this is achieved, he tells us in 1.3, the seer abides in its own nature (svarūpa).

All is not quite so simple, however, since, according to 2.11, the vṛttis are merely vehicles for expressing just the coarse aspect of the kleśas. So, although the seer might experience itself in the state of dhyāna such an experience is only temporary.[[8]](#endnote-8) The conjunction between puruṣa and prakṛti still remains. For this to be broken the subtle aspects of the kleśas have also to be eradicated. For this, one who seeks liberation continue with and develop the two-pronged method that is set out in YS 1.12. This involves both practice (abhyāsa) and dispassion (vairāgya). In 1.12 practice and dispassion are presented as the means to stop the vṛttis, though they clearly go beyond that. 1.15-16 distinguish two levels of dispassion: a lower (in relation to seen and revealed objects) and a higher (in relation to the guṇas and, if we also consider 3.50, in relation to omniscience and omnipotence). This higher dispassion only emerges after the puruṣa’s experience of itself (puruṣa-khyāti), i.e. in the state of yoga/dhyāna. (Indeed, if we take 1.20 as referring to the higher dispassion rather than so-called ‘asaṃprajñāta samādhi’ then it follows rather than precedes the experience of samādhi.) Likewise, dhyāna itself is to be deepened into samādhi, which has a number of levels (1.41-51). 4.30 brings these two together in what seems to be a statement along the lines of ‘when the higher dispassion is made permanent there is the experience of dharma-megha-samādhi, which, in turn, prompts the disappearance (nivṛtti) of the kleśas and the process of pratiprassava, the return of the guṇas to their unmanifest state, what the *Sāṃkya Kārikā* calls avyakta.’ This means that the kleśas persist in subtle form right until the moment that puruṣa separates from prakṛti (kaivalya).

Patañjali's path is thus a deeply radical challenge to common sense thinking. He encourages us to stop identifying with *everything* that we have hitherto regarded as our 'self', i.e. our bodies, our minds, our feelings, our memories, much as the Buddha did when he taught that none of the five aggregates of a person (the skhandhas) nor all of them together constituted our self. Patañjali says that we do have a self, but that, unlike our bodies, etc. it is not part of prakṛti. This is why his path involves both practice or meditation (abhyāsa) and detachment (vairāgya). Meditation reveals the nature of things; detachment enables the connection between puruṣa and prakṛti to be broken.

In broad outline then, the *Yoga Sūtra* offers an intelligible soteriology that is quite similar to those developed in other renouncer circles. The problem, suffering, is described, the methods for dealing with it are set out and a notion of what the liberated state is like is offered.

Having attempted a relatively unprejudiced interpretation of Patañjali’s teaching, I will now turn my attention to some modern accounts that, in my view, systematically distort that teaching. Perhaps the most striking general observation to be made about what seems to be the majority of these commentaries, which often accompany a translation, is what we might call their Vedāntic spin.

At a talk entitled ‘Yoga Darśana and Vedānta Darśana’ that I gave at the British Wheel of Yoga’s DCT Conference back in September 2000 I argued that although the ‘schools’ (darśana – lit. viewpoint) of Yoga (based on the YS) and Vedānta (based on the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā and Brahma Sūtra) were both nominally orthodox (astika), i.e. accepting the authority of the Veda, there was little in the YS to justify such a categorisation.[[9]](#endnote-9) Moreover, both Yoga and its sister school of Sāṃkhya exhibit many similarities with early Buddhism and Jainism, which were nāstika, i.e. denying the authority of the Veda.[[10]](#endnote-10) Vedānta, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in Vedic texts. It is primarily based on the Upaniṣads, which are the Veda-anta (i.e. end of the Veda) with the Bhagavad Gītā and Brahma Sūtra added on.

One point that I made in that talk is worth reiterating here, as it is germane to the case I want to make. It is that Vedāntic theology harbours a profound philosophical difficulty at its most fundamental level. This problem arises from the claim that all the root Vedāntic texts teach essentially the same thing.

If they were correct about this then all that would be needed to create a coherent theology is a demonstration that the various terms and claims do, in fact, contribute to a single scheme. The problem is that an unbiased reading of Vedāntic texts reveals quite clearly that not only do they teach different things, but that some of these teachings also contradict each other, i.e. if one is true then the other is false. Here’s just one example to illustrate the point:

In Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.2.1, Uddālaka challenges head on the claim found in other Vedic texts such as Ṛgveda 10.72.2-3, Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 6.1.1 and Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa 2.2.9 and also, interestingly, in Chāndogya Up. 3.19 and Taittirīya Up. 2.7.1, that being arose out of non-being:

'In the beginning, my dear, this world was just Being (sat) one only, without a second. To be sure, some people say: "In the beginning this world was just Non-being (asat), one only without a second;

from that Non-being Being was produced"

But verily, my dear, whence could this be? said he.

How from Non-being could Being be produced?

On the contrary, my dear, in the beginning this world was just Being,

One only, without a second.'[[11]](#endnote-11)

Here’s the TU passage for comparison:

 ‘In the beginning, verily, this [world] was non-existent (asat).

Therefrom, verily, Being (*sat*) was produced.

That made itself (*svayam akuruta*) a Soul (*Ātman*).

Therefore it is called well-done (*su-kṛta*).’[[12]](#endnote-12)

In short, although Vedāntic theologians might wish to create a coherent theology from all the texts they regard as authoritative their desire is a philosophical impossibility. Only by contorting the meanings of key terms by claiming that their obvious meaning does not apply and that they have to be understood in a ‘symbolic’ way or by categorising passages as expressing ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ truths, as Śaṅkara does, can they bring a even a semblance of coherence to the Vedāntic corpus.

For anyone who is not prepared to force these texts into claiming the same things, a different way of understanding them stands out as obvious: namely that the material preserved in them reveals different thinkers making sense of the world in different ways and disagreeing with each other. If this is a more honest and accurate approach, then commentators who buy into the Vedāntic assumption that all Vedāntic texts teach essentially the same thing are unlikely to be reliable guides to the teachings found in those texts.

When it comes to understanding the teachings of the YS we encounter a double challenge, for not only do Vedāntic commentators, both ancient and modern, assume that Vedāntic texts all teach the same thing they also tend to assume that the YS teaches the same things as the Vedāntic texts.

My response to these assumptions is twofold:

1. The Vedāntic texts do *not* all teach the same thing, and
2. The teachings of the YS are different from those found in any Vedāntic text, though there is also some overlap.

Given that many of the English translations of the YS are written by people who subscribe to Vedāntic assumptions, then the likelihood is that the majority of modern yoga students who read these translations and their attached commentaries will be reading a text whose meaning will have been distorted to fit with Vedāntic teaching.

Occasionally, one encounters a Vedāntin who is at least open and honest about at least some of what is being done. So, for example, some years ago the BWY made the Prabhavananda and Isherwood translation of the YS, entitled *How to Know God: the yoga aphorisms of Patanjali,* the recommended text for its teacher-training course.[[13]](#endnote-13)

In their introduction to that translation Prabhavananda and Isherwood write:

‘Since yoga, prior to Patanjali, was originally grounded in Vedanta philosophy, we have interpreted the aphorisms, throughout, from a Vedantist viewpoint. In this we differ from Patanjali himself, who was a follower of Sankhya philosophy.’ (p.9)

Here they are at least honest about their difference from Patañjali, though their claim that yoga prior to Patañjali was originally grounded in Vedānta is false, or, at least, there are good reasons for doubting it.

Honesty is OK as far as it goes, but it is of little help to the novice student who has *How to Know God* as their only translation of the YS and who, not unreasonably, thinks that these erudite scholars will offer a largely faithful and accurate interpretation of the text.

Given that so many of the translations of the YS that are currently available have been produced by people who promote Vedāntic interpretations it is both impossible and unnecessary (not to mention tedious) to comment on them all. So I have selected two examples by eminent writers who adopt a similar approach: Swami Vivekananda, whose *Rāja Yoga* was published in 1912, and BKS Iyengar, whose *Light on the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* was first published in 1966, with a new edition by Thorsons in 2002. By identifying the variety of ways in which these works Vedānticise and distort the teachings of the YS I hope to provide you with enough information to engage with most English versions in a critical manner.

Vivekananda’s *Rāja Yoga* is still in print and now available in a Kindle version. The low cost of these texts: £3.50 for the paperback (£0.01 for a used copy) and £0.77 for the Kindle version, means that quite a number of yoga students will think they have found a bargain route into the YS.

*Rāja Yoga* is presented as a two-part work, comprising a series of lectures on Rāja Yoga delivered in 1895-6 followed by what Vivekananda calls ‘a rather free translation of the aphorisms (Sūtras) of Patañjali, with a running commentary.’[[14]](#endnote-14) These aphorisms are, according to Vivekananda, ‘the highest authority and text book on Rāja Yoga.’[[15]](#endnote-15) The lectures thus function as a kind of general introduction to the translation of the sūtras*,* which also have their own mini-introduction.

A reasonable expectation for any reader to bring to this work is that there will be a good deal of congruence between the introductory lectures and the translation plus commentary. Such an expectation is, however, misguided. What we are actually presented with is a package that subtly distorts Patañjali’s message. To his credit, in the translation and commentary Vivekananda rarely inserts ideas that were alien to Patañjali’s view. The damage is done before the reader gets that far.

Like Prabhavananda and Isherwood, Vivekananda accepts that ‘The system of Patañjali is based upon the system of the Sānkhyas, the points of difference being very few…’[[16]](#endnote-16) Later, in his commentary on 2.19, he reiterates this point, writing, ‘The system of Yoga is built entirely on the philosophy of the Sānkhyas …’[[17]](#endnote-17)

Overall, with a few exceptions I shall mention, Vivekananda stays within this frame when expounding the sūtras*.* However, as I intimated a moment ago, any reader who arrives at the translation after reading the introductory chapters has a mind that is already filled with expectations arising from those chapters, and it is here that the distortions really kick in.

**Most prominent amongst these distortions** are those dealing with the topic of prāṇa. Prāṇa is a concept found in India’s oldest religious literature: the Vedic hymns, finding its most exalted status as the source of everything in Atharva Veda 11.4. I have argued elsewhere[[18]](#endnote-18) that here we have the template for later Vedāntic cosmologies that present ātman and/or brahman as the fundamental principle. Prāṇa is an inherently Vedic-Vedāntic concept that underwent considerable elaboration in the later tantric literature. However, when we examine the root texts of the Sāṃkhya and Yoga darśanas: the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* of Īśvarakṛṣṇa and the *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali, references to prāṇa are few and far between and seem to refer to nothing more than breath. Indeed, a perusal of the Sāṃkhya tattva scheme reveals no place for a vitalistic principle like the Vedic-Vedāntic prāṇa.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Similar statements can be made about Pāli Buddhism, where meditators were encouraged to be mindful of their breathing but where notions of a life-force that can be manipulated for yogic ends are completely absent. Moreover, no Vedic or early Vedāntic accounts of prāṇa refer to kuṇḍalinī, iḍā and piṅgalā nādīs, or the cakras within the suṣumnā. These are all later tantric concepts that first appeared in the 6th century CE at the earliest, long after the composition of the YS. They may, however, have been known to Vyāsa, the earliest commentator on the YS, who is likely to have lived sometime between 650 and 850 CE.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Clearly then, any elaborations of Patañjali’s statements about prāṇa and prāṇāyāma that incorporate the vitalistic metaphysics of Vedic and early Vedāntic literature and/or later tantric developments of these ideas misrepresent Patañjali’s view. Yet this is exactly what we find in Vivekananda’s introductory chapters. A few quotations will serve to illustrate the point:

1. ‘Just as *Ākāśa* [the ether] is the infinite omnipresent material of the universe, so is this Prāṇa the infinite manifesting power of this universe. … From thought down to the lowest physical force, everything is but the manifestation of Prāṇa. … The knowledge and control of this Prāṇa is really what is meant by Prāṇāyāma.’[[21]](#endnote-21)
2. ‘This Prāṇa is the vital force in every being.’[[22]](#endnote-22)
3. ‘Every part of the body can be filled with Prāṇa, this vital force, and when you are able to do that, you can control the whole body.’[[23]](#endnote-23)
4. ‘… that part [of prāṇāyāma] which tries to control the manifestations of Prāṇa as mental force, by mental means, is called Rāja Yoga.’[[24]](#endnote-24)
5. ‘According to the Yogīs there are two nerve currents in the spinal column, called Piṅgalā and Iḍā, and there is a hollow canal called Suṣumnā running through the spinal cord. At the lower end of the hollow canal is what Yogīs call the “Lotus of the Kuṇḍalinī.”[[25]](#endnote-25)
6. ‘The Yogī conceives of several centres, beginning with the Mūlādhāra, the basic, and ending with the Sahasrāra, the thousand-petalled lotus in the brain.’[[26]](#endnote-26)
7. ‘… the rousing of the Kuṇḍalinī is the one and only way to attaining Divine wisdom, and superconscious perception, the realisation of the spirit.’[[27]](#endnote-27)

**A second significant distortion** appears in chapter 8 of the Introduction. Even though Vivekananda had told his readers that the YS was ‘the highest authority and text book on Rāja Yoga’ he bases his summary of the system, entitled ‘Rāja Yoga in Brief,’ on a different and later text, the *Kurma Purāṇa.* There, the highest yoga, called Brahmayoga or Mahāyoga, is described. This yoga leads to the realisation that the yogi himself and the whole universe are actually part of God. In the short introduction to the translation he reiterates this claim, so we can’t put it down to a slip: ‘We all came from God, and we are all bound to go to God, call that God by any name you like; call Him God, or Absolute or Nature, or by any hundred names you like, the fact remains the same. “From whom all this universe comes out, in whom all that is born lives, and to whom all returns.” This is one fact that is certain.’[[28]](#endnote-28)

Leaving aside the fact that such a claim is a long way from being a fact, we can simply note that this is pure Upaniṣadic Vedānta. Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 1.1. 6-7 and 2.1.1-10 illustrate it well.

**In conclusion**, there are good reasons for being suspicious about the accuracy of Vivekananda’s presentation of Patañjali’s teaching. That said, if readers ignored the introductory lectures and the short introduction to the translation then, apart from a couple of statements about prāṇa in his running commentary (pp. 130-33; 184-5) I would not be overly concerned about students being misled.

The same cannot be said about Iyengar’s more recent Vedānticisation of Patañjali: *Light on the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali.*

Like Vivekananda, Iyengar prefaces his translation and commentary with a substantial introduction where a number of Vedāntic and tantric concepts are presented to the reader, supposedly in order to clarify the teachings of Patañjali.

Here’s just a few of those concepts that are never used by Patañjali. Let me state that again: concepts that are never used by Patañjali:

1. the 4 āśramas (stages of life for a twice-born male) p.3.
2. the supreme soul (brahman) p.4.
3. dharmaśāstra (textbook on duty) p.4.
4. karmamārga (way of action) p.6.
5. bhaktimārga (the way of devotion) p. 6.
6. satcitānanda (being-consciousness-bliss: the characteristics of brahman) p.12
7. jīvātman (living/individual soul) p.12.
8. paramātman (supreme/universal soul) p.13.
9. 5 kośas (sheaths that surround the soul) p. 12.
10. kāraṇa- śarīra (causal body) p. 12.
11. manolaya (an alert, passive state of mind) p.18.
12. 4 stages of practice: mṛdu; madhya; saṃvegin; adhimātrataman. pp. 18-19.
13. śabda brahman (supreme/universal sound) p. 20
14. amanaskatva (no-mind-ness) p. 22.
15. ‘the divine union of puruṣa and prakṛti’ p.26.
16. adhyātmika/adhidaivika/adhibhautika (traditional 3-fold division of the universe according to the Vedas) P.312.
17. iḍā, piṅgala and suṣumnā nādīs. p.32.
18. the distinction between sahita (deliberate) prāṇāyāma and kevala (non-deliberate) prāṇāyāma. p.33.
19. guṇātītan (a ‘pure’ and flawless person) p.39.
20. kuṇḍalinī p.39.
21. cit – citta distinction (cit = cosmic consciousness; citta = individual or ‘sprouted’ consciousness) p.42.
22. Yogeśvara (lord of yoga) p.43.
23. Yogarāja (king of yoga) p.43.

The insertion of these technical concepts and the tables that are inserted at various points into Iyengar’s text do not simply make the YS much more complex than it actually is, they also introduce ideas that are alien to Patañjali and which, in many cases, twist what he writes into its opposite. Moreover, this, apart from the tables, is merely the introduction. The translation and commentary is just as replete with extraneous concepts and distortions as the introduction. It would be too tedious and time-consuming to list them all here; so I’ll content myself with a few illustrative examples to substantiate my claim:

1. ‘Patañjali is the first to offer us a codification of yoga, its practices and precepts…’ (p.48) - **T**he Buddha’s teaching, especially that on the 8-fold path, is quintessentially yogic in character, as a comparison of his 8-fold path and Patanjali’s 8-limbed scheme will reveal; so even those who misguidedly equate the compiler of the YS with the grammarian who lived around 200 BCE have to recognise the falsity of Iyengar’s claim, unless, of course, they want to deny the yogic character of the 8-fold path.
2. ‘… the sages analysed humans as being composed of five sheaths or kośas …’ (p.51) - This scheme originated in the Taittirīya Up. and is not found in either the *Sāṃkya Kārikā* or the YS. To insert it into an explanation of YS 1.2 is to confuse the reader from the outset.
3. ‘The practice of yoga … unifies him from the intelligence of the skin to the intelligence of the self, so that his self merges with the cosmic Self. This is the merging of one half of one’s being (*prakṛti*) with the other (*puruṣa*).’ (p.51) - This is pure Vedānta, and it contradicts what Patañjali states in 2.17, to the effect that the problem to be overcome is the conjunction (saṃyoga) of the seer and the seen. For Patañjali the merging/joining of the seer with the seen is the problem; not the solution.

Two of the great sayings (mahāvākya) of the Vedānta are *tat tvam asi* (That Thou Art) and *aham brahmāsmi* (I am brahman). Both convey essentially the same message: my inner essence, my self, is the same as that which is the source and substance of the universe, i.e. ātman/brahman. This does not, at least in my view and the view of anyone who thinks that Patañjali’s metaphysics is broadly aligned with the metaphysics of Sāṃkhya, comply with Patañjali’s analysis. On this fundamental issue Patañjali and the Vedāntins hold irreconcilable views.

1. ‘Through pakṣa and pratipakṣa we can balance the energetic currents of iḍā, piṅgalā and suṣumnā …’ (p.147) – In 2.33 Patañjali employs the term pratipakṣabhāvana (the cultivation of an opposite – here to

vi-tarka, deliberations that are, as the next sūtra makes clear, of an unwholesome kind) to indicate cultivating states that are opposite to those listed in 2.34: harming, etc.

In these sūtras, Patañjali seems to be making a simple point: inclinations towards harming, etc. - however they arise – just lead to suffering. Therefore, the yogin should cultivate their opposites, which are the 5 yamas of non-harming, truth-telling, non-stealing, faring-in-brahma, i.e. celibacy, and greedlessness.

There is no need whatsoever to introduce alien energetic currents and subtle channels into the account. Indeed, they merely serve to complicate it.

1. Moving on to book 3 (note that 3.22 in Iyengar’s translation is often omitted from others and that from here references do not match up), I home in on his translation of bhuvana-jñānaṃ in his sūtra 27 (26 in most translations), which goes: ‘knowledge of the [seven] worlds, [and of the seven cosmic centres in the body]…’[[29]](#endnote-29) A good deal of extra material is being introduced into this sūtra without the reader being alerted to it.

First of all, material from Vyāsa’s commentary is inserted into the translation. Feuerstein translates bhuvana as singular, hence ‘the world,’ which, I think, is grammatically legitimate, though as Monier-Williams comments, ‘generally 3 worlds are reckoned … , but also 2 …, or 7 … or 14 …’ (p.760) Vyāsa opts for 7 and provides a detailed description of them.

That description is a mixture of mythological imagination and primitive, misguided astronomy that most modern readers will not take seriously or simply skip over. It does, nevertheless, raise a question about the credibility of Vyāsa as a reliable guide for modern students of the YS, for his account is quite incredible and perhaps best described as pure fantasy, albeit a fantasy with an ideological twist.

It also raises questions about the notion that genuine knowledge about the world outside the yogin’s mind can be obtained through saṃyama. I will not pursue that here, though those who are familiar with my work on religious experience and hypnosis can make a good guess on how I might proceed.

But, Iyengar does not stop with the insertion of Vyāsa’s complex mythological universe. He adds a knowledge of what he calls ‘the 7 cosmic centres in the body.’ Vyāsa does not mention these, though Vācaspatimiśra opens the way for such a move with his interpretation of a remark by Vyāsa at the end of his commentary on 3.27 (26 in other versions). Patañjali had written something like ‘From constraint on the sun (sūrye saṃyamāt) …’ but at the end of his commentary on this sūtra Vyāsa changes it to ‘constraint on the door of the sun,’ which Woods interprets as a reference to the entrance to the world of brahma (brahmaloka) mentioned in a number of Upaniṣads. Some of these mention a channel from the heart, going up to brahmaloka and Maitrī 6.21 seems to refer to this when it calls the channel (nādī) that leads upward through the palate ‘suṣumnā’. This channel, which is not given the name suṣumnā in other relevant Upaniṣadic passages, always originates in the heart.

So when Vācaspatimiśra claims that the phrase ‘door to the sun’ means ‘the tube called suṣumnā’ this ‘nādī’ that originates in the heart is probably what he had in mind. Even this, we may note, is an insertion of Vedāntic references into an interpretation of Patañjali. Iyengar, however, takes it as a reference to later tantric and haṭhayogic physiology to create what James Mallinson might call a corporalisation of the lokas.[[30]](#endnote-30)

He writes,

‘the fourteen worlds are represented in the various regions of the body … The several aerial regions correspond as follows: pelvic region to *bhūloka,* navel to *bhuvarloka,* diaphragmatic to *suvarloka*, heart to *mahāloka*, neck to *janoloka,* eyebrow centre to *tapoloka* and crown of the head to *satyaloka* … [also] within the aerial regions are the seven major *cakras.* They are *mūlādhara …svādhiṣṭhāna … maṇipūraka … anāhata … viśuddhi … ajñā …and sahasrāra …* All these are interconnected, like the solar system.’ (p.210)

What can one say about this kind of commentary?

None of the texts where such correspondences are set out are mentioned, though one can predict that all will have been composed much later than the YS and that the correspondences mentioned within them were unknown and/or alien to Patañjali.

A modern reader might also wonder what the heck is meant by ‘correspond’ and ‘represented’ in this passage, especially in relation to two further cakras, the sūrya and the candra, that ‘correspond’ to the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems respectively. And what about the ‘correspondences’ between the bodily regions and the worlds (the lokas) or those between the worlds and the cakras? Even if one is a native English speaker and familiar with terms like ‘represent’ and ‘correspond’ the kind of relationship implied here must surely be opaque. I, for one, would welcome a clear explication of it.

When I attempted to map out these relationships the whole scheme looked like a bit of a fudge (or a ‘dog’s dinner’ – depending on how critical one wishes to be). Here we go:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *satyaloka*  | crown of the head | *sahasrāra*  |
| *tapoloka* | eyebrow centre | *ajñā* |
| *janoloka* | neck | *viśuddhi* |
| *mahāloka* | heart | *anāhata* |
| *suvarloka* | diaphragm | ? |
| *bhuvarloka* | navel | *maṇipūraka* |
| *bhūloka* | pelvis | *svādhiṣṭhāna* |
| ? | ? | *mūlādhara* |

In sum, it seems reasonable to conclude that even careful readers will find this sūtra and its commentary puzzling and/or confusing. Less careful readers may well assume that reference to all these technical terms in a foreign language just indicates how clever and knowledgeable Iyengar is and move on to the next one without even realising its problem potential.

1. My final illustration comes from book 4, partly to indicate that Iyengar’s Vedāntic-tantric distortions pervade his entire presentation of the YS. Moreover, his commentary on 4.34 is longer than any of his others. This is his final benediction, the last seed of misrepresentation that he sows in the minds of his confused readers.

Iyengar takes the term puruṣārtha (aim or purpose or goal of the puruṣa) to refer to the 4 aims (artha) of a person (puruṣa) that figure prominently in the brāhmanical lawbooks (dharmaśāstra). These are artha (that which is desirable, e.g. wealth, power), kāma (sexual pleasure), dharma (duty – as set out in the lawbooks) and mokṣa (release – from rebirth).

I certainly haven’t consulted all of the available translations of the YS, though none of those I did consult have adopted this rendering. Rather, in their different ways, translators (even Vivekananda) render puruṣārtha in more or less the same way. Historically:

* Vivekananda – ‘bereft of any motive of action for the Puruṣa’ (1912)
* Woods – ‘no longer provided with a purpose by the Self’ (1914)
* Prabhavananda and Isherwood – ‘no longer … any purpose to serve for the Atman’ (1953)
* Feuerstein – ‘devoid of purpose for the Self’ (1979)
* Miller – ‘empty of meaning for the spirit’ (1996).

It’s difficult not to suspect that this rendering is a deliberate sleight of hand/pen/keyboard to cement a thoroughgoing Vedānticisation of the YS. Indeed, the entire commentary on this sūtra supports that inference. So, for example, Iyengar claims that Patañjali’s thoughts on the puruṣārthas (if he had any) ‘are implicitly contained in the earlier chapters …’

Then he links each chapter with ‘these four aims and stages.’ He had not previously mentioned the stages (āśrama) of a twice-born male’s life, though he does so later, within a scheme made up of the 4 puruṣārthas, the 4 varṇadharmas (duties according to caste: brahman, kṣatriya, vaiśya and śūdra) and the 4 āśramas (student, householder, forest dweller and renunciant).

The first chapter/book/pāda, we are told, deals with dharma, the second with artha, the third with kāma and the fourth with mokṣa. Again, quite a bit of sleight of keyboard is involved. Dharma becomes ‘the science of disciplining the fluctuations of consciousness; artha becomes the purpose of yoga, namely physical health and contentment, instead of wealth/power; kāma becomes a temptation to use yogic powers for worldly joys rather than spiritual purposes instead of sexual pleasure as desirable in itself. Mokṣa more or less preserves its meaning. The 4 varṇas become 4 ‘stages of evolution,’ in which the lowest, the śūdra, is described as someone who is ‘servile, a sycophant, submissive and labours hard.’ In short, he makes yoga sound like an oppressive social ideology.

Yogic practice is also stageified (I know that’s not a real word, but it does the job for me) to fit this 4-fold scheme. So practitioners start as śūdras and work their way up to becoming brāhmans. Then, ignoring Patañjali’s espousal of brahmacārya, he writes, ‘… married life has never been considered a hindrance to happiness, to divine love or to the union with the Supreme Soul.’

Isn’t the passive voice great for glossing over awkward details with an air of objectivity?

Well, Patañjali seems to think that the sexual relations implied by the married state *are* a hindrance to happiness, though he has nothing to say about ‘divine love,’ whatever that is, nor of a union with the supreme soul (brahman and paramātman are the two terms that Iyengar translates with this phrase, neither of which can be found in the YS).

Patañjali’s ‘seer’ (draṣṭṛ) becomes the, ātman, who is ‘one without a second,’ and the whole thing is rounded off with yet another quotation from the BG, which serves to put the YS into a Vedāntic-bhakti nutshell: ‘Lord Kṛṣṇa, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* XVIII.61-62, explains that “the Supreme Ruler abides in the hearts of all beings and guides them, mounting them on wheels of knowledge for spiritual evolution”. He says: “one who has earned this divine knowledge should seek refuge by surrendering all actions as well as himself to the Supreme Spirit or God”, so that he journeys from Self-realization towards God-Realization.’

Job done! Patañjali has been fully smārta-ised.

I’ll finish this section with a quotation from the Foreword of a book I haven’t read that sums up my concerns about the Vedāntic distortion of Patañjali:

‘Bhāvani [the author] brilliantly weaves together the ancient texts of the *Yoga Sūtra* and *Bhagavad Gītā* …’[[31]](#endnote-31)

I’m losing the will to live!

**In my final section** I want to raise two questions that are of direct relevance to modern practitioners of yoga: 1) what, if anything, does even a de-Vedānticised *Yoga Sūtra* have to offer to modern, mainly Western yogis? and 2) what motives lie behind the numerous attempts to Vedānticise this text?

**1) What, if anything, does even a de-Vedāntised *Yoga Sūtra* have to offer to modern, mainly Western yogis?**

In my view, apart from improving their understanding of the history, philosophy and politics of yoga it offers little. Indeed, I want to claim that although Indian yoga gurus present the teachings of the YS (whether Vedānticised or de- Vedānticised) as offering an accurate and credible description of the way the universe works they actually do not. Rather, both Vedānticised and de-Vedānticised versions are fundamentally incompatible with the understanding of the universe and ourselves that has emerged over the past few hundred years. In other words, one cannot accept both accounts as true. To engage in supporting such a claim is, perhaps, to step into the waters of political incorrectness, especially in the eyes of critics of what Edward Said called ‘Orientalism.’ So be it.

The issue of competing, incommensurable worldviews is a huge one and I certainly cannot address it adequately here; so I’ll restrict myself to making what I hope will be a few provocative comments that set at least part of the agenda. It seems to me that none of the three pivotal concepts or claims that inform the teaching of the YS (puruṣa, prakṛti and saṃyoga) can withstand critical scrutiny in the light of modern discoveries about the nature of the material universe, the nature of consciousness, and the relationship between them.

**Prakṛti**, as everything in the universe apart from puruṣa, is presented in the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* as having a number of components. One description is in terms of tattvas, another is in terms of the bhāvas of buddhi, and a third is in terms of the three guṇas. It is far from clear from the text how these three schemes fit together and a number of scholars, e.g. Larson, Van Buitenen, have suggested that each was originally independent of the others. Patañjali refers only to the guṇas, an early version of reductionism: the world may appear to be complex, but all its diverse phenomena are reducible to combinations of just three primary elements. This explanatory scheme is similar in conception to the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) of Empedocles or the five of Aristotle (earth, air, fire, water and ether).[[32]](#endnote-32) Like those theories, the guṇa and tattva schemes are of historical and cultural interest, though they are incompatible with the findings of modern physics and chemistry about the structure of matter. People are, of course, free to believe anything they want, but if they wish others to take those beliefs seriously then at some point there has to be an engagement with the evidence that has been accumulated over the last few centuries. Sāṃkhya-Yoga cosmology does not fare well in such an engagement, though convincing those who are sceptical about that conclusion might require another essay. For those who, by and large, subscribe to the modern scientific understanding of the material universe these kinds of cosmological accounts have little to offer.

**Puruṣa** Most Indian soteriological systems (indeed, soteriological systems generally) postulate the existence of a consciousness (soul, spirit, ātman, jīva, puruṣa) that exists either prior to and/or independently of the material universe. The only evidence for such consciousness comes from personal experience of some kind, usually intuition, some form of revelation or some form of meditation, often supplemented with inferential extrapolation. By contrast, all the evidence from scientific enquiry since the European Enlightenment indicates that consciousness is an emergent property, a result of material processes generating complex life forms. We have here, then, one of the most fundamental incompatibilities between most if not all modern scientific worldviews and most traditional systems of spirituality. Modern interpreters of the YS, even those who do not seek to Vedānticise the text, often indicate an awareness of such incompatibility but either dismiss it[[33]](#endnote-33) or subtly sidestep the issues raised by it.[[34]](#endnote-34) Such manoeuvres do a disservice to modern readers who consult these works in search of understanding. To claim, as Vivekananda does and as Iyengar assumes, that the existence of prakṛti and puruṣa are ‘facts’ is either dishonest or delusional.

**Saṃyoga** If the concepts of puruṣa and prakṛti fail to offer a robust description of the components of existence then the relationship between them cannot provide an adequate account of human experience and human potential. The teaching of the YS may have served as a guide for meditators in the past, but it is clear that modern practitioners of yoga have good reason to be sceptical about its value for them and about claims that it offers ‘a profound and unerring understanding of the human condition.’

**2) What motives lie behind the numerous attempts to Vedāntise this text?**

The Vedānticisation of Indian spiritual traditions and their texts has been going on for many centuries. As I have argued elsewhere, there is plenty of evidence for this in the Bhagavad Gītā and Śānti Parvan sections of the Mahābhārata and the re-classification of teachings, such as Sāṃkhya, that had been regarded as heterodox (nāstika) as orthodox (astika).[[35]](#endnote-35) The commentaries on the YS exhibit the same tendency, particularly in relation to īśvara.[[36]](#endnote-36) Over time, all the traditions that lacked a robust institutional structure came to be incorporated in what Thomas J. Hopkins calls ‘the new brāhmanical synthesis,’[[37]](#endnote-37) essentially the process of Vedānticisation that I have described above. Modern Vedānticisation is simply a continuation of this practice.

Given that there are good reasons for doubting the veracity of many of the claims generated by this process some reflection on the motivation behind it is in order. My simple answer to the motivation question is ‘making mythology and ideology credible.’ This is a complex area, so here I’ll just offer a couple of the components that have influenced my thinking about this issue. First of all there is a concept that was introduced into the philosophical lexicon by the American philosopher Harry Frankfurt in a 1986 article that was reprinted as a little book in 2005: ‘bullshit.’[[38]](#endnote-38) This work is written in straightforward English and clearly distinguishes bullshitting from telling the truth and telling lies. On page 56 he explains his understanding of bullshit as follows:

‘When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensible that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. *He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.’* (emphasis mine)

Another influence is Donald Brown’s work on history and society in South East Asia. His findings are neatly summarised by Steven Pinker: ‘Brown looked at twenty-five civilizations and compared the ones organised by hereditary castes with the others. None of the caste societies had developed a tradition of writing accurate depictions of the past; instead of history they had myth and legend. The caste societies were also distinguished by an absence of political science, social science, natural science, biography, realistic portraiture, and uniform education.’[[39]](#endnote-39)

A further influence on my thinking in this area is scholarly work on ideology, which we can define as ‘a system of collective, widely-held ideas and beliefs concerning the nature of society and its dominant power structures organized and understood in such a way as to make the interpretation of each concept support the others.’[[40]](#endnote-40)

Most ideologies fit neatly into Frankfurt’s ‘bullshit’ category, they serve the power manoeuvrings of certain social groups. Brāhmanical mythology/ideology (what I call the BBP – Brāhmanical Bullshit Package) serves the interests of Brāhmanical groups and their supporters. For example, myths about cosmic cycles more or less eradicate history and make social arrangements non-contingent. If there are problems now it is because we are at a particular point in the cycle. The only possible way to solve them, if a solution is possible, is to recreate, as far as possible, the ‘golden age,’ when everyone knew and accepted their place in the world and did what they were told. By contrast, historical thinking treats the world as contingent and contemplates novel solutions to present problems that can be realised in the future.

However gullible or naive they might be, modern Western yoga practitioners, at least those I have spoken to, engage with historical and philosophical material on yoga because alongside their search for greater wellbeing they seek to deepen their understanding of the world. So, when Vedāntic interpreters of the YS seek to pass off the BBP as an entre into a deeper understanding of the human condition and the world in which we live, all they are really offering is a variation of the deception they have perpetrated on the Indian people for centuries. Their ‘gifts’ are not what they seem. Laocoon warned the Trojans to beware of gifts from Greeks (*Aeneid*, chapter 2). A similar warning seems appropriate in relation to brāhmans bearing gifts, for they too are not what they seem.

1. Gill Lloyd (Senior Trainer for T.K.V. Desikachar) personal communication. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In the Foreword to Iyengar, B.K.S. *Light on the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* (Revised Edition) Thorsons Publishers, 2002, p.viii. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Rāja Yoga* Longmans, Green, and Co. 1912, p.ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Carrera, J. *Inside the Yoga Sutra: a comprehensive sourcebook for the study and practice of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras* Integral Yoga Publications, 2006, p. ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Stoler Miller, B. *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom: the Yoga Sūtra Attributed to Patañjali* Bantam, 1996/1998, cover. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. White, D.G. *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: a biography* Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2014, p.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gill Lloyd, personal communication. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Kaṭha Upaniṣad 6.11. Yoga arises and passes away. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. DCT = Diploma Course Tutor (the people who train yoga teachers). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. There are many such links. In her introduction to and notes on her translation of the *Yoga Sūtra* Barbara Stoler Miller claims that ‘The important role of Buddhist technical terminology and concepts in the *Yoga Sutra* suggests that Patanjali was aware of Buddhist ideas and wove them into his system.’ (p.9.) Examples of such terms and concepts include dharma-megha, duḥkha, kleśa, nirodha, samāpatti and vikalpa. She also draws attention to Patañjali’s incorporation of the brahamavihāra meditations (maitrī, karuṇā, muditā and upekṣā), the earliest references to which are found in the Pāli texts – though they may pre-date Buddhism – the similarities between Patañjali’s 8-limbed yoga and the Buddha’s 8-fold path and the similarities between Patañjali’s Sanskrit and what Franklin Edgerton called Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. To these observations can be added those of Johannes Bronkhorst: parallels between YS 3.51 and the Jain Āyaraṃga 252 (‘[A god] may offer him eternal things, [but] he should not trust this divine trick …’ p.35); parallels between YS 1.2 and the Jain Uttarajjhayaṇa 29.25 (By making the mind onepointed [the soul] brings about the destruction of thought [citta-nirodhaṃ]’ p.42); parallels between prāṇāyāma understood as ‘a complete cessation of breathing’ (YS 2.49) and Uttarajjhayaṇa 29.72 (‘he first stops the activity of his mind, then of his speech and body, then he puts a stop to breathing out and breathing in.’ p.37), and parallels between the characteristics of jhāna/dhyāna states in Buddhism and the YS (pp.74-5). (*Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1993) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Hume, R.E. (trans.) *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads* (2nd revised edition) OUP, 1931, p.241. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Op. Cit. p.287. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Prabhavananda, Swami and Isherwood, C. (trans.) *How to Know God: the yoga aphorisms of Patanjali* Vedanta Press, CA, 1953/1981. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Rāja Yoga* p. x. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. p. ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. p. x [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. p. 164. Both Vivekananda’s and Prabhavananda and Isherwood’s claims about the relationship between Patañjali’s teaching and that of Sāṃkhya (there are a number of versions of Sāṃkhya found in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* differs from all of them and from the later *Sāṃkhya Sūtra*) is too simplistic*.* Even so, if one is looking for affinities between the teachings of the YS and those of other schools there are good reasons for identifying those associated with Sāṃkhya as being the closest. For example, the final sutra in Patañjali’s text (4.34) and its equivalent in the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* (K68), convey essentially the same conception of what happens at the attainment of kaivalya:

 ‘The reversal of the evolutionary course of material things [guṇānam pratiprassavaḥ], devoid of purpose for the puruṣa [puruṣārtha-śūnyānāṃ], [is] isolation [kaivalya], or/in other words the establishment of the faculty of awareness [citi-śaktir] in its own form [svarūpa].’

(YS 4.34)

‘With the cessation of *prakṛti* [pradhānavṛttau] due to its purpose having been accomplished [caritārthatvāt] (*the* *puruṣa*) on attaining separation from the body, attains isolation (*kaivalya*) which is both certain and final.’

(SK 68) Larson, G.J. *Classical Sāṃkhya* (revised ed.) Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1979, p.275.

Moreover, as David Gordon White points out, nearly all YS manuscripts have this notation in their colophon: ‘This has been Patanjali’s authoritative ‘Teaching on Yoga’ (*Yoga Shastra*), an exposition of Samkhya (samkhya-pravachana).’ *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: a biography* Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2014, p.228. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Vitalistic Thought in India*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1992, chapter 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See Connolly, P. *A Student’s Guide to the History and Philosophy of Yoga* (Revised ed.) Equinox, Sheffield, 2014, p. 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Woods, J.H. *The Yoga System of Patañjali* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.1914, pp. xx-xxi. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Rāja Yoga* pp.31-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. p.34 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. p.39. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. p.47. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. p.48. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. p.49. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. p.54. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. pp.97-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Parentheses mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Mallinson, J. *The Khecarīvidyā of Ādinātha* Routledge, London, 2007, pp.26-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Vernon, R.J. Foreword to Bhāvani, S.M. *The Yogi’s Roadmap: the* Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra as a Journey to Self Realization* Viveka Press, Kauai, HI, 96714, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Aristotle’s list is very similar to that of the 5 mahābhūtas, and the guṇas are presented as more subtle than these. This does not affect my point here: that they are explanatory abstractions based on common sense ideas that are interesting notions in the context of the history of ideas but have no place in modern descriptions of the world that seek to be as accurate and evidentially-grounded as possible. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. For example, in the introduction to his translation of the YS Georg Feuerstein deals with the issue by setting up what I regard as a misleading either-or decision: puruṣa is *either*, as Patañjali claims, ‘overwhelmingly *real* … more real than anything encountered in ordinary experience’ *or* it is not, the latter being a view that would force him to deny, ‘without sufficient reason, the validity of the testimony of thousands of individualsof different ages and countries, and thereby dump a significant part of the total human experience on to the garbage heap.’ (*The Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali: a new translation and commentary* Dawson, Folkestone, 1979, pp.8-9) Alternatively, puruṣa is *either* ‘a meaningless word’ *or* it is ‘the symbol of an experience, which has as its content something real and not imaginary …’ (Op. Cit. p.7) Feuerstein may be satisfied with this kind of rhetoric but most discerning readers will not. A person (or 1000 people) may have an experience that has puruṣa-like characteristics, but that does not, in itself, guarantee the actual existence of a puruṣa. History provides us with many examples of shared experiences that were accepted as verifying a particular knowledge claim and which were subsequently shown to be erroneous. Amongst the most obvious are experiences of the Earth being flat and experiences of the stars revolving around the Earth. Moreover, the options listed by Feuerstein are far from being exhaustive. Puruṣa-like experiences are open to a variety of explanations. Some of these will align with those generated by the people who have had the experiences and some will not. Moreover, the latter do not necessarily 'dump a significant part of the total human experience on to the garbage heap.’ They can comfortably accept the reality of the experiences whilst simultaneously denying the veridicality of the inferences made about them, much as the Buddha did. (see Connolly, P. *A Student’s Guide to the History and Philosophy of Yoga* (Revised Edition) Equinox, Sheffield, 2014, pp.9-14 for examples. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. David Gordon White also touches upon this issue in his biography of the YS. After commenting that ancient systems such as Patañjali’s were ‘unified Theories of Everything’ …very much like the current Theory of Everything of modern theoretical physics …’ he states that they differ on ‘two crucial points’: the motives behind the construction of the system (ancient systems were soteriological) and the use of mathematics by physicists (ancient systems used Sanskrit). The ancient systems are, nonetheless, ‘rational, coherent, and verifiable on the basis of their foundational axioms.’ (pp.24-5) This is a fudge.

Systems like Patañjali’s differ from modern ‘theories of everything’ in many more ways than those highlighted by White. One of the most significant lies in the realm of truth claims. Modern scientific theories of everything (which are not limited to physics, but extend through chemistry, biology, and beyond – what E.O. Wilson calls ‘consilience’) have no place for a consciousness or consciousnesses that existed/exist prior to the origin and expansion of the universe as we know it.

White’s wrapping up of what is but a minor aside in his book, his statement that the ‘Metaphysical positions that were set forth in words [by the ancient system philosophers] rather than mathematical formulas are more like legal precedents than the postulates of theoretical physics’ (p.26) is opaque to say the least. Legal precedents are not truth claims, except in the sense that they rest on the ‘fact’ that the precedent derives from an actual previous ruling. These ancient soteriological systems were not, on my reading, merely reiterating the judgements of their predecessors but making actual claims about the nature of reality. In other words, they were not saying ‘this is what previous teachers thought and taught about the way the universe is’ but rather ‘this *is* the way the universe is.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Op. Cit. pp.116-129. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Op. Cit. pp.144-149. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Hopkins, T.J. *The Hindu Religious Tradition* Dickenson, Belmont, CA, 1971, chapter 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Frankfurt, H.G. *On Bullshit* Princeton University Press, N.J. 2005 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Pinker, S. *How The Mind Works* Penguin, London, 1998, p.306. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Taken from McLennan, G. ‘The Power of Ideology’ in Maidment, R. et al. *Politics and Power* (Open University course D103, Society and Social Science) Open University, 1991, p.111, and Lacewing, M. ‘Political ideologies’ [www.alevelphilosophy.co.uk](http://www.alevelphilosophy.co.uk). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)