

February, 2006: PANTANJALI

Welcome to a Special Report from Dan Brulé at www.breathmastery.com: taken from over 50 pages of journal notes and thoughts about this legendary sage; jotted down and carried around...Bits and pieces of his quintessential work: the “Yoga Sutras.” Ideas and exercises gleaned from books and articles and conversations; insights gained from dreams, intuitions, conversations, direct initiations, and personal transmissions.

Patanjali was a mind-body scientist and a self-motivated independent life-explorer. He is what you might call a yogi saint. He didn't invent yoga but he mastered it. He absorbed and integrated all the accumulated yogic wisdom of his day, and organized it all into a simple and clear step by step method of holistic personal growth and genuine spiritual development. He attained liberation and he served as a living example of a self-realized being. He gave us a tried and true method of awakening: a sure-fired practice for reaching enlightenment.

The Yoga Sutras act to preserve and convey a profound spiritual teaching that Jesus referred to as the “Kingdom of Heaven,” and what Lao Tse would call the “Tao.” Patanjali's way is so much more about experience than it is about explanations. It has very little to do with philosophy or psychology, and everything to do with action.

The sutras were probably sung or chanted for hundreds of years before they were actually written down. They were memorized and verbally repeated like mantras. They were passed on like a code through a direct living oral tradition. In studying the sutras today, we have to rely on what the earliest writers were able to capture for us; and what ancient and modern translators and interpreters have made available to us.

But most of all, we have to rely on our own study and practice, our own experience and understanding. Only through our own actions and insights, can we lay claim the awesome fruits of this knowledge and practice.

There's a part of you that has never been touched by anything that has happened in this world. Deep within you is a place of pure love and peace and freedom and joy and power. And this place has never been—nor can it ever be—lost or forgotten for long. It cannot be altered, influenced or affected in anyway by anyone, including you! Awakening to this essence in us is called liberation or enlightenment. Living consciously in this state—and deliberately operating from it—is called self-realization.

Whenever we touch this truth through the practice of breathwork or meditation—or even by accident—we experience undeniable moments of utter freedom, irreversible moments of total clarity, and indescribable moments of profound peace. We each have a natural inherent ability to awaken to—and to abide in—this purest state of ultimate human potential.

Patanjali summed up his understanding of life in a way that is similar to the Buddha. He said that suffering is inherent in the natural world of physical, mental and emotional phenomena. He said that suffering has a cause, and that it can be ended. And he said there was a way to end suffering.

He taught the essential path of yoga hundreds of years before hatha yoga—the most popular form of yoga practiced today—was even invented. And his yoga teachings had nothing to do with complicated poses or difficult postures. To him, the perfect “asana” was any posture or position that kept the body from becoming an obstacle to meditation, a distraction from the work of mastering the “kriyas” (actions) leading to liberation.

Patanjali reveals the underlying cause of all human suffering. And he demonstrates a way to end it. He identifies the major impediments and obstacles to liberation, and he provides a guaranteed two-pronged strategy for overcoming them. He gives us two powerful yet often misunderstood keys to permanent freedom. They are: non-attachment and non-reactive-ness.

He summarizes the causes of suffering in this way:

1. Yielding to a false sense of a separate self.
2. Not seeing things as they really are.
3. Succumbing to attachments and aversions.
4. Trying to use our fear of death to control life.

Suffering comes when we identify with the ego—with a mind-made, non-self; when we confuse what is real with what is not real, what is pure with what is not pure, when we treat facts as non-facts, and non-facts as facts.

We create suffering when we allow our limited physical, emotional, and psychological habits, patterns and structures to determine our experience of life; when we allow our changing moods, states of health, and points of view to direct the course of our lives. We inherit suffering when we accept deathist philosophies, theologies, and ideologies. We invite suffering when we allow fear to trump love, when we forget that love conquers fear.

Patanjali’s teachings stand apart from the Buddha’s in one: he teaches the distinction between awareness and consciousness. And he reveals the relationship between consciousness and nature. He points out that consciousness is part of the natural phenomenal world, and as such, is distinct from awareness, which is something else—something entirely different.

Awareness exists before and beyond consciousness. Awareness is totally independent of consciousness. Awareness observes consciousness in the same way that a viewer watches television. A television is not aware of what plays on its screen. It cannot watch itself. Consciousness is like a television screen. Awareness is the real you—pure and free!

Pantanjali uses a beautiful analogy to describe what we can call purified, enlightened consciousness. He describes it in terms of a perfect jewel or a flawless gem. When consciousness has been cleared of all desires and attachments, reactions and prejudices, it is able to serve us in our awakening. But it seems that one of his followers or students came up with what I think is an even better analogy for understanding and describing it: the analogy of water. I love it! It goes like this:

Water has two very interesting properties or qualities: transparency and reflectivity. When a body of water is clean, calm and still, it is like a perfect mirror. You can see yourself clearly reflected in it; and you can also see right down through it to the bottom. But when the water is dirty and polluted, or when it is stirred up by waves on the surface or currents within it, it loses its transparency, and it is also no longer reflective.

So too with consciousness! Ideas and emotions, actions and attitudes—whether expressed or suppressed, whether positive or negative, whether chosen or inherited—produce waves and currents that block and distort true perception. But when the mind becomes quiet and still, our consciousness approaches purity.

When our mind is free of negative and limiting thoughts, it is better able to reflect the truth reality and of our being. When consciousness is not stirred up by thoughts, feelings, sensations, emotions and reactions, it allows us to see reality as it really is. And when consciousness is pure and still, Awareness is able to see a pure reflection of itself for the first time; with it, we can see the truth of our being.

It's as if our normal waking consciousness is actually un-consciousness. It is filled with memories, impressions, judgments, desires, feelings, sensations emotions, in other words waves and currents. And so it is like a funhouse carnival mirror that makes you look short and fat with a big swollen butt, or tall and thin with a tiny pointed head!

You laugh, but in life we actually form judgments and make decisions about ourselves, others and the world, based on these distorted reflections and perceptions in consciousness! That's why meditation has always been taught by the masters: it helps to quiet and clear the mind.

The mind is a pattern making, metaphor generating, and symbol creating machine. The mind or consciousness is made of the same stuff as everything else in nature and the phenomenal world. And it is subject to the same principles, laws and dynamics. The problem is we have become identified with this operation or function called the mind, and we believe its collection of ideas and images; we confuse its representations of reality with actual reality.

Breaking our identification with the mind opens the way to a direct experience of life and reality. When consciousness becomes still and quiet and spacious, it is more able clearly reflect the pure unlimited awareness that is our very Self (with a capital S).

The practice of meditation orients the mind toward stillness and spaciousness. It creates a tendency to move out of the reflective consciousness of the mind and into pure awareness of the heart. Meditation opens us to a direct experience of life instead of living in the symbolic representations—the metaphors—conjured in consciousness.

With practice, the conditioned mind stops being the middle man between us and life. Our conditioned mind stops being the warped and distorted mirror, the filter or lens through which we view life.

Every thought, feeling, sensation, emotion, impulse, movement, desire, and every reaction to these things causes a wave or current in our consciousness. And so whenever any of these things occur, it is an opportunity to practice non-reaction, non-resistance, and non-judgment. This is the art of transcendence.

When we can stand apart from what occurs in consciousness, when we can simply let “what is, be as it is,” we are in ecstasy. Ecstasy is such a beautiful word that comes from the Greek. It literally means “to stand apart.”

When we can simply be aware without reacting, or becoming attached, or identifying with what occurs in consciousness, we take a step in the direction of pure awareness. Through this process and practice, we gain energy and momentum for self-realization. Every time we choose to simply breathe and relax, and to be a witness, to the observer of psychological, emotional or physiological or energetic events, we get freer!

Patanjali taught that we should relate to both painful and pleasurable states with the same sort of detached neutral awareness. This attitude helps us to develop and support the stable state of stillness where perfect reflection and clarity can arise. Anything that stirs up our consciousness acts as a barrier to stillness.

Calming waves and currents are those that result from an attitude of friendliness, compassion, delight and equanimity toward all things in us and around us, whether good or bad, painful or pleasant, real or imagined.

An important realization is that body, mind, senses, personality or ego are not necessarily impediments to realization. They need not be denied, abandoned, or destroyed. In fact, they need to be formed and shaped and guided—and made to serve our awakening! Patanjali gives us a number of ways to dissolve barriers and overcome distractions:

1. Become absorbed in the movement of breath, in the breathing rhythm
2. When the breath pauses, become absorbed in the pause
3. Steadily observe sensations as they arise and pass
4. Generate luminous thoughts, thoughts that are free of sorrow
5. Focus on things that do not inspire attachment
6. Reflect on insights culled from dreams, reading, or learning
7. Become meditatively absorbed in the object of your desire

He recommends intense and persistent practice. How quickly we attain liberation depends on the level of our commitment. How would you characterize your commitment? Is it mild, moderate or intense? Is your desire for liberation or perfection a casual thing, or a fire that consumes you? Is becoming free a passing poetic interest, or a full time passionate quest?

To be free means to be independent of and unaffected by conditions and circumstances. It means we are no longer pushed or pulled or forced or bound by anything but love. Freedom is pure awareness abiding in itself, as itself. Freedom is not something that we can achieve through mental or physical effort: it is a natural intrinsic quality of life.

If you are not experiencing this freedom right now, it's because you are doing something, consciously or unconsciously, to keep yourself from it!

The physical body and the physical universe are indivisible. You and everything else in existence are inseparable. Don't be disturbed or seduced by the play of opposites. They all exist within a single whole existence. Our work, our hobbies, our activities have to be aligned with this reality. That is what the Buddha called "right livelihood." Our relationships need to serve to promote awakening to and impede suffering. When they do, they are called "sacred relationships."

Ultimately, yoga is about transcending mind and ego, time and space, birth and death. Whole-heartedness devotion and constant remembering are sure-fired strategies for success. Constantly projecting and protecting a sense of a separate self, certainly makes it difficult or impossible for us to wake up.

Everything exists to serve our spiritual awakening. But unconsciousness, useless mental chatter, apathy, doubt, illness, pain, fatigue, and other things can interfere with our practice and distract us from the work.

Breathwork represents the cutting edge of mind-body science and the practice of genuine yoga today. Spiritual Breathing unites the visible and the invisible, the conscious and the unconscious. It connects us to the Source of Life. It orients us toward the Godhead.

Conscious breathing is a way to put into practice the profound teachings of Pantanjali. It helps to shift our focus, to free up energy, and to quiet and calm the mind. The breath can fuel our most luminous thoughts, and it bridges our fragmented parts. With Breathwork we can strengthen and deepen our commitment, empower us to realize our highest aspirations.

If Pantanjali was alive today, he would be doing breathwork!