Closing the Gap Between Yoga and Zen

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There doesn't seem to be much in common these days between yoga and Buddhist meditation practice. Buddhist meditators tend to regard yoga as a system of Lycra-clad stretching exercises that might help them sit better and perhaps relieve tension on a long retreat, but that otherwise have little or nothing to contribute to their meditation practice. On the other side, the current distance between yoga and Buddhist meditation practice has been expressed with delicious irony by yoga teacher and author Richard Rosen in *Pranyama Beyond the Fundamentals* (Shambhala Publications, 2006):

> . . . we yoga people leave meditation
> to the Buddhists, whom we then
> look at askance because we consider
> their posture to be deplorable.

But what yoga has largely become during the last hundred years or so—a highly developed system emphasizing scores of physical postures called asanas (a term that means "seat" and originally referred only to a handful of sitting positions)—is not what it always was. Nor was it at all unrelated to early Buddhism. Quite the opposite.

Yoga began as a meditation practice. By the middle of the first millennium BCE Yoga was already established as one of the major philosophical and spiritual schools in northern India. When Shakyamuni Buddha left his life as palace prince to lead the homeless life, it was to prominent Yoga teachers he turned, first Arada Kalama and, when he mastered his teachings, to Udraka Ramaputra. We know their names and a little about their teachings and practice techniques from various sources, including early Buddhist sutras. The teachings pointed to reality as consisting of matter and spirit. Spirit, or atman, pure and clear in itself, has become enmeshed in matter and lost its identity. The yogic meditation practice he learned was designed to lead to higher and higher levels of samadhi, culminating in the atman, or self, becoming liberated from its identification with matter and attaining its original state of absolute independence.

The Buddha mastered the levels of samadhi that his teachers had attained, but found that this experience did not resolve the great question that led him to the spiritual life: Why is there suffering and what can be done about it? So he moved on, first joining a small group devoted to extreme ascetic practice. When he found this too to be unsatisfactory, he set out on his own, devoting himself to a seated meditation practice, some of the details of which are echoed in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the earliest Yogic text we have and one that quite possibly existed in oral form during the Buddha's life:

> Having set up in a clean place
> A firm seat, neither high nor low,
> A seat of kusha grass covered
> With deerskin and soft cloth on top,
> Let him sit there and train his mind
> On *one point*, controlling his *thoughts*.

It seems clear that Buddha did not abandon his early Yogic training in the final stages of his quest. But the liberating insight he attained was in contradiction to an essential Yogic teaching. According to the Buddha, there actually is no atman in the sense of a permanent, individual self but rather a dependent co-origination of all phenomena, all of which possess a nature perfect in every way. It is ignorance of original completeness that is the fundamental cause of suffering.

From these beginnings Buddhism and Yoga went on to influence each other over the centuries, sharing teachings and debating philosophical differences well into the sixth century CE. The best evidence for this is the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, which were composed in the second century CE, and the extensive commentaries on them that began soon after and continued for centuries. The *Yoga Sutras* themselves consist of 195 brief aphorisms, or threads (the word *sutra* literally means "thread"), arranged in four chapters: "Meditative Absorption," "Practice," "Mystic Powers" and "Absolute Independence." The terseness of the Sanskrit text suggests that the sutras are mnemonic devices summarizing an older oral tradition. The very first sutra, "Yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind," sets the tone: Yoga's primary concern is meditation.

The most striking example in the *Yoga Sutras* of cross-influences between Buddhism and Yoga can be seen by comparing the eight limbs of Yoga (*yogashtanga*) as presented by Patanjali with Buddhism's traditional noble eightfold path (*aryashtangamarga*) (see table on page 19).

Both systems have similar overall structures, foregrounding moral and ethical practice—how we live our lives—and then listing progressive stages of meditation practice culminating in samadhi. It's worth noting that the moral restraints in the first limb of Yoga as detailed in the Yoga Sutras are almost identical to the traditional Buddhist five precepts and are presented as allowing no exceptions whatever. Yoga limbs 3 through 8 begin with

The Noble Eightfold Path (Aryashtangamarga)		The Eight Limbs of Yoga (Yogashtanga)	
1. Samyak Drishti	Right View	1. Yama	Moral Restraints
2. Samyak Samkalpa	Right Intention	2. Niyama	Ethical Observances
3. Samyak Vac	Right Speech	3. Asana	Seated Posture
4. Samyak Karmanta	Right Action	4. Pranayama	Breath Control
5. Samyak Ajiva	Right Livelihood	5. Pratyahara	Sense Withdrawal
6. Samyak Vyayama	Right Effort	6. Dharana	Concentration
7. Samyak Smrti	Right Attention	7. Dhyana	Meditation
8. Samyak Samadhi	Right Samadhi	8. Samadhi	Samadhi

the basics of meditation—this is how you sit, this is how you breathe—and then take us through deepening stages of sensory and mental absorption.

There are many other indications in the *Yoga Sutras* of common ground between Buddhism and classical Yoga. A few examples must suffice:

• *YS* 1.33 recommends cultivating an attitude of friendship (*maitrī*) toward happy persons, compassion (*karunā*) toward the distressed, joy (*muditā*) toward the virtuous and equanimity (*upekshā*) toward the vicious. These four virtues are identical to the four brahma viharas in Buddhism.

• *YS* 1.41 compares samadhi to a transparent jewel taking on the form of whatever is before it. Compare this with the familiar Buddhist trope of mirror mind.

• *YS* 1.49 states that samadhi has a different focus from that of discursive reasoning or scripture. Compare Bodhidharma's "direct pointing to the human heart/mind, without reliance on words or scriptures."

• *YS* 2.3 lists as impediments to Yoga practice the *kleshas*, referencing especially desire, aversion, ignorance and a sense of self. Compare this with the second great vow of Mahayana Buddhism: "Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all."

There are significant differences between the two traditions as well. In addition to their already-mentioned divergent positions on selfhood, there is in classical Yoga no real equivalent to Buddhism's bodhisattva ideal. Nevertheless it is clear that Yoga was originally grounded in meditation practice and remained so for centuries. The process by which it has been transformed into a largely postural practice in modern times has been definitively laid out by Mark Singleton in his book *Yoga Body* (Oxford University Press, 2010). One promising way modern yoga might recover its meditative origins has been suggested by Edwin Bryant, whose magisterial edition of the *Yoga Sutras* (North Point Press, 2009) I have used freely in this essay. In his commentary on YS 1.39, which states that anything whatsoever can be used as the object of meditation, Bryant calls attention to a proposal by the great yoga teacher B. K. S. Iyengar in his own book (*Yoga: The Tree of Knowledge*, HarperCollins, 2012), that the yoga posture itself be the object of meditation. Here is Bryant:

> Approaching *asana* in this way—as a bona fide support for fixing the mind (and one for which many people in the West might be best suited)—is thus fully within Patañjali's system, *provided it is performed with this intent* rather than some other superficial motive. Indeed, this approach constitutes a unique contribution not just to the history of Yoga as it has been transmitted over the centuries but, more important, also to the participational possibilities of the practice of yoga as it is being transmitted in a present-day mainstream context. People who might otherwise be disinterested in some of the other truth claims of Yoga are very attracted to *asana*, albeit often for physical rather than spiritual reasons. Even if this is the case, if the mind is fully fixed and absorbed *without distraction* on the practice of *asana*, for whatever motive, it can still attain fixity and stillness.

This seems like a promising approach, one that could draw current yoga students into a congenial but serious meditation practice, and one that could possibly be useful for Zen students who are interested, as we all should be, in bringing our practice off the cushion and into our lives as a whole. In any case, it is always worth remembering that just as Buddha was a yogi and made full use of the resources of the traditions of his time, so should each of us make best use of whatever traditions in which we participate. ◆