

# Ayurveda, Yoga and the Alchemy of Consciousness

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Ayurveda is a science and Yoga is a philosophy. Both arise out of the Vedic lineage. Ayurveda is a science of medicine built on philosophical foundations that resist change even as the superstructure may wear and tear over time.<sup>1</sup> Yoga, as with all systems of Vedic Philosophy, contains a practical aspect that offers a direct experience of one's own essential nature.<sup>2</sup> Sanskrit is the language in which they are communicated and thus their vehicle of expression. Many attribute all three to the same source: Patañjali.

The *Yoga-Sūtras* are a *darśana*: a vehicle for seeing reality. This reality is what is revealed once the turmoil of the ocean, seen on the surface as waves, subsides. The reality revealed thus is that the ocean is all. The waves are just its expressions. Seeing them as waves, it mistakes them for objects. Thus it has *avidyā* or a false understanding of itself, which can only be completely corrected by the stilling of the waves.

The *Caraka Samhita* describes Ayurveda in two ways: firstly as the science by which one realizes that life is a compound of factors coming together to *experience* itself as an object.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, that this compound can be described in a variety of ways.<sup>4</sup> What is common to it at all times is that without the activation of consciousness, life is only matter, no matter how subtle. And matter dissolves back into what it arose from.

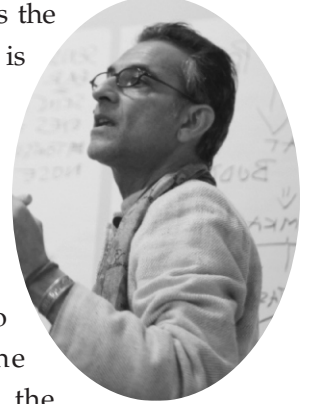
This is alchemy. Once matter, which is the realm of *prakṛti* or primordial creation, sheds the *caturviṃśati tattva* (24 principles of existence),<sup>5</sup> the *puruṣa* or pure consciousness stands revealed. Alchemy is described in English as the turning of base metals into gold. In Sanskrit, however, it is known as *rasavāda*: purification of a substance to reveal its innate *taste*. This taste is the Essence of a thing and the Essence

of life is consciousness. Thus the essence of dross (all life) is gold (pure consciousness).

Because of the conditioning of consciousness that begins at the moment that consciousness wishes to *experience* itself and the resulting separation into the roles it must play as observer, observation and observed, life arises.<sup>6</sup> Life, therefore, is conditioned. This conditioning has been compared to a dancer wishing to have her dance appreciated. Everyday she shows up at the court of the king, doing her best to please him but never knowing if he is pleased. This causes her great suffering and everyday she tries to come up with a new dance and walks away with the same result. It is only when the knowledge is revealed that the king has no interest in the dance; he just shows up daily because it is required of him, that she finally stops and finds peace.<sup>7</sup>

In the fourteenth century text, *Bhāvopprakāśa*, there is a legend of how Patañjali came to write the three great texts on Yoga, Ayurveda and Sanskrit. It is said that Ādiśeṣa, the Serpent God, who is the repository of all knowledge (the Vedas) came to earth to see how all its living beings were faring. Finding great suffering and misery, he was deeply moved and decided to take birth and remind us of the three subjects that could take us out of our misery:

1. *Sanskrit*: To communicate perfectly (a famous NASA article calls Sanskrit the only existing unambiguous language: Rick Briggs, author).



2. *Ayurveda*: To eradicate disease so as to attain the four goals of life: *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*. In order to experience a fulfilling life and a sense of well-being, we must first be established in the order of things (*dharma*), only then can we allot to ourselves the wealth of knowledge that is applicable and appropriate to our position (*artha*) and enjoy the fruits of our wealth (*kāma*), and then, having experienced what is to be experienced, we may seek a return to our source (*mokṣa*).<sup>8</sup>
3. *Yoga*: As with the other two, Yoga is revealed, not created, in the *Yoga-Sūtras*.<sup>9</sup> What is revealed is what we are to do once we decide to seek liberation from suffering. This goal is relevant no matter what our state of health or our stage of life. Thus the myriad meanings of Yoga that have since arisen and the various pathways we can follow up the mountain to the single peak that adorns it. But the goal remains the same: eradication of suffering.

In the concomitance of the three is found the reasoning by which we choose to attribute them all to Patañjali. The story of Patañjali is found in myths of which the *Patañjalicarita* of Ramabhadra Dikṣita describes his miraculous human birth as an *avatāra* of the great Serpent God, Ādiśeṣa, upon whom Lord Viṣṇu resides. Eager to see the *tāṇḍava*, the great dance of Lord Śiva, he is chosen to not only see it but to get from it and redefine the original Sanskrit

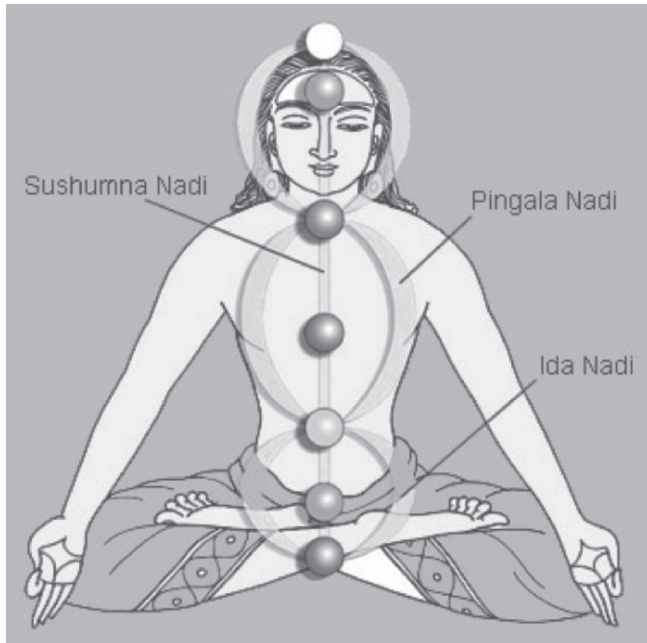


*Mahābhāṣya* as also to give the penultimate definitions of the eternal knowledge(s) of Ayurveda and Yoga. Needless to say, there are variant reasons for opposing views. For the sake of parable and its symmetry, let us for a moment see where this view can lead us by taking poetic license. To quote from *The Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*:

Parables have only one purpose: to enable the listener to arrive at the truth. The realization of truth is so vital that any reasonable method used is justified, though the parables themselves may be fictitious.<sup>10</sup>

Patañjali translates as that which drops (*pata*) into cupped reverential hands (*añjali*). Cupped in reverential shape is our pelvic girdle. At the center of this sits the mythical *mūlādhāra cakra*. Ādiśeṣa is said to have taken shape as a half-human/half-snake to manifest as Patañjali. The bottom half of Patañjali is depicted as a coiled serpent and the top half as an enlightened sage. The snake represents *kuṇḍalinī*, the coiled energy that drops down our central channel (*brahma-nāḍī*) to nestle in the *mūlādhāra cakra* as our Protector. So, what does it protect? It protects our Identity, which is apparent as a life form. This being or identity in Sanskrit is known as *ahamkāra*, the I-former. A very crude translation in English would be ego. The snake part represents primordial energy (*śakti*), which needs to climb up half the cakras to the heart cakra where it begins to transform into a sage. This transformation is complete when it reaches the top of the head (*sahasrāra cakra*). Then there is no need to protect an identity and the ego merges back into *buddhi* (cosmic consciousness), which merges back into *puruṣa* (pure consciousness) Patañjali returns to being Ādiśeṣa.

This energy, which sits at the *mūlādhāra*, reaches out both to manifest form as well as to experience (through the senses) using the channels known as *nāḍīs*. Tāntric texts claim there are 72,000 such.<sup>11</sup> Of these, three are of vital importance: *iḍā*, *piṅgalā* and *suṣumnā*.<sup>12</sup> *Iḍā*, the left channel, corresponds to the *candra nāḍī*, which is cooling and represents the



energy of the moon and *tamas*. Piṅgalā corresponds to the *sūrya nāḍī* or solar energy and is heating while corresponding to the sun and *rajas*. *Suṣumnā nāḍī* relates to *prāṇa*, the life force of consciousness and represents *sattva*, the *guṇa* most closely associated with pure consciousness. It is interesting to note that *rajas* is associated with daytime, *tamas* with nighttime and *sattva*, which is most prevalent at the *sandhis* (joints) of the two: relates to both dawn and dusk. In fact, it is said that we alternate breathing through the two nostrils to balance the energies of hot and cold and at dawn and dusk we breathe through both, for a moment achieving the clarity of activated *sattva guṇa*!

On a cellular level, Ayurveda says we are composed of *prāṇa*, *tejas* and *ojas*.<sup>13</sup> These represent intelligence, radiance and immunity respectively. When functioning efficiently they provide us with well-being, purpose and contentment. The inferior versions of these circulate throughout our being as humors known as *doṣas*. The word “*doṣa*” is difficult to translate but the word “*humor*” is not: the Greeks thought of it as an “ill wind.” While it has been translated variously as dark, blemish, fault and blame, the truth is that the *doṣas* represent those factors that can easily go out of balance and in doing so, create dis-order (*adharmā*), leading to loss of well-

being (*anartha*) and excessive desires (*atilaulya*) and finally, desire for the unreal to be Real (*avidyā*). These three *doṣa(s)*, *vāta*, *pitta* and *kapha*, collectively represent the forces of the five gross elements: earth, water, fire, air and ether.

There is an intrinsic relationship between the *tri-doṣa* and the *tri-guṇa*. Shri David Frawley refers to this as the crossing of horizontal and vertical vectors.<sup>14</sup> Although an imbalance of a *doṣa* can be functional, primarily as in an increase or a blockage, the deeper causative factor lies in this relationship. He states that a *vāta* type personality can vary anywhere from a saint to a sinner.<sup>15</sup> This would hold true for the other two *doṣa(s)* too, reflecting a state of consciousness and thus a means for its transformation. From an Ayurvedic perspective, the mind itself is known as *sattva*. *Rajas* and *tamas* would then be the *doṣas* of the mind. By shifting the vector of the meeting point of the *doṣa* to the vector of *sattva*, we remove the dross of rajasic or tamasic dominated feeling, thought or action. *Rajas* and *tamas* then assume their rightful places as the accelerator or brakes that the driver (*sattva*) uses to navigate its journey through *experience* while the physical body (*śarīra*) becomes its vehicle. This is known as *sattvavijaya cikitsā*.<sup>16</sup>

Sāṅkhya, the philosophy that enumerates the steps of the descent of consciousness into matter and the bridge between Yoga and Ayurveda, states that there are actually two experiencers: *puruṣa* and *ahaṅkāra*. The difference is that, unlike *puruṣa*, *ahaṅkāra* is *affected* by its experience. Arising out of cosmic consciousness (*mahad*), this entity (*ahaṅkāra*) is armed with eleven sensory organs. Known as *indriyāṇī*, the sense and motor organs and the mind that directs both, they are the organs by which life immerses itself in experience. For *sattvavijaya*, the victory of *sattva*, there must first be *indriyajaya*,<sup>17</sup> the conquest of the sense organs. The diseases of the sense organs are *rajas* and *tamas*. They give rise to the *kleṣas* or afflictions that cause suffering. In Ayurveda these are known as *asātmya indriyārtha samyoga*: incorrect usage. These are signs that the *ahaṅkāra* is

trying to validate its existence, an existence it desperately wishes to make permanent.

When we function optimally at the cellular level, all our systems being directed by *sattva*, our *ahamkāra* is not preoccupied with its very survival, and can focus on the pleasure of its being; satisfying this, it can find *meaning* to its being and focus on its *dharma*. In regards to our parable, this would mean that we have purified and climbed past the *mūlādhāra*, *svādhiṣṭhāna* and *maṇipūra* cakra and now sit at the crossroads of the heart. Remember, that *ahamkāra* here represents the *experiencer*.

It is said that once the heart cakra (*anāhata*) opens, we weep tears, not just in seeing the sorrows we have left behind but also, it being the seat of compassion, we can see the suffering of *others*. This is where the coiled snake part of us, through the alchemy of the purifying forces of resolve, self-inquiry and compassion, burns the dross of *rajas* and *tamas* to transform back into the practical applications of *sattva*. Base metal becomes gold. Our essence is revealed.

Suspecting our true nature, we arise to the *viśuddha* cakra and, having forsaken fear (practicality/*vāta*), anger (control/*pitta*) and grief (seeking temporary pleasures/*kapha*) we come face to face with our creativity (*prāṇa*), innocence (*tejas*) and joy (*ojas*). Reveling in these, we may dally a bit, this being the warning of the third chapter of the *Yoga-Sūtras*, where we come face to face with *siddhis* and either choose to become *siddhas*; or we continue our journey to reach the *ājñā* cakra where we meet the first intercrossing of *iḍā* and *piṅgalā* at *suṣumnā* (*saṅgama*); at the optic chiasma, where the right brain and the left brain cross over so that the whole world becomes our mirror. When we untangle ourselves from this misconception (*māyā*), we may find that all the cells of our brain light up like a thousand-petaled lotus opening to the rays of the sun and dross turns to gold. We find our essence. Our *rasa*. We find the sacredness of being.

The purpose of a parable is to spur us towards finding that experience that no one else can tell us

about because it is beyond the realm of *expression*. Yoga and Ayurveda are each, clearly defined steps on this sequential journey. The alchemy of consciousness is where the *realization* takes place of what we really are and the journey ends in *sat-cit-ānanda*: Innocence of truth, creativity of consciousness and joy of being. Pure gold. What is beyond is beyond description: *Aum*.

*In gratitude to my Teachers  
Srivatsa Ramaswami for explaining Yoga  
Dr. Vasant D. Lad for the heart of Ayurveda*

## Endnotes

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