

American psychologist William James, both heroes experience an episode of entering into the phase of the "sick soul." Arjuna balks at entering into what he perceives to be an unwinnable war. Rāma, a teenager, resists Viśvāmitra's request that he launch a campaign to purge the forest of unruly elements. Both these kṣatriyas push back against the performance of their dharma, becoming paradigmatic examples of human disaffection with worldly entanglements. Both are educated through the teachings of yoga to embrace their dharma, to engage the world, and to perform their duties from a place of freedom from attachment (*vairāgya*). The paradox of their eventual acceptance of responsibility for these grave tasks underscores the ongoing tension between worldly involvement (*pravṛtti*) and rejection of the world (*nivṛtti*). Non-attached action (*karma-yoga*) provides the bridge between involvement and rejection and helps make sense of these inherent contradictions. Each narrative talks about the ultimate goal of leaving the world in peace, yet both emphasize the necessity of living life fully.

Each chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā* names a particular experience of yoga, beginning with the yoga of the despondency of Arjuna (chapter one) and then moving from the yogas of knowledge, action, the renunciation of action to knowledge, to the yogas of renunciation and meditation (chapters two through six). Devotional or bhakti yoga occupies the middle six chapters of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, focusing on knowledge, the imperishable *brahman*, the royal mystery, the yoga of manifestation, the yoga of the vision of the universal form, and the yoga of devotion (chapters seven through twelve). The final six chapters of the *Bhagavad Gītā* equip Arjuna for his return to the world of the battlefield. In these chapters, Kṛṣṇa teaches the yoga of the distinction between the field-knower and the field, the yoga of the distinction between the three *guṇas*, the yoga of the supreme spirit, the yoga of the distinction between the divine and the demonic tendencies, the yoga of the distinction between the three kinds of faith, and the yoga of renunciation (chapters 13 through 18).

In the unfolding of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Arjuna moves from his despondency and resistance through a progressive sequence of teachings. Kṛṣṇa reminds him of the core principles of knowledge (the soul cannot be killed), non-attached action, and meditation. These lead to a sequence of chapters of devotion, through which the visionary experience of Kṛṣṇa's divine identity re-oriens Arjuna's grasp on reality. In the final chapters of the *Gītā*, Arjuna learns to see the world through the Sāṃkhya prism of the three *guṇas*, and hence develops the sense of dispassion that equips him, as would be said in modern India, to "do the needful." In the process, Arjuna learns to operate from a much broader context (nothing is born, nothing dies) that allows him to advance the narrative of the story, and, by extension, serve as an example

albeit ultimately a tragic one, of how yoga requires engagement with the ways of the world, while retaining remembrance of one's ultimate position as a soul connected to the vast expanse of the cosmos. For Mahatma Gandhi, this metaphor served to inspire his nonviolent campaigns against injustice. Karma yoga allows reintegrating the vision of the totality (as seen in chapter eleven) into the realm of worldly engagement.

This lesson can also be seen in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. However, whereas the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a much shorter text nested in a huge narrative, ends with Arjuna finding the resolve to enter into battle, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* retains its interest in and praise of *nirvāṇa* up to the end. Even though the reader knows that Rāma will eventually protect the sages in their hermitages and rescue his wife Sita from Rāvaṇa's confinement in Sri Lanka, the writer of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* constantly reminds the reader that all reality is fiction. In the spirit of Borges' magical realism, Vasiṣṭha tells dozens of stories that undermine the reader's (and Rāma's) sense of the fixity of things. One gets a sense that regardless of what happens, nothing is really happening; all things that occupy space simultaneously call out and point to the fluidity, evanescence, and ultimate freedom of every circumstance, every occurrence. Hence, the chapter flow of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* follows a similar trajectory to that of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but with a difference. Whereas Arjuna's ultimate embrace of the yoga of renunciation leads him back to the reality of the battlefield, Rāma's entry into *nirvāṇa* delivers him into a state of perpetual non-dual awareness. One could argue that both narratives see their protagonists engage in warfare and participate in princely and kingly duties. However, Arjuna proclaims later that he forgot Kṛṣṇa's lessons and he eventually suffers a stint in hell due to his misdeeds, whereas Rāma goes on to rule from a place of dispassion and freedom.

Rāma's spiritual or yoga journey can be summarized in the book (*prakarṇa*) titles of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*: (1) Rāma's Disaffection (*Vairāgya*); (2) The Behavior of the Seeker (*Mumukṣu Vyavahāra*); (3) Creation (*Utpatti*); (4) Existence (*Sthiti*); (5) Dissolution (*Upasama*); and (6) Liberation (*Nirvāṇa*). These six sections of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* provide a narrative arc for understanding the spiritual path. Rāma begins, as does Arjuna in the *Gītā*, in a state of deep questioning, rejecting the notion that any of his actions carry importance or significance. He then learns about the efficacy of human action and creativity (*pranirūpa*). He discovers that his thoughts and emotions construct the very world that he inhabits. Consequently, he learns about his intimate relationship with the creation and maintenance of the world. In story upon story, Vasiṣṭha demonstrates how the whims and desires of the past inform and create the present. Ultimately, Vasiṣṭha shows Rāma both how to create the narrative of human life and how to dissolve it. This skill, particularly as conveyed

through womanist narratives that show the power of the goddess and self-liberation of Queen Cūḍalā, is then taken up by Rāma himself, who moves into a place of freedom, engages the all in the each, and sees the vast space of pure consciousness in all things.

In chapter 162 of the *Nirvāṇa Prakaraṇa*, Vasiṣṭha teaches a sevenfold yoga to Vasiṣṭha. It is particularly suited to help the reader understand the many dream narratives of the text and follows the overall philosophy of the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha*: to the extent that a person can see beyond the world of appearances while embracing them, one can move with ease within and beyond all attachments, cultivating a life of perfect freedom, or at least a life that embraces moments of deep insight. The later school of Dṛṣṭi-Sṛṣṭi-Advaita-Vedānta relies upon the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* to explain and promote this method.

The sevenfold yoga of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* begins with disenchantment. Big questions haunt one's awareness, dramatically posed in the critical question, "How can I go on living out these stale old karmas?" At this stage of renunciation, one decides to change and improve oneself. In the second stage, deep thinking, one cultivates concentration and meditation and fully takes on an ethical life. The third stage, non-attachment, signals a radical split from one's former identity. In this state, the ego dissolves, bringing great peace. All three of these stages of yoga are said to happen within the realm of waking consciousness. By living in this manner, one assumes great dignity, earning the respect of others. In the fourth stage, all things appear as if they were in a dream. In the fifth stage one gains deep peace, as if one were engaged in deep sleep. The sixth stage is described as being liberated while still in the body. In the seventh stage, one's body dissolves, and one merges with or returns to the universal consciousness.

The *Yogavāsiṣṭha* sets forth seven stages of yoga as follows: (1) Renunciation (*Nivṛtti*); (2) Deep Thinking (*Vicāraṇa*); (3) Non-attachment (*Asaṃsāṅga*); (4) The World as Dream (*Svapna Loka*); (5) Non-dual as if in Deep Sleep (*Advaita Susupta*); (6) Living Liberation (*Jīvan Mukti*); and (7) Freedom from the Body (*Videha Mukti*). In many ways, the first three stages are similar to the first three stages of Tantra and Haribhadra's threefold yoga. In Icchā Yoga, one desires to leave behind the sufferings and pains of the world. In Śāstra/ñāna Yoga, one diligently dwells in the modality of correct insight and behavior. In Sāmarthya/Kriyā Yoga, non-attachment arises spontaneously, allowing one to move through the world, unaffected by its negativities, like the Nonattachment Yoga of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*.

The latter four phases demonstrate the special philosophy of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. Having disengaged from the fixity of things in the world, at the fourth stage one sees all things as if they are merely a dream. At the fifth stage,

one is able to go beyond even the dream itself into a realm of utter peace. In a sense, these stages reflect verse 2.67 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*: "When others are awake, it is like night to the restrained one; when others are asleep, this person awakens." At the sixth stage, one resumes activity in the world, but only apparently so; in truth, one is liberated while yet living. At the seventh stage, one passes beyond, into the ultimate reality, safe from rebirth.

The beginning of the yoga of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* mirrors Rāma's own experience. Rāma experiences a deep disaffection (*vairāgya*) for the things of the world. He does not wish to engage in the battle for which he has been recruited. Through his tutelage by Vasiṣṭha, he comes to learn of the power of human effort and the efficacy of human action, as well as the ability that one has to overcome the difficulties of the past. Repeatedly, Vasiṣṭha shows Rāma that the world is no more than a dream, a refrain repeated through the course of dozens of stories. Eventually, by seeing the relationship between his intentions and his mental conjurings and the creation of the world, Rāma transcends attachment and moves forward in the role of *jīvanmukta*—a status, incidentally, that remains with him through the remainder of the *Rāmāyana*.

This translation is based on the Sanskrit for the text included in Wasudeva Laxamana Sastri Pansikar, ed., *The Yogavāsiṣṭha of Vālmiki with the Commentary Vasiṣṭhamahārāmāyaṇatātṭparyaprakāśa*, revised and re-edited by Narayan Ram Acharya Kavyatirtha (Bombay: Pandurang Jawaji, 1937; reprint New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981). The Sanskrit version reproduced in *The Yoga-vāsiṣṭha of Vālmiki: Sanskrit Text and English Translation*, edited and revised by Ravi Prakash Arya (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 1998) was also consulted. Several of my students contributed to the following translation, including Viresh Hughes, Jodi Shaw, Daniel Levine, Wynanda Jacobi, and Randall Krauss.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Partial translations of the text by Swami Venkatesananda can be found in *The Supreme Yoga: A New Translation of the Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, 2 vols. (Shivanandanagar: The Divine Life Society, 2003); *The Concise Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); and *Vasiṣṭha's Yoga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). An early English rendering of the text can also be found by Vihari-Lala Mitra, *The Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha-Mahārāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki* (Calcutta: 1891–1899, reprint Varanasi: Bharatiya Publishing House, 1976). A new critical edition of the entire text is under way in Germany under the direction of Walter Slaje.

For further reading, see the works of B. L. Atreya, particularly *The Philosophy of the Yogavāsiṣṭha* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1936) and *Deification of Man: Its Methods and Stages According to the Yogavāsiṣṭha* (Moradabad: Darshana, 1963). Surendranath DasGupta devotes eighty pages to the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* in his *A History of Indian Philosophy in Five Volumes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932). More recent studies include T. G. Mainkar, *The Vasiṣṭha Rāmāyaṇa: A Study* (New Delhi: Meharchand Lachhmandas, 1977); Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Christopher Chapple, *Karma and Creativity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Jürgen Hanneder, *Studies on the Mokṣopāya* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006); and Arindam Chakrabarti and Christopher Key Chapple, eds., *Engaged Emancipation: Mind, Morals, and Make Believe in the Mokṣopāya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2011). On the eightfold yoga of the *Yogaśāstra*, see Olle Qvarnström, *The Yogaśāstra of Hemacandra* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

Yogavāsiṣṭha Book Six, Chapter 126

On the Seven Stages of Yoga

1. Śrī Rāma asked:

What constitute the seven stages of yoga practice?
How are the various stages of the yogin distinguished?

TAGE ONE: RENUNCIATION (NIVṚTTI)

Vasiṣṭha responded:

Listen to the characteristics of the two types of people.
The engaged ones (*pravṛtti*) draw near to heaven.
The renouncers (*nivṛtti*) are yearning for liberation.

3. What is this thing called *nirvāṇa*?
To me, it is stopping transmigration.
By contrast, the one who keeps doing what is to be done
stays engaged (in the world).

4. However, just as a tortoise withdraws its neck
and just as the ocean's tides fill any available opening,
so, after countless births, a person of great discernment is born.

5. (Such a person says): "Alas! I have had enough of the *samsāra* caused by this weakness of mine.

How can I live another day, driven by these stale karmas?

6. What would be the highest [method] for release from pain?
What actions would lead to this superior liberation?"

The renouncer, it is recalled,
asks these ultimate questions and more.

7. "Having experienced this dispassion (*virāga*),
how will I cross over the ocean of *samsāra*?"
This, indeed, is the highest thought;
from it arises devotion to truth.

8. Having drawn into oneself due to dispassion (*virāga*),
one experiences fragrance-filled meditations,
an uplift of one's actions within the realm of forms,
moving forward with joy every day.

9. The one who continually questions the stupid actions of people
does not condemn their faults, but performs virtuous actions
(by way of counter example).

10. This person's mind is wary of busy tasks.
This person performs only mild actions,
is continually on guard against sin,
and looks away from shallow pleasures.

11. This person speaks delightful and affectionate words,
nurturing and leading to love appropriate to time and place.

12. Such a person has accomplished the first stage (*bhūmika*) of yoga
and serves wise people in thought, deed, and word.

STAGE TWO: DEEP THINKING (VICĀRAṆA)

13. Then one is led forward and seeks out the knowledge of the scriptures.
This person would become a deep thinker (*vicārin*)
and move in the direction of deliverance from *samsāra*.

14. It is said that this person already has attained the first stage.
Others are regarded to be self-obsessed.
This stage of deep thinking has two names:
"established in riches" and "arrived at the stage of yoga."

15. From the performance of concentration (*dharana*) and meditation (*dhyana*), and through keeping the company of revealed and remembered scriptures, such a one is regarded silently and aloud as reaching toward the highest wisdom.

[Note that this person is performing the sixth and seventh limbs of Patañjali's yoga.]

16. This person knows the classifications of things and the rules of proper conduct.

Having heard what is to be learned, this person has command (over the mind) like a householder manages the home.

17. Such a person leaves behind conceit, pride, envy, delusion, and cupidity. Like a snake shedding its skin,

this person escapes from attachment to externals.

18. From serving wise people, and following the guru, scriptures, and clear thinking,

one discovers how to act according to the unparalleled supreme secret.

YOGA THREE: NO ATTACHMENT (ASAMSAṅGA)

19. The third yoga stage is called "no attachment" (*asamsaṅga*). In this, one arrives at an agreeable state, like [walking into] a bed of flowers.

20. The mind of this person focuses on the meanings of scriptural statements.

This person takes up company with those in ashrams [spiritual retreats] who are calmed by their austerities and are making progress on the narrative journey to the inner self.

Those who scorn *samsāra* and are treading the path toward the release from desire gather together in the refuge of virtue, entering in this way into the waning years of their lives.

Such people pass the time prudently living with forest dwellers in their hermitages.

With the radiance of their pacified minds, they are non-attached, happy, exuding auspiciousness.

23. From practicing the holy scriptures and from doing meritorious actions, this person consequently speaks well and settles into seeing the truth of things.

24. Having obtained this third stage, one experiences the awakening (*bodha*) of the Self through two types of non-attachment. Listen as I explain this distinction.

25. The two ways of non-attachment are equally splendid: I am not the doer; I am not the enjoyer. I am not oppressed nor do I oppress others.

26. With the intention of keeping a distance from the world, one sees as equal all who have bodies and names. Every one is formed by karma from past lives and is indeed subject to God (Īśvara).

27. [Such a person continually asks:]
If I am happy, is it due to me? If I am sad, is it due to me?
If I experience pleasure, is it due to me?
If I experience displeasure, is it due to me?
If things turn out well, is it due to me?
If things go wrong, is it due to me?

28. All that comes together eventually falls apart. All thoughts that arise eventually dissipate. Time swallows all existence, zealously and continually.

29. "It does not matter!" Through the practice [of this insight], one enters the inner [realization] of non-existence. Attaching the mind to the meaning of this phrase is the same as [dwelling in] non-attachment.

30. Through the various steps of yoga and through associating with great souls, one separates oneself from unreliable people and joins with those who have knowledge of the self.

31. Through creativity and effort and from the frequent practice of yoga

one lives the life of a spotless doer,
having arrived at a place of firm meaning.

32. In the core [understanding] of the highest purpose,
one crosses the ocean of *saṃsāra*.

"I am not the doer—God is the doer,
but deeds belong to *prakṛti*."

33. Having indeed accomplished this highest transcendence,
one penetrates the meaning of all words.

One sits like a sage in peace.

This, it is said, is the best non-attachment.

34. This [state] is neither inside nor outside,
not below nor above, not in the quarters nor in the sky.
It is not with meaning nor is it without meaning.
It is not without awareness nor is it aware.

35. [Like the moon] it sits, radiating peace.
In darkness or in the clouds, it is the same,
without beginning or end, unborn, beautiful.
This, it is said, is the best non-attachment.

36. Delight, contentment, and joy
are caused by this spotless blossom [of non-attachment].
Conscious thought, though at first like a lotus, can start to cling
and contract into a necklace of obstacles.

37. As the lotus of discernment rises up inside,
it bursts like a flash of lightning in one's thoughts.
Non-attachment to the fruits
is the third stage of yoga.

REVIEW OF THE FIRST THREE STAGES

38. By performing yoga, through accumulated purity
and by the storehouse of one's good actions,
one arrives at the mysteriously fortuitous first stage.

39. The guardian Mothers say, "This stage is like a tender sprout.
The waters of discernment must be diligently
sprinkled on it to protect and nourish it."

40. By this gift, one becomes brilliant.
Through deep thinking (*vicāra*) one would be guided upward,
just as a gardener tends to his seedlings diligently, every day.

41. By holding onto this inner strength indeed,
one sets in motion an inexhaustible commitment.
From effort at the second stage (*vicāra*),
one reaches the third stage (*asamāṅga*).

42. This third stage is non-attachment, which is higher.
The person at this stage shuns all remaining things
and dissolves all thought.

43. Śrī Rāma said:
What world would be the destiny of those
whose actions are vile?
Who are born in wicked families and are confused?
Who do not take up the company of yogins?

44. What path, O Bhagavān, will those follow
who have failed to attain the first, second, or third stage
at the time of death?

45. Vasiṣṭha said:
Saṃsāra is bestowed on the one who is deluded and taken by foolishness.
The consequence is hundreds of random births.

46. But possibly freedom from passion will arise
through association with the holy ones.
In this freedom from passion,
a person inevitably rises up to the level of one of these stages.

47. Thus, it is agreed upon in the scriptures
that *saṃsāra* can be ended.
The living being can be released from the body
by attaining a stage of yoga.

48. Through following the stages of yoga, one basks [in the benefits of]
past happy deeds, as if one were riding in the chariot of the gods
in the presence of those souls who protect the world.

49. It is as if one were dwelling in the fragrant groves on Mount Meru,
delighting in the company of a beautiful friend.

Thus, the accomplishment of good deeds
will prevail over the previous bad deeds.

50. The yogins, having vanquished the net of worldly enjoyment,
stand victorious in a blessed state.

Unsullied and of pleasant disposition,
these most excellent persons live on, protected [from negativity].

51. Having been born into yoga, they serve others
and encourage others to attain yoga.

These wise ones, due to their prior practice of meditation,
are on course within the stages of yoga.

GNITYIN YOGA

52. O Rāma, these three stages occur in the realm designated as the wak-
ing state.

This waking state is seen through the brilliance of the intellect,

53. Those who are disciplined through yoga
carry themselves in their solitude with dignity.

Having seen such people, the minds of the ignorant
are inspired to develop a desire for liberation.

54. This person desires to perform what needs to be done
and does not get involved with improper activity.

Standing up for refined conduct,
such a person is renowned as possessing dignity.

55. This person follows proper conduct,
studies the scriptures, and has a stable mind.

Due to this appropriate behavior,
such a person is renowned as possessing dignity.

56. In the first stage, the (seeds of yoga) sprout.

In the second stage, the (plant of yoga) grows.

In the third stage, it bears fruit.

This would be the unfolding dignity of yogins.

57. This dignified yogin, upon death,
carries pure intentions [to the next life].

After enjoying pleasure for a long time,
that person assumes [a life of] yoga again.

FOURTH STAGE: WORLD AS DREAM (SVAPNA LOKA)

58. From the practice of these three stages (of yoga),
one arrives at the destruction of ignorance.
Singular knowledge arises in the mind
like the splendor of the full moon rising.

59. Those yogins, their minds disciplined and
thoroughly free from dwelling on difference,
regard all things to be the same.
Through this, they enter the immeasurable fourth stage.

60. Standing in the non-dual vision,
with all thoughts of duality put to rest,
the yogins see this world as if it were a dream.
Through this, they enter the immeasurable fourth stage.

61. The first three stages (of renunciation, deep thinking, and
non-attachment)
take place in waking life. In the fourth stage, things are seen
as if they are dreams, like the falling away (of leaves) in autumn.
Thing gradually fade away as if into oblivion.

FIFTH STAGE: NONDUAL SLEEP (ADVAITA SUSUPTA)

62. Having arrived at the fifth stage,
one is at the end of the remaining existence.
At this fifth stage, one reaches the level (*pada*)
that is called sleep (*susupta*).

63. That person stands in a state of utter non-dualism (*advaita-mātra*),
each part in perfect peace.
The appearance of dualism drops away,
and one awakens into inner joy.

64. In this fifth stage of deep sleep (*susupta-ghana*),
one's countenance takes on an inward stability,
transcending external concerns.

65. One achieves eternal, abundant peace through this.
One is perceived as if one were a sleeping owl.
In doing this practice one rushes to banish (worldliness) in this stage.

SIXTH STAGE: LIVING LIBERATION

66. The sixth stage is another name for the soul as it traverses these steps:
All form is seen as neither nonexistent nor existent.
One obtains action neither with an ego nor without an ego.

67. In solitude, with thoughts diminished,
one dwells in a state released from "oneness" or "two-ness."
With the knots of karma untied, one finds peace in the body,
living as a liberated soul.

68. Standing neither in *nirvāṇa* nor not in *nirvāṇa*,
one shines brightly,
outwardly free, inwardly free,
free like the piece of sky in a jar.

69. Full on the outside, full on the inside,
as full as a jar overflowing with water,
this person seems highly accomplished,
but also seems like nothing special.

SEVENTH STAGE: FREE FROM THE BODY

70. Having dwelt in the sixth stage,
one then attains the seventh stage:
this is called liberated, freed from the body.
This is the seventh stage of yoga.

71. Peaceful beyond words,
this state is beyond the horizon of the earth.
By some, it is called Śiva.
By others, it is referred to as Brahmā.

72. By some, it is determined to be female, others call it male.
Thought of in so many ways,
at the core of things, it is imagined as the Self.

73. How can this eternal, indescribable consciousness be described?
Its attainment has been spoken of in seven stages by me to you, O Rāma.

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