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## *A Structural Analysis of the 'Samādhi-Pāda'*

The study of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* is a rewarding process that unfolds many levels of understanding and interpretation through repeated application of the lens of critical analysis. Through this process, what at first seemed like an impenetrably dense and virtually indecipherable text eventually yields up incisive insights into the structures of human consciousness and their potential for transformation.

I will make the argument that Patañjali's textual structure is extremely logical and organised, following a pattern of establishing a firm foundation, then layering more nuanced levels of understanding over top of that in the subsequent sūtras. Like any good author, Patañjali uses foreshadowing, alluding to difficult ideas initially and then explicating them later. Often terms are introduced with abbreviated definitions that are later elaborated. We shall look at this textual structure as it pertains specifically to Book One, the *Samādhi-Pāda*.<sup>1</sup>

The title of the work is *Aphorisms on Yoga* (or *Threads of Yoga*), so the first question that logically occurs to the uninformed reader is: what is yoga? And the definition of this term is exactly Patañjali's first goal. After an initial sūtra (which alludes simultaneously to the immediacy of the topic and the fact that this is an exposition of already ancient practices<sup>2</sup>), Patañjali gives his famous definition: *yogaś-citta-vṛtti-nirodhah*. This is yet a preliminary definition,

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<sup>1</sup> This essay will assume that the reader has a cursory familiarity with the text under consideration.

<sup>2</sup> Hariharananda 2 and Feuerstein 25.

illustrating the process of yoga by equating it with the stilling of thought-waves within the mind.

The definition is immediately followed by two sūtras presenting related ideas: what happens if one pursues and achieves this stilling process and what happens if one does not? Identification with the true Self and knowledge of reality or mistaken identification with the ephemeral thought-machine of the mind, respectively.

Something startling has happened: in just four sentences, Patañjali has summarised the nature of the topic at hand, its definition in terms of process, and the results of applying the process or not. Here the foreshadowing technique is also evident: the rest of the *Yogasūtra* could be seen as an unpacking of these first four sūtras.

Yoga is defined as a process, and central to that process is the complex manipulation of *vṛttis* or thought-waves. Hence the next logical question that occurs is: what exactly is the nature of these *vṛttis*? Patañjali spends the next seven sūtras defining and explicating this key term. First he introduces a typology of five kinds of *vṛttis*, which can be in one of two conditions. (Whether these five classes exhaust all the thought-waves is not entirely clear.<sup>3</sup>) The mention of the condition of 'kliṣṭa' (afflicted) foreshadows the discussion of the *kleśas* in 2.3-10 (where the afflictions are described). Next our author carefully defines the five types of *vṛttis* (1.6-11). We must know what we are to stop before we can stop it! This section also serves to dispel the illusion that it is only 'negative' thoughts that we are attempting to eliminate. This is not an

axiological analysis of thought — *any* thought-waves at all must cloud the consciousness. Whether they are black (invalid or afflicted) or white (valid or unafflicted) clouds is immaterial.

Now that we know what the *vṛttis* are, and that the goal of yoga is their cessation, the next logical question would be: how does one achieve cessation? This is the topic Patañjali next takes up in sūtras 12-29.

First he delineates the attitudes that must be adopted in this yogic practice. First the practice must be prolonged, uninterrupted, and done with zeal and dedicated effort (12-14). The implication here is that patience is required. Not only is the task difficult, it is also time-consuming. Enormous equanimity and patience is a necessary condition for its completion. How to achieve this patience? Through the cultivation of the second attitude, *vairagya* (dispassion or renunciation). Complete renunciation of desires would invalidate any kind of practice, which is why Eliade claims that what is being talked about is not *no* desire, but rather the cultivation of a calm, patient desire, nay a certainty (rooted in faith) that full attainment will come in proper time. Dispassion implies a calm acceptance of whatever comes, a commitment and dedication which is unwavering and free of doubt. To achieve this dispassion, the yogin can for example contemplate the true nature of material reality as *anitya*, *aśuci*, and *duḥkha*,<sup>4</sup> and thereby renounces desire for attainment in worldly terms (1.16).

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<sup>3</sup> Feuerstein thinks not (31); Hariharananda indicates how apparently different classes of thought-waves can be seen as analogous to these five (18).

<sup>4</sup> Eliade 17.

Next Patañjali continues his discussion of ‘How to Stop the Vṛttis’ with an initial catalogue of the two main types of yogic ecstasy, or *samādhi*. He briefly foreshadows more detailed discussion by mentioning four types of Samprajñāta Samādhi (or ecstasy with (*sam-*) seeds of knowledge (*prajñā*)) in 1.17, as well as first introducing the ultimately transcendental Asamprajñāta Samādhi in 1.18. The prerequisites for attainment of these states are delineated in 1.20-22. These states of samādhi are both the means to still the vṛttis, as well as the end product of the process (respectively, one could say, though the categories are not so rigidly defined).

As for the seemingly bizarre sūtra 1.19, it is such an unusual and unnecessary break in the flow of descriptive classification that I am tempted to regard it as a later interpolation, though I have no additional evidence for this assertion. Perhaps it is my western conditioning, but to me it sticks like out a supernatural ‘sore thumb’ in a highly pragmatic text.

After the complexity of that initial discussion of samādhi, it (intentionally?) comes as a relief to the reader to examine the last and simplest way of stopping the vṛttis, that of dedication, devotion, and surrender to God (1.23-29). In this section, the nature of God is described briefly (a ‘definition’ of God is given in v.24), and the matter is given a practical dimension by the introduction of a specific technique to meditate on ‘Him’: contemplation of the syllable ॐ (OM), which designates, symbolises, and stands for him.

In the final sūtra of the ‘Īśvara section’ repetition of *Om* is said to remove obstacles on the spiritual path. Patañjali uses this verse as a springboard to the next section, a classification of the types of obstacles encountered by the

sādhaka in his or her practice (30-31). Following an already established pattern, discussion immediately moves to the means of overcoming these obstacles, which can be summarised as: *ekāgrata* (32), cultivation of positive attitudes (33), *prāṇāyāma* (34), focused contemplation (35), uplifting thought (36), contemplation of saints (those who have ‘conquered attachment’, 37), introspection through analysis of dreams and sleep (38), or meditation in general (39). It is explicit in the text that sūtra 32 describes remedies for the previously-mentioned obstacles, and implicit that 33-39 are also remedies, as well as being generally helpful to the sādhaka.

The final question of the educated reader would be ‘why should I do this practice? What would be its result?’. Patañjali therefore closes with a section on the true fruit of yogic practice, the state of *samādhi* (1.40-51). A non-comprehensive, provisional definition of *samādhi* (or *samāpatti*) is given in sūtra 41: *samādhi* is that state in which the knower, known, and process of knowing experientially merge into one. There follows a classification of four types of *sabīja* (*samprajñāta*) *samādhi*. A simplified summary:

*savitarka* → discursive meditative absorption with a physical object (42)

*nirvitarka* → non-discursive meditative absorption with a physical object (43)

*savicāra* → discursive meditative absorption with a subtle object (44)

*nirvicāra* → non-discursive meditative absorption with a subtle object (44)

In the final of these four stages, ‘purity in the inner instruments of cognition is developed’ (47), and ‘insight [becomes] filled with truth’ (48). The latent impressions of *this* experience, by their very nature, prevent other latent impressions from forming (50). The final sūtra, with a sense of climax, declares

that when even these latent impressions of supremely pure wisdom are dissolved, the highest and final state of samādhi is attained, the *nirbīja* or pure consciousness without any object whatsoever (51). This will be discussed further later in the text.

### *Summary of Analysis*

We have seen how Book One of the *Yogasūtra* is a comprehensive, logical, detailed, and highly sophisticated introduction to Classical Yoga for the novice. The structure is even easier to see in a short summary:

Student: What is Yoga?	Patañjali: Sūtras 2-4 (Yoga is cessation of the vṛttis)
Student: What are the Vṛttis?	Patañjali: Sūtras 5-11
Student: How do you stop the vṛttis?	Patañjali: Sūtras 12-29
Student: What are the obstacles to the cessation of the vṛttis?	Patañjali: Sūtras 30-31
Student: How do you overcome these obstacles?	Patañjali: Sūtras 32-39
Student: What is the fruit of this practices?	Patañjali: Sūtras 40-51

Given that the structure is logical, relatively simple, and clear, why is the meaning of this text not immediately apparent to a present-day reader (as indicated in the first paragraph)? I would argue that it is merely cultural and chronological gaps that make it not so. To the people and practitioners of his time, Patañjali's treatise must have been startling in its lucidity, concision, and insight into yogic practice. Though it is not so immediately luminous to 20<sup>th</sup> century Americans, still, it is because it *does* have these qualities that this text continues to be studied.