

A Buddhist Look at Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras

Chapters One and Two of the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali (India, approx. 2nd Century A.D.)

translated in the spirit of the Buddhist Mahāmudrā tradition

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The complete work of Patañjali consists of four chapters. Here the first two are presented, which are most relevant to current practitioners of meditation and yoga. The third one deals with the special powers, which might be obtained, and the fourth chapter explains the absolute independence or liberation at the end of the described yoga path.

This new, concise translation of the Yoga Sūtras in easy-to-understand terms intends to build bridges of understanding between practitioners of the Buddhist path and the Yoga path. It is essentially based on the original translation and explanations by the Indologist Edwin F. Bryant. In his detailed work "The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali", he explains them word by word, referring to the traditional Indian commentaries that have been written over 1500 years. The Buddhist tradition and the Yoga tradition use the same Sanskrit terms in many places, although here and there with different connotations.

- The most important Sanskrit terms are given in the endnotes for easy comparison; they have been translated as identically as possible throughout the text.
- Simple additions clarifying the meaning are in square brackets [...].
- Differences in meaning are indicated by "P" for Patañjali and "MM" for Mahāmudrā.
- Explanatory comments have been largely omitted. A transcript of the oral instructions (in German) is in preparation.

Chapter One: Meditative Absorption¹

1. Now, some further explanations on yoga.

2. *Patañjali* writes: Yoga is the cessation of the changing states of mind².

The *Mahāmudrā*-wording could be: Yoga is the cessation [of all grasping due to seeing the true, ungraspable nature] of the changing states of mind.

3. In that [i.e., in the completion of yoga] the seer rest in their very being³.

4. At other times, they identify [due to confusion] with the changing states of mind.

5. There are five kinds of changing states of mind, which can be afflicted⁴ or unafflicted [by confusion].

6. These five changing states of mind are: valid recognition, erroneous assumption, imagining, sleep, and mindful remembrance.

7. Valid recognition⁵ is based on sense perception, inference and [reliable] verbal testimony.

8. Erroneous assumption⁶ is a false understanding that believes something to be as it is not.

9. Imagining⁷ consists of an understandable sequence of expressions [or ideas], which are devoid of an actual object.

10. Sleep⁸ is the mental state, where supports for sensory perceptions⁹ are absent.

11. Mindful remembrance¹⁰ is the preservation of an already experienced sensory impression¹¹.

12. *Patañjali*: The cessation [of the changing states of mind] comes from continued practice and non-attachment.

Mahāmudrā: The cessation [of all suffering through seeing the true nature of the changing states of mind] comes through continued practice and non-attachment.

13. Here, continued practice¹² means steadfast effort.

14. This [steadfast] practice becomes a firm ground when cultivated uninterruptedly with dedication for a long time.

15. Non-attachment¹³ is mastering consciousness¹⁴, thus being without craving for sense objects, whether they are [directly] perceived or [only] described.

16. Superior to that is to be without craving for the elemental qualities¹⁵, due to knowing pure awareness¹⁶.
17. Meditative absorption with discernment¹⁷ is [in stages] accompanied by forms of analysis, discernment, joy, and the feeling of "Who I [really] am".¹⁸
18. The other [meditative absorption free from discernment] occurs when, after continued practice, all sense perceptions [of becoming] come to an end and all mental formations¹⁹ [based on lack of awareness] become inactive.
19. Those who have merged with the formless states or with subtle forms of conditioned existence²⁰ will [on the other hand] still encounter sense perceptions of becoming²¹.
20. For all others, it [meditative absorption free from discernment] is preceded by trust, energy²², mindful remembrance, meditative absorption, and wise discrimination²³.
21. It [the meditative absorption free from discernment] is near for those with high intensity,
22. since there are differences depending on the light, medium or high intensity of practice.
23. Or [the difference is] due to dedicated devotion²⁴ to the ultimate refuge [Patañjali: Īśvara].
24. *Patañjali*: God Īśvara is special – pure awareness²⁵ – untouched by afflicted mental states²⁶, by karmic effects²⁷ and by stored imprints²⁸.

Mahāmudrā: The ultimate refuge is completely pure awareness, untouched by afflicted mental states, by karmic fruits and by stored imprints.
25. In it [P: In Him], the power of all-awareness²⁹ is unsurpassed.
26. It [P: He] was also the teacher of the ancients, because of not being limited by time.
27. It [P: He] is perfectly praised by the word symbol³⁰.
28. This is repeated while we dwell [undistracted] on its meaning.
29. This dissolves [all] obstacles and the inner consciousness is realized.
30. The obstacles are disease, laziness, doubt, carelessness, sloth, greed, misconception, wandering focus, and instability – and they all distract the mind.
31. These distractions are accompanied by suffering, dejection, trembling, as well as disturbed in-breath and outbreath.

32. Continuous, one-pointed practice³¹ serves to remove them [the obstacles].
33. Clarity arises in the mind through cultivating love for the happy, compassion for the suffering, joy with the virtuous, and equanimity with the non-virtuous.³²
34. Or clarity comes from exhaling [inhaling] and restraining the breath [with full awareness],
35. ...or [it comes from arising sensory impressions, whose activity causes the perceiving mind to become steadfast,
36. ... or through the painless and luminous [awareness],
37. ... or by a sense impression in the mind that is free from desire,
38. ... or by using the awareness³³ gained from dreams and sleep as a support,
39. ... or by meditating on anything that is pleasant.
40. Mastery [of the mind] includes the most subtle aspects of experience³⁴ up to the ultimate totality of all experience.
41. Absorption³⁵ occurs when the mental movements become weaker and the mind is like a translucent jewel, taking on the colour of whatever appears in the sense fields - consisting of perceived object, perceiving organ, and perceiving consciousness.
42. Meditative absorption with analysis³⁶ is (still) mixed with words, meanings, understandings, and conceptualisation.
43. Meditative absorption without analysis occurs when mindfulness has been purified and the mind is experienced as if empty in its own nature, only luminosity.³⁷
44. The meditative absorptions with discrimination³⁸ and without discrimination concerning the subtle nature of phenomena are to be understood in the same way.
45. The subtle nature of phenomena has no signs – and extends all the way up to the finest aspect of experience.
46. All these are [still] meditative absorptions “with seeds”³⁹.
47. The clarity of being without discrimination is the lucidity of the inner nature [P: the true self]⁴⁰.
48. There is truth-bearing wisdom⁴¹.

49. It has the particular nature of phenomena as its object, and thus is different from [wisdom arising due to] inference or hearing.
50. The mental formations born from truth-bearing wisdom block the other mental formations [based on lack of awareness].
51. Upon the cessation of even those [truth-bearing mental formations], the [non-dual] meditative absorption “without seeds” arises⁴².

Chapter Two: Practice (Sadhana)⁴³

1. The path of active practice⁴⁴ consists of energetic application, self-study, and engaged devotion to the ultimate refuge [*Patañjali*: to God Īśvara].
2. The purpose of practice is to weaken the afflictions⁴⁵ and generate meditative absorption.
3. The afflictions are lack of awareness, identification with a self, attachment (desire), aversion (anger), and clinging to life.
4. Lack of awareness (ignorance)⁴⁶ is the field, in which the other afflictions grow – and they can be dormant, weak, intermittent, or fully activated.
5. *Patañjali*: Lack of awareness takes the joyful, pure, permanent self to be the suffering, impure, impermanent non-self⁴⁷.

Mahāmudrā: Lack of awareness takes the joyful, pure, permanent non-self to be the suffering, dual, impermanent self.

6. *Patañjali*: Identification with a self⁴⁸ takes the actual seer to be one [and the same] with the faculties of seeing.

Mahāmudrā: Identification with a self takes the non-dual timeless awareness to be one [and the same] with the faculties of dualistic perception.

7. Attachment (desire)⁴⁹ arises in relation to pleasant experiences.
8. Aversion (anger)⁵⁰ arises in relation to painful experiences.
9. Clinging to life⁵¹ as an inherent tendency pervades even learned people.
10. These [afflictions] are subtle; and they are eliminated by returning to the original state⁵².

11. Deep meditation⁵³ eliminates the changing states of mind thus produced [by the afflictions].
12. Afflictions are the roots of the accumulation of actions and their effects are experienced in the present life or in future lives.
13. As long as these roots are active, they produce the fruits of [their corresponding] births, life spans, and life experiences.
14. Due to wholesome or unwholesome action, the fruits of joy or pain manifest in these [circumstances of life]⁵⁴.
15. For those with discriminating wisdom⁵⁵ all of this is [without exception] suffering, since there is suffering due to change, discomfort, mental formations, and due to the changing states of the elemental qualities⁵⁶.
16. Not-yet-arisen suffering should be eliminated [in time].
17. Its cause, the [mistaken] complete association⁵⁷ of the [supposed] seer with the [supposed] seen, should be eliminated.
18. The seen [i.e., everything perceivable] has the natures of being illuminating, active and inert, and consists of the elements and sense faculties. It serves the purposes of providing experiences or liberation⁵⁸.
19. The elemental qualities manifest in stages: [fully] differentiated, undifferentiated, with signs, and without signs.
20. The seer is merely the seeing – although [primordially] pure, it witnesses the ideas of mind.
21. The essential nature⁵⁹ of the seen [i.e., everything perceivable] serves only that purpose [to realize the seeing, timeless awareness].
22. For those whose purpose is accomplished, the seen ceases to exist. But it does not cease to exist for others, since it is common [to perceive phenomena in such a way].
23. The [mistaken] complete association causes [ultimately] the understanding of the true nature of the powers of the [actual] owner and the owned⁶⁰.
24. The cause of that [mistaken, complete association] is lack of awareness.
25. When it [lack of awareness] is absent, complete association is absent – and that is the autonomy⁶¹ [full liberation] of that which sees.

26. The means to liberation is undeviating, finely discriminating, wise discernment.
27. Such wisdom unfolds in seven stages leading up to the end [of the path].⁶²
28. The practice of the limbs of yoga dissolves impurities [afflictions], and the light of awareness arises – culminating in discriminative, wise discernment⁶³.
29. The eight limbs are abstentions, observances⁶⁴, [beneficial] posture, breath regulation, disengagement of the senses, settling the mind, deep meditation, and absorption⁶⁵.
30. The abstentions are non-violence [not harming], truthfulness [not lying], not stealing, pure conduct, and non-grasping [non-coveting].⁶⁶
31. These abstentions are the great vow, since they apply to every place on earth, without being altered by class, place, time, or circumstances.
32. The observances are pure awareness of one's body, contentment, energetic application, self-study, and engaged devotion to the ultimate refuge [P: God Īśvara].⁶⁷
33. Being harassed by [self-centred] thinking movements⁶⁸, cultivate their opposite.
34. Such [self-centred] thinking leads to acts of violence and the like. They may be performed personally, by someone else upon our wish, or with our consent. They may be triggered by greed, anger, or delusion, and may be of slight, moderate, or great intensity. Cultivate their opposite, especially with the support of the contemplation that their never-ending fruits are suffering and ignorance.
35. In the presence of those established in nonviolence, enmity is abandoned.
36. Being established in truthfulness supports the fruits of one's actions.
37. Being established in refraining from stealing [and being generous], all jewels manifest.
38. Being established in pure [sexual] conduct, energy is gained.
39. Being stable in non-grasping leads to the knowledge of the circumstances of births.
40. *Patañjali*: Cleanliness leads to disenchantment with one's body and to cessation of union with others.

Mahāmudrā: Pure awareness of one's body leads to disenchantment with temporary pleasures and to an inspiring use of the body as a support for practice.

41. When the luminosity of mind is purified, there arise cheerfulness, one-pointedness, sense mastery, and the capacity of directly seeing the true nature.⁶⁹
42. Contentment leads to attaining unsurpassable happiness.
43. Energetic application removes impurities [the veils of lack of awareness] and thus perfects the body and sense faculties.
44. Self-study deepens the connection with one's deity [Buddha-aspect] of choice⁷⁰.
45. Engaged devotion to the ultimate Refuge accomplishes meditative absorption.
46. The posture⁷¹ [serves the mental clarity and] should be steady and comfortable [wholesome].
47. Such posture is attained by relaxing [all] effort and by being absorbed in the infinite⁷².
48. As a result, one is not afflicted by opposites.
49. When that is attained, breath control⁷³ regulates the inbreaths and outbreaths.
50. Such breath regulation includes external, internal, and restrained breathing movements, which are drawn out and become subtle in accordance with place, time, and number.
51. The fourth type of breath regulation⁷⁴ surpasses the limits of the external and internal.
52. Due to this, the veils covering lucidity⁷⁵ are weakened
53. ... and the perceiving mind becomes capable to settle in deep meditation⁷⁶.
54. *Patañjali*: The sense faculties are disengaged, when they do not enter contact with their respective sense objects, which resembles [experiencing] the mind's true nature⁷⁷.

Mahāmudrā: The sense faculties are disengaged, when they, free from all clinging, do enter contact with their respective sense objects, which is possible without entanglement due to realizing the mind's true nature.
55. From this comes the highest mastery of the sense faculties⁷⁸.

End of Chapter Two

Endnotes

- ¹ Meditative Absorption is *samādhi* in Sanskrit.
- ² Mind is *citta*, the umbrella term for all mental processes, cessation is *nirodha*, changing mental states are *vṛtti* in Sanskrit.
- ³ In their very being, literally “in their very own form“, is *svarūpa* in Sanskrit.
- ⁴ Afflicted is *kliṣṭa*, unafflicted is *akliṣṭa* in Sanskrit.
- ⁵ Valid recognition is *paramāna*.
- ⁶ Erroneous assumption is *viparyaya*.
- ⁷ Imagining is *vikalpa*.
- ⁸ Sleep is *nidra*.
- ⁹ Sensory perceptions are *pratyakṣa*.
- ¹⁰ Mindful remembrance is *smṛti* in Sanskrit and *sati* in Pali.
- ¹¹ Sensory impression is *viśaya*.
- ¹² Continued practice is *abhyāsa*.
- ¹³ Non-attachment is *vairāgyam*.
- ¹⁴ Consciousness is *saṃjñā*.
- ¹⁵ Elemental qualities are the *guṇas*, which cause the relative existence (*prakṛti*).
- ¹⁶ Pure awareness is *puruṣa*.
- ¹⁷ Meditative absorption with discernment is *samprajñāta samādhi*.
- ¹⁸ The **stages of deep meditation** of Patañjali and of Buddhist description resemble each other: meditative absorption with discernment knows the mind in its three aspects – (1) reflective, perceiving mind, (2) self-centred, by emotional patterns shaped mind and (3) the finely discriminating, intelligent basic awareness, which at first is still interwoven with cognitive veils, whereby the awareness of one's own true nature already shimmers through. But only the meditative absorption without discernment frees from the last veils and leads into the true, nondual being.
 - Meditative absorption with analysis (*vitarka*) knows the reflective mind (*manas*) and the grasping to gross sense objects and gross elements (*mahābhūtas*) and disengages from that.
 - Meditative absorption with discrimination (*vicāra*) knows the self-centred, by emotional patterns shaped mind (*ahaṅkara*) and the grasping to subtle sense objects and subtle elements (*tanmātras*) and disengages from that.
 - Meditative absorption with bliss (*ānanda*) knows the finely discriminating, intelligent basic awareness of mind (*buddhi*) and the grasping at the powers behind the sensory faculties and disengages from that.
 - Meditative absorption with a sense of “who I [truly] am“ (*asmitā*) knows the subjective self to be an empty (*śunya*) reflection of pure awareness, which prepares for not identifying with the perceiving one.
- ¹⁹ Mental formations are *saṃskāra*.
- ²⁰ Subtle forms of conditioned existence are *prakṛti*.
- ²¹ Sense perceptions of becoming are *bhava pratyaya*.
- ²² Energy is *vīrya*, the joy of the wholesome.
- ²³ Wise discrimination is *prajñā*.
- ²⁴ Dedicated devotion is *prañidhāna*.
- ²⁵ Pure awareness is *puruṣa* like above; here with the connotation of a pure being or God.
- ²⁶ Afflicted mental states are *kleśas*.
- ²⁷ Karmic effects (*karma vipāka*) are the effects of dualistic acting with body, speech, and mind.
- ²⁸ Stored is *āśaya* and refers here to the imprints (*vāsanās*) due to dualistic mental formations (*saṃskāras*).
- ²⁹ All-awareness is *sarvajñā*.
- ³⁰ That which gives voice to its energy, in short, the "word symbol" is *vācakaḥ praṇavaḥ* and means the syllable Om.
- ³¹ One-pointed is *ekatattva* and continuous practice is *abhyāsa*.
- ³² Clarity is *prasādanam*. Love, compassion, joy, and equanimity are *maitrī*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekṣā*.
- ³³ Awareness is *jñāna*.
- ³⁴ The subtlest aspects of experience (*paramāṇu*) also include the subatomic aspects of conditional existence (*prakṛti*).
- ³⁵ Absorption is *samāpatti*.
- ³⁶ Analysis is *savitarkā*.
- ³⁷ Own nature is *svarūpa*, empty is *śunya*, luminosity is *nirbhāsa*.
- ³⁸ Discrimination is *vicāra*.
- ³⁹ Meditative absorption „with seeds“ is *sabīja-samādhi*. Seeds of rebirth are meant, which arise from the fine, still dualistic, discrimination in the *samprajñāta* Samādhis.
- ⁴⁰ Inner nature or true self is *adhyātma*.

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- ⁴¹ Wisdom is *prajñā*.
- ⁴² Meditative absorption „without seeds“ is *nirbīja-samādhi*.
- ⁴³ Practice is *sādhana*.
- ⁴⁴ Active (dedicated) practice is *kriyā-yoga*.
- ⁴⁵ Afflictions are *kleśas*.
- ⁴⁶ Lack of awareness, Sanskrit *avidyā*, is often also translated as ignorance.
- ⁴⁷ Self is *ātman*, non-self is *anātman*.
- ⁴⁸ Identification with a self is *asmitā*.
- ⁴⁹ Attachment or desire is *rāga*.
- ⁵⁰ Aversion or anger is *dveṣa*.
- ⁵¹ Clinging to life or fear of death is *abhiniveśaḥ*.
- ⁵² Returning to the original state is *pratiprasava*.
- ⁵³ Deep meditation is *dhyāna*.
- ⁵⁴ Wholesome and unwholesome action are *puṇya* and *apuṇya*; (karmic) fruits are *phalāḥ*.
- ⁵⁵ Discriminating wisdom is *viveka*.
- ⁵⁶ The elemental qualities are the *guṇas* – illuminating (*sattva*), activating (*rajas*) and dampening (*tamas*).
- ⁵⁷ Complete association is *saṃyoga*.
- ⁵⁸ Experiences are *bhoga* und liberation (severance) is here *apavarga*.
- ⁵⁹ Essential nature is *ātmā*.
- ⁶⁰ Owner is *svāmi*, here to be understood as synonym for *puruṣa*, and the owned is *sva*, here to be understood as synonym for *prakṛti*.
- ⁶¹ Independence (autonomy or aloneness) is *kaivalyam*, Patañjalis term for enlightenment.
- ⁶² Wisdom is like above *prajñā*, and the stages are the *bhūmis*.
- ⁶³ Light of [timeless] awareness is *jñāna-dīpti* and discriminative, wise discernment is *viveka-khyāti*.
- ⁶⁴ The eight limbs are *aṣṭau-aṅgāni*, condensed pronounced as „Astanga“. Abstentions are *yamas*, observances are *niyamas*.
- ⁶⁵ **The Buddhist Eightfold Path** was formulated by Buddha Shakyamuni in the 5th century BCE as the Fourth Noble Truth, the path to liberation from all suffering:
- True *view* or sight is open to new insights without prejudice and leads to the understanding of the true causes of suffering and their resolution.
 - True *intention* or motivation guides our actions: non-harm-wanting, renouncing attachments, purity of heart, love, compassion, and such qualities.
 - True *speech* opens the mind, is truthful, beneficial, unifying, and full of meaning.
 - True *action* stands for performing what is wholesome and abstaining from all that is not wholesome.
 - True *livelihood* stands for pure, respectful living without deceiving or harming others.
 - True *aspiration* stands for unwavering, joyful perseverance in practicing all the above points.
 - True *mindfulness* in all situations of life leads to the recognition and dissolution of the suffering-generating identifications.
 - True *meditative absorption* (Skt: *samādhi*) leads to insight into being, true knowledge and true liberation.
- ⁶⁶ Non-violence is *ahiṃsā*, truthfulness is *satya*, not stealing is *asteya*, pure conduct translates *brahmacharya*, which means in a particular pure sexual behavior or chastity, and *aparigrahāḥ* is non-grasping.
- ⁶⁷ Pure awareness of one’s body here translates Patañjalis *śauca*, what actually means cleanliness. Contentment is *santoṣa*, energetic application is *tapas*, self-study is *svādhāya* and engaged devotion is like above *prāṇidhāna*.
- ⁶⁸ [Self-centred] thinking is *vitarka*; this refers to all dualistically analyzing thought movements; they distinguish between "I" and "my", "you" and "your" and place the supposed "I" in the center.
- ⁶⁹ Luminosity is *sattva*, cheerfulness is *saumanasya*, one-pointedness is *ekāgrya*, sense mastery is *indriya-jaya* and the capacity of directly seeing one’s own true nature [resp. the true self] is *ātma-darśana*.
- ⁷⁰ The meditation deity resp. the Buddha-aspect of choice is *iṣṭa-devatā*.
- ⁷¹ Posture is *āsana*.
- ⁷² Absorption in the infinite is *ananta-samāpatti*.
- ⁷³ Breath control is *prāṇāyāma*. It also includes regulating the subtle energy flows inside and outside the body.
- ⁷⁴ A form of the vase breathing in which there is no breathing at all (*kevala-kumbhaka*).
- ⁷⁵ The veils are *āvaraṇa* and lucidity is *prakāśa*.
- ⁷⁶ Perceiving mind is *manas* and settling in deep meditation is *dhāraṇā*.
- ⁷⁷ Disengagement of the sense faculties is *indriyāṇām-pratyāhāra* and the mind’s true nature is *cittasya-svarūpa*.
- ⁷⁸ Mastery of the sense faculties (unfortunately often wrongly translated as 'control' of the senses) is *vaśyatā indriyāṇām*.