

ON YOGA

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WHAT IS YOGA?

From “Yoga,” Sir Monier Monier-Williams, M.A., K.C.I.E., *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 1899

YOGA, the act of yoking, joining, attaching, harnessing, putting to (of horses); a yoke, team, vehicle, conveyance; employment, use, application, performance; equipping or arraying (of an army); fixing (of an arrow on the bowstring), putting on (of armour); a remedy, a cure; a means, expedient, device, way, manner, method; a supernatural means, charm, incantation, magical art; a trick, stratagem, fraud, deceit; undertaking, business, work; acquisition, gain, profit, wealth, property; occasion, opportunity; any junction, union, combination, contact with; mixing of various materials, mixture; partaking of, possessing; connection, succession; fitting together, fitness, propriety, suitability; exertion, endeavor, zeal, diligence, industry, care, attention; application or concentration of the thoughts, abstract contemplation, meditation, (esp.) self-concentration, abstract meditation and mental abstraction practised as a system (as taught by Patanjali and called the Yoga philosophy; it is the second of the two Samkhya systems, its chief aim being to teach the means by which the human spirit may attain complete union with Ishvara or the Supreme Spirit; in the practice of self-concentration it is closely connected with Buddhism); any simple act or rite conducive to Yoga or abstract meditation; Yoga personified (as the son of Dharma or Kriya); a follower of the Yoga system; (in Samkhya) the union of soul with matter (one of the ten Mulikarthas or radical facts); (with Pasupatas) the union of the individual soul with the universal soul; (with Pancaratras) devotion, pious seeking after God; (with Jainas) contact or mixing with the outer world; (in astron.) conjunction, lucky conjuncture; a constellation, asterism (these, with the moon, are called *chandra-yogah* and are 13 in number; without the moon they are called *kha-yogah* or *nabhasa-yogah*); the leading or principal star of a lunar asterism; of a variable division of time (during which the joint motion of in the longitude of the sun and the moon amounts to 13 deg. 20 min.; there are 27 such Yogas beginning with Vishkambha and ending with Vaidhriti); (in arithm.) addition, sum, total; (in gram.) the connection of words together, syntactical dependence of a word, construction; a combined or concentrated grammatical rule or aphorism; the connection of a word with its root, original or etymological meaning; a violator of confidence, spy . . .

WHAT DOES YOGA MEAN?

It's typical for a book about Yoga to begin by asking, What is Yoga? Even though Yoga has spread far and wide through the American mainstream, we're still a bit perplexed by this exotic Indian import. A friendly introduction to the subject lays out the Welcome mat and makes everybody feel more at home. But what looks like a single question is really two questions rolled into one. What is Yoga? could mean: What is the English translation of the Sanskrit word *yoga*? Or considered from another angle, we could interpret the question as: What is Yoga all about?

There's no general agreement on how best to render yoga into English. Out of curiosity, I made an informal survey of 70 or so instruction manuals in my library, most written by American teachers and most published after 1990. "Yoke" and "join" each showed up about a quarter of the time, which is certainly fitting: both words are distant etymological kin of yoga, related through the ancestral Sanskrit verb *yuj*, which means "to yoke or join or fasten or harness." Yuj, by the way, is also the root of a handful of other familiar English words that either start with ju- (like jugular, juxtapose, and junction) or sandwich -ju- (like adjust, conjugate, and conjugal). But the most common English rendering of yoga by our teachers, though the word's not etymologically related, is "union."

As a straight translation, union works pretty well but it's not perfect. One problem, usually ignored or overlooked in popular books, is that tells only half the story. That's because little *yuj* also denotes "to make ready, prepare, arrange, fit out, set to work, use, employ, apply." How are these two meanings related and why are they both needed to fully translate yoga? There's an interesting back story here, and since it's set a few thousand years ago, I think it's only appropriate we begin with: Once upon a time, yoga referred to the yoking of animals to a cart, specifically of war horses to a chariot. Nowadays our only contact with chariots is in the movies, like the hair-raising race between the late Charlton Heston and Stephen Boyd—or likely their stunt doubles—in *Ben Hur*. It's hard for us to imagine, with our armored tanks and jet fighters, that a two-wheeled buggy pulled by a couple of horses, and carrying a guy with a bow and quiver-full of arrows, was ever an imposing weapon of war. But in that distant age a chariot was a very expensive piece of technology, and a bunch of them rumbling hell-bent across the battlefield was a sight that no doubt scared the pants off the average enemy foot soldier.

Now the warrior didn't drive the chariot, his job was to wreak havoc and commit mayhem. Instead the chariot was chauffeured by a charioteer, who also cared for and yoked the horses. These horses weren't your ordinary farmyard dobbins, far from it. They were unruly at best, and functional yokes had yet to be invented. So not just anybody off the street could tame these fractious beasts, hitch them to the chariot, and then steer them through the frenzy of a battlefield. The charioteer was a highly trained and respected professional, who'd likely earned his degree in yoking at the feet of a more experienced colleague. In regard to yoga then, to paraphrase the old song, "yoke" and "make ready" go together like a horse and carriage, you can't have one without the other: the former signifies the charioteer's goal, the latter indicates that he needs a method to achieve that goal. So we'll agree from now on that yoga is more accurately rendered as "union-method."

WHAT IS YOGA ALL ABOUT?

These reins of his are the organs of action. The body is the chariot. The charioteer is the mind. The whip is made of one's character. By Him forsooth driven, this body goes round and round ... So, this body is set up in possession of consciousness; or, in other words, this very one is the driver.

Maitri Upanishad 3.6

This raises an obvious question: what does yoga have to do with Yoga? How did the martial story of the charioteer become associated with the decidedly pacific practice we're all familiar with today? This actually brings us back to the second interpretation of our original query, since it's just another way of asking: What is Yoga all about?

To be honest, this is an enormously complex question that American scholars and practitioners have been trying to answer satisfactorily for at least 50 years. On the one hand, a detailed answer requires a good-sized tome in itself, which is far beyond the scope, and not really in the job description, of this modest effort. And anyway the heavy lifting has already been done by other writers, so there's no point in re-inventing the wheel (for a few suggestions on books about the general history and philosophy of Yoga, see Recommended Reading at the end of this section). On the other hand, we can't just skip over this question without paying it some attention, since we'll need a working description of Yoga to provide a basic framework for its American story. The description should be succinct, but not so succinct that it becomes simplistic and misleading.

One reason it's so difficult to describe Yoga in twenty-five-words-or-less is that over the centuries, the seeds of the original practice have sprouted a bewildering and rather impressive number of schools and sub-schools. This process, in the hothouse environment of America, is still going on today. Why so many schools? Imagine several teams of mountaineers preparing to climb the same peak. While each team may outfit itself with the same equipment—ropes and ladders and ice picks and the such—each team may have a slightly different strategy for reaching and take a slightly different route to the summit. All Yoga schools point toward the same goal—union—but at the same time, all schools have, to a lesser or greater degree, different methods for reaching that goal. The Yogins recognized early on that different personalities and temperaments call for different methods; so for example, brainy intellectuals, who like their hairs split neatly and coolly down the middle, will gravitate toward the so-called wisdom school, while pious types, who wear their heart on their sleeve, and like to sing and dance and generally let their hair down, will tend toward the devotional school.

It's no secret that a good proportion of American students equate Yoga almost entirely with the physical exercises or postures (*asana*) extracted from one school, Hatha Yoga. Much to the chagrin of Yoga Traditionalists we've essentially reduced the whole of Yoga, with all of its myriad schools and practices, to one practice characteristic of one school (and not even that school's main practice). Moreover, we seem blissfully ignorant of Yoga's long tradition; for many of us, Yoga just appeared one day on our shores full-blown—poof!—as if by magic out of thin air. But of course, Yoga is extremely old (just how old we'll discuss shortly), and it evolved gradually, over hundreds of years, out of a loose collection of archaic meditation-like exercises. Many of these exercises, scholars speculate, had their origin in older priestly sacrificial rituals or

the even older mind-bending techniques of tribal shamans, who were a combination of magician, medium and medicine man.

Eventually though, the amorphous mass of these practices were refined and coalesced into a discernable system, which naturally enough needed a catchy name. But why Yoga? We'll never know exactly how Yoga got its name. I like to imagine that some chariot-savvy practitioner came up with the brilliant idea, but it's more likely that the name evolved organically along with the system it named. However it came by its appellation, yoga is a good general fit for Yoga: in one broad stroke, the word both capsulizes the two main ingredients of the practice—that it has both a goal and an instrumental method—and imbues the practice with rich historical and metaphorical associations, especially from the story of our charioteer and his horses and chariot. There are at least three fables (along with the longer *Bhagavad Gita*, which we'll look at in the next chapter) that draw analogies between this story and key elements of Yoga. In written form, the simplest version is estimated to be about 2400 years old (but since all of these written records are the end product of a long oral transmission, the fable itself is probably much older):

The wise one, heedful, should control the mind
As a chariot yoked to bad horses.

If this doesn't sound much like our modern Yoga practice, it's not. The earliest practitioners weren't at all interested in pretzel-like contortions or jumping around like crazy in overheated rooms. That comes much, much later. Back in Yoga's infancy, *asana* (which literally means "seat") indicated nothing more than a steady and comfortable sitting posture assumed by the practitioner as a prelude to meditation. The "wise ones," our Yogin-charioteers, lived spartan lives in forest or mountain hermitages, spending their days in self-absorbed "heedfulness," some kind of meditation-method, no doubt learned from an accomplished teacher, just as our charioteer learned his yoking-method from a senior colleague. The focus of their meditations generally was the "contents" of their own minds, their thoughts, feelings, memories, fantasies and such, much the same agglomeration of stuff that crowds and worries all the nooks and crannies of our minds today. The Yogins call these contents of whatever kind *vrittis* (pronounced *vrit-tees*), which means "to turn, revolve, whirl."

Vrittis are often pictured as the waves roiling the surface of a deep pond, which is analogous to the whole of our consciousness. They're generated not only by the impressions we take in through our senses from the outside world, but also by sub-surface "currents," which are unconscious impressions themselves left behind by old *vrittis* and continually reinforced by new ones. We can think of these impressions as our ingrained habits and personality traits, that impel us to act and think in fixed, predictable ways. As you may have experienced yourself if you've ever tried to meditate, the *vrittis*—which are aptly compared to the charioteer's "bad horses"—are maddeningly uncooperative: ceaselessly rearing, snorting, and whinnying, they stir up all sorts of trouble and never give us a minute's peace. Just as his charioteer predecessor aimed to control and yoke the horses to the chariot, the Yogin aimed to "control" and "yoke" all this brain-rattling, untamed turmoil.

Why control? And yoke to what? The early Yogins realized the *vrittis* are a veil that hide something absolutely critical from our view at the symbolic bottom of the pond. You don't have

to live on an isolated mountaintop and pass your days in meditation to contact your vrittis—they're most always there, and all you really have to do is "step back" and observe whatever happens to be passing through your mind. But it's not so much the vrittis themselves that are at the root of our problem, though like the charioteer's horses they can be a terrible hassle; rather it's that we identify with them and define ourselves through them. As the Yogins vehemently insist, while we indubitably *have* these vrittis, just as indubitably we are not the *same as* these vrittis. It's something like having an illness: we all immediately recognize and say we *have* a cold, but we never for a instant suppose that we *are* the cold. We're all infected, believe it or not, with a bad case of mistaken identity or maybe identity amnesia, and this causes us intense, unrelenting suffering.

Now this brand of suffering isn't the kind we endure at the dentist or an IRS audit; rather it's a kind of existential malaise, a "sickness of the spirit," to borrow phrase from the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, that colors everything we do. It's curious—and it would be amusing if it weren't so sad—that in the Yoga lexicon, the word for suffering is *duhkha* (pronounced dew-kah), "having a bad axle hole." Because of our false identification with the vrittis, this word suggests, our lives are like an excruciatingly bumpy chariot ride, without the relief of shock absorbers or pneumatic tires.

I wish I could recommend a Yoga-pill that we could pop to make us feel better, but alas, no such medication exists that I'm aware of, though such a pill would undoubtedly be a huge money-maker for some enterprising Yoga teacher. What we really need to cure our illness is an answer to the question at the heart of all Yoga, which is simply: Who am I? Or asked from the flip side: How can I be truly happy?

That's enough for the bad news. The good news is that while this condition is common—actually pandemic—it's not incurable: somewhere along the way, the Yogins intuited a line of attack that would permanently eradicate *duhkha*-related suffering. This doesn't mean, unfortunately, that we'll never feel pain again—the IRS will still be looming over our shoulder every April—but we can resolve our existential predicament and so free ourselves forever from the vrittis' debilitating grasp.

How? Before I answer I'll have to ask the more skeptical among you to exercise what Samuel Coleridge, the nineteenth-century English poet and critic, called a "willing suspension of disbelief." That's because most of us have invested so much time and energy in our personality, and don't take kindly to anything that threatens it, and so the Yogins' solution seems pretty dubious to some folks, downright scary to others. Remember though, as you read what follows, that you don't need to discard your personality and leave yourself hopelessly exposed to the slings and arrows of the world; you just have to re-orient your attitude toward it.

Now according to the Yogins it's possible, by diligently applying the suitable meditation-method, to "step back" and dis-identify ourselves from the vrittis. Once we get enough distance from them, they naturally become less rambunctious—much like the charioteer bringing the horses to heel prior to yoking them to the chariot—and less oppressive; then we can glimpse, so to speak, of the bottom of the pond. And what do we espy there? In the West we typically call it the soul or spirit; but for our purposes, to avoid these loaded words, we'll call it the Self. As you can

see each of us has two selves: the minuscule “s” vritti-self, the self we use to present ourselves to the world, and the majuscule “S” Self, our authentic identity.

The first thing to realize is that this Self doesn’t inhabit us, we’re not a bunch of individual Selves wandering about, bumping into each other, though oftentimes it seems that way. More properly, we inhabit the Self. This is perhaps the most momentous and profound discovery of our Yogins, that a single Self is the source, sustenance, and common link (or we might say the “yoga”) of all life. Unlike our vritti-self, which is changeable, ephemeral, limited, and suffering-prone, the authentic Self is immutable, eternal, omnipresent, and best of all, blissful. As one famous charioteer remarks to his equally famous warrior-companion-student:

The presence that pervades the universe
is imperishable, unchanging ...

It was never born; coming
to be, it will never *not* be.
Birthless, primordial, it does not
die when the body dies.

Ironically, while the horses and chariot are separate entities, and so can be yoked one to the other, “we” are never separate from the Self; each of us *is* the Self, it’s impossible for us to split away from it or be anything else but the Self. So at the end of the Yoga journey, once the vrittis are harnessed and we yoke our identity to our true Self, there’s really no union at all—how can there be since there’s only one entity that exists in all the universe? What actually happens is a kind of *dis*-union from our dukkha-causing attachments and a re-union (or re-member-ing) with what we’ve always been all along. The Yogins call the feeling we get from this ultimate experience *sukha* (pronounce sue-kah), “having a good axle hole.”

WHO WAS THE FIRST YOGA TEACHER?

Hiranya-garbha alone is the teacher of yoga, and no other.

Bṛhad-yogi-yajnavalkya-smṛti ch/verse?

Yoga tradition says the first teacher was a figure named Hiranyagarbha. This name is made of two smaller words: *hiranya* means “gold,” which in India is the worshiped as the God of all the metals, and thought to be a fragment of the sun; and *garbha*, which variously means “womb, embryo, fetus, child.” As you can see, this latter word covers the entire birth cycle from beginning to end, and tenses in the maternal incubator for good measure. Hiranyagarbha thus means the “Golden Womb,” though you’ll often see it defined as the Golden Embryo, Fetus, or Child.

Not surprisingly, given the Yoga tradition’s total indifference for names and dates, there’s some controversy over whether there ever really was a Hiranyagarbha. True believers stoutly champion Hiranyagarbha’s historicity, but modern scholars, most of whom seem to be from Missouri, aren’t convinced.

The earliest mention of Hiranyagarbha is found in the Rig Veda, where he plays the leading role in a well-known creation account (10.121). The opening three lines of this poem read:

In the beginning rose Hiranyagarbha, born Only Lord of all created beings.
He fixed and holdeth up this earth and heaven....
Giver of vital breath, of power and vigour, he whose commandments all the Gods
acknowledge...

For Westerners, this might ring a bell. The first two lines are remarkably similar to the opening line of Genesis (1.1) in the Torah: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” Here of course, it’s clear that Hiranyagarbha is not a flesh-and-blood person but what’s called the Demiurge, the deity who fashions the material world out of the primal chaos. In this role he’s nicknamed Sambhuti, a feminine noun which means “one in whom anything has arisen.”

The third line of the Rig story echoes Yahweh’s inspiring of Adam with the “breath of life” (Genesis 2.7). In this role, Hiranyagarbha is the cosmic vital force (*prana*), nicknamed the “Thread Self” (*sutra-atman*), the Self on which all other selves—including you and me—are threaded, like beads on a string. Like Yahweh, Hiranyagarbha not only constructs the world, but then breathes out the motive energy for its creatures.

Since he’s both architect and animator, traditionalists also cast Hiranyagarbha as the cosmic mind, the “Teaching Spirit of the Universe” in the words of Swami Veda Bharati (*Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali*, 70), and the original fount of Yoga wisdom. And so in one of the Upanishads (*Shvetashvatara* 6.18), Hiranyagarbha is credited with generating the Rig Veda, which he delivers to humankind through the medium of the sages. This book, along with its companions, the Sama Veda and Yajur Veda, is called the “supreme bridge to immortality,” that is, self-knowledge and liberation.

But we still haven't answered the \$64 question: was there really an actual Hiranyagarbha, and was he the first Yoga teacher? Several modern scholars cite a book, the "Collection of the Serpent of the Deep" (*ahirbudhnya samhita*)—don't you just love these titles?—written about 1500 years ago, that names Hiranyagarbha as the author of two books on Yoga: the "Compendium on Restriction" (*nirodha samhita*) and the "Compendium on Action" (*karma samhita*). Neither book apparently contained any autobiographical information, and both of these books are now lost.

But interestingly, according to one scholar, the Compendium on Restriction is also known as the *yoga anushasanam*, which translates into the "Exposition of Yoga." This doesn't seem especially earth-shaking until we discover that this title is almost exactly echoed in the opening aphorism of the Yoga Sutra: *atha yoga anushasanam*, which means "Now begins the exposition of yoga." Moreover, in the second aphorism of this book, Yoga is defined as the "*restriction (nirodha)* of the fluctuations of consciousness," which again echoes the title of this vanished book. As we'll soon learn, the Yoga Sutra is the first systematic presentation of Yoga, compiled sometime between 200 BCE and 200 CE by the sage Patanjali. Though nowadays the practice it presents has been superseded in importance by a number of other schools, the Yoga Sutra is still considered one of the foundations of all later Yoga systems.

These parallels (or coincidences?) convince traditionalists that remnants of a historical Hiranyagarbha's original teaching are preserved in Patanjali's book, and that Patanjali himself probably was a student of Hiranyagarbha's school. But in the end, this conjecture about the existence of a flesh-and-blood Hiranyagarbha, intriguing as it is, is completely unverifiable. It's likely, as some scholars speculate, there never was a "first" teacher; rather, Yoga is the result of a group effort spanning numerous generations of practitioners, each generation passing along its knowledge to the next like the baton in a relay race. For better or worse, we Westerners are now holding that baton—it'll be most interesting to see how, and in what condition, we pass it along to the next generation.

WHO IS PATANJALI?

Biographical information about the historical Patanjali is essentially non-existent, except for a brief reference in an old book or two. Experts have made some wildly diverse guesstimates about when he lived, but the consensus seems to be sometime between 200 BCE and 200 CE.

There are a few traditional stories about Patanjali's life, which of course should be taken with huge helpings of salt. One tells us he was born in a place called Ilavrita Varsha. Ilivrita (from *ila*, "earth") is one of nine regions (*varsha*) of a mythical continent, though a few people have actually tried, rather unconvincingly, to fix its location: one theory has it at the North Pole, another in the vicinity of the Pamir Mountains in central Asia.

Like many legendary heroes the world over, Patanjali wasn't just born like the rest of us, he made a grand entrance. In one account he "fell" (*pata*) from heaven in the form of a serpent into the open palms (*anjali*, a gesture of supplication) of his virgin mother, Gonika, a devoted yoga practitioner. Because of this Patanjali is sometimes known as Gonikaputra (*putra*, "son, child"). He's also supposed to have found his wife, Lolupa, in a hollow tree, not exactly the usual spot to go looking for a date.

Finally there's a report that, one day, his meditation was disturbed by the rowdy and disrespectful inhabitants Bhotabhandra. Did he ask them nicely to quiet down? Nope. It seems that whoever Patanjali was, he had a short fuse and a direct way of dealing with people; peeved by their behavior, he burnt them to a crisp with a blast of fire from his mouth.

Whoever he was, Patanjali is remembered today as the compiler of the Yoga Sutra. The material he gathered together and systematized in this book existed for a long time before him, no doubt orally, like the hymns of the Rig Veda. Scholars wonder if Patanjali made any original contributions to the book, but it's impossible to come to any clear-cut conclusion.

Traditionalists assert that Patanjali authored two other books, a commentary on an important Sanskrit grammar, and a treatise on India's native system of medicine, Ayurveda, literally the "knowledge or science of health." They credit him then with being one of the first holistic healers, providing Ayurveda for the body, grammar for the mind, and Yoga for the self. But Western scholars don't agree with traditionalists about these two books, maintaining that other men named Patanjali wrote them.

It may seem strange to us Westerners that so little is known about a person of Patanjali's stature and widespread influence. If he were alive today, he might be jetting all over the world, offering week-end workshops in Raja Yoga and teacher training intensives. But anonymity is typical of the great sages of the East, who surely were genuinely humble people. They believed that their teaching was the "fruit" of a unselfish collective effort made over many generations, and that the individual was only a small link in this great chain.

IS YOGA A SCIENCE?

Q: Is Yoga a science ...?

A: Where there is a “technique,” there is science. Yoga has its own technique of physiological, psychological and supramental well-being of man. So it is a science. . . . Yoga is a science of character-building or right conduct.

–“An Hour with Sri B.K.S. Iyengar,” an interview in *Iyengar: His Life and Work*, 189.

The science of Yoga gives a practical and scientifically prepared method of finding the truth in a religion.

–Swami Vishnu-devananda, *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*, 5

Is Yoga a science? Here’s another question that’s often broached, though it generates much less heat than the question about religion. The response you get depends on who you ask. Most mainstream scientists are “I’m-from-Missouri” types; whether they have spiritual inclinations or not, they’ll probably answer “No.” Science is scientific, it produces measurable results that can be re-created by other experimenters, and Yoga, at least by scientific standards, doesn’t and can’t.

But not everybody agrees with this assessment. Middle-of-the-roaders, those who dabble in both science and spirituality, insist there’s really no contradiction between science and Yoga. That’s because each functions in different, though intimately related, worlds, science the material, Yoga the spiritual. Each provides us with a slightly altered perspective of the same landscape, like two people standing a mile apart looking at the same mountain. Then there are the optimists who affirm that the more modern science advances the more it aligns itself with the ancient teachings of Yoga. So who’s right? Is Yoga a science? Or maybe, is science a Yoga?

Before we can decide, we have to ask that basic question again: what is science? Here’s something to think about: the root of “science” is the Latin *scire*, which means both “to know” and “to cut or split” (and which also gives us the word “conscious”). So while yoga means “to join or yoke,” science implies “to split.” This etymology tells us two things about science. First and most obviously, scientists are mostly interested in acquiring concrete knowledge, particularly about a world they see as wholly material. In such a world human consciousness is relegated to a peripheral role, dismissed (if acknowledged at all) as a mere by-product of matter.

Second, scientists customarily acquire this knowledge by cutting or splitting, in two ways. First they try to cut themselves off from their world, by stepping back and studying things objectively, ideally minimizing any subjective involvement. The classical scientist assumes it’s possible to separate what’s “out there” entirely from what’s “in here.”

But with the development of the so-called “new physics” over the last few decades, this dualistic stance is harder to defend and maintain. About 75 years ago, physicist Werner Heisenberg (the 1932 Nobel laureate in physics) postulated that the supposedly objective observer couldn’t help but influence, at least on a microscopic level, whatever he was observing. This means that, in the end, there’s no such thing as outright objectivity, and that we unavoidably have to add our two-

cents worth to any dealings we have with the world.

Scientists will also literally cut whatever it is they're studying into smaller and smaller pieces for a closer look. Physicists, for example, do this with matter in their particle accelerators by smashing atoms into each other. This is part and parcel of the scientific method, in which scientists first gather data based on observation, use this data to draft a hypothesis, run and re-run experiments that either prove or disprove the hypothesis, and finally, if the experiments confirm the hypothesis, draw conclusions and devise grand theories or natural laws (which they can always, in the future, if new information surfaces, modify or scrap entirely).

So how does Yoga stack up as a science? Yogins surely value knowledge as much as the scientists; but the knowledge they value most concerns the immaterial Self, though the physical world is never ignored regardless of they're attitude toward matter. For Yogins, knowledge is always a means to an end, which is union. Despite their often undeserved reputation as ascetic world-renouncers, Yogins have accumulated an encyclopedic knowledge about the material world. From this, they've developed a intricate model of nature, though scientists would doubtless either be amused or shocked by their efforts, for a couple of reasons we'll go into shortly. Anyway, in their quest for union, Yogins have traversed all the realms of our world, physical and subtle, leaving no stone unturned. In the process, every school of Yoga has developed its own unique "yoga-tific method," which in its formal structure and approach to practice is every bit as systematic and rational as its scientific counterpart's approach to the world.

In the fragmented way the practice is ordinarily taught in the West, students tend to miss or misunderstand this Yoga-tific method behind the seeming Yoga madness. But Yogins have occupied themselves for hundreds of years with self-observation and meditative experimentation, hypothesis-building and testing, and fine-tuning theories about the nature, the mind, and the Self. This was all performed in the research laboratory of the Yogin's own body-mind, then rigorously scrutinized and evaluated by students his own school, rival schools, even hostile schools. If a practice was found effective, if its initial results could be repeated by others following the same procedure, then it was adopted and integrated into the general method. But if it was found wanting, then it was revised for further review or dumped on the Yoga rubbish heap.

So it's no exaggeration to say that our "mystical" Yogins, in their own way, are just as practical as the scientists. Remember that while there's pure or theoretical (as opposed to applied) science, there's no such thing as purely theoretical Yoga. In Yoga, *speculation* about the practice always follows from the day-to-day mule work of *doing* the practice. Svamarama writes, in his Hatha Yoga Pradipika, that as long as your practice hasn't reached its fullest expression in "spontaneous meditation," then merely talking about spiritual knowledge is only "indulging in boastful and false tales."

Of course the scientists make their observations *on* the world *in* the world and, as I mentioned above, minimize as much as possible—or so they hope—the subjective element. They put their trust in the evidence of their five senses, which are frequently extended or amplified by one or another scientific doo-dads. If a scientist can't see, touch, taste, and get an accurate measurement of what he's observing, it simply doesn't exist. By contrast, the Yogins feel that the senses are

inherently limited, no matter how refined or amplified they are by instrumentation. You can absolutely discover lots of useful stuff about the world through your senses, but you can't know what's most important—union—by relying on them alone.

So is Yoga a science? There are obvious parallels between the scientists' and the Yogins' methods, and both, in their own way, are searching for the truth at the heart of the world. But scientific truth is not the same as Yoga-tific truth. The scientists want knowledge that reveals and transforms the world, though it's possible that they too will be profoundly affected by their work. The Yogins, on the other hand, while not indifferent to the world, only want knowledge that reveals and transforms the Self.

The answer to our question Is Yoga a science? then is very definitively, It all depends. If you interpret *scire*, "to know," in a strictly Western sense, then no, Yoga isn't truly a science. But if we allow ourselves to expand the territorial limits of this "knowing" to include the subtle and spiritual provinces—as the Yogins do—then in this sense Yoga is the supreme science, the science of all sciences.

THE COSMIC SPACES: The Mythical Geography of the Yoga Sutra

Bhuvana-jnanam surye samyamat (through constraint on the sun [the yogi gains] knowledge of the world).

–Yoga Sutra, III.26.

Samyama (from *sam* + *yam* “to restrain,” literally, “to go together,” “vehicle”) is a technical term that Patanjali uses in the third chapter of the *Yoga Sutra* to designate the collective practice of the three so-called “inner limbs” of classical Yoga, concentration, meditation and ecstasy (*samadhi*) with regard to a single object. Since, as G. Feuerstein writes, “paradoxically, the Unconditioned and the Formless, *i.e.* the Self, can only be reached *via* the manifest forms, the yogic journey . . . takes the adept through the depths of cognitive-ecstasy (*samprajnata-samadhi*) and thus inevitably confronts him also with the mysteries of the powers (*siddhis*) arising from these special states of consciousness” (*The Philosophy of Classical Yoga*, p. 104-5).

The listing and description of these seemingly fantastic powers deriving from the performance of *samyama* on various objects occupy most of chapter three. In Vyasa's commentary to 3.26, written perhaps in the seventh century A.D., we are given a glimpse of the Hindu vision of earthly geography and the structure of the universe (*bhuvana*, “cosmic spaces”), which is revealed by performing *samyama* on the sun. Most commentators, including Vyasa and Vachaspati Mishra, understand the “sun” here not as our planetary system's star, but instead the *sushumna nadi*, the central channel of the pranic network in the body, which Vyasa calls the “door of the sun” that leads to Brahma.

They who practice austerity and faith in the forest,
The peaceful knowers who live on alms,
Depart passionless through the door of the sun,
To where is that immortal Person (Purusha), e'en
the imperishable Spirit (Atman).

–*Mundaka Upanishad*, 1.2.11

The Hindu conception of the universe varies greatly from that of Western tradition, influenced as it is by the Semitic ideas found in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. To us, the universe is created and destroyed just a single time; it is not much more than 6,000 years old (based on a literal counting of generations from Adam to Jesus, and adding the number of years between the birth of Jesus and the present time); and it is the only one in existence. To the Hindus, on the other hand, the universe is millions of years old and very large; its creation, evolution and destruction repeats cyclically forever; and there are many other universes beyond our own.

Thus, the cosmography of the *Yoga Sutra* is not accessible to “normal” human consciousness. It is only through the “vehicle” of *samyama*, practiced on the “sun,” that one can explore these cosmic spaces.

Our earth, called Vasumati by Vyasa and described in some sources as a flat disc of enormous size, consists of seven islands (*dvipas*) and seven oceans. The innermost island is called *Jambudvipa*, after the Jambu-vrksha (*Eugenia Jambolana*, the Indian rose-apple tree) that grows on the

southern slope of Meru, the “golden king of mountains” (V) at the center of the island. The Jambu tree, said by some to grant wishes, by others to “resound with the melodious voices of celestial singing girls,” casts its protective shadow over our earth. Its fruits, according to one source, are as large as elephants; when ripe, they fall on the mountain's slope and their juice collects to form the Jambu river, which gives health (or immortality) to those who drink from it.

Golden Meru, the central axis of the entire cosmic system, is sometimes said to be 84,000 *yojanas* high (one *yojana* is calculated to be the distance covered by a horse in one harnessing, about nine miles), other times 350,000 miles, and may be compared to the mythical home of the Greek pantheon, Mount Olympus. It is buttressed by four peaks, each 10,000 *yojanas* high, of silver, emerald (or lapis lazuli), crystal, and gold. One of these peaks is Mount Mandara, which was used as the pivot in the famous story of the churning of the ocean (see Iyengar's account in *Light on Yoga*, p. 173. Some sources say that Meru, and not Mandara, was used as the pivot).

“... among mountains I am Meru.”

–Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, 10.23.

The diameter of Meru's base is 16,000 *yojanas* and that of its summit is 32,000 *yojanas*, so that the mountain is shaped like the seed-cup of a lotus. On the top of Meru is Brahmapura, the “city of Brahma,” covering 14,000 *yojanas*, surrounded in turn by the city of Indra. The river Ganges flows about Brahmapura and then, leaving the mountain, divides into the seven sacred rivers of India.

The meeting place and pleasure ground of the gods is the highest of all mountains, the axial northern mountain sometimes identified with a mountain in the Himalaya, between Malyavat and Gandhamadana ... According to the *Mahabharata* (13.4862), this mountain, Meru, is round like the morning sun, and resembles a flame without smoke. It is 84,000 *yojanas* (350,000 miles) high and goes as far down in depth. It overshadows the worlds above and below and across. All the birds on this mountain have beautiful feathers. This is why the bird Beautiful-Face (Sumukha), a son of Beautiful-Wing (Suparana, i.e., Garuda), left the mountain in protest, for there was no difference between good, average, and bad birds. The Sun, the Moon, and the lord-of-wind (Vayu) move ceaselessly round this mountain. Its gardens are filled with flowers and fruit. Everywhere can be seen shining palaces of gold. Host of gods, celestial-musicians (*gandharva*), genii (*asura*), and demons (*rakshasa*) play with heavenly nymphs (*apsaras*). The top of Mount Meru is covered with forests. Its fragrant flowering trees and huge *jambu* trees resound with the melodious voices of celestial singing girls, the *kinnaris*.

–Alain Danielou, *The Gods of India*, 145.

Around the foot of Meru are the boundary mountains of the earth. To the north are the mountain chains of Nila, Shveta, Shrngavat, each 2,000 *yojanas* in length, and between these are three “zones” (*varsha*), Ramanaka, Hiramaya, and Uttarakuru, each 9,000 *yojanas* in size. To the south are the Nishadha, Hemakuta (Goldhorn), and Himashaila (Snow-crag) chains, again each 2,000 *yojanas* in length, which separate the zones of Harivarsha, Kimpurusha, and Bharata

(India, or perhaps the entire human world), each again 9,000 *yojanas* in size. To the east is Bhadrashva, bounded by Malyavat mountain, to the west is Ketumala, bounded by Gandhamadana mountain, and in the middle zone is Ilavrta.

Below our earth, to a depth of 70,000 *yojanas* (or again 350,000 miles), are the seven “nether worlds” (*patala*) of Mahatala, Rasatala, Atala, Sutala, Vitala, Talatala, and Patala, inhabited by the asuras and other semi-divine beings. Below this is the Great Hell (maha-naraka, naraka literally means “pertaining to the human”), or purgatory, ruled by Yama, the god of death, which Vyasa divides into seven regions, called (in ascending order) Avici (“that which is waveless,” i.e. static), Mahakala (“great death or blackness”), Ambarisha (“frying pan”), Raurava (“that which pertains to ruru, i.e. a demon), Maharaurava (“that which pertains to the great ruru”), Kalasutra (“thread of death or blackness”), and Andhatamishra (“thick darkness”), “in which creatures are born to suffer painful long lives as consequences of their accumulated sinful actions” (V). According to the Gita:

The gateway of this hell leading to the ruin of the soul is
threefold, lust, anger and greed. Therefore these three, one
should abandon (16.21).

All of these worlds then are supported on the head (or heads, sometimes seven in number, sometimes one thousand) of a gigantic snake, Shesha (“Remainer,” called so because he remains after the destruction of the world; also called Adishesha or Ananta [Infinite]), in whose coils the god Vishnu sleeps between world ages. In one Hindu tradition, Patanjali is said to be an incarnation of this serpent. At the beginning of his commentary on the *Yoga Sutra* (1.1), Vyasa invokes this figure:

Our homage to Shesha,
the snake of eternal kundalini,
the residue that remains
after the great dissolution,
the one who incarnates again and again
to teach the science of yoga.

Jambu-dvipa is said to be 100,000 *yojanas* across and surrounded by a salt sea, called Lavana, double that size. Spreading out in concentric circles from this central point, like the rings around the bull's-eye of a target, are the six other islands, Shaka, Kusha, Krauncha, Shalmala, Magadha, Pushkara, “each twice the size of the one mentioned just before it” (V), and the six other seas, which are said to taste like sugarcane juice or treacle (Ikshu), wine (Sura), clarified butter or ghee (Sarpis), curds (Dadhi), cream, and milk (Kshira or Dugdha) (sometimes the sixth sea is said to taste like milk, and the outermost sea like fresh water, called Jala). Finally, this great round of the earth, “encompassed by garlands of lands and forests and mountains and cities and oceans” (VM) is girdled by the Lokaloka (“world no-world”) Mountains, which are 500 million *yojanas* in length.

Thus, the Earth world (Bhurloka) extends from the depths of Hell to the summit of Mount Meru. The Intermediate Space (Antariksha), “strewn with planets and stars” (V), extends from the summit of Meru to the Pole Star (Dhruva), the pivot of the entire planetary system. Interestingly,

the planets and stars are said to be “fastened by the pole-star and restrained by the movement of the wind” (V); in other words, they are fixed to the Pole Star and driven by the wind around it like a cow is driven by the farmer in a circle around the threshing post.

Above the Pole Star are the five worlds of Heaven (Svarloka), of increasing beatitude, called Maha-Indra-loka (“world of the great Indra”), the Mahar-Prajapatya-loka (“world of the great Prajapati”), Janaloka (“world of people”), Tapaloka (“world of *tapas* or asceticism”), and Satyaloka (“world of truth”), the latter three also known collectively as the Brahmaloaka (“world of Brahma”). Many classes of fabulous beings (*devas*) inhabit the various regions of Heaven. For example, in the Tapaloka, there are beings who “live on meditation” (V); in the Satyaloka, there are beings who “have control over the Pradhana [primary matter] and live to the end of creation” (V).

All evils turn back therefrom, for that Brahma-world is freed from evil. Therefore, verily, upon crossing that bridge, if one is blind, he becomes no longer blind; if he is sick, he becomes no longer sick. Therefore, verily, upon crossing that bridge, the night appears even as the day, for that Brahma-world is ever illuminated.

—*Chandogya Upanishad*, 8.4.2.

All of these vast worlds are then contained in the middle of the macrocosm, called the *Brahmanda*, the “Egg of Brahma, and seem then but a “minute particle of Pradhana [“foundation,” that is, primal matter] like a firefly in the sky” (V). The egg is said to be surrounded, in turn, by water, fire, air, mind, and the origin of the elements, and all of this is then contained in the infinite Supreme Principle. According to Vyasa, yogins “should see all these by practicing Samyama on the solar entrance (Suryadvvara) or on any other region, until all these are seen thoroughly.”

ON SOUND

Listen. Hear that? Sound is all around us, whether it’s just random noise or organized into language or music. Sometimes the babel of modern life seems overwhelming, and if you’re like

me, you've learned to tune much of it out, if only to protect your sanity. I wonder though: if I learn to selectively ignore much of the unnecessary racket in my life, what effect will this have on my capacity to hear what *is* necessary, not only coming to me from the outside world, but from my inner world as well? And if I desensitize myself to the sound the world is making, do I do the same with the "sound" I'm making, in my everyday thoughts and conversations, and so inadvertently contribute to the very cacophony I'm trying to avoid?

The yogis are avid listeners, and no sound escapes their notice. It's no surprise then that they've elaborated a "science of sound," since they've turned just about everything available to us through our senses, in one way or another, into a vehicle for self-investigation and self-liberation. Certainly Western science has also studied sound, but only as a material phenomenon; as is usual with their scientific inquiries, the yogis' occupation with sound has taken them beyond the physical realm into the metaphysical. They've discovered that the whole universe is shaped, pervaded, and ultimately, at the end of its life cycle (*kalpa*), reabsorbed by sound, or to be more precise, a vibratory power that has both audible and inaudible manifestations.

It may seem contradictory to talk about inaudible sound, though of course we're bombarded all the time with sounds we can't hear because of the inherent limitations of our sense of our hearing. But for the yogis, subsonic and supersonic sounds are still considered audible, since we can hear them if our hearing is amplified with special instruments. Instead inaudible sound refers to subtle, or what the yogis call "unstruck" (*anahata*) sound. Naturally we can't hear subtle sound with our everyday ears, for that we need to train our special "yoga ear" with constant meditation practice. Subtle sound is, as it were, like a homing device: when we hear it with our yoga ear, we know we're heading in the right direction and getting closer to the goal of our practice. The yogis describe subtle sound in concrete terms, ocean waves, various drums, a gong, a horn, even oddly enough clouds, which suggests that the "unstruck" is unlike any sounds we've ever heard before.

The yogis distinguish between four "states" (*bhava*) of sound. In effect these are four stages of world/word creation, though it might be more accurate to say that all sound, whether random or organized, issues or broadcasts from the same "soundless" source in three increasingly "soundful" extensions or involutes. The source is called the "supreme sound" or "supreme voice" (*shabda-brahman* or *para-vac*), similar to what we in the West call the Logos (which means both "speech" or "word" and "reason") or the Word of God. "In the beginning was the Word," writes the disciple John at the opening of his gospel, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The ancient Greeks envisaged the Logos as the creative and governing spirit of the world, while for the early Christians the Word was divine wisdom incarnated in the person of Jesus.

Shabda-brahman is the transcendent, perfectly quiescent background to sound, in which there's as yet no differentiation into subject and object, and so no world and nothing to say. In Shabda-brahman the world/word exists only in potential. But each of us is ultimately rooted this absolute, and given the proper training, we can develop our inborn ability to tap into its creative, transformative, and emancipative power.

The first faint stirring of Shabda-brahman's world/word-building impulse—actually the first moment of consciousness—gives rise to the second stage of sound, called "visible sound"

(*pashyanti-shabda*). This unusual phrase needs some explanation, since *pashyanti* is still located in the subtle, wholly subjective sphere and certainly can neither be seen by a physical eye nor heard by a physical ear. The root of this Sanskrit word means, in its simplest and most literal sense, “to see, look at, observe.” Here though it’s used in a more specific sense that means “to see with the spiritual eye, to have insight or discernment.” With second-stage sound there’s still no distinct separation between self and other, only an intense desire to be a self, an “I,” and to “see” (and hear) itself in and through the “that,” the world of objects.

The third stage is called the “middle sound” (*madhyama-shabda*) simply because of its location in the middle of the second and fourth states, between the sheer possibility of the world/word and the world’s palpable inception and sounding out. Middle sound is also known as “hidden speech” because it’s associated with thought or ideation and reason. With this stage we’re finally in familiar territory. Now a clear difference is established between self and other, and the Word is cut up into words, though not as yet fully “spoken” as the world/word.

Finally we arrive at the fourth stage of this involutory scheme, “corporeal sound” (*vaikhara-shabda*). Several interesting explanations have been offered for the Sanskrit word *vaikhari*; for instance: it’s what is in that which is most solid (*vikhara*), the body; or it’s that which certainly (*vai*) enters (*ri*) the space (*kha*) of the ear. Corporeal sound, whether random or organized, is the sound of Western science and the everyday world, including human speech (*vac*).

This graduated emergence of everyday sound from its soundless source has been compared to the process of human birth, in which the child first exists only as an abstraction in the loving thoughts of its parents, then as a fertilized egg, then as a fetus, and finally as a neonate. Every sound is ultimately rooted in and infused with some quality of its “parent,” Shabda-brahman. Moreover every sound we make is a “child” of ours, and a so little world-creation. But only the yogis are aware of this intrinsic connection between their sounds and the soundless source. Their words then, as Vyasa remarks in his commentary to the *Yoga-Sutra* (2.36), are “infallible.” If a yogi “says to somebody ‘Be virtuous’ he becomes virtuous, if he says ‘Go to heaven’ he goes to heaven” (translation by Swami Hariharananda Aranya). The rest of us are unconscious of this connection; consequently our words are cut off from their source, which makes them confused and confusing, and so a source only of ignorance (*avidya*) and bondage.

Though all sound radiates out from Shabda-brahman, and possesses some degree of its power, some sounds, called mantras, are far more powerful than others. The yogis’ science of sound is often called *mantra-vidya* (*mantra-wisdom*) or *mantra-shashtra* (*mantra-teaching*). You’ve likely heard the word mantra before, and maybe even recite mantras in your daily practice. It’s a word that has no exact correlation in English. Though it’s often translated as “hymn” or “prayer,” these words have associations in English that are misleading when applied to mantra, and so it’s probably best left untranslated.

A mantra is literally an “instrument of thought” (the Sanskrit *man* means “to think), though not the kind of discursive thinking most of us engage in most of the time. To fill out this definition, we might add in brackets the word “concentrated” or “meditative” right before “thought” and the phrase “about the self” right after. Mantras are really sacred formulas, through which we can invoke and affirm our identity with the soundless source, but *only* if they’re properly pronounced with due attention paid to their essential meaning, and held in strictest secrecy. They can consist

of a single letter, a syllable or string of syllables, a word, or a whole sentence. The building-blocks of the mantras are the 50 letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, the holy, “perfected” (*sanskrita*) language of India. Collectively these letters or sounds are known as “divine city writing” (*devanagami*); individually each is affectionately called a “little mother” (*matrika*), a “seed” (*bija*) or packet of spiritual energy, an aspect or spark of Shabda-brahman.

There are more mantras than we can count. Probably the most famous mantra in the West is the monosyllable OM, the “root mantra” (*mula-mantra*), which has been venerated and chanted by practitioners for thousands of years. To conclude this article, I’d like to work with a mantra that, while surely not as well known as OM, is nevertheless on every living creature’s lips, breath after breath, throughout its life. It’s called the “unspoken mantra” (*ajapa-mantra*).

The yogis teach that each inhale and each exhale makes a low though distinct sound. Remember how I asked you to “listen” at the start of this article? Sit back now, close your eyes, and listen carefully for a few minutes to the sound of your everyday breathing. (Incidentally, I was once taught that the yoga ear is situated at the back of the skull, just in front of that little bony bump you can feel at the apex of the neck. You might want to “listen” from this spot as an experiment). Don’t get discouraged if you can’t hear the mantra right away—just pretend that you do, and eventually it will come.

We’re supposed to hear a hissing SA-sound with each inhale, and a breathy HA-sound with each exhale (though in some old instructional manuals the sounds are reversed). Joined together the two syllables make the mantra SAHAM (sometimes spelled SOHAM). This mantra, which we all speak with every breath we take from cradle to grave, bears witness to our eternal identity with the soundless source, “That (SA) am I (HA).” Try tuning into the unspoken mantra for a few minutes a few times each day, especially when you’re feeling stressed or out of sorts. The practice will naturally draw your awareness inward, slow the speed of your breathing, and help soothe the tumultuous fluctuations (*vritti*) of your consciousness.

THE MEANING OF HATHA

Beginning students are often confused regarding the Sanskrit word *hatha*, both about its meaning and its pronunciation. Let’s clear up the latter first.

PRONUNCIATION

It’s natural for English speakers to pronounce the “th” in *hatha* exactly as we would in familiar

words like “with” or “this,” so we say something like HATH-AH. But these two English letters are a transliteration of a single Sanskrit letter, known as a retroflex. That’s because it’s spoken with the tongue curled back (that is, retroflexed) so that the underside of its tip hits the roof of the mouth to form the “t.” To get a sense of this, slowly say “right *hand*.” Exaggerate the “t” sound of “right” by rolling your tongue tip back against your palette, pause briefly, then similarly exaggerate the aspirate “h” of “hand.” Now do the same with the “th” in hatha, as if they were separate letters, and the word will come out sounding more like HOT-HAH.

MEANING

You might have heard or read that hatha means “sun-moon.” This isn’t exactly wrong, but it’s not exactly right either. Many words in the yoga lexicon, hatha among them, have two layers of meaning. There’s an exoteric or dictionary meaning intended for public consumption, and an esoteric or hidden meaning, traditionally accessible only to initiates, that reveals something about the deeper significance of what’s being named.

The dictionary definition of hatha is “violence, force; obstinacy, pertinacity” (all definitions from M. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*). On the face of things then, hatha yoga is the “forceful yoga,” a reference to the vigorous methods—like posture (asana), conscious breathing (pranayama), and various body “seals” (mudra) or muscular contractions—that yogis of this school employ to storm the gates of self-liberation. Notice also that the dictionary hatha conveys one the of the central requirements for the success of any practitioner (and not only for hatha, but for all kinds of yoga): a stubborn determination, whatever the obstacles and however long it takes, to see the work through to its desired end.

Now what does hatha’s esoteric definition of “sun-moon” mean? There are several differing interpretations, but they’re all based on the teaching that every living creature is powered by a subtle energy called *prana*. For our purposes here, we can think of prana as having two principal modes or, like a car’s battery, two “poles.” These modes, or pair-of-opposites (*dvandva*) as they’re technically called, are visualized in various ways: as male and female deities, as hot and cold currents (as you might find in an ocean), or as the sun and moon, the two great celestial bodies that rule our days and nights.

So the two syllables of hatha, HA and THA, are said to signify, respectively, the sun and moon. Keep in mind that these assignments are somewhat arbitrary. The dictionary does define THA, in certain contexts, as the “moon’s disk” (though its primary meaning is “a loud noise”). HA, on the other hand, doesn’t literally mean “sun”; in fact, one of its dictionary definitions is “the moon.”

Hatha yoga then, by implication, is a practice that operates on these two opposing but simultaneously complementary energies. For most of us, our sun and moon energies are at loggerheads, pulling us this way and that in a perpetually agitating tug-of-war. The methods of hatha yoga have been developed to harmonize this conflict, to balance the sun and moon and calm the body-mind. So while the dictionary hatha says something about what the practice *is*, the esoteric hatha says something about what the practice *does*.