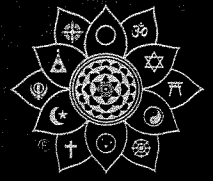




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INSIDE THE YOGA TRADITION

An Interview with Edwin F. Bryant, Ph.D.

Dr. Edwin Bryant lived for years in India and was trained with traditional pundits. He has a background in Indian philosophy, and his new translation and commentary on the Yoga Sutras that will be released this summer, is dedicated to contributing to the growing body of literature on Yoga by providing insights from the major pre-modern commentaries on the text with a view to grounding the teachings in their traditional context.

Integral Yoga Magazine: There seems to be confusion about who founded Yoga and whether Patanjali actually authored the *Yoga Sutras*. Can you shed some light?

Edwin Bryant: The origins of Yoga are in primordial and mythic times. Patanjali is the author of what came to be the seminal text for the Yoga traditions, the *Yoga Sutras*. Essentially, Patanjali was a compiler and organizer of pre-existing traditions. There were variants and different strains of Yoga: As early as in the *Upanishads*, there is reference to a six-limbed Yoga, and there is a five-limbed Yoga found in the Epic *Mahabharata* (Patanjali organizes his system into eight limbs). Therefore, Patanjali is not the inventor or founder of Yoga—and he doesn't say he is. The very first *sutra* is: "*Yoga anushasanam*." "*Anu*" means continuation. Patanjali is saying that he is expounding upon an existing Yoga tradition, and all the commentators understand it in this way.

Indeed, the commentator Vacaspatimishra points out that the *Yajnavalkya Smṛti* states that a sage known as Hiranyagarbha was the original teacher of Yoga. Therefore, the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali is an organization or systematization of existing Yoga traditions. Patanjali was not giving birth to something new, but because he is the organizer, he becomes the prime or seminal figure for the Yoga tradition, and is accepted as such by all schools, including rival schools.

IYM: Why did you write this book?

EB: This is my 6th book. I've done one other Sanskrit translation, the 10th book of the *Bhagavat Purana* (the story of Krishna's incarnation). This translation of the *Yoga Sutras* is intended for students of Yoga and came out of my lecturing to university students and many different Yoga communities. The book intends to be academically rigorous but it is meant for educated Yoga practitioners in addition to scholars.

It's a traditional commentary in so far as I represent the traditional commentaries and then add some elaboration of my own. I don't pretend to have any original groundbreaking insight. I don't think that is how tradition works:

In India, the knowledge systems were handed down through disciplic succession, *parampara*. This approach is to take the existing traditions and expand upon them. I chose to continue this succession. I wanted to ground my commentary completely in the traditional commentaries to provide the modern practitioner with insight into the *sutras* and the practice of the *sutras* from the traditional understanding of them, but I do expand whenever I feel there is need for further clarification for the modern context.

I am also a practitioner. So, I was in the dual role of scholar and practitioner. I wanted to know what the tradition said. I felt it had become watered down and unrecognizable in some of the modern commentaries. I also had concerns about how Yoga was being presented in the West. The idea that asana represents Yoga says everything about some (but, in fairness, not all) modern representations. There is great benefit in asana practice. But, I began to see a great thirst in many practitioners once they had mastered asana. As the mind becomes more peaceful (after doing asana), it becomes interested in and open to other dimensions of Yoga.

IYM: Is there a great variation in the classical translations?

EB: The Yoga tradition is very different from the Vedanta tradition which has three main texts: the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Vedanta Sutras*. In the Vedantic tradition, the commentaries differ quite significantly in metaphysical understanding. The basic issue they examine is the relationship between *Brahman* (the Absolute), *Atman* (the individual Self) and the world. The commentators, such as Adi Shankara and Sri Ramanuja differ greatly in their interpretation. The Yoga tradition is entirely different in this regard—it is very homogenous.

The commentators expand upon each other, and while they might occasionally quibble about minutiae, they don't disagree about essential metaphysical concepts. What this means, is that we can talk about a Yoga tradition. We can't talk about a *Vedantic* tradition. We have to talk about "*Vedanta* according to Shankara" or "*Vedanta* according to Madhva." To establish a tradition you need a standardized,

consistent body of knowledge. We do have such a tradition in Yoga, even though a lot of Yoga in the West would not be recognized by Patanjali today. The task I set for myself was to present what the pre-modern tradition has to say about itself.

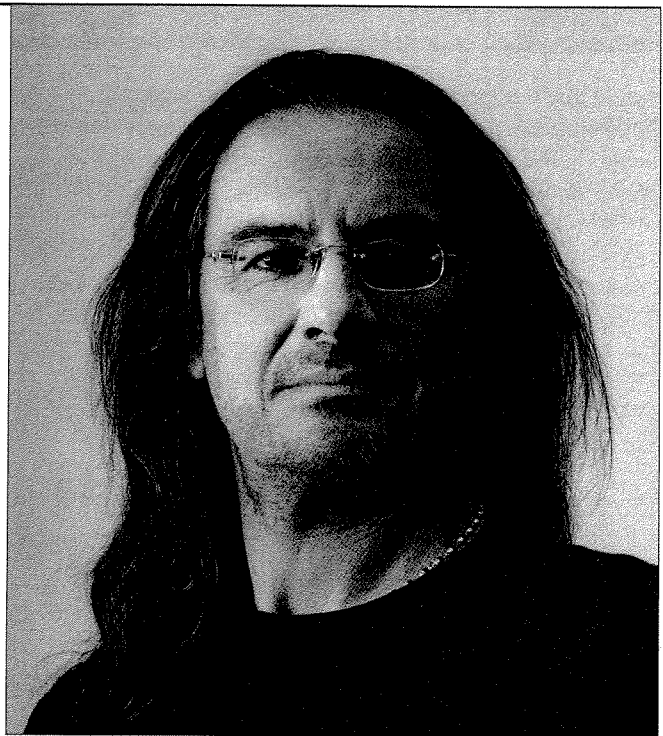
IYM: Do we need commentaries in order to interpret the *sutras* themselves?

EB: When we talk about the *sutras*, we don't have a clue what half of them mean. Some verses are easier, but many need commentary. They are so obtuse and undecipherable in their own terms that one can't construe meaning from them. The *Yoga Sutras* was a composition handed down orally, and that's why the *sutras* are short and very cryptic. People memorized them. Each *sutra* is almost like a bullet. If you are giving a presentation at a conference and don't wish to read a paper, you write some bullet points to help you structure your talk and trigger your memory. In the same way, *sutras* are very succinct. They are meant to be unpacked by the teacher. So, to say we can bypass commentary is a grandiose and ultimately impossible task.

The *Yoga Sutras* is a manual to be taught by a teacher. The *sutras* themselves are like mnemonic devices—like notes for a teacher. Some of these teachers wrote commentaries. Actually, when we speak of the philosophy of Patanjali, what we really mean is the understanding of Patanjali according to the 5th century commentator Vyasa. He determined what Patanjali's abstruse *sutras* meant, and all subsequent commentators elaborated on Vyasa. Vyasa's commentary becomes as canonical as Patanjali's. So Yoga philosophy is really Patanjali's philosophy as understood by Vyasa!

IYM: What commentaries do you reference in your new book?

EB: The first commentary we have is from the sage Vyasa. From one *sutra* of a few words, Vyas might write ten lines of comment. All the later commentaries unpack Vyas. Nobody questions his commentary, which is considered canonical. I also look extensively at the second most important commentator, Vacaspati Misra as well as the other significant contributors to the tradition such as Vijnanabhikshu, Bhoja Raja, the commentary attributed



Dr. Edwin Bryant

to Shankara and other pre-modern commentators.

As an aside, my commentary brings out more of the Ishwara element. *Ishwara* means: God—the Supreme Being, a *Purusha* distinct and superior to all other souls in Patanjali. It's very interesting to see people squirm away from Ishwara. Those fleeing the Abrahamic tradition run smack into Ishwara in Patanjali. You can't escape God in Yoga! Some try to redefine what Ishwara means—construing Ishwara as a “paradigmatic yogi” and other such things—but this violates the meaning of the term, not just in Patanjali but in the entire Indic philosophical tradition! The bottom line is that Patanjali is a theist. He was an *Ishwaravadin*. Other sects such as the Jains and Buddhists and the Mimamsa school all denied the existence of Ishwara on philosophical grounds, but nobody quibbled about what the term meant—not even the atheistic schools. Almost all Hindu philosophical schools were theists, but even the atheists understood and accepted the meaning of the term as God, even as they made philosophical arguments against the existence of such a Being.

IYM: Is this why we have the argument about whether Yoga is a religion or not?

EB: While Patanjali is an *Ishwaravadin*, he is not dogmatic. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna says, “I am the Supreme. I am God. Surrender to Me.” Krishna is stating that he is *Ishwara*. The *Svetasvatara Upanisads* claims Rudra (Shiva) is God. Patanjali doesn't say that Krishna is *Ishwara* or that Shiva is *Ishwara*. He does not identify *Ishwara* perhaps because he recognized that in doing so, it

would alienate people from other sects. *Ishwara* is a philosophical category—the category of God, the Supreme being. Some sects identify *Ishwara* as being one of the great manifestations of Divinity such as Krishna or Vishnu or Shiva. Patanjali chose not to do so. He avoids sectarianism. He invites the practitioner to worship their chosen *Ishwara*, their *Ishta Devata* in the framework of the Yoga tradition. So, Yoga is a religious, theistic tradition, but it is not a religion.

IYM: Or, as Sri Swami Satchidananda often said, “Yoga is not another religion.”

EB: Yes, very true. It is not a religion. You can be Christian and appropriate the *Yoga Sutras*. Actually, Yoga is primarily a psychology of the mind; a technique of involuting awareness to its own source. It is a practice of becoming self-aware that leads to Self-realization.

IYM: What do you feel the *Yoga Sutras* have to say to our modern world?

EB: The *Yoga Sutras* is a timeless text in that it can be applied to all times and to all embodied beings. At the same time, we have to realize that the *Yoga Sutra* is a radical text. The second *sutra* (*Yogas chitta vritti nirodhabh*) is about as radical a statement as a human can make: “Stop thinking!” Our only experience of reality is one mediated by thought. To even grapple with that idea is a thought, and this idea involves thinking. So to be told to stop thinking is very radical for our modern world!

Yoga is about getting behind the mind and involuting awareness to its own source, to *Purusha*. The *Yoga Sutras* is extreme and ascetic; it is about giving up all desire for any material pleasure. However you water it down that’s what it’s about. Of course, the *Vedantic* tradition claims that the happiness we are looking for in material pleasures is but a fraction of the happiness that will be encountered when we realize *Purusha*, the source of bliss, so Yoga is not asking us to give up material happiness for no gain.

What we can do, as people in the world who are not going to go off to live the lives of ascetics, or attain the lofty states of *samadhi* outlined in the *Sutras*, is nonetheless attain secondary benefits from meditation practice. Perhaps the most often repeated theme in the commentaries is that Yoga is about altering one’s *gunas* [qualities of nature]. The commentators practically define Yoga as being about maximizing *sattva*. There is much boon and benefit from being in *sattva*. *Sattva* is wisdom, intuition, peacefulness, happiness, clarity. It’s *prakritic* happiness, not the bliss associated with *Purusha*, but nonetheless, it is a state of well-being and calm. When *rajas* [restlessness] is activated we get confused and

tormented by desires and frustrations; we don’t know right and wrong. Even a bit of meditation can bring great benefit to our frantic and frenetic Western society. Even a little maximizing of *sattva* bears good fruit. The consequence of a peaceful mind is happiness. So, everyone can get benefit even from the preliminary stages of Yoga. But, the ultimate goal of Yoga is to transcend even *sattva*.

IYM: Do you think there are particular challenges that Westerners face in trying to apply the *Yoga Sutras*?

EB: I stress in my commentary that Patanjali is emphatic about the *yamas* and *niyamas*. We can’t say that what he is teaching is applicable only to the time period in which he codified the *Sutras* or that they are only for Hindus living in India. Patanjali asserts that the *yamas* and *niyamas* are great, universal vows. He didn’t have to further qualify them—universal means no exceptions whatsoever. To underscore the point he further qualifies that that there is no exception to their practice based on family, time period, epoch, country or condition.

It’s interesting because throughout the *Sutras*, he’s generally non-dogmatic and low key, but he and his commentators are very uncompromising about the universality of following the *yamas* and *niyamas* for yogis. The commentators state that there is no possibility of the cultivation of *sattva* or higher stages of *samadhi* without the *yamas* and *niyamas*.

IYM: Swami Satchidananda often discussed the parallels between the *yamas* and *niyamas* and the Ten Commandments and the Buddhist *Dasa Sila*.

EB: Yes, in Buddhism we have the five precepts, *silas*, four of which correspond to four of the five *yamas*. In Jainism there are the five *Mahavratas* or great vows that are identical to the five *yamas*. The *yamas* and *niyamas* were standard principles for spiritual practitioners in ancient India that are non-negotiable according to Patanjali. We can take this or leave it, but, according to the Yoga tradition, if there are no *yamas* and *niyamas*, we are just kidding ourselves—there is just *rajas* and *tamas* [inertia] without them. And without *sattva*, there certainly is no Yoga, at least not Yoga as recognizable to Patanjali!

Edwin Bryant, Ph.D. taught Hinduism at Harvard University for three years, and is currently the professor of Hinduism at Rutgers University where he teaches courses on Hindu philosophy and religion. He has received numerous awards and fellowships, published six books and authored a number of articles on Vedic history, Yoga, and the Krishna tradition. His forthcoming translation of and commentary on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (North Point Press, a division of Farrar, Straus & Giroux) will be available summer 2007.