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How Release Informs Practice: Nonattachment as a Key to the Yogic Techniques of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*

By Dana Tarasavage

Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between practice and nonattachment in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* (*YS*). I examine these concepts in their original context and then view them through a modern lens, arguing that the application of nonattachment alongside yogic practices holds the key to fruitful spiritual exploration. My research shows that nonattachment is more than a secondary consideration to the main element of practice; instead, the intentionally paradoxical pairing offers nuance and grounding for a holistic Yoga practice. I begin by establishing the goal of the *YS*, explore the context of practice and nonattachment within it, consider how the state of liberation demonstrates the interplay between the two, and examine the root of suffering and its relationship to attachment. I then survey practice and nonattachment within the Indian philosophical tradition, in the *Vedas*, *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, *Sāṃkhya Karika*, and *Bhagavad Gītā*. With this comparison established, I discuss practices from the *YS*, showing that the diverse techniques Patañjali advocates involve a subtilization, revealing their connection nonattachment through increasingly introspective practices. Through firsthand evidence I consider how release both informs practice and why it is often a necessary compliment, offering a detailed consideration of specific practices and their relationship to nonattachment. My investigation shows that this relationship, present in various iterations among other texts, confirms the importance of not just doing practices, nor just "letting go," but the potency of combining the two. Patañjali's inclusion of practice and nonattachment *together* demonstrates the importance of specific yogic techniques and continual release from attachment to results.

Keywords: Yoga, Yoga Practice, Nonattachment, *Yoga Sūtra*, Patañjali

Within Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* (*YS*) nonattachment is more than just a secondary consideration to the main element of practice: the practices themselves have an intimate relationship with the concept,

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which informs them and refines their focus.¹ When thoughtfully examined in its original context and then viewed through the lens of a modern practitioner, I argue that the application of nonattachment alongside the yogic techniques presented in the *YS* can help connect us more fully to the world, rather than requiring a negation of it. Although the two seem to be diametrically opposed, I hope to show that it is this paradox that offers the nuance and grounding needed for fruitful spiritual exploration: we cannot merely practice, nor can we simply “let it all go,” we must learn to integrate the two.

In this paper I will begin by establishing the goal of the *YS*, then explore the context of *abhyāsa* (practice) and *vairāgya* (nonattachment) in the text. I will consider how the state of liberation can help us understand the interplay between action and renunciation and discuss the definitions of *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya* established in the *Samādhi Pāda* (section on meditative absorption, the first chapter). Then I will show, through a discussion of the *Sādhana Pāda*'s (section on practice, the second chapter) section on *kleśas* (afflictions), that because the suffering the practices seek to remedy are, at their root, spiritual ignorance, which is a form of attachment, they too have the eradication of attachment as their motive. I will then proceed to examine the presentation of practice and nonattachment in texts and traditions that influenced or were related to the *YS*'s position: the *Vedas*, the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, The *Sāṃkhya Karika*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. With this comparison as a background, I will discuss several of the specific yoga practices detailed in the *YS* and show that the diverse range of techniques Patañjali advocates for involve a subtilization (*pratiprasava*), demonstrating their underlying connection to the concept of nonattachment through increasingly subtle and introspective practices. Through firsthand experiential evidence I will consider how nonattachment either informs some of the practices, or how the practices themselves might inspire it. I will further argue that when viewed through the lens of the modern practitioner, a person fully engaged in the world can use nonattachment strategically alongside their chosen yoga practices in a way that is world-affirming, rather than negating, eventually moving towards living liberation, as a *jīvan-mukta*.

¹ Throughout this paper, I will use the terms “nonattachment,” “release,” “detachment,” and “dispassion” interchangeably to discuss the concept that Patañjali calls *vairāgya*; and I will use the term “practice” to refer to the broader concept of repeated *abhyāsa*. I will also refer to the specific yogic practices themselves, sometimes known as *sādhana*, as “practices,” “techniques,” and “methods.”

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The *YS*, likely composed in the early centuries of the common era,² synthesizes and codifies existing theory and practice, weaving its message together *sūtra*-style into 195 aphorisms designed to be memorized and internalized.³ The goal of Patañjali's Yoga, like many Indian philosophical and religious texts, is the eradication of suffering. He reminds us that in our regular state, the mind identifies with its *vṛtti* (mental fluctuations – part of *prakṛti*, the non-conscious material world) and constructs a limited sense of ego-centered self at odds with our true Self. This true Self (called the *draṣṭu*, Seer, or *puruṣa*, Soul) can be fully experienced when the movements of the mind have been restrained through the practice of yoga, a process called *nirodha* (restraint).⁴ Although this final liberated state of restraint might be mistaken as a complete detachment of the mind and therefore a cessation of life altogether,⁵ scholars like Ian Whicher take a different understanding. As he explains:

Nirodha [...] refers to the transformation of self-understanding brought about through the purification and illumination of consciousness; *nirodha* is not the ontological cessation of *prakṛti* [...] Thus, *nirodha* is not, as is often explained, an inward movement that annihilates or suppresses the modifications or functions of the mind (*vṛttis*) [...] rather, *nirodha* involves a progressive unfoldment of perception [...] that eventually reveals our authentic identity as being rooted in *puruṣa*.⁶

With this goal in mind, Patañjali identifies and examines the various *vṛtti* that cloud the apprehension of our true Self,⁷ and then presents his method for correcting this case of mistaken identity in *YS* I:12: “*abhyāsa vairāgyābhyam tan nirodhaḥ*,” or, “Restraint arises through practice and release from desire.”⁸ In setting this dual requirement of practice and detachment early on, I believe that Patañjali reinforces the importance of action through the various techniques he will outline, and the continued additional application of nonattachment alongside these practices. Yoga advocates both action

² Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds., *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), xix, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zvjb9>.

³ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 139.

⁴ *YS* I:2-I:4.

⁵ Ian Whicher, “Reflections on Liberated Consciousness,” in *Thinking with the Yoga Sutra of Patañjali: Translation and Interpretation*, eds. Christopher Key Chapple and Ana Laura Funes Maderey (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 3, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁶ Ian Whicher, “Reflections,” 5.

⁷ *YS* I:6-I:11

⁸ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 116.

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and release, practice and theory;⁹ and although the practical techniques are of high importance, releasing their results ensures that the *yogin* (practitioner of yoga) continues on their path of transformation.

The Sanskrit term *abhyāsa* when translated simply means “practice,” but its implication is that of a repeated exercise.¹⁰ Indeed, *abhyāsa* is the effort to fix the mind and keep it stable. It becomes firmly established when cultivated for a long time, without interruption, and with devotion.¹¹ Patañjali offers a wide range of diverse practices throughout the text¹² which speaks to the ability of these methods to be molded to the needs, personality, and intensity of the practitioner.¹³ In contrast, *vairāgya* has been rendered by various translators as “release,”¹⁴ or even “dispassion.”¹⁵ Grammatically, the prefix *vi* indicates negation, and *rāga* from the verbal root *√rañj* (to be attracted)¹⁶ together show that the term implies a giving up of our natural tendency towards attraction, attachment, and desire. As Edwin Bryant says of the two together: “By practice and dispassion, the flow of the mind towards sensual attractions [...] becomes drastically diminished. Rather, by practice, which of course refers to the practice of *yoga*, the flow of the mind toward higher knowledge becomes unobstructed, and the mind becomes immersed in discrimination.”¹⁷ Discrimination (*viveka khyāti*), which is later given by Patañjali as the result of the eight-limbed path of *aṣṭāṅga yoga*,¹⁸ is the ability to discern between what is eternal, the Self, and what is simply the ego, no matter how pure it may seem, rendering one able to identify and release attachments from a place of neutral and true understanding.

Patañjali further declares that nonattachment is a disinterest in sensory objects,¹⁹ which Bryant points out indicates that its application helps cultivate discrimination of the temporary nature of all things.²⁰ This is significant because it demonstrates that nonattachment is not a denial of the sense objects, rather it is a reorganization of our understanding of them, part of the process or reorganizing and

⁹ Ian Whicher, “Reflections,” 10-11.

¹⁰ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 146.

¹¹ *YS* I:13-I:14.

¹² Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 5.

¹³ Christopher Key Chapple, *Karma and Creativity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 40.

¹⁴ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 116.

¹⁵ Edwin F. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (New York: North Point Press, 2009), 47.

¹⁶ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 146.

¹⁷ Edwin F. Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras*, 48.

¹⁸ *YS* II:28.

¹⁹ *YS* I:15.

²⁰ Edwin F. Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras*, 52-53.



understanding our, as Whicher stated, “authentic identity.”²¹ Finally, the highest state of nonattachment is an indifference to the *guṇas*, which results from this realization of the true Self.²² Disinterest in the *guṇas*, the three building blocks of *prakṛti*,²³ might again seem to imply that nonattachment calls for a cessation of functional life as we know it, but Whicher contends that in this ultimate state the *guṇas* don’t disappear, instead they stop being informed by attachment and *avidyā*, ignorance. The resulting reality is one where the yoga practitioner is no longer attached to the movements of the mind as a basis for self-identity and thus the changing nature of the *guṇas* no longer exist as they always had: informed by ignorance.²⁴

It is an interesting paradox: we must want to eradicate suffering and then do specific actions while simultaneously letting go of them to experience liberation. Doing practices and being dispassionate seem to be opposites, and yet they are given together by Patañjali as a unit. This paradoxical pairing may inspire questions such as: if thoughts and actions lead to suffering how can certain actions or practices help us find liberation? The solution to this paradox lies in the intent of the practitioner and their ability to recognize that they should not attach to the techniques, just as they should not attach to thoughts or the results of actions, but that the practices are tools on the path towards liberation. Yoga suggests that we must learn to transform from our normal actions, rooted in ignorance, toward a way of existing in the world that is not ego-centered nor focused merely on satisfying personal pleasures.²⁵ Specific purifying practices are vital in that pursuit. As Christopher Chapple explains:

Through the practices of yoga, the influence of action as dictated by the afflictions of human weakness are lessened to the point where, though seemingly involved with all activity, the yogin or yogini is internally peaceful and not bound by what otherwise appears to be worldly existence. Due to his or her meditative accomplishments, karma is said to be neither white (virtuous) nor

²¹ Ian Whicher, “Reflections,” 5.

²² YS I:16.

²³ The *guṇas* are *rajas* (activity), *tamas* (inertia), and *sattva* (purity). It is the intention of yoga practice to move the practitioner towards a more *sattvic* state, though even this state is not to be confused with the true Self.

²⁴ Ian Whicher, “Reflections,” 7-8.

²⁵ Christopher Key Chapple, *Karma and Creativity*, 2.



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black (nonvirtuous) nor mixed. Nonattachment [...] is the key to the transcendence of afflicted action.²⁶

I will now turn to ignorance and the other underlying root causes of suffering to examine how practice is the tool to undo attachment. In the *Sādhana Pāda*, Patañjali defines the *kleśas*, underlying afflictions that pattern behavior and lead to problematic thoughts, actions, and thus, suffering.²⁷ The *kleśas*—*avidyā* (ignorance), *asmitā* (egoism), *rāga* (attraction), *dveṣa* (aversion), and *abhiniveśa* (clinging to life)—all demonstrate variations of attachment and reestablish the need for yogic practices as tools to undo their pull on the mind. *Avidyā* is a fundamental error of identity that occurs when we see the impermanent and mistakenly believe it is permanent.²⁸ It is the very suffering yogic techniques seek to eliminate and is the breeding ground of the other afflictions.²⁹ *Asmitā* is the tendency to attach ownership to the limited sense of self created by the mind. It is a clinging to the personhood created by the particulars of our life which gives us a sense of permanence and compels us to act out life in a familiar way. *Rāga* and *dveṣa* deal directly with attachment: we seek out the things we like, and we reject the things we don't. And finally, *abhiniveśa*, which Patañjali says is present even in the wise,³⁰ shows our deep attachment to this life. The specific practice given to weaken these *kleśas*, *kriyā yoga*, is deeply influenced by the idea of release. It is made up of *tapas* (austerity), *svādhyāya* (self-study), and *īśvara praṇidhāna* (devotion to the lord),³¹ and interestingly, its elements are repeated later as part of the *aṣṭāṅga yoga* path. Further, devotion to *īśvara* is given as a practice an additional time in the first chapter,³² again highlighting that weakening the *kleśas* is a goal of all yogic techniques. *īśvara praṇidhāna*, for example, allows the practitioner to tap into the potency of devotion to a being without attachments, thus visualizing themselves as similarly free. Because *īśvara* is a special *puruṣa*, free from the problems humans deal with including the afflictions, actions and their fruits, plus the subtle leftover

²⁶ Chapple, 5.

²⁷ *YS* II:3.

²⁸ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 6.

²⁹ Edwin F. Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras*, 176.

³⁰ *YS* II:9.

³¹ *YS* II:1.

³² *YS* I:23, *YS* II:1, *YS* II:32.

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impressions,³³ it can serve as a template for the kind of freedom available in the state of liberation. Thus, in embarking on the path of yoga practice, no matter the technique, practitioners attempt to release from the hold of these afflictions and make more informed choices in life through the insights gained from practice. Practices are the methods of activity that purify actions toward this higher awareness no longer based in ignorance, and this purification may also lessen the hold of past actions, *saṃskāras*.

Finally, as Bryant notes, in Sanskrit hermeneutics often the first item on a list is the most important. In analyzing Patañjali's choice to list *abhyāsa* before *vairāgya*, he argues that practice will naturally give way to nonattachment.³⁴ Although this indicates that the practices themselves are infused with methods toward dispassion, nonattachment must be an attitude applied alongside the practices. It is not enough to assume that nonattachment will spontaneously appear: it is an approach that can refine the focus of practice and should be taken in tandem. Practices are techniques to stabilize our minds and bodies, and the cultivation of nonattachment prevents us from taking the results for selfish gain.³⁵ Thus, nonattachment in action may create more empathetic, engaged practitioners, rather than disinterested renunciates that have become disillusioned with the world. Importantly, yoga does require, as Chapple says, "a distancing of oneself from worldly attachments," but it is not a path toward death but a "way of life."³⁶ Practice together with release offers the opportunity to both continue acting within the world, and to undertake a process of humility and ego-reduction through renunciation.

Since the *YS* was not the first text to present these concepts in conjunction, I now turn to examine some of the philosophical and religious tradition that surround it to explore how practice and nonattachment were understood. The spirit of nonattachment is present across religious traditions in India and living and acting without selfishness and worldly attachments is a major theme,³⁷ but where did that idea begin and how did release come to influence practice?

The most ancient group of orally transmitted texts in the Indian religious and philosophical tradition, the *Vedas*, established *yajña* (ritual sacrifice) as the heart of spiritual life. The external fire sacrifices of the *Vedas* show an early iteration of practice and nonattachment. Through the ritual release of sacrificing objects into the finality of fire, practitioners performed actions with detachment built in:

³³ *YS* I:24.

³⁴ Edwin F. Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras*, 57.

³⁵ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 24.

³⁶ Chapple, 26.

³⁷ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds., *A Source Book*, xxviii – xxix.

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what was given to the fire was gone. Yet the *Vedic* understanding of practice and nonattachment was motivated by a desire to maintain *ṛta* (cosmic order), rather than for individual spiritual liberation: rituals were performed by priests, sacrifice was performed with a specific gain in mind, and the actions themselves created change through *tapas*.³⁸

Building on *Vedic* tradition and foreshadowing future yoga systems, *Upanṣadic* literature began to explore sacrifice as an internalized ritual, rather than an external act. As Michael Nicholas points out, the “importance of sacrificial ritual has obviously been carried over from the Vedic tradition, the goals for that practice have been redefined in terms more reminiscent of renunciant ascetic traditions.”³⁹ The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad (KU)* offers an allegorical narrative conversation between the young Naciketa and Death himself, Yama, in which Death becomes the teacher. Nonattachment is presented as a prerequisite requirement for Naciketa to become worthy of instruction on yoga. Only after he resists Yama’s offers of worldly pleasures is he told, “I regard you, Nachiketa, as worthy of instruction, for passing pleasures tempt you not at all.”⁴⁰ Here renunciation is highlighted as a higher form of living and understanding, and Death, as the ultimate teacher, symbolizes the need to live in the moment, remember our impermanence, and learn from this realization that our ultimate reality is divine.⁴¹ The main yoga practice detailed in the text is meditation and involves learning to reign in the senses. Yama explains: “When a person lacks discrimination and his mind is undisciplined, the senses run hither and thither like wild horses. But they obey the rein like trained horses when one has discrimination and has made the mind one-pointed.”⁴² This horse and chariot metaphor is expanded later in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the premise being that the true Self is the passenger, the charioteer is the intellect, the chariot the physical body, the reins the mind, and the horses the senses. Yama explains that “meditation enables them to go deeper and deeper into consciousness, from the world of words to the world of thoughts, then beyond thoughts to wisdom of the Self.”⁴³ This meditative practice, informed by renunciation, enables the *yogin*

³⁸ Christopher Key Chapple, *Karma and Creativity*, 12.

³⁹ Michael David Nichols, “Dialogues with Death: Māra, Yama, and Coming to Terms with Mortality in Classical Hindu and Indian Buddhist Traditions,” *Religions of South Asia* 6, no. 1 (June 2012): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1558/rosa.v6i1.13>.

⁴⁰ Eknath Easwaran, *The Upanishads* (Tomales: Nilgiri Press, 2007), 75, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁴¹ Michael David Nichols, “Dialogues,” 21.

⁴² Eknath Easwaran, *Upanishads*, 81.

⁴³ Easwaran, 82.

to understand reality, transcend mundane pleasures and pain, and attain the true joy of knowledge of the undying Self.⁴⁴

The *YS* draws heavily from *Sāṃkhya* philosophy; indeed, it has been asserted that all Indian religions and philosophies have the foundational principles of *Sāṃkhya* at their core.⁴⁵ The *Sāṃkhya Karika* (*SK*) of Īśvara Kṛṣṇa postulates the idea of a division between the material world of the Seen, both manifest and unmanifest, or *prakṛti*; and the Seer, the uninvolved witness consciousness, or *puruṣa*,⁴⁶ which we see paralleled in the central thesis of the *YS*. *Prakṛti*'s twofold purpose is to offer experience and provide the possibility of liberation for *puruṣa*, therefore all action can be for the purpose of liberation.⁴⁷ But, as in the *YS*, because of the misidentification of the ego as the Self, a confusion plays out which causes human suffering. This confusion and its resulting pain can be remedied, in the *Sāṃkhya* view, only by true knowledge. The main practice given in the text is the process of obtaining this knowledge through inference and discrimination.⁴⁸ In liberation, the “dance” of *prakṛti* ceases because the dancer is “seen” and retreats from view as *puruṣa* takes its place as the spectator.⁴⁹ While at a preliminary glance, ultimate liberation in the *SK* might be seen as a negation of action requiring renunciation from the world, the text clearly situates *Prakṛti* and human activity as vital to the liberation process.⁵⁰ Thus, liberation in the *SK* denotes a new way of living inside the world, described in the text as a continually spinning potter's wheel, wherein creation and involvement in the world continue with the witness Self remaining above it all, distanced, yet involved.⁵¹ In this new path, knowledge and discernment become tools of renunciation and illuminate a path forward where a person can understand what to let go of, what actions or behaviors cause suffering, and can thus practice an embodied renunciation and purification of their personality.⁵²

A religious text rather than a purely philosophical one, The *Bhagavad Gītā* (*BG*) brings together moral and metaphysical ideas and presents them in a compelling conversation between Lord Kṛṣṇa and

⁴⁴ Easwaran, 78.

⁴⁵ Christopher P. Miller, “Sāṃkhya,” in *Hinduism and Tribal Religions, Encyclopedia of Indian Religions*, eds. Pankaj Jain, Rita D. Sherma, Madhu Khanna and Jeffrey D. Long (Springer, Dordrecht, 2018), 1, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1036-5_45-1.

⁴⁶ Christopher P. Miller, “Sāṃkhya,” 1-2.

⁴⁷ *SK* 21.

⁴⁸ Christopher Key Chapple, *Karma and Creativity*, 28.

⁴⁹ *SK* 59.

⁵⁰ *SK* 60 – 68.

⁵¹ Christopher Key Chapple, *Karma and Creativity*, 30.

⁵² Chapple, 27.



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Arjuna, the reluctant warrior. As in the *KU*'s presentation of Death as the teacher of yoga, here Kṛṣṇa acts as the instructor, talking the hopeless and depressed Arjuna through various yoga practices as remedies for his misery and confusion. A great emphasis is put on *karma yoga* (yoga of action), in which Kṛṣṇa advises that although renunciation is an option, remaining in the world is superior, acting in line with your personal *dharma* is of utmost importance, acting without attachment to the fruits of those actions is vital, and further, performing all actions while giving up one's agency to god is the ultimate tool to purify and release.⁵³ As Pavulraj Michael explains, Kṛṣṇa

[...] is not concerned with running away from life through asceticism or contemplation or ecstatic devotion. He does not want the *yogin* to flee from a worldly career or the haunts of men to the solitude of the forest... This urge to action (*karma*) is the dominant role of the gospel of the Bhagavad Gita [...] When a *yogin*, keeping the mind steadfast, feels neither attachment for the objects of the senses...nor attachment for the fruits of action...and when he has learned habitually to renounce all thoughts which give rise to desires for objects of this world [...] then he has attained *karma yoga*.⁵⁴

This affirmation, that the material world is real and worthy of putting effort into, is important and indicates that the yoga of the *BG* can be viewed as a tool toward engaging in society with a broader perspective less centered on the individual ego and more on working towards a better world.⁵⁵ The detachment advocated is one that continually asks the practitioner to decenter themselves and their selfish desires and consequently consider the bigger picture.

In using the practices of the *YS* to alleviate suffering, the *yogin* starts a process of *pratiprasava*, the inverse movement towards becoming reabsorbed in the essence of being. This "return to the origin" is not a dissolution of life altogether, rather, a subtilization of consciousness necessary for correcting the attachment we have to our egoic identity.⁵⁶ As in the *SK*, here too the material world is said to be for the

⁵³ Pavulraj Michael, "Karma Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita: Way for All to Self-Realization," *The Asia Journal of Theology* 28, no. 2 (October 2014): 207-208, <https://search-ebshost-com.electra.lmu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAn3765781&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁵⁴ Pavulraj Michael, "Karma Yoga," 205-206.

⁵⁵ Michael, 211.

⁵⁶ Ian Whicher, "Reflections," 6-7.

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Seer's experience and liberation,⁵⁷ which supports the position that though nonattachment is vital, experiences, like yoga practices, inside the material world should not be discounted. Furthermore, a clear parallel exists between the relationship of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* and the elements of practice and nonattachment. *Prakṛti* is the field in which one does yogic practices and *puruṣa* remains detached. This can be a model for our personal relationship between practice and nonattachment: in repeated action and continual release we allow space for our true Self by learning to witness, thus integrating nonattachment into our actions.⁵⁸ This integration results in a state where the mind becomes polished like a transparent jewel, able to reflect reality clearly.⁵⁹ To illustrate this, I will include firsthand experiential evidence of my interaction with these techniques and how nonattachment both informs them or is their natural result, and how they allow the misidentification with my ego-self to fade. My experience is that of a modern, Western, non-renunciate, female yoga practitioner and teacher, so my own additional opinions and insights are purely from this specific point of view.

Patañjali presents what are called elsewhere the *brahma vihāras*, attitudes or thoughts “that minimize our separation from others.”⁶⁰ This practice says that one should cultivate loving-kindness towards the happy, compassion toward those in distress, joy toward the virtuous, and equanimity towards the non-virtuous, which results in *citta prasādana* (a clarified mind),⁶¹ and shows that the practitioner must learn to release their desire to follow impulsive reactions.⁶² In remembering these attitudes, I try to release my hostile instinctual reactions, so my actions are no longer ones of ego-centered ignorance. In my experience trying to put this practice into action, the outcome is often one where interactions go differently than expected: when I let go of the way I want to react, I am often met with gentler, easier exchanges. It is also worth noting that this practice must be done in connection to

⁵⁷ YS II:18.

⁵⁸ Christopher Key Chapple, *Karma and Creativity*, 37.

⁵⁹ YS I:41.

⁶⁰ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 63.

⁶¹ YS I:33.

⁶² For example, normally interacting with a happy person might induce jealousy; seeing a suffering person could result in judgment or indifference; and, most challenging, a non-virtuous person might cause us to react with anger or rage.



others: it is not one that requires renunciation of society, instead it demonstrates how nonattachment can create more interpersonal harmony.

The following section in the *Samādhi Pāda* includes a list of different objects of meditative support on which the practitioner may choose to focus to clear and center the mind. These culminate in progressively more subtle states of awareness and meditative absorption, (*samādhi*), demonstrating the importance of the inward journey.⁶³ They include things such as the exhalation and retention of breath, sorrowless illumination, the mind of a liberated being, and conclude by offering that the practitioner may focus on anything they wish.⁶⁴ The optionality shows that the emphasis is not on a specific technique, but on choosing one point in which to direct the mind, thus encouraging the *yogin* to learn to let go of the natural pull of multiple thoughts and distractions.

After the previously discussed *kriyā yoga*, the *Sādhana Pāda* details the well-known *aṣṭāṅga yoga* system,⁶⁵ beginning with what are often called the *YS*'s ethics. The *yama* (restraints) and *niyama* (observances) offer a range of ethical and personal considerations for the practitioner to put into place to change existing habits and plant seeds of wholeness and wellbeing.⁶⁶ In recognizing that our natural state might not be pure, we use these practices to reorganize our tendencies towards a more productive and harmonious way of being. Rather than a simple prerequisite for deeper practices, these ethics create an internal purification that must constantly be refined and re-established.⁶⁷ Each practice in this section contains a necessary release from previously unexamined behavior and therefore is deeply informed by nonattachment. Moreover, the inclusion of these ethics shows that the path of yoga is one in which dispassion cannot be used to rationalize evil behavior; actions should be moral and uplift both the practitioner and the society in which they live.⁶⁸

The *yama* are *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacarya* (sexual restraint), and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness).⁶⁹ In committing to a life of non-violence, for example, the yoga practitioner is asked to confront violent tendencies and practice the opposite

⁶³ *YS* I:41-I:45.

⁶⁴ *YS* I:34-I:39.

⁶⁵ *YS* II:29.

⁶⁶ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 31.

⁶⁷ Chapple, 6.

⁶⁸ Ian Whicher, "Reflections," 10.

⁶⁹ *YS* II:30.



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(*pratipakṣa bhāvana*).⁷⁰ Even though I don't consider myself outwardly aggressive, I have practiced releasing my inclination towards conflict, no matter how seemingly insignificant, which allows me to truly discriminate instances that require me to fight or stand up for myself and those where hostility is unnecessary. Interestingly, from my experience, nonattachment toward violence can also be a result of this practice. Because I try to practice *ahiṃsā*, I am less inclined to performing useless violence when the desire does manifest.

Asteya and *aparigraha* confront a person's inclination to steal and to accumulate material possessions, acting as a reminder of the impermanence of all things in the realm of *prakṛti*. This attitude of renunciation works toward refining the discernment of *viveka khyāti*. From my personal journey in practicing minimalism, if I approach possessions with the attitude that nothing is actually "mine" I start to view everything as precious, which is said to be the result of non-stealing.⁷¹ When I step outside the ideas of ownership and hoarding and view everything as borrowed, I can release the hold of the things I do own, and in doing so, start treating them with reverence. I believe these practices can be extremely healing in our modern consumerist society. When my material possessions no longer define me and the pull of making purchases to feel alive subsides, I am more able to appreciate what I do have and discern what I might need to live a fulfilled life.⁷² Renunciation here is not inflicted but realized.

The *niyama* are *śauca* (purity), *santoṣa* (contentment), and the repeated elements of *kriyā yoga*: *tapas*, *svādhyāya*, and *īśvara praṇidhāna*.⁷³ In practicing purity, for example, Patañjali says we develop *jugupsā* toward the body, which is often translated as dislike or disgust⁷⁴ but has been rendered "guardianship" by Ana Laura Funes Maderrey. She writes, "the word "*jugupsā*" derives from the verbal root "gup" which means [...] "to protect, guard, defend, preserve." It can also mean "to shun, avoid, detest, spurn, despise," but its most common appearance has always been found in connection to secrecy."⁷⁵ When viewed through this lens, she explains, we see that purity involves a step back from

⁷⁰ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 24.

⁷¹ *YS* II:37.

⁷² *YS* II:39.

⁷³ *YS* II:32.

⁷⁴ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 177.

⁷⁵ Ana Laura Funes Maderrey, "The Perfect Body in Classical Yoga Philosophy," in *Thinking with the Yoga Sutra of Patañjali: Translation and Interpretation*, eds. Christopher Key Chapple and Ana Laura Funes Maderrey (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 41, ProQuest Ebook Central.

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ownership of the body, towards stewardship of it. She continues, “Then we could say that: “Guardianship of one’s own body and protection from the contact with other bodies arises from the practice of purification.” This way of reading the verse reveals the body as something valuable, something to be taken care of [...]”⁷⁶ We may use detachment in this sense not to negate the body or render it unimportant, but to become protective of it as if it were a precious vessel rented to use for a short time.

The next practices continue to work directly with the body to purify it and allow for deeper understanding.⁷⁷ *Āsana* (posture), though only briefly mentioned in the text, has become the dominant practical technique in modern yoga. *Āsana* works with nonattachment by asking us to challenge ourselves and give up our limiting beliefs about what the body can do, which could be considered a version of *tapas*. Through the purifying heat of austerity, the physical body is transformed, healed, and strengthened. From my experience, however, this is a yoga practice that does not naturally inspire nonattachment; instead, it can result in deeper misidentification with the body as a reflection of the Self. Thus, I believe adding an attitude of nonattachment is vital in allowing *āsana* to enable spiritual growth instead of ego development. We must learn to release our attachment to ego-driven striving for physical perfection and focus on honest and thoughtful posture practice. The use of modifications, props, and the slow, gradual increase of the physical intensity of poses are all ways I have practiced remaining detached from the outcomes of *āsana*.

Prāṇāyāma (breath control) is first mentioned in the *Samādhi Pāda* where Patañjali says that a clarified mind might be obtained specifically through exhaling and retaining the breath.⁷⁸ Here he suggests regulation of both the inbreath and the outbreath.⁷⁹ From my personal experience, *prāṇāyāma* not only contributes to improved physical health, but is infused with lessons on release. Because many of the classical techniques from other texts include breath retention, the practice teaches me not to rush to or cling to the next breath, and although it deals with the very essence of life itself, it is a reminder of the impermanence of it. *Prāṇāyāma* requires true presence: each breath must be given its own time and

⁷⁶ Ana Laura Funes Maderey, “Perfect Body,” 41.

⁷⁷ Maderey, 42.

⁷⁸ *YS* I:34.

⁷⁹ *YS* II:49.

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be allowed to fully form before the next. These practices teach me to let go of the past and the future and live fully in the moment, witnessing and marveling in the miracle of life itself.

Pratyāhāra, withdrawal of the senses, or simply “inwardness,”⁸⁰ puts Patañjali’s definition of *vairāgya* into practice. When we release the pull of the senses, we practice letting go of our deep-rooted attachment to the external, continue the inward journey of *pratiprasava*, and release the immediacy of reacting to experiences in habitual patterns of behavior so that we can instead choose thoughtful response. Recalling the metaphor of the unruly horses pulling the chariot, the practice of *pratyāhāra* does not imply that the senses are no longer important (just as the horses are still necessary to the chariot). Instead, our attachment to them is put into a secondary place, and we are free to access more subtle elements of the mind.⁸¹ My experience with this technique has allowed me to realize that one reason we run with the pull of sense objects is because of the urgency they create: if I see or hear something I experience the immediate urge to respond. This creates a distracted and disorganized reaction, and thus part of releasing attachments to the pull of the senses is a simultaneous sharpening of focus, presence, and memory. It involves the filing away of relevant information to be attended to in the proper time or disregarded altogether and teaches the power of staying in the moment, using discernment to decide if or when to act, not in a chaotic way, but with calm awareness.

Of all yogic practices, meditation, *dhyāna*, is perhaps the most important in the *YS*. Indeed, it is highlighted as the technique that prevents the *kleśas* from causing new and problematic *vṛttis*.⁸² As discussed, the practice of fixing the mind on one point using gradually more subtle supports gives way towards levels of *samādhi*, meditative absorption.⁸³ Patañjali understands that we are primarily thinking beings, accustomed to creating our identities from our thoughts. Meditation, then, is a practice of letting go of extraneous thoughts by focusing only on one object.⁸⁴ This eventually leads to a place of neutrality, where thoughts no longer dictate our identity.⁸⁵ From this process we step into the power of our true Self, described in the *Kaivalya Pāda* (section on liberation, the fourth chapter), as *citi śakti*

⁸⁰ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 173.

⁸¹ Chapple, 90.

⁸² *YS* II:11.

⁸³ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 64.

⁸⁴ *YS* III:2.

⁸⁵ *YS* III:3.

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(power of higher consciousness).⁸⁶ My own personal experience of meditation is one where, through letting go of thoughts, I witness the extent to which I normally identify them. This clarity, when it arises, helps me step into my power, soften my ego, and function from a place of mindfulness.

The final three limbs, *dhāranā* (concentration), *dhyāna*, and *samādhi* (meditative absorption) are taken up as the subject of the *Vibhūti Pāda* (section on special powers, the third chapter). The conjunction of these three practices and states together is called *saṁyama*. Through the “binding together” of these practices comes wisdom,⁸⁷ and when directed in specific ways results in various powers and abilities. The practices and their results push the boundaries of perceived reality and ask the *yogin* to reengage with the world in new, transformed ways. Funes Maderey says “The last three limbs in particular [...] train the psycho-physical complex to approach and know the world in a way that is not obstructed by one’s own thinking and affective processes.”⁸⁸ These include powers like knowledge of the past and future, gaining the strength of an elephant, or even understanding the movements of planets and stars.⁸⁹ Patañjali is careful to remind the *yogin* though, that even these powers must be released towards the goal of liberation, that they are a distraction to the main task of discernment between the Seer and the Seen.⁹⁰ If performing these practices, which are in themselves informed by the release of perceived reality, we must apply the vital additional element of nonattachment to the resulting abilities to stay centered on the ultimate goal.

Thus, for a world-affirming, living liberation to take place, the afflicted causes of suffering and their resulting behaviors must be rooted out and scorched like a seed, through practice, so that they may not be planted and cause future suffering.⁹¹ A person in this state, though not called as such in the *Yoga Sūtra*, becomes known in later texts and commentaries as *jīvan-mukta*, one who is “living liberation.”⁹² In such a state, nonattachment and discernment give way to a light and *sattvic* experience, a life of “higher awareness.”⁹³ For this practitioner the world of the Seen transforms into one where, through the

⁸⁶ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 62.

⁸⁷ *YS* III:4-III:5.

⁸⁸ Ana Laura Funes Maderey, “Perfect Body,” 42-43.

⁸⁹ *YS* III:16, *YS* III:24, *YS* III:27-28.

⁹⁰ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 65-66.

⁹¹ Chapple, 91.

⁹² Chapple, 83-84.

⁹³ Chapple, 93.



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process of *pratiprasava*, enabled by practice, they are no longer operating through ignorance of their true Self. As Whicher says:

Relinquishing all obsessive or selfish concern with the results of activity, the accomplished yogin remains wholly detached from the egoic fruits of action. This does not imply that the liberated one loses all orientation for action. It is important to remember that it is only attachment (and compulsive, inordinate desire or craving), not action itself, that sets in motion the law of moral causation (*karma*) by which a person is implicated in *samsāra*. The liberated yogin [...] is no longer oriented within the ego-logical patterns of thought [...]⁹⁴

In conclusion, the power of practice in the *YS* is found partly in the potency of its pair, nonattachment, and that release is bolstered by its opposite, the creative action of practice. This relationship is present in various iterations among other texts in the Indian philosophical tradition demonstrating the importance of contemplating how to act in our human condition in a way that reflects its impermanence. I contend that the practices themselves are powerful, and though they oftentimes result in a sense of detachment, the addition of an attitude of nonattachment reveals another layer of nuance. Through this renunciate attitude practices become sacrifices and challenges to our limited understanding of Self. Though liberation often looks to be a state in which we can no longer function in the material realm, we should not understand it in that way. Patañjali's inclusion of *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya* together demonstrates the need to be present and engaged in the world, study and perform purifying techniques, and continually release from attachment to their results. Practice is the tool for purification through action, and nonattachment is the element that allows those actions to be for good: for health, liberation, the good of society, and knowledge. It's not that we must release completely from the world because it's not important, rather that we must reorganize our understanding of the role of the world and our place in it, because we are important. The two together reaffirm that we are more than our experiences and can help us see that our ego is a very limited view of who and what we truly are. By ritualizing the purifying actions of practice, continually acknowledging the impermanence of all things,

⁹⁴ Ian Whicher, "Reflections," 9-10.

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and using the potency of that remembered sacrifice, we may magnify our experiences in the material world and use them to move towards embodied liberation.

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