

**IN SEARCH OF
THE HIGHEST TRUTH**

Adventures In Yoga Philosophy

Hari-kirtana das

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Dedication

Introduction

PART ONE: ENTRANCE

Chapter 1: Seeing Through the Eyes of Yoga

Chapter 2: Faith and Knowledge

Chapter 3: Cause and Effect

Chapter 4: Yoga and Religion

Chapter 5: Finding Hidden Treasure

PART TWO: EXPOSITION

Chapter 6: A Very Brief History of Yoga Philosophy

Chapter 7: Yoga, the Vedas, and Hinduism

Chapter 8: Functions of Yoga Philosophy

Chapter 9: Yoga and Vedic Social Organization

Chapter 10: Teachers and Gurus

PART THREE: EXIT

Chapter 11: Ethical Imperatives

Chapter 12: Destiny, Free Will, and Pure Chance

Chapter 13: Karma, Samsara, and Happiness

Chapter 14: Modernity, Duality and Non-duality

Chapter 15: The Highest Truth

Glossary

About the Author

INTRODUCTION

Yoga is a joyful science of self-realization. This book – a mash up of lectures, discussions, articles, and blog posts – is a journey into yoga’s spiritual dimension. Its purpose is to reveal how traditional yoga philosophy offers both reasonable answers to life’s most important questions and practical solutions for life’s most challenging problems.

As a frequent guest instructor at yoga teacher trainings, I’m often asked to recommend a book that provides a general overview of yoga philosophy. Although I have my favorite translations of Sanskrit scriptures, accounts of personal journeys, and obtuse scholarly tomes, I’ve not found a short, simple, contemporary book that I felt confident in recommending to someone who was looking for an accessible overview of yoga philosophy as it is presented in the Vedic tradition from which yoga arises.

Moreover, I could not think of any books that succinctly explain why traditional yoga’s esoteric concepts matter or what to do about them. What was missing was a book that combined theory with practice on personal and social levels written in a style that was both conversational and reflective. My hope is that this book fills this need.

My specific hope is that yoga teachers, participants in yoga teacher training programs, and serious yoga practitioners will find in this book to be an easy and entertaining way to acquire a general orientation to the basic concepts that form the foundations of yoga philosophy. I hope as well that this book provides readers with a distinctive viewpoint through which to reconsider popular assumptions about yoga philosophy and to examine social issues of direct concern to members of the greater yoga community.

I have been very fortunate to learn about yoga from extraordinary teachers who have instructed me that sharing what I’ve received is an essential part of my practice. In Sanskrit, the act of passing transcendental knowledge forward is called *parampara*, meaning ‘one after the other’. The idea is that one takes the ever-fresh fruit of transcendental knowledge, as it has been transmitted since time immemorial, and carefully, without changing the essence of the teaching, sweetens the fruit with one’s own personal realizations as they hand the fruit to the next person in a manner suitable for their favorable reception.

I humbly request the blessings of my teachers as I offer this fruit to you.

CHAPTER 1

Seeing Through The Eyes Of Yoga

Hari-kirtana das: There are a variety of possible definitions of ‘yoga philosophy’ based on different conceptions of what yoga is; what the underlying premise is, what the recommended process is, and what the ultimate goal is. Yoga philosophy can be defined as the systematic examination or study of the ‘self’ but what we mean by ‘self’ depends on which particular school of yoga philosophy you subscribe to. So, broadly speaking, ‘yoga philosophy’ is not just one thing: there are many different opinions as to what it is and you have to decide for yourself which definition works for you. Objectively speaking, if someone asks you, "What is yoga?" then a correct response could be, "According to whom?"

Just to make things simple, I’m going to use the word ‘yoga’ and the phrase ‘yoga philosophy’ to indicate an understanding of yoga based on a direct reading of two the oldest and most authoritative treatises on yoga: the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and the Bhagavad-gita. Commentaries by learned sages on these and other texts within the Vedic tradition from which yoga arises will also be referred to as ‘Yoga philosophy’. And I’ll present what I’ve heard from my teachers along with offer my personal realizations about the significance and relevance of their teachings.

With this in mind, let’s try to look at the world through the eyes of yoga in order to understand what the world looks like from the vantage point of yoga. It’s easy for us to look at yoga through the lens of the modern world and some people might say it’s impossible to do otherwise, but we’re going to try to step to the other side of that lens. We may discover that the world looks very different from the perspective of yoga; that yoga reveals things about the modern world that we might not see or consider from the vantage point of the modern world itself.

When we look at the world through the eyes of yoga the question we should ask first is, “is what I see real?” Since we’re on a philosophical journey, shouldn’t we ask the ever-popular question, ‘what is reality?’

Students: Yes <casual nods of general agreement>

Hari-kirtana das: Very well then: <gestures>

Students: <chorus in unison> What is reality?

Hari-kirtana das: I’m so glad you asked.

Students: <laughter>

Hari-kirtana das: 'Reality' in yoga philosophy is comprised of three qualities: eternity, knowledge, and bliss. The basic proposition of yoga is that to be acquainted with reality is to be happy forever. Yoga's formula for how to be happy forever is to realize your eternal spiritual nature, to have experiential knowledge of an eternal identity that does not depend on a material body for its existence. In other words, yoga philosophy begins with the proposition that we are not our temporary material bodies; we are eternal spiritual beings currently experiencing consciousness through the medium of a temporary material body. The logic is that if you're not your body then you don't need your body to be.

This is not to say that you should dislike your body or neglect it. On the contrary, it's a great gift that we have a responsibility to care for, a wondrous vehicle with the potential to help us achieve amazing things.

But it's not us; it's a vehicle, a container. The body goes through all manner of transformations in the course of a life and we, the possessor of the body, experience those transformations. The transformations affect us, but there is a core consciousness that experiences these transformations and their effects. I experience this body but I am not this body. The independent existence of the self from the body is the most fundamental concept of yoga philosophy.

If you actually experienced yourself as an eternal spiritual being whose very existence did not depend on this material body, how would that change your life?

Student: I wouldn't have much to get stressed out about.

Hari-kirtana das: Yeah, if you're eternal then everything associated with our struggle to survive is no longer an issue.

Student: I might not need to do anything at all.

Hari-kirtana das: Which could get boring. We may think of 'enlightenment' or 'liberation' as a static state of just 'being' rather than a dynamic condition of spiritual activity.

Student: Well, you need a body to do stuff, right?

Hari-kirtana das: You need a material body to do material stuff; what if you had a spiritual body with which to do spiritual stuff? . . .

CHAPTER 5

Finding Hidden Treasure

... Sutras, by their very nature, are compositions of esoteric knowledge densely packed into a minimal number of syllables. As such, understanding the Yoga Sutras without any commentary or guidance is practically impossible. The Sutras are easy to memorize but need to be unpacked in order for their significance to be understood.

Story-driven scriptures like the Bhagavad-gita are challenging in a different way in that we assume they are exclusively allegorical. As such, we find no shortage of speculative interpretations. And, though reasonably transparent translations are available, it may never occur to us that there might be some value in taking an ancient text literally.

It's natural to look for a translation or commentary that resonates with us. But this, too, has its pitfalls. If we merely choose the interpretation that appeals to us, we may find ourselves reinforcing a philosophy and lifestyle we've already embraced rather than venturing out of our comfort zone into a space where the hard work of substantive growth and transformation really takes place.

To complicate things further, a singular yet limitless Absolute Truth is bound to be clothed in paradoxes. And sure enough, we find a wealth of paradoxes in the Upanishads. To wit, the Absolute Truth is everything and yet nothing is the Absolute Truth save and except for the Absolute Truth. The Absolute Truth is One and yet is all-pervading, the Absolute Truth is beyond form and yet has an unlimited form, the Absolute Truth is everywhere and yet, can only be found in one place. The Supreme Person walks and does not walk, is far away yet very near, is within everything and yet resides outside of everything. Ever residing in His own abode, the Supreme Person is swifter than the mind and can outrun all others.

If the Absolute Truth is everywhere and stays perpetually in one place, how can the Absolute Truth run *to* anywhere? How do you sort out the paradoxes from the contradictions? We can make some headway on our own but at a certain point it becomes clear in the pursuit of any kind of knowledge that a teacher is required if one is to reach beyond one's own limitations.

Student: Aren't we ultimately our own best teacher? It seems more important for me to understand what yoga philosophy means to *me* rather than what it means to someone else, to integrate my personal understanding into how I live my personal truth.

Hari-kirtana das: If you look at yoga through the eyes of post-modernism all you will see are anachronisms waiting to be reshaped into something relevant to your own point of view. If you look at post-modernism through the eyes of yoga you will see a descent into relativism that increases the illusion of separation from the grand narrative of Absolute Reality. Yoga is not post-modern. Ultimately you have to decide what makes the most sense and what resonates with you. But if you act as your own teacher then you'll be like the lawyer who represents him or her self in court.¹

However, you've brought up a good point insofar as there are two ways we can learn something. One way is by our own effort: speculation. The other way is by reception of knowledge from a source of knowledge: revelation. In the modern world, we usually prefer speculation. And, from the position of a modern worldview, we generally tend to assume that ancient wisdom texts are a product of human speculation, the thoughts of people who lived thousands of years ago. That's one way to approach a yoga wisdom text, in which case Patanjali's speculation is no better than our own, maybe a little worse because we think of ourselves as much more advanced now than people were then.

The other way to approach yoga wisdom text is to think, "This is transcendental knowledge, revealed to us through the pens of those who are actually self-realized, who are qualified to access transcendental knowledge and are doing us the favor of communicating that transcendental knowledge to us for our benefit." . . .

¹ "The adage that 'a lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client' is the product of years of experience by seasoned litigators." (Kay v. Ehrler, 499 US 432, 437 (1991)). The well-known quote cited here by the United States Supreme Court appears in an assortment of forms and is attributed to various sources, most notably the 18th century British writer Samuel Johnson.

CHAPTER 8

Functions of Yoga Philosophy

Yoga philosophy performs five functions. I borrowed the first four functions from Joseph Campbell's analysis of the functions of myth and retrofit them to yoga philosophy.² The fifth function is one that I added to Campbell's list. The functions are a metaphysical function, a cosmological function, a sociological function, a psychological function, and an illuminative function.³

These functions act as a bridge between theory and practice. Realization is applied knowledge. Theory by itself is just interesting mind-fodder; it's the practical application of theoretical knowledge that facilitates our experience of knowledge by direct perception.

So let's see how we can apply the theory of yoga in a practical way.

The first function is a metaphysical function: yoga reveals the divine nature of the world. The practice of yoga induces a realization that there is a transcendent source behind the surface phenomenology of our mundane experience. Gradually, the practitioner is promoted to a position from which he or she literally 'sees' and 'feels' the universe as a spiritual place.

If you experience the world as a manifestation of divinity, you treat the world differently than if you think of it as a causeless resource to be consumed at will.

The second function is a cosmological function: yoga provides a map that shows us where we are, the direction we're headed, what our possible destinations could be, and how to get anywhere from where we are. You can think of it as a GPS system for people who want to travel along on a spiritual path.

The third function is a sociological function. The sociological function has two parts: a set of ethics based on an established cosmic order that guides us in the process of moral decision-making and a naturally occurring social structure that offers everyone a position in society that's in harmony with their temperament and natural aptitude.

The ethical imperatives of yoga and the social structure that supports yoga each merit their own chapter and will be addressed forthwith.

² 'Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation' by Joseph Campbell

³ The psychological function is also known as a pedagogical function.

The fourth function is a psychological function: yoga provides a means for us to be peaceful irrespective of any external condition in our lives. As far as yoga is concerned, happiness does not come from an external pursuit of happiness in the mundane world; it comes from an internal condition of consciousness. The theory of yoga provides us with the means to make a distinction between material happiness, which is fleeting, and spiritual happiness, which is permanent. The practice of yoga is the exercise of a technology that awakens an experience internal spiritual happiness that's sustainable irrespective of external material conditions.

The fifth function is the illuminative function: yoga wisdom texts provide us with the means to re-create the revelatory experience of the author. Such texts don't just describe a condition of liberation from material consciousness; they also tell us how we can achieve it. They're like recipe books: you just follow the recipe.

But it's not exactly the same for everyone. As with any recipe, once you understand the principles then you can personalize it by adding a little extra cinnamon or a little more salt, or a little whatever. We can and should personalize our path within the parameters of universal principles of yoga. The essential principles of how you cook up self-realization are there and those are set and unchangeable. But there are also elements that are variable, that change according to time and circumstance and the individual practitioner.

Knowing the difference between a changeless principle and a variable principle is the art of understanding how to practically apply the principles of yoga in order to achieve the experience of yoga. . . .

CHAPTER 13

Karma, Samsara, and Happiness

Hari-kirtana das: I was at a *kirtan* festival in Florida and I was asked to speak at the end of the festival – just a brief talk about my experience of the festival. I opened by saying how happy I was to be among such a wonderful group of spiritually elevated people. Most of the people I was speaking to were young adults who were just getting married, just starting to have families or thinking about starting a family.

I said, "I'm very happy to be here and to be able to get to know some of you and to let you get to know me because it's only a matter of a short period of time before two of you... become my grandparents. I haven't decided which two of you it will be but in about 25 years, perhaps a few more if I'm lucky, you will look at me as I approach death and think, 'he's lookin' pretty repulsive'.

And then, a year later, you'll look at me again and you'll think, 'she is the most *adorable* thing I have *ever* seen ever! She's so adorable I just can't.'

Students: <laughter>

Hari-kirtana das: "Why will you think I'm adorable? Because I'll be in a little baby body that just popped out of your daughter or daughter-in-law's body. And everybody knows that babies are cute. It doesn't matter what kind of baby – human babies, goat babies, duck babies, they're all cute. But grandchildren babies are the cutest. So a year after being repulsed by my disgusting decrepitude you'll be hypnotized by my adorable cuteness."

Students: <trying to imagine being hypnotized by my adorable cuteness>

Hari-kirtana das: *Karma* and *samsara* describe the transmigration of the self through the cycle of repeated birth and death and how that cycle is driven by perpetual reactions to previous actions. *Karma* is action that creates future births.⁴ *Samsara* is the cycle of repeated birth and death.⁵ The concept of action that creates future births and the concept of a cycle of repeated birth and death go together. You can't separate them. Nor can you separate the idea of *atma*, of a conscious spiritual being who exists independently from the material body, from the idea of *karma* and *samsara*. These three elements, *atma*, *karma*, and *samsara*, are intrinsically linked.

⁴ See Bg 8.3

⁵ See Bg 9.3

Let's see how this is: as soon as you say that there is no *atma*, no spiritual, conscious being, who exists prior to taking birth in a particular body then you've eliminated both *samsara* and *karma* from the equation. That's because *karma* no longer makes sense in a 'one-shot' life scenario.

If your consciousness comes into being with the body then there's no past *karma* to determine what kind of body you got, where you take birth, or from whom: your life is a random event. So if you eliminate *karma* as a cause to the effect of taking birth in this or that way then an independent *atma* experiencing *samsara* also disappears. The same thing happens when you subtract *samsara*: you can't account for the nature of your birth without a previous life to refer to nor can you cram all of the reactions to our actions into a single lifetime. So *karma* disappears along with the *atma* in a 'single lifetime' scenario.

The bottom line is that all three come or go as a package deal.

In yoga philosophy our evolution is not thought of in terms of an accidental formation of a single-celled living thing that, somehow or other, automatically and mechanistically developed into all of these different life forms. Yoga thinks of evolution in terms of the evolution of qualities of consciousness that takes you to different life forms. Just because I'm a human in this life doesn't mean I will be a human in the next life. I can just as easily take birth in any one of the innumerable life forms that populate this universe, depending on the consciousness I cultivate in this life.⁶ Ever see someone who looks just like their dog?

Students: <laughter>

Hari-kirtana das: The only question is, 'which way are they going?' Are they coming from or going to?

Students: <more laughter>

⁶ See Bg 8.6