

YOGA SUTRAS OF PATANJALI

A Guide to Self-knowledge

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INTRODUCTION TO PART 3 – VIBHŪTI-PĀDA

On the attainment of extraordinary abilities

The Vibhūti-Pāda is for many the most fascinating chapter of the Yoga Sūtras. Vibhūti has several meanings: miraculous deed, supernatural ability, sacred ash, and sacred incarnation. In this chapter Patanjali discusses in detail the extraordinary abilities and supernatural powers (siddhis) that arise as fruits of perfection in concentration and meditation, for example, knowledge of past lives, insight into the past and future, being able to "see into" other people's minds, reaching others by telepathy, making the body larger, smaller, heavy or quite light, floating or even invisible at will.

In this context, I would like to elaborate on the Sanskrit terms TATTVA and SIDDHI.

TATTVA S are the primordial principles or elements: earth, fire, water, air, ether (space). Matter – and thus also the human body – is composed of these five primal elements. If there is harmony between the elements, body and mind are healthy. If there is an imbalance between them, illness or mental disorder arises. If one of the elements is missing, the body dies.

In matter these five tattvas assume certain properties (gunas). Through the different manifestations and compositions of the gunas, the variety of appearances arises.

If one succeeds in concentrating the physical, mental and spiritual energy like a laser beam and directing it to one point, it is possible to influence the tattvas in such a way that even the laws of nature can be suspended.

By practice and perfection in concentration, meditation and samādhi, by understanding and respecting the laws of nature and cosmic laws, the Yogi masters the various elements. Or in other words, they free themselves from their domination and can direct their effects according to their

will. The purer the mind and consciousness are, the more clearly does the effulgence of the ātma shine forth. Purity in consciousness, feelings and thoughts brings out the light of wisdom. Thus, the yogi attains extraordinary powers, which we regard as supernatural.

With the following picture it is easy to understand. Two men are in a room and look out of the window. One sees everything very clearly, but the other perceives things only blurred and indistinct because he is short-sighted. This means his vision is weak or not "pure". It seems to him like a "miracle" what the other one, whose sight is "pure" and strong, is able to recognise.

SIDDHIS are natural phenomena on the spiritual path. These powers, which appear to "normal" people like magic and miraculous powers, consist in the power and control over the elements which the yogi has gained through power of concentration.

The further an aspirant progresses on the spiritual path, the more siddhis begin to develop in them. However, at the same time Patanjali warns against the dangers of these special powers. When "miraculous powers" arise, it tempts the aspirant to become proud and arrogant and to boast about these powers. But the "ego" immediately destroys the spiritual gain.

All abilities that come to us are God's grace. Our principle should be: nāhamkartā – "It is not I who acts. God is the doer. The divine power works in me and through me in accordance with God's will."

Yoga is a science that reveals the secrets of human and cosmic consciousness. Yoga transcends the boundaries of religion and connects us with the Supreme Self. Through meditation, the rishis discovered and explored a way to escape the wheel of birth and death. This path is Yoga.

What does yoga mean? Yoga is not only physical and breathing exercises, not only mantra-japa and meditation. Yoga is that which connects us with the truth. Reality can only be experienced when the individual consciousness connects with the divine consciousness. The ways to do this are numerous, and yoga encompasses each of them: selfless work, study, prayer, exercise and meditation. Everyone may choose the path that corresponds to personal dispositions and feelings – if these are genuine, constant and selfless.

To attain and maintain saintly consciousness (santabhāva) is difficult. It is easy to say, but difficult to accomplish. We are too attached to different things – nation, culture, religion, friends, partners, children. We are selfish and think only as far as family and friendships go. The Realised One sees beyond these boundaries. Their heart is like an ocean in which all living beings find a place. Where God is, there is love, and where love is, there is God. Love connects heart to heart and the individual to God.

What is the difference between birth and incarnation? Both words mean to be born in a physical body. But the word "incarnation" expresses something special and is used only for the becoming human of a God-realised soul.

From time to time, God Himself incarnates on earth to liberate His devotees. How is this to be understood? Just as the moon is reflected in numerous bowls of water, so God's light reflects itself in the various incarnations. He Himself is but One, and each incarnation is a vessel in which a ray of God's light manifests itself in the purest form. To believe that the Divine Self has embodied itself on earth in only one Person is a fundamental error.

Many people do not understand how it is possible for a holy incarnation to act like a normal human being and have the same body, feelings, etc. as everyone else. Normally people are bound by their karmas and receive their birth according to their past deeds. A realised master, on the other hand, comes to earth voluntarily to help and returns to oneness with the ātma after the task is done. However, as long as they exist in the body, they too, like every living being, is connected with nature.

There is a parable for this:

A lawbreaker is convicted and sent to prison to serve his sentence. When he has "served" his time, or when he is pardoned, a representative of the judiciary appears in prison to free him. This liberator is also in prison at that moment, and to someone who does not know him, it appears as if he is also imprisoned. The meaning and significance of the prison stay, however, are not clear to the prisoner.

The prisoner's situation is completely different from the liberator's, even though outwardly there is no difference between the two. The one is in prison as a guilty person, while the other comes voluntarily and as a liberator.

We all have a debt to repay to those who helped us along the way and made our realisation possible. We should show gratitude to them by passing on the knowledge and contributing to the common good.

Five debts of gratitude each person has to repay:

1. MĀTRI-RĪNA to parents – by honouring them, helping them, and caring for them. When we are adults ourselves, we repay our debt for the care and love they gave us in our childhood.
2. PITR-RĪNA towards the ancestors – through prayers, remembrance and offerings.
3. DEVA-RĪNA towards the gods, i.e. the elements, principles, nature – through prayers, mantras, offerings and donations.

4. ĀCHĀRYA-RĪNA towards our teachers – by applying and passing on the knowledge they gave us have transmitted.
5. RISHI-RĪNA towards the spiritual masters and saints – through selfless service and help to all people.

Until this obligation is fulfilled, we are not free. Only then can the ātma become detached in the cosmic self.

There are three types of laws:

1. Human laws. This includes the state laws and social regulations.
2. Laws of nature. The laws of nature are valid throughout the universe. Their characteristic is that they are connected with time and space. As long as we are bound to nature, we are also subject to the passage of time.
3. The Divine or Cosmic law. This law is eternal and unchangeable and is above the other two laws. It is light, truth, reality, eternity, unity and bliss. We can name "God" any name we want, but in reality He has no "name". The names are our inventions. We originally had no name either – others gave it to us.

As long as we do not succeed in overcoming natural law and reaching cosmic law, we will remain trapped in duality and swing back and forth between happiness and suffering.

Life is like a river flowing between two shores. On one shore we experience happiness, beauty, joy and all the good things of life. On the other shore, however, there is suffering, misery, pain, separation, sadness. In short, everything we call "unhappiness". But what is important is not which side we are currently "swimming by" – what is important is that we are moving toward the ocean. Whether in happiness or sorrow, our goal is to reach eternity where this duality is suspended. All exercises and techniques, meditation, repetition of the mantra and prayer have only one purpose: to evolve so that the flow of our existence finally flows into the ocean of infinity.

God sometimes appears to us full of goodness and grace, but sometimes hard and cruel. In good times, we thank God. But when misfortune befalls us, we complain how God can be so merciless. In reality, God has nothing to do with it. He is only the witness. The universally valid law of karma is the cause of happiness and suffering, in that what everyone has caused by their own deeds in the course of their existences falls back on them.

Human laws cannot change the laws of nature. Conversely, however, natural law can very well annul earthly laws and make them ineffective. Natural law, in turn, can be overridden by

divine law. In between, however, there is a barrier that must be overcome, like the border between two countries.

On what does it depend whether someone is allowed to cross the border from one country to another? Whether or not they have the right documents and there is no police warrant against them. What does that mean in this context?

An example:

Suppose someone stays for a few weeks in an expensive hotel where he has registered. However, one morning he secretly makes off without paying the bill. The hotel will report to the police, who will pass on a report to the border authorities. If this man now tries to flee abroad, he will be arrested at the border and detained until he has paid his debt. He may not be caught immediately, but at some point, he will certainly be caught.

Analogous to this example is the transition from natural law to cosmic law. The individual self is denied entry into the light as long as there are karmas to be paid. Inevitably it is drawn back again into darkness.

Life does not cease after death. The subtle sheaths (koshas) continue to exist. All karmas – and consequently all problems – go with us.

Today's scientists have so far tried without success to locate the seat of consciousness and memory in the brain. According to the yoga teachings, consciousness, memories and feelings are stored in the ātma, and the brain is only the physical transmitter. Proof of this is given by the accounts of persons who were clinically dead, yet can remember how they passed out of the body into the astral plane and could perceive their bodies, their relatives and friends, the whole environment from above. How could the brain have recorded this happening when the consciousness was obviously outside the physical body?

I have a student who had such a death experience. He had an accident and almost bled to death. He remembers a sharp, almost unbearable pain that stopped quite suddenly. At that moment he found himself outside his body. He could see his figure lying beneath him and watch as he was taken to the hospital and resuscitation attempts were made. He himself felt quite well, happy and without pain. Then he saw two tunnels. One was brilliantly bright and filled with light, the other dark and eerie. He wanted to go to the light, but he could not. An invisible force pulled and pushed him towards the dark tunnel. He knew that pain and suffering awaited, but he had no choice. He fell into the dark shaft and at that moment regained his body consciousness. The doctors who had cared for him rejoiced at their success, but he felt sad that he had to return to earthly existence.

These and many other similar accounts of experience prove that life goes on after death and that the Self is the witness of all events. The self knows all past lives, it is the observer of the present existence and also knows its future.

Liberation is not attained through siddhis, so we should not strive for them. For in so doing we lose sight of the goal of self-realisation and union with God. The supernatural, magical or tantric powers lead one who is attached to them to the corresponding astral planes after death, but not to liberation.

A realised yogi and master does not demonstrate their powers. They take the essence – the wisdom – from all things and phenomena, just as the bee takes honey even from poisonous plants. So also, a true aspirant takes the best part of truth and knowledge from every teaching and experience and is not misled by it.

But there is also a danger. To collect the "nectar" like a bee is wise. However, reaching into the beehive is not advisable if one does not want to make acquaintance with painful stings. When the ego gets involved, even positive forces can "sting" and turn into problems.

So, siddhis can be positive or negative depending on how you use them. Never is something only negative or only positive. One should always look at both sides. Poison can kill or medicine can save life. Nectar can make one immortal or, if consumed in excess, it can act like poison. Siddhis in themselves are not bad. They can be helpful in service to others or for self-protection, in accordance with cosmic laws. The only harmful thing is to play around with them and proudly demonstrate their powers. Unfortunately, there are few who can resist this temptation. Those who think they are special and accomplish great things because they possess such abilities will feel the negative effects.

A man once saw a bird on the shore of a lake, which elegantly threw up the fish it had caught, caught it with its beak and swallowed it whole. He managed to do this in seconds and with consummate perfection. The man was impressed with this bird's skill and began to try it as well. He began by throwing up cherries and grapes, catching them in his mouth and swallowing them without chewing, as the bird had done with the fish. He practiced with much patience and perseverance, and eventually succeeded in catching and swallowing other things in this way – pieces of wood, stones, nails, and finally even a knife. He could throw up a sword, catch it with his mouth open, and let it slide down his throat without being hurt. The man began to perform this feat publicly, gathering spectators and admirers. When someone asked him who was his master who taught him this art, he used to say, "No one taught me. I taught myself." He had now reached the point where his ego came out and believed he could do everything on his own.

But when the ego rises, the siddhis disappear. One day this also happened to the man in this

story, and he was mortally wounded by the sword he swallowed. Then he realised his mistake and cried out, "Oh, now I know who my guru is. It was the bird whom I saw swallowing the fish. It was from him that I learned everything!" But this realisation came too late to save him.

Hard work on oneself, practice and concentration are necessary to attain perfection, a siddhi. Once one has acquired it, the temptation is to boast about it. To acquire supernatural powers is not the aim of the yogi. They accept the powers that come to them on their path, but do not waste their time and thoughts on them, but goes on unperturbed.

On the spiritual path we encounter stones and thorns as well as flowers and fruits. Sometimes we even find a piece of gold or a precious stone. The important thing is not to stop and not to be deterred by hardships, nor to be seduced by treasures.

Many students want to realise everything very quickly, which, of course, does not succeed, just as it is not possible to become an Olympic champion overnight by merely "wanting". To achieve a siddhi, strong discipline is necessary, not just for a few days, but for months and years. One who observes the yoga discipline will certainly obtain siddhis one day. But those who run after the siddhis will not get them. The king should not ask the beggar for alms, otherwise he will lose his kingship. The ātma is king, and the siddhis are lowly before him, like beggars.

Accept these forces, protect them, respect them, but do not "idolise" them. Only then can you realise the highest goal.

In order to understand the Vībhūti-Pāda, we must distinguish two concepts: BAHIRANGAYOGA and ANTARANGAYOGA (bahiranga= outside, antaranga= inside).

In the previous section, Sādhana-Pāda, Patanjali began by explaining the eight-stage Rāja-Yoga path (Asthānga Yoga), first describing the five stages of "outer yoga" up to pratyahāra (withdrawal of the senses). Now Patanjali continues his exposition and describes the next stages: concentration (dhāranā), meditation (dhyāna) and highest consciousness (samādhi).

Compared to the previous principles, these belong to the "inner" yoga and consist in the inwardly directed search and realisation of imminent powers. Compared to the last and highest perfection, however, all preceding stages of the development and expansion of consciousness are "bahiranga", i.e. "outer" degrees of yoga.

DHĀRANĀ– Concentration

Just as physical training increases muscular strength, constant practice of dhāranā strengthens the power of concentration. If the aspirant succeeds in concentrating the mind on a single object for a long time, their consciousness enters the next stage, dhyāna.

DHYĀNA– Meditation

In this state of consciousness the meditator is exclusively aware of the object of meditation. In an uninterrupted stream, consciousness flows towards this object. The fruit of meditation is wisdom and enlightenment of the mind (pragyā buddhi).

Dhyāna results in the consummation of:

SAMĀDHI– highest consciousness

In samādhi, consciousness merges with the object of meditation and becomes one with it. As knower, knowledge and object unite, an essential transformation of consciousness takes place. The state of samādhi is fundamentally different from the "normal" states of consciousness – waking consciousness, dream and deep sleep – and cannot be described in words, just as it is impossible to explain higher mathematics to a one-year-old child.

The practice of these three sādhanas is called SAMYAMA.

Samyama consists of the attainment of complete control over mind and consciousness, and ultimately of their union with the object of meditation – the divine Self. Samyama bestows upon the aspirant numerous spiritual fruits. The mind is sharpened and the will power strengthened, so that subsequently the yogi can master all disciplines more easily and quickly. "Heavenly" visions, extrasensory experiences and extraordinary powers (siddhis) appear.

Every human being has a certain task to fulfil in life, a goal to reach. Human life is a precious gift. Only man has the opportunity and ability to achieve what his inner self desires and for the sake of which he was born. Only man can know and realise God. My teaching for you – as Srī Mahāprabhujī has given it to me – is the realisation of truth, God-realisation.

