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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Cease & Desist or a Doorway to the Soul: Sensing Your Way to Spirituality

By Christine Gabaly

Abstract: This paper will argue that yoga is not just a mind-body practice, but a spiritual practice that is experienced through the body and the senses, including sight, sound and physical sensation. This is of importance because most of the emphasis within yoga scholarship is on the mind as the doorway to spiritual practice and not the sensory experience as the key to opening the door. We will look at two important passages within *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* and *The Bhagavad Gītā*, and compare how they differ. We will also analyze two spiritual doorways: the mind and the heart. Feelings and emotions often seem to be absent from yogic practices, or there seems to be a misconception that we need to rid the self of feelings and emotions within our practice. Meditation is a common practice found within world religions. One sits quietly contemplating an aspect of the divine. But what happens next in reality? The mind likes being given things to do, and points of focus help draw our awareness and attention to where we would like to direct it. A variety of practices can help us in our efforts to concentrate, many of which involve our senses, such as *mantra*. In addition to the sense of sound, our sense of sight and touch is also often used within meditative practices, such as *yantra*, *mudra* and *mandala*. In our meditative practices, are we really telling our minds to cease and desist? Stop thinking. Stop feeling. Stop sensing. Is that what we are really saying? What would a world without senses look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like? Yoga is a sensory spiritual practice that is experienced by the heart-mind through all of the senses, a completely immersive experience. Yoga is a spiritual practice that is experienced by the whole person, heart and mind, through the body and senses. It is felt.

Keywords: Yoga, Heart-Mind, Senses and Sensation, Meditation, Experience (Religion), Spirituality

I. Introduction

From community centers offering classes in prenatal yoga and yoga for mommy and me, to yoga in daycares and assisted-living centers, the popularity of yoga has exploded in the West. Countless styles and lineages exist: ashtanga, Iyengar, vinyasa, restorative, and so on. Recently there has been the

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question of authenticity, and what is authentic yoga. This leads us to the question: what is yoga? First, yoga is not one discipline or practice, and it has been in a constant state of change over the millennia. Second, to attempt to answer that question fully would require much historical analysis, as well as analysis of philosophies and religions of the Indus Valley and beyond.¹ In this paper, I will argue that both the mind and the heart are equally important spiritual doorways unlocked by the practices of yoga and that our senses become the key.

We will look at two primary texts relevant to this discussion, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* and *The Bhagavad Gītā*. *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* is used significantly within the process of yoga teacher training, and thus is an important resource. *The Bhagavad Gītā* exemplifies equal importance within Hinduism as well as yoga teacher training. My paper focuses on yoga being not only a mind-body practice, but a spiritual practice that is experienced through the body and the senses, including sight, sound and physical sensation. We will also analyze two spiritual doorways, specifically the mind and heart. While most people who seek out a yoga class for the first time are not looking for spiritual help or guidance, yoga often acts a door into the subtler aspects of our being, like feelings, emotions and thoughts, and can even lead us to contemplate our intellectual and spiritual natures.

The mind is most often the point of focus in yoga practice, but there exists its counterpart point of focus, the heart. In this paper I will argue that both the mind and heart are equally important, despite the emphasis that is placed on the mind over the heart. I will also explain how practices which involve our senses help us to embody the sacred nature of the divine. So while the mind might seem like it gets all of the focus of our attention in our yoga practice, the heart is more than just a supporting cast member.

II. Analysis of *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* and *The Bhagavad Gītā*

“Yogaś citta vrtti nirodhah. The restraint of the modifications of the mind-stuff is Yoga.”² This is the definition of yoga according to Patañjali. Yoga Sūtra 1.2 is also considered the ultimate goal of yoga. Some may translate this slightly differently: stilling the mind, cessation of the thought-waves, and so on. In *Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom*, Christopher Chapple offers the following translation from the Sanskrit:

¹ Stuart Ray Sarbacker, *Tracing the Path of Yoga: The History and Philosophy of Indian Mind-Body Discipline* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021) 1-7.

² Patañjali, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: Translation and Commentary by Sri Swami Satchidananda* (Buckingham: Integral Yoga Publications, 2013), 3.

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yogaś - union, connection, joining
citta - mind, reason, intelligence
vṛtti - modification, turning, fluctuations
nirodhaḥ - restraint, control, suppression
“Yoga is the restraint of the fluctuations of the mind.”³

The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali are often used in 200-hour yoga teacher trainings, and much emphasis is placed upon this sutra which shows up very early in the text. Of the 196 yoga *sūtras* only 3 *sūtras* are about *āsana*, the physical portion of the practice. But much attention is given to the mental aspects of yoga. Of the 8 limbs of yoga that Patañjali describes, the last 3 limbs of yoga are varying degrees of mind practices, or stages of meditation: *dhāranā* (concentration), *dhyāna* (meditation) and *samādhi* (meditative absorption). And the fifth limb of yoga, *pratyāhāra*, is a withdrawal of the senses. Patañjali makes a clear distinction here, an emphasis on the mind and thoughts and an avoidance of the sensory.

Contrast this with *The Bhagavad Gītā*. The following passage from Chapter 8 of the text is Krishna’s response to Arjuna’s question about what one should do at the hour of death if one wants to be united with Krishna:

Remembering me at the time of death, close down the doors of the senses and place the mind in the heart. Then, while absorbed in meditation, focus all energy upwards to the head. Repeating in this state the divine name, the syllable *Om* that represents the changeless Brahman, you will go forth from the body and attain the supreme goal.⁴

In this context, the mind is directed to the heart and *prāna*, energy, is directed to the head. The *mantra Om* is used to connect with Krishna. The differentiation is subtle, but it is clear that the heart is the area of focus. The mind is contained in the heart, and at least at the hour of death, meditation is a heart-based practice. It is also interesting to note the use of sound at the final moments of life, the *mantra Om*. *Mantra* is a sensory practice. We hear the sound with our sense of hearing. But we also feel the sound through vibrations.

III. Spiritual Doorways: Mind vs. Heart

³ Christopher Key Chapple and Patañjali, *Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom* (State University of New York Press, 2008), 143.

⁴ Eknath Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita: Introduced and Translated by Eknath Easwaran* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007), 166-67.

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Eknath Easwaran, in his commentary on this passage, goes on to say, “When consciousness has been withdrawn from these gates, Krishna says, ‘the mind is placed [‘locked up’] in the heart.’ (8:12) Here, as in Christian mysticism, it is the heart and not the head that is taken to be the home of the soul. Probably what is meant is the heart *chakra*, the center of consciousness corresponding to the center of the chest.”⁵ *Chakras* are energetic centers that affect our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. In a simplified model, there are seven chakras: root chakra (*mūlādhāra*); sacral chakra (*svādhīsthāna*); solar plexis chakra (*manipūra*); heart chakra (*anāhata*); throat chakra (*viśuddha*); third eye chakra (*ājñā*); crown chakra (*sahasrāra*). The first three chakras provide the foundation for living our life from our higher self. If we feel safe and secure (*mūlādhāra*), with a passion for life but without attachments or aversions (*svādhīsthāna*), along with courage and strength (*manipūra*), then this allows us to live our life from our spiritual home, the heart. The *anāhata* is the center of love and compassion. Home is where the heart is, and the soul resides within.

Many may think of the mind as being located in the head, but it is unclear where the mind truly resides. This was even a matter of debate amongst philosophers: Hippocrates, Socrates and Plato viewed the brain as where intelligence resided, whereas Aristotle located mental thought within the heart. More recently, things became even more interesting when neuroscientists discovered that the heart does indeed have a nerve plexus made up of neurons very much like the brain and that the heart emits electromagnetic waves that when functioning well, are in sync with the brain.⁶ Intuitively, we can feel these distinctions, and sometimes even discern between the two by observing if we are thinking with our heart or our head and evaluating whether we should let our heart or our head lead the way. When the heart and head are in agreement it is easy to decide but often times they are not in agreement, and perhaps when one is speaking more loudly than the other one goes unheard. Which leads to another question, who exactly is in charge? Do we let the mind or heart steer? Do we make decisions based upon what we think or what we feel? Does the thinking mind or the feeling heart lead? Or is it even possible to invert that? Allow the heart to think and the mind to feel?

IV. Psychology: Mind vs Heart Pathways

Feelings and emotions often seem to be absent from yogic practices, or there seems to be a misconception that we need to rid the self of feelings and emotions within the practice. Georg Feuerstein

⁵ Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 160.

⁶ Georg Feuerstein, *The Psychology of Yoga: Integrating Eastern and Western Approaches for Understanding the Mind* (Boston: Shambhala, 2014), 101-2.

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cites the work of American psychiatrist, and Buddhist practitioner, Mark Epstein, about working with emotions. “Epstein argues that we ought not to negate, or transcend, our affects or suppress them in meditation but allow them to surface fully while witnessing them through the practice of mindfulness.”⁷ It is not uncommon to hear in meditation practices, that if a thought arises, note it, and send it on its way. But this rhetoric is clearly an act of suppression. Being a witness to what is present within, thoughts, feelings and emotions, working with them in a mindful way, or with a qualified mental health therapist is a more compassionate form of practice.

V. Mind & Heart: Thinking, Feeling, Sensing

Meditation is a common practice found within world religions. A moment of silence is observed, generally with little to no direction. But then what happens next in reality? What goes through our mind? Work deadlines might pop into the mind, perhaps a grocery list item or an appointment that needs to be made, or any other random thought that may come knocking on our door. The mind likes being given things to do, and points of focus help draw our awareness and attention to where we would like to direct it.

One such point of focus is *mantra*. *Mantra* is a practice that uses the repetition of a word or sound. *Mantra* can take various forms such as invoking the name of a deity (e.g., Shiva, Krishna, Rama), *bij* sounds (e.g., *LAM*, *VAM*, *RAM*), a phrase (e.g., *om mani padme hum*) and so on. *Mantra* can be chanted or sung so there is an auditory component, the sense of sound, and also a vibrational component, the felt sense in the body. Visualizations can be incorporated within this practice as well. For example, a *mantra* can be devotional in nature and chanted visualizing the deity being named, or in the case of a *bij* sound, awareness can be drawn to the corresponding chakra (e.g., the heart for *YAM*).

Chanting can be found in many world religions outside of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Growing up I experienced the chanting of the liturgy in the Armenian Apostolic Church. The practice of chanting, and listening to chanting, is a powerful experience because it is a practice that is felt. My father who was raised Catholic, and only knew a few words of Armenian, was always incredibly moved by these services, and in particular, was drawn to the chanting. That is why I believe that the practice of *mantra* chanting acts as a doorway to the spiritual aspects of yoga. It is a devotional, heart-centered practice and it is experienced through the senses.

In Tantric Śākta traditions, in addition to visualization of the deity, *mantra*, *yantra*, *mudra* and *mandala* are part of meditation practices. *Yantras* and *mandalas* are used as visual aids for meditation to

⁷ Feuerstein, *The Psychology of Yoga*, 121-22.



help focus concentration. And *mudra* acts as another felt sense, that of touch, based on the positioning of the fingers. So, the senses of sight, sound and touch are employed by the practitioner.⁸ Henrich Zimmer explains these practices in his book, *Philosophies of India*. In Tantric meditation, the practitioner utilizes “eloquent postures of the hands and body (*mudrā*), and the meditative placing of the tips of the fingers and palm of the right hand on various parts of the body, accompanied by mantra (*nyāsa*), assist him in this process, as well as in that of welcoming the god into the image or yantra. The two processes are reciprocal, and constitute the whole mystery of ritualistic transubstantiation.”⁹ Zimmer goes on to draw a comparison to “an example of *nyāsa* in Christian worship” and that is “the making of the sign of the cross, touching first the forehead (“in the name of the Father”), then the breast (“and of the Son”), the left shoulder (“and of the Holy-”), right shoulder (“-Ghost”), and finally bringing the palms together in the position of salutation known to the Hindus as *añjali*, which is the classic Christian *mudrā* of prayer (‘Amen’).¹⁰

Meditative tools are also used within Buddhism where *mandalas*, *tankas* and sand-paintings are used as aids to meditation. Within Christianity, church walls are adorned with art depicting Jesus, Mary, religious saints for contemplation. If our minds do happen to wander in church, there are a variety of rich images to remind us of where our thoughts should be focused. Even the distractions of what is going on in the outside world are in some ways removed. Stained glass allows the light to shine in but doesn’t allow our sense of sight to be distracted by what’s going on outside on the other side of the glass, instead our eyes are met by the image of Jesus or a lamb or a flower.

VI. Yoga Therapy: Healing

It is helpful here to also look at mindfulness in yoga therapy-based practices such as iRest, a mindfulness meditation practice developed by Dr. Richard Miller. Mindfulness practices are used to work with thoughts, feelings and emotions. One such practice is what is called “Welcoming Opposites” opposites of thoughts, feelings and emotions. Sensory practices such as “Bodysensing” and “Breathsensing” are also exercises used within sessions.¹¹ The purpose of these exercises is to move

⁸ Madhu Khanna, “Yantra and Cakra in Tantric Meditation,” in *Asian Traditions of Meditation*, ed. Halvor Eifring (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016), 71-72 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvvn7fs.8>.

⁹ Heinrich Robert Zimmer and Joseph Campbell, *Philosophies of India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 585-586.

¹⁰ Zimmer and Campbell, *Philosophies of India*, 586.

¹¹ Richard C. Miller, *The IRest Program for Healing PTSD: A Proven-Effective Approach to Using Yoga Nidra Meditation and Deep Relaxation Techniques to Overcome Trauma* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2015), 24.



from the thinking mind to the feeling heart. As human beings we are more than our mind. We are living, feeling beings. We experience the world through our senses. Dr. Miller created iRest based on the teachings of Yoga Nidra. The practice of Yoga Nidra, or *yogic sleep*, is a body-based, deep-relaxation practice where the practitioner rotates their awareness to different parts of the body. These practices have been used effectively with those suffering from PTSD.

While not necessarily a counterargument to the benefits of Yoga Nidra, and other relaxation-based practices, Mark Singleton notes that these practices cannot be traced back to pre-modern yoga, but are derived largely from techniques of “proprioceptive relaxation developed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America.”¹² So it must be acknowledged that because these practices cannot trace their roots back to India, these sensory relaxation practices might not fall under Stuart Ray Sarbacker’s definition of yoga. But since the scope of this paper is not trying to make any claims as to what falls under the label of authentic yoga, and the intent is merely to lay out what yoga means to the author; the origins of Yoga Nidra are not relevant.

While *mantra* is practiced mostly for spiritual purposes, it is not surprising to read that *mantra* may also have physical and mental health benefits as well. In an article written by Julie K. Staples for *Yoga Therapy Today*, various studies were cited about the benefits of *mantra* meditation. One study by the *British Medical Journal* found that *mantra* such as ‘om-mani-padme-om’ or the Ave Maria (Hail Mary) in Latin were found to slow the breath rate and those with long-term *mantra* meditation practices were found to have lower blood pressure and higher brain oxygen saturation. The results also supported the idea that the vibration and/or meaning of the *mantra* were responsible for the effects. A separate study conducted by Duke University found that participants reported decreased stress and anxiety and improved moods after a 4-week daily *mantra* meditation practice. Results from these and other studies have been promising and have shown that *mantra* meditation works on physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual levels. Functional magnetic resonance imaging has shown that *mantra* activates the area of the brain responsible for staying focused on a phrase, including the motor control network, the pre-motor and supplementary motor cortices and the putamen.¹³

VII. Cease and Desist

When we read the *The Yoga Sūtras* and think about the mind within the context of meditation, we often get the impression that we are giving the mind an order to stop thinking. That works about as

¹² Mark Singleton, “Salvation through Relaxation: Proprioceptive Therapy and Its Relationship to Yoga,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20, no. 3 (October 2005): 301.

¹³ Julie K. Staples, “The Science of Mantra,” *Yoga Therapy Today* (Spring 2018): 14–16.



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well as telling a person who is feeling stressed to just relax. In yogic practices, are we really telling our minds to cease and desist? Stop thinking. Stop feeling. Stop sensing. Is that what we are really saying? Perhaps where we start to get a little confused is when we read about the 5th limb of yoga, *pratyāhāra*, a withdrawal of the senses. And by reading this we start to think of our senses as a bad thing. But what would a world without senses look, sound, smell, taste and feel like? Is our quest for experiencing *dhyāna*, meditation, telling us to stop being a human being without thoughts, feeling and emotions? And what would a world like that be? Yoga is often thought of as cessative in nature, a restraining of the mind and a turning away from the world. While it is often thought that all external awareness is turned off in yoga “the world of the senses and the objects of senses is the portal to the stabilization of the mind. Yoga does not call for the obliteration of mind, but for the taming of mind.”¹⁴ Using external objects and our senses are methods for experiencing our inner selves and become the keys to unlocking spiritual doorways so ‘When the power of absorption [*samādhi*] transcends the particular external object or thought and reaches into the depth of one’s psychic structures (*buddhi*), then one attains the state of *nirbīja samādhi*, through which the underlying structures of the mind become purified’.¹⁵

VIII. Yoga: A Sensory Spiritual 4D-Movie of the Heart and Mind

Where does this all lead us? I like to think of yoga as a sensory spiritual practice, that is experienced by the heart-mind through all of the senses, a completely immersive experience. The practice of meditative absorption takes work. When we use our meditative tools, be it *mantra*, *mudra*, *mandala*, *yantra*, *tanka* or other images, be it our senses, sight, sound or physical sensations, these tools may allow us to go deeper into an experience. Just like in *āsana*, props may make us feel more comfortable in a posture. Meditative tools can act as props that can allow us to go deeper into our meditation practice. We often hear yoga teachers saying in class that modifying a posture or using props does not make it lesser yoga, and the same should be held for our meditative practices, not just the *āsana* practice. Others may liken it to training wheels and say at some point those training wheels come off, but do they really need to if that is the only way a person is able to reap the benefits of the practice? In reality, most of us never make it beyond the practice of *dhāranā*, the practice of concentration, and that’s ok.

¹⁴ Christopher Key Chapple, “Activity, Cessation and a Return to Origins in the Yoga Sūtra,” in *Thinking with the Yoga Sutra of Patañjali : Translation and Interpretation*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Ana Laura Funes Maderey (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 198.

¹⁵ Chapple, “Activity, Cessation and a Return to Origins in the Yoga Sūtra,” 197.

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IX. Conclusion

As seen in *The Bhagavad Gītā* and *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, the mind and the heart are of equal importance. While *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* does place focus on the practices of the mind and withdrawal of the senses, this does not mean that the heart and senses are absent from yoga. At the hour of death, the heart becomes the point of focus as one prepares to make the transition to unite with God. The heart is the home of the Soul. As human beings, we experience thoughts, feelings and emotions. Meditative tools found within the practices of yoga that employ the senses can help to cultivate thoughts and feelings as a means to finding union with the divine, and the nature of the divine within. These meditative tools can even be healing, body and Soul. While from certain perspectives yoga may appear to the cessative in practice, looking through another lens, yoga can be a sensory spiritual practice. The world around us becomes part of our practice, a completely immersive experience, sight, sound, feeling, where we are full participants. As stated earlier in this paper, *yogaś* can be translated to mean “union, connection, joining.” Thus, through the means of yoga one may find union, with the world around us, the world within us, and that which is divine.

X. Epilogue

My father died of COVID-19 in May of 2020 while in the hospital. We had to say our goodbyes through Zoom. Three months later, my mother entered in-home hospice in August of 2020. On a Saturday evening in mid-August, after a full day of being visited by family members, I said goodnight to my mother. I was just about to retire for the night on the sofa across from my mother’s hospital bed. My mother looked up at me, the expression on her face reminded me of a scared little girl. In that moment, I thought of the passage from *The Bhagavad Gītā* that I drew upon earlier in this paper. And I thought to myself, put all of your thoughts to God. And I also knew in that moment that my mother knew this and I didn’t need to verbalize what she already knew. In the next moment, wordlessly, my mother put her hands together in prayer, her eyes and her hands pointing towards the ceiling. And then her hands opened like a lotus flower, hands held apart gazing upwards, a gesture that said everything she was thinking and feeling. She wanted to be united with God. My mother passed away the next morning. Many of us don’t think about the moment of death on a daily basis. But that moment of transition is one of the most important sacred moments of life. And in that moment, we draw our minds to our heart, and put our thoughts to God, to divine union with the eternal.

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