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## THE STRONG CASE FOR VEGETARIANISM IN PĀTAÑJALA YOGA



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In a recent interview, yoga historian David Gordon White commented on the precarious commitment that modern yoga has to so-called Classical Yoga. The predicament stems from a disjuncture between the contents of the *Yogasūtra* (*YS*) and the practices and concepts commonly taught in many yoga centers and trainings. The latter teachings resonate stronger with alternative traditions, specifically those illustrated in *haṭha* yoga and Vedānta sources and within their related living communities.<sup>1</sup> As White concluded regarding this peculiar and ubiquitous selection of the *YS*, “They chose the wrong text, but so be it.”<sup>2</sup> It is crucial to note that White’s allegation of “wrongness” implicates consonance rather than authenticity, and is little concerned with the question of which yoga system is the most “genuine.” Yet despite this potential disjuncture, as Pātañjali’s *YS* is almost universally regarded as the sourcebook for Classical Yoga, it is consistently prioritized within modern practice communities. It thus remains vital to probe the ideas contained therein, and the subject of this essay, vegetarianism, is one such idea.

The title of this study should not come as a complete surprise. In fact, for those familiar with the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* (*PYŚ*) and convinced of its stance on vegetarianism, the following argument is superfluous. What must be understood, however, is that the following analysis focuses on the normative and prescriptive features of the *PYŚ*. There is no attempt to describe how supposed Pātañjala yogins of the first millennium were actually behaving, whether consistently or inconsistently with the text. Besides the fact that any such endeavor is highly questionable if not impossible, modern yoga communities rarely if ever base their ethical orientations and practices on what specific premodern yogins were doing, as more often than not the emphasis is on what certain texts described they *ought* to be doing. One can criticize modern yoga communities for their textual normativity, but until these texts cease operating as the bases for “off the mat” behavior, they remain relevant objects of scrutiny and potential sources of critique aimed back at the communities themselves. Hence, while the subject of vegetarianism/veganism is often skirted in modern yoga due to its persistent volatility, this essay thus confronts the issue head-on from a specifically textual perspective. I conclude that the *PYŚ* unconditionally prohibits the intentional harming of animals for any purpose,<sup>3</sup> and incontestably so with respect to the structure of *aṣṭāṅgayoga*.<sup>4</sup> Does this imply that one must be a strict vegetarian to practice *any* form of yoga? No. There exist practice traditions that condone, pardon, or integrate the consumption of flesh at all times or under specified circumstances. Besides,

one can justifiably call him/herself a student of Pātañjala Yoga while sincerely pursuing this goal of strict vegetarianism. What is unjustifiable is the attempted reconciliation of the consumption of flesh and use of skin with the *PYŚ* itself. Pātañjala Yoga in no way sanctions harm to animals, and hence a dedicated Pātañjala Yoga practitioner either adopts such a regimen immediately or is consistently striving to do so.<sup>5</sup>

### Yogaśāstra and Yogasūtra

The title “*Pātañjalayogaśāstra*” refers to the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali as well as the accompanying commentary or *bhāṣya*. The latter is commonly attributed to Vyāsa, a commentator who supposedly lived a few centuries after Patañjali (fifth century C.E.) and composed the first commentary on the *Yogasūtra*. However, recent scholarship into early manuscripts, especially that of Philipp A. Maas, has reenergized the hypothesis that Patañjali and Vyāsa were one and the same person.<sup>6</sup> In a strong version of this claim, the *sūtras* and *bhāṣya* were composed at a single same time by a single person, namely Patañjali. In a weaker formulation, Patañjali/Vyāsa compiled the *PYŚ* at a single time but the pre-existent *sūtras* themselves (of Patañjali?) were cleverly positioned alongside his own “auto”-commentary. Maas’ convincing research is my first basis for referring to the *PYŚ* as a unified composition, rather than a quarantine of individual *sūtras* with only casual or convenient reference to the *bhāṣya* (a habit prevalent in modern yoga discussions). Second, regardless of the veracity of Maas’ work, it is prudent to recognize that our entire understanding of the content of the otherwise impenetrable *Yogasūtra* derives from the language of the *bhāṣya*. Edwin Bryant has emphasized that the history of Pātañjala Yoga scholarship is a history of analyzing the *Yogasūtra* as understood by the *bhāṣyakāra* (writer of the *bhāṣya*).<sup>7</sup> Even scholars who critique the *bhāṣyakāra*’s unpacking of particular *sūtras* have initially relied on the *bhāṣya* for their fundamental understanding of the context and content of the *sūtras*. For this reason I maintain that the authority of the *bhāṣya* must be considered approximate if not identical to that of the *sūtras* themselves. Therefore, in the following discussion I will refer to the entire *PYŚ* as representative of Classical Yoga, invoking additional sub-commentaries only when there is a critical reason to do so.

### *The Not-So-Strong Arguments for Vegetarianism*

The strongest claim for vegetarianism arrives in the second half of the *Sādhanapāda* and will be discussed in detail below. However, it is helpful to reflect on earlier portions of the text that could potentially be summoned as evidence.<sup>8</sup> An admittedly thin claim can be attached to YS 1.33 of the *Samādhipāda*, where mental dispositions such as friendliness (*maitri*) toward the happy (*sukha*) and compassion (*karunā*) toward the suffering (*duḥkha*) are promoted as means for mental purification.<sup>9</sup> This *sūtra* also enjoins joy (*mudita*) toward the virtuous (*punya*), but as animals are not traditionally (and at least generally) considered capable of generating *punya* or merit, one doubts whether *any* part of this *sūtra* can legitimately be applied to nonhuman

animals. The *sūtra* could be stretched to read in such a manner, but such an interpretation would be challenging to defend. In addition, akin to numerous other Classical Yoga prescriptions, these attitudes are primarily engendered to pacify the mind-complex (*citta*) of the individual yogin and only benefit other sentient beings in the process (a divergent orientation is visible in Mahāyāna Buddhism). Although compassion for animals *in themselves* is an ethic regularly employed in contemporary vegan and Animal Rights movements, this specifically “other-oriented” sense of compassion is not prominent in the *PYŚ*. The lack of such an emphasis and the overall “Self-centeredness” of the *PYŚ* is a central theme to be remembered by an attentive reader of the work. This notion of Self-centeredness stems from both the insistence on the cleansing of one’s personal mind-complex and also the acceptance by the *PYŚ* of a “plurality of Selves” (*puruṣabahutva*).<sup>10</sup> Hence, the dominant focus is on one’s own *citta* (mind-complex) and one’s own embodied *puruṣa* (Self). It is important to mention that the “plurality of Selves” doctrine does not come without its own internal philosophical problems, but for the moment one need only agree that it is accepted by the *PYŚ*.

Returning to *YS* 1.33 itself, there are other noticeable problems. First, it is not suggested in the *sūtra* that these mental dispositions need to manifest in the form of tangible action toward physically present or once-present beings. One can satisfy the requirement simply by visualizing those who are happy, suffering, et cetera, and developing the corresponding mental attitudes. *YS* 1.33 places an emphasis on nourishing these mental dispositions without necessarily coupling them with actions toward actual living beings. Second, even if corresponding actions are assumed, the *sūtra* or *bhāṣya* does not state that these dispositions or actions need apply to non-human animals. Third, and perhaps most significantly, is the actual location of this *sūtra* in the first chapter. *YS* 1.33 can be read as marking the first in a long list of *sūtras* that furnish options for the one-pointed stability of the mind. As such, the attitudes of friendliness and compassion are not requirements for the practicing yogin, but merely options among a variety of equally appropriable techniques. Responding to the apparent flimsiness of such an ethic, some commentators have worked to embolden the *sūtra* by defining its *cittaprasādanam* (mental clarity) as a type of requisite cleansing that precedes any one-pointedness. As such, the cultivation of friendliness and compassion *are required* in advance of the cherished practice of one-pointed stability. However, an equally if not more persuasive claim is that this *sūtra* initiates a section of “*vā*”s (“or”s) that ranges from *YS* 1.33 to 1.39. Under this alternative interpretation, the friendliness and compassion of *YS* 1.33 are not mandatory ethical orientations. Not only is this highly plausible given the grammar of the *sūtras* themselves, but the *bhāṣya* on *YS* 1.33 states that these dispositions are what create one-pointed stability;<sup>11</sup> the succeeding *sūtras* up until 1.39 appear to make the same promise.

I highlight this *sūtra* because while its recommendation of “compassion toward the suffering” seems to strongly support the ethical treatment of animals, on close inspection it fails to provide unshakable *textual* support for vegetarianism-in-action. This example is also noteworthy, for it illustrates how Pātañjala Yoga *in toto* focuses

on transforming the mind of the individual aspirant with only a secondary interest in the welfare of others.<sup>12</sup> This repeated theme of Pātañjala Yoga can be critiqued in its own right, even in the context of the strong case for vegetarianism discussed below. However, the objective of this essay is not to deconstruct *why* Patañjali requires a vegetarian diet (i.e., out of a concern for oneself, for others, or both) but rather *if* and *where* he does so. YS 1.33 is a prime example of how arguably “other”-oriented dispositions such as friendliness and compassion are still ultimately grounded in their ability to contour the mind of the yogin.

### *One, Two, Three Classical Yogas?*

Before we turn to the strong case for vegetarianism in the second chapter (*Sādhanapāda*), it is necessary to isolate the three yogas of the *PYŚ* with particular attention to the second and third. The three are: the yoga of mental cessation (*yogaścittavṛttinirodhaḥ*, in YS 1.2), the yoga of action (*kriyāyoga*, in YS 2.1), and the eight-limbed yoga (*aṣṭāṅgayoga*, in YS 2.28–2.29).<sup>13</sup> The yoga of mental cessation is discussed throughout the first chapter, and the other two are first introduced in the second. The *bhāṣyakāra*’s introduction to the *Sādhanapāda* clarifies that chapter 1 provides yoga for the collected mind (*samāhitacitta*) while the following chapter provides yoga for the restless mind (*vyutthitacitta*). The second chapter then discusses both a yoga of action and an eight-limbed yoga. Any scholar of the *PYŚ* is forced to speculate on how these three yogas interface and also wonder if any of them represent an “original” Pātañjala yoga, with the remaining yogas included for greater scope or comprehensiveness. There is also the puzzle of whether the second two, *kriyāyoga* and *aṣṭāṅgayoga*, overlap or abide independently. These are not cardinal issues for the present inquiry, but the fundamental division of aspirants and yogas based on mental fitness must be borne in mind. The teachings of the *Sādhanapāda* aim to instill the collected mind assumed in the first *pāda*. Yogins ill equipped for the yoga of mental cessation must resort to the yogas about to be discussed. This is pertinent to the topic of vegetarianism because if the restraint (*yama*) of non-harming is found only in the *Sādhanapāda*, does that mean that it applies only to yogins of agitated mind and not those of restless mind? If one is already fit to follow the yoga of mental cessation, does this permit the violation of the yoga-limbs (*yogāṅgas*) of the second chapter?

Although this creative reading has some traction, it fails to align with the *bhāṣya*’s hierarchy of mental fitness based on the presence of *sattva* regarding the yogins of chapter 1 and those of chapter 2. As the yogin of mental cessation sustains a very high degree of *sattva*, it is understood that s/he is not restless and thereby not vulnerable to the temptations of the mind-body that instigate unvirtuous behavior such as harming. This mind is already in a state of “collectiveness” that inhibits such harmful, *sattva*-defiling behavior. Also, from the perspective of popular relevance, the majority of modern Yoga practitioners relate more to the yogas presented in the *Sādhanapāda* than the *Samādhipāda*. Therefore, this line of thought lacks both textual credibility and positive application for most practice communities. That being

said, an interesting case for the “suspension of the ethical” could be made from a tantric angle; it may be alleged that the yogin of mental cessation is not bound by the “ethical” injunctions of *aṣṭāṅgayoga*, as s/he has passed beyond such dualities. Therefore, the taboo against harm is nullified. However, this perspective is nowhere indicated in the *PYŚ* or in the traditional sub-commentaries.

### *The Strong Case for Vegetarianism in the Sādhanapāda*

The *Sādhanapāda* begins by introducing the yoga of action and later describes the ambiguously affiliated eight-limbed yoga. Recalling the scale of mental fitness mentioned at the start of the *pāda*, it is evident that *kriyāyoga-aṣṭāṅgayoga* (interwoven or separated) comprises a “lesser” path than the route of direct mental cessation. Also, it is important to recognize that *kriyāyoga*, the yoga of action, is explicitly referenced in only two *sūtras* (*YS* 2.1 and *YS* 2.2), while the *aṣṭāṅgayoga* or eight-limbed yoga is discussed in thirty-six *sūtras* (2.28–3.8)! As might be expected from only two *sūtras*, *kriyāyoga* nowhere includes the practice of non-harming or vegetarianism, unless one reckons that its inclusion of austerity (*tapas*) in the form of fasting (a typical form of *tapas*) involves precise dietary restrictions that prohibit the intake of flesh. Unfortunately this conception of *tapas* is not substantiated by the *PYŚ* and thus fails as a strong argument. It is valid to maintain that austerity commonly involves the limiting of food and water, but nowhere is that restriction explicitly vegetarian in nature (and certainly not vegan<sup>14</sup>). Furthermore, *tapas* is primarily undertaken to overcome one’s ensnarement with binaries (hot and cold, pleasure and pain, etc.) that stem from false identification and attachment to the body. *Tapas* is not orchestrated according to “ethical” principles of harming and non-harming;<sup>15</sup> rather it involves hardship in varying degrees for the sake of challenging the body and transforming the yogin’s mental relationship to it. Hence, taken in isolation, *kriyāyoga* provides no evidence for the practice of strict vegetarianism.

The eight-limbed yoga introduced at *YS* 2.28–2.29 is difficult to place alongside or within this yoga of action. The term *āṅga* is consistently translated as “limb” or “part” but has also been given as “aid” (e.g., by T. S. Rukmani and M. R. Yardi), “accessory” (Prasada), and “ancillary” (Maas). The former is a correct literal translation of the word but leaves much to be desired by way of meaning. By calling the *āṅgas* “limbs” there is no indication of either the hierarchical nature of the limbs of *aṣṭāṅgayoga* or of how this *aṣṭāṅgayoga* functions alongside the other yogas. The remaining translations of “aid,” “accessory,” and “ancillary” take the debatable liberty of implying that the eight limbs fall under the yoga of action or serve as assistants to it, thus gesturing toward the interpretation that the two yogas do not operate in complete isolation from one another. This interpretation is initially persuasive given the lack of any elaborate explication of *kriyāyoga* itself, but it is even more persuasive to assume that the three facets of *kriyāyoga*—austerity, own-study, and devotion to God—were self-explanatory to the intended audience of the *PYŚ* and thus required little further discussion.<sup>16</sup> If the prior claim is made, that the yoga of action serves as a type of superstructure under which eight-limbed yoga articulates, several problems

arise, most of which cannot be handled here. Perhaps the most outstanding source of consternation is the fact that the three aforementioned pillars of *kriyāyoga* are repeated *verbatim* as three of the five observances (*niyama*) of the eight-limbed yoga. If the limbs of this *aṣṭāṅgayoga* are generally progressive, as the grammar and content of the *sūtras* signify, then surely the entirety of *kriyāyoga* cannot be condensed and contained within just one of the early limbs of *aṣṭāṅgayoga*. If so, the whole now serves as part, the superstructure operating as a mere preliminary technique. This construction is also puzzling considering the fact that the five observances are considered an “external” limb of the eight-limbed yoga in comparison to the final three components.<sup>17</sup>

Perplexing textual juxtapositions such as this have motivated commentators and scholars either to offer inventive reconciliations or to plainly conclude that *aṣṭāṅgayoga* represents a third yoga in the *PYŚ* alongside the two aforementioned yogas. The latter conclusion strengthens the hypothesis that the *PYŚ* is a compilation of three (or more) historically distinct yogas, with the author of the *PYŚ* striving for syncretic if not synthetic success. Whatever the final conclusion may be, this eight-limbed yoga *by itself* is what many modern-day practitioners recognize as the heart of their practice of Classical Yoga. Therefore, while discussing Classical Yoga as a whole, I highlight the *aṣṭāṅgayoga* section due to its unquestionable stance on vegetarianism as well as its mainstream recognition and relevance. In the conclusion I also address the tangential issue of how vegetarianism applies to a yogin who disregards *aṣṭāṅgayoga* and solely follows the yoga of cessation or the yoga of action.

### *The Absolutist Stance of Aṣṭāṅgayoga*

In *YS* 2.30, the first limb of *aṣṭāṅgayoga*, the restraints (*yamas*), are described. The yogin commences the practice of the eight-limbed yoga through non-harming, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-hoarding.<sup>18</sup> The principal restraint, non-harming, is unique not only because it directly relates to the treatment of living creatures, but also because the succeeding four restraints and five “observances” (*niyamas*, the second limb) derive from it.<sup>19</sup> In other words, not only is *ahiṃsā* prioritized over these nine components, but also the others are only explicated for the purpose of teaching and instilling *ahiṃsā*. It is noteworthy that one of the later commentators, Vijñānabhikṣu (sixteenth century), not only deems non-harming the preeminent feature of *aṣṭāṅgayoga*, but also adds that the main function of certain *āṅgas* beyond *yama* and *niyama* (namely *asana* and *prāṇāyāma*) is to address the consequences of harming and establish non-harming.<sup>20</sup> Vijñānabhikṣu may be reading a bit past the *bhāṣya*’s wording of “*uttare ca yamaniyamāstanmūlāḥ*” (“The other abstentions and observances are rooted in it”), but in any event the priority of non-harming is staunchly expressed. However, the opening line of the *bhāṣya* to *YS* 2.30 still does not clarify what non-harming refers to in practice, stating only that it must be adhered to constantly, in all places, at all times, and toward all beings.<sup>21</sup>

The next *sūtra*, *YS* 2.31, insists on the primacy of strict adherence to the five restraints, all of which stem from non-harming. Echoing with greater force the first

line of the *bhāṣya* of 2.30, this *sūtra* labels the adoption of the restraints as a *mahāvratam* or great vow (of the yogin) when followed regardless of birth, location, time, and circumstance.<sup>22</sup> It is crucial to underscore the stridence with which the otherwise diplomatic Patañjali (case in point, 1.39<sup>23</sup>) phrases this *sūtra*, not to mention the emphasis added in the accompanying *bhāṣya*. The author does not mince words. The great vow of restraint is pressed upon the aspirant from the outset, encouraging an unconditional practice of non-harming. Nowhere else in the *PYŚ*, at least in the *sūtras*, can one find such an uncompromising demand. If one makes the suspect argument that the *mahāvratam* of restraint need not be embraced in full (i.e., the restraints are only unconditional *if* one takes the great vow), Patañjali has made it clear in the commentary on *YS* 2.30 that *ahiṃsā* (at the very minimum) is always to be practiced unconditionally, regardless of its relationship to the vow.

In the context of vegetarianism, *Yogabhāṣya* (*YBh*) 2.31 discusses the inescapable bond between the killing of animals and the violation of *ahiṃsā*. The *bhāṣyakāra*'s example of the fisherman dismisses any suggestion that an individual's livelihood and sustenance justify acts of slaughter. Harms inflicted under the guise of "necessity" still transgress the inviolable restraint of non-harming. A fisherman cannot modify the contours of the restriction by saying that he will kill only fish and nothing else; nor can another say s/he will only kill or not kill in certain locations; nor can another say that s/he will kill or not kill on certain days or only for certain gods or people. *Ahiṃsā* and the great vow are absolutely unconditional no matter the circumstances. While this primary restraint can extend well beyond obvious examples of animal sacrifice, slaughter, and consumption, these cases are viewed as the most rampant and blatant transgressions of the keystone of the eight-limbed yoga.

After listing the five *niyamas* in 2.32, Patañjali implores the yogin to guard against any dubious thoughts that may endanger one's adherence to the restraints and observances (*YS* 2.33).<sup>24</sup> The most direct threat to them is the inclination toward *hiṃsā* and the flawed rationale behind it. In *YS* 2.34 Patañjali gives the example of harming and its various actualizations to illustrate the depth to which contrary attitudes and behaviors must be practiced:

Dubious thoughts such as harming, etc., whether committed by oneself, for oneself, or approved of, preceded by greed, anger, or delusion, and mild, medium, intense, result in unending suffering and ignorance—this is a consideration of the opposite.<sup>25</sup>

Given the three sets of three in the *sūtra* (of harm, motivation, and intensity) and the further threefold subdivision given in the *bhāṣya*, there amount to eighty-one forms of *hiṃsā*. Yet the *bhāṣyakāra* quickly concedes that in reality the varieties of harming are countless (*asaṃkhyeyā*) due to the diversity of individual circumstances. The general point is that no instance of harming, "whether committed by oneself, for oneself, or approved of," escapes the domain of harming. Regarding the three basic motivations for harming (greed, anger, and delusion), the *bhāṣyakāra* again employs the quintessential example of animal slaughter as the corresponding action. The first motivation discussed, greed, is especially relevant as the *bhāṣya* connects it to the killing of an animal for her flesh and skin. It is owing to greed that one kills, has killed

on one's behalf, or approves of the killing of an animal for her flesh (for food) or skin (for clothing, shelter, etc.). It would be a mistake to underestimate the breadth of this claim. The *PYŚ* exclaims that not only must one refrain from killing by one's own hand, but s/he cannot have the killing performed by another, nor can s/he approve of or assent to an environment in which acts of killing are carried out. It could not be stated any more plainly that the practice of *ahiṃsā* mandates the unconditional renunciation of all flesh eating, and even appears to stretch much further (i.e., to consent to the societal practice of killing).

The seriousness of the *PYŚ* on the matter is further illustrated when it concludes that the acceptance of dubious thoughts and actions that seek to reconcile the practice of harming only leads to "unending suffering and ignorance."<sup>26</sup> Here the *PYŚ* forcefully fuses the practice of harming to *one's own suffering and ignorance*, two enduring states of being that the entire edifice of Yoga is designed to abolish. Harming in any form is completely antithetical to the practice of Yoga, and, more importantly, leads in the opposite direction toward greater pain and ignorance. The killing of animals and the consumption of flesh negate the possibility for the alleviation of these two main fetters. As such, the eight-limbed yoga is rendered impotent without the practice of vegetarianism as the dominant actualization of *ahiṃsā*.

One may reasonably question if greed always motivates flesh eating or how killing and flesh consumption *actually* affect the mind-complex. *YBh* 2.33 delves into these matters, and one can certainly dispute the reasoning provided therein. One basic counterargument on behalf of the *PYŚ* is that killing and consumption reduce the sattvic quality of mind through the contamination by *rajas* and *tamas* that intrinsically accompany acts of harm. As the purpose of Pātañjala Yoga is to "sattvicize" or purify the mind-complex to the utmost degree,<sup>27</sup> thus effecting liberation, to inhibit the cultivation of *sattva* by *hiṃsā* runs counter to one's own pursuit of liberation. A proponent of this counterargument could conceivably point to the observance of cleanliness (*śauca*) as further grounds for a "sattvicizing"-based vegetarianism. But regardless of one's acceptance or dismissal of any of these theories of motivation or purification, the present objective is not to deconstruct *why* Patañjali insists on vegetarianism, but rather to determine if and where he does so and if there is any wiggle room on the matter. The answer to these questions is *yes*, the killing of animals and the consumption of flesh are absolutely forbidden, and *no*, there are no extenuating circumstances.

### *The Step Beyond Vegetarianism*

The preceding analysis extends to the use of animal skin as well, particularly if their procurement requires the execution of animals. The example of hides is included in the *bhāṣya* and given almost equal weight as the consumption of flesh. The argument could be made that non-vegetarianism eludes harming if flesh or skin are obtained from animals that perished naturally and not through purposeful killing.<sup>28</sup> Under such atypical circumstances where the degree of direct *hiṃsā* is quite difficult to locate, the remaining question asks if the use of any animal-based products, no

matter their prehistory, negatively affects the mind-complex. As these conditions account for the extreme minority of cases, it is not a central concern of this analysis.

An extended interpretation of *ahimsā* in the *PYŚ* can argue for behavioral and dietary modifications beyond vegetarianism. Appealing to the *anumodita* (accepting or consenting to) aspect of harming, one can claim that patronizing businesses that slaughter or serve flesh substantiates an act of harm. Harming is not only implicated in what one physically puts into his/her body, but also in how one engages with surrounding networks of harming. In the example of a flesh-serving restaurant, one's consumption of a non-vegetarian dish is certainly more severe than the taking of a vegetarian one, but through the financial support of the flesh-serving establishment one still supports the machinery of slaughter. The same argument can be applied to markets, grocers, and other businesses that encourage the routine killing of animals. This contention is serious and not to be casually discarded. But are the bounds of its logic and resulting behaviors determinable? How far is this practice of defiant non-consent to be exercised? Given the impossibility of avoiding all instances, mechanisms, and networks of harm, to some degree one is forever doomed to the process of harming other beings (by walking, cooking, etc.).<sup>29</sup> The *PYŚ* does not deny this inescapable misfortune, but instead urges a relentless avoidance of complicity with discernible forces of harm.

A proponent of veganism would claim that *any* enslavement, confinement, mutilation, or manipulation of animals for their products constitutes *himsā*. This relates to the acquisition both of products that require slaughter (flesh, skin) and those that do not (milk, eggs, honey). Animal agriculture as a whole is predicated on the forced manipulation of animals for human benefit, and as this inherently involves harming the animals it amounts to a transgression of *ahimsā*. Most people—vegan, vegetarian, or otherwise—would hopefully, at the very minimum, concur that the mass manipulation and slaughter of animals that occurs on present-day “factory farms” substantiates a blatant violation of non-harming.<sup>30</sup> This being the case, vegetarians who still consume animal products may claim that the “real” harming is embedded in these industrialized farming practices and not in the use of animals for food *per se*. According to this perspective, more “humane” practices of domestication, handling, and even slaughter significantly reduce the *himsā* inflicted. At this juncture one is faced with the predictable questions about what actually constitutes *himsā* and if “humane” treatment legitimately fulfills the obligation of *ahimsā*. These questions are tangential and simply too intricate for the scope of the present essay. The focus here is determining the position of the *PYŚ* specifically on animal slaughter and subsequent consumption. But it is an intriguing topic in its own right.

Lastly, as an interesting addendum, a vegan may argue that the restraint of non-stealing (*asteya*) applies to the forcible extraction of milk, eggs, and honey from animals who naturally produce and “own” these substances. As stealing substantiates a tributary form of harming according to *YS* 2.30, and these substances are produced for intraspecies purposes, human appropriation can be viewed as a form of stealing and thus harming. A hypothetical opponent may contend that according to the *PYŚ*, stealing is simply described as the “improper taking-for-one's-own the things of

another." "Improper" is the key term here and the *bhāṣya* defines "improper" as "not authorized by sacred texts."<sup>31</sup> Hence, a vegan must demonstrate that the sacred texts (*śāstras*) affirm that milk, eggs, and honey "properly" belong to cows, chickens, and bees, respectively. If this cannot be proven and the extraction of these substances is not considered "improper" by the sacred texts, then there exist no conclusive instances of theft. In addition, from a historical (as opposed to purely textual) perspective, milk and ghee have been daily staples on the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years. These products have been consumed by the general population as well as by yogins, even as part of austerity-oriented fasts. Thus, it would be difficult (though not impossible) to assert that Patañjali intended one's diet to extend to such culturally atypical ends.

### Review

Three important points should be made in summary. The first tackles the question of whether non-harming is strictly a feature of *aṣṭāṅgayoga* and not equally compulsory for the two other yogas of the *PYŚ*. If *aṣṭāṅgayoga* is the *sādhana* suited only for those of very restless minds, do its eight limbs and sub-limbs have any jurisdiction over the conduct of those of more collected minds, specifically those treading the yoga of mental cessation in chapter 1? A critique of such cross-chapter application may attempt justification though an analogy of the various stages of meditative absorption (*samādhi*). It is generally accepted by the traditional commentators that if a yogin naturally abides in an intermediate or advanced phase of *samādhi*, there is no need for him/her to backtrack to a more preliminary stage. Each and every level of *samādhi* need not be experienced in a single lifetime, especially if one can naturally achieve one of the more subtle levels. However, for the aspirant who has trouble obtaining even the first stage of *samādhi*, s/he must persevere at this initial level for as long as it takes; it is simply impossible to leapfrog to a higher stage. I cite this example because such reasoning from analogy could be ventured to justify the impropriety of applying the dictums of the *yogāṅgas* to a more sophisticated practitioner. After all, the *PYŚ* is silent on how the yogin of mental cessation relates to the restraints. Does s/he eventually operate "above the law" of non-harming, the foundational restraint exclaimed as unconditionally inviolable? Such an argument seems hard to substantiate.

This perspective could be supported in a tantric context where transgression is utilized as a yoga practice itself, yet that is not the arena of Pātañjala Yoga. Remaining within the text, the progressive process of *samādhi* assumes that a mature yogin has mastered the previous stages of *samādhi* in a former life or could easily achieve those grosser planes of absorption if so desired. But as there is no soteriological purpose in doing so, the yogin does not pursue these "lesser" planes of experience. In a similar manner, the yogin of collected mind has transcended the motivations of greed, anger, and delusion that propel the minds of more unstable practitioners (the latter thus requiring formal restraint). The aspirant who continues to cause harm is motivated by the exact thoughts that are absent or rendered impotent in the mind of the mature

yogin. It is illogical to conclude that a mature yogin sustains any active desire to cause harm, for the presence of active seeds of *hiṃsā* are by definition confined to the restless mind. The motivations that would require explicit restraint are categorically denied to the yogin of collected mind. Therefore, it can be inferred that non-harming and vegetarianism pertain to all followers of the *PYŚ*, no matter which yoga path s/he is engaged in.

Second, the argument for vegetarianism in the *PYŚ* advocates perfect implementation from the start. This is the ideal. Yet akin to any practice, yoga-related or otherwise, it is safe to assume that for most this disposition is cultivated gradually over time.<sup>32</sup> Consider truthfulness (*satya*), for example. It is highly unlikely that immediately after taking the great vow, which includes truthfulness, one will instantly cease all acts of untruthfulness. Not only will ingrained habits of lying and deception continue to affect one's speech, thoughts, and deeds, but one will be incapable of detecting the extent to which they repeatedly engage in dishonesty. The aspirant must not simply avoid obvious inclinations toward deception, but also doggedly investigate the dark and unrestrained corners of the mind that have formerly gone unnoticed and unchecked. Truthfulness is the ideal and can only be approached (even if never fully achieved) by first sketching the vast territory it covers. A conceptual recognition of the scope of *satya* is then coupled with a firm resolve to detect and scorch all seeds of contrary thought. This is a complicated task indeed. Returning to the main topic of vegetarianism in light of this example, the overall argument is not that "All Pātañjala yogins are strict vegetarians," but rather that "All Pātañjala yogins must sincerely strive to become strict vegetarians." Just as dishonesty cannot be philosophically reconciled with the "ethics" of Pātañjala Yoga,<sup>33</sup> even more so does harming stand in stark dissonance.

Third, for those with an exclusively scholarly interest in the *PYŚ*, this entire study may offer little more than a curious aside to the soteriological mechanics of Yoga philosophy. However, for practitioners who trace or credit their *sādhanas* to the teachings of this tradition, the ramifications are profound. One is ever free to dismiss the authority of the text or ignore it altogether, as there are numerous Indic traditions that reject the value and validity of Patañjali's work. If an alternative textual authority is elevated in its stead, then any argument for or against vegetarianism must play by a completely different set of rules. That is an altogether separate conversation. This essay has pointed to aspirants who do invoke Patañjali and *aṣṭāṅgayoga* as the authorities that underpin their yoga practices. A large percentage of contemporary yoga practitioners (largely outside India) regard the *PYŚ* as the textual and philosophical foundation of their *sādhana*, if not only because Patañjali incorporates the now popular practices of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* into the eight-limbed system. If one alleges loyalty to some form of Pātañjala Yoga, then the goal of an unconditional vegetarian diet must be strongly prioritized. There is no way to reconcile the *PYŚ* with a conscious decision to kill, have killed, or approve of the killing of an animal for human consumption. Elaborate arguments regarding nutrition have no bearing on the inviolable restraint presented in the *PYŚ*. A more nuanced interpretation of the *PYŚ* could argue for the refusal to support any non-vegetarian

establishments, and also the need to adopt veganism in order to truly satisfy non-harming and non-stealing to satisfactory degrees. These additional claims are much more contestable than the text's outright prohibition of the killing of animals for flesh or skin.

For various reasons modern Yoga communities frequently neglect or tone down the dietary injunctions of the *PYŚ* and by association the ideal of *ahiṃsā*. But if one sincerely intends to follow any course of Classical Yoga, whether it be the yoga of mental cessation, the yoga of action, or the eight-limbed yoga, a strict vegetarian lifestyle must be pursued in earnest. Edwin Bryant draws an even stronger conclusion, arguing, "Without following *ahiṃsā*, one can not claim to be following the Yoga of Patañjali, or of any other of ancient India's soteriological spiritual traditions."<sup>34</sup> It should now be clear that the consensual adherence to a non-vegetarian diet directly contradicts one of the most (if not the most) fundamental requirements of Classical Yoga. Within the *Yogaśāstra* there is no feasible way to square the circle of non-vegetarianism vis-à-vis non-harming.

## Notes

- 1 – Many *haṭhayoga* texts could be named, but the most widely known ones are the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*, *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā*, and *Śivasamhitā*. These are sometimes referenced in modern yoga settings but to a much lesser degree than the *Yogasūtra*. The only text that could rival the *Yogasūtra* for conspicuousness is the *Bhagavad Gītā*.
- 2 – David Gordon White, interviewed by Blair Hodges, in "#13—What's the *Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, featuring David Gordon White [MIPodcast]," at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/mipodcast-whiteyoga-sutra/>, 56:26.
- 3 – What exactly constitutes an act of harm (*hiṃsā*) is a complex question and begs a discussion of veganism, which firmly rejects the use of animals, their products, and their labor, due to the harm intrinsic to all domestication and manipulation. However, from a textual and historical perspective (at least regarding the *PYŚ*), the extraction and consumption of both cow milk and honey were not considered violations of non-harming. I assume this derives from the fact that cows manipulated for dairy products during this time period were not routinely slaughtered once their productivity ceased. *Hiṃsā* toward animals in the *PYŚ* focuses specifically on the killing of animals for their flesh and skin, as will be seen below, with the general manipulation of them left unprobed. A contemporary proponent of veganism could convincingly argue that *hiṃsā* not only involves slaughter but also the forced servitude imposed upon cows for their milk (or bees for their honey), no matter how "humanely" the animals are treated. Nevertheless, while this proponent may criticize the *PYŚ* for its failure to recognize such forms of *hiṃsā*, the *PYŚ* itself does not appear to share this conception. For this reason, in this essay I stick with vegetarianism even though

the case for veganism could definitely be made in light of a broader discussion of *hiṃsā/ahiṃsā*.

- 4 – The *PYŚ* refers to three forms of yoga: the yoga of mental cessation (*YS* 1.2), the yoga of action (*YS* 2.1), and the yoga of eight limbs (*YS* 2.29).
- 5 – The subject of the actual existence of self-identifying “Pātañjala Yogins” along with their dietary and sartorial choices is an interesting one, though tangential to this investigation. As modern scholars and practitioners largely rely on the text for the construction of the “Classical Yoga” tradition, the focus here is on the terminology and doctrines of the *PYŚ* itself.
- 6 – Philipp A. Maas, “A Concise Historiography of Classical Yoga Philosophy,” pp. 57–68; Maas, *Samādhipāda: Das erste Kapitel des Pātañjalayogaśāstra zum ersten Mal kritisch ediert*, pp. xii–xix.
- 7 – Edwin Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*, p. xl.
- 8 – I include this section for the sake of comprehensiveness. Those only interested in the “strong” arguments can move to the following section.
- 9 – *YS* 1.33: *maitrīkaruṇāmuditopekṣāṇām sukhaduḥkhaṇyāpuṇyaviṣayāṇām bhāvanātaścittaprasādanam* | “Mental clarity derives from these attitudes (toward objects)—friendliness toward the happy, compassion toward the suffering, joy toward the virtuous, and indifference toward the unvirtuous.” (All translations are original unless otherwise indicated. Original Devanagari text taken from T. S. Rukmani’s cited volumes.)
- 10 – The clearest evidence for Patañjali’s acceptance of a “plurality of Selves” (*puruṣabahutva*) is found in *YS* 2.22: *kṛthārthaṃ pratinaṣṭamapyanaṣṭham tadanyasādhāraṇatvāt* | “Even though it [*prakṛti*] has ceased with respect to the *puruṣa* whose purpose has been fulfilled, because it is a common entity, it has not ceased for other *puruṣas*.” I borrow the term “*puruṣabahutva*” from *Sāṃkhyakārikā* 18, as one will not find it in the *PYŚ*. I am not implying that these two texts espouse the same *sāṃkhya*, but rather share this particular view on the quantitative differentiation of *puruṣas*.
- 11 – *YBh* 1.33: *tataśca cittaṃ prasīdati* | *prasannamekagraṃ sthitipadaṃ labhate* | “[by cultivating these attitudes] then the mind is made clear; when clarified it attains steadiness that is one-pointed.”
- 12 – More research into the moral standing of nonhumans in Indian Philosophy and ethics is definitely wanting. Christopher Framarin’s recent work is a step in the right direction. See Christopher Framarin, “The Argument for *Ahiṃsā* in the *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*,” and Framarin, *Hinduism and Environmental Ethics*. Framarin highlights the problem with the assumption that since nonhumans appear only to have instrumental value for the human project of liberation, then they have no direct moral standing themselves. However, as Framarin conclusively proves, explaining *how* nonhumans can even have this

instrumental value for humans requires a recognition of the direct moral standing of nonhumans themselves.

- 13 – YS 1.2: *yogaś cittavṛttinirodhaḥ* | “Yoga is the cessation of the turnings of the mind-complex.” YS 2.1: *tapah svādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānāni kriyāyogaḥ* | “The yoga of action is [composed of] austerity, own-study, and devotion to God.” YS 2.29 (2.28 is also informative): *yamaniyamāsanaprāṇāyāmapratyāhāradhāraṇādhyānasamādhayo’ṣṭāvaṅgāni* | “The eight limbs are restraints, observances, posture, breath control, drawing-in of the senses, attention, concentration, meditative absorption.”
- 14 – Such fasts often include the consumption of milk, ghee, and honey. This is one instance where it is problematic, from a strictly textual perspective, to argue for veganism from the *PYŚ*.
- 15 – Voluntary hardship as a type of self-*hiṃsā* is an intriguing notion, but none of the traditional commentators interprets *tapas* as an unethical act of harming. The commentaries do warn about overdoing austerities, but only because of their negative effects on the stability of the mind. For this last point, refer to the *bhāṣya* on YS 2.1.
- 16 – This statement appears to sidestep the issue, but the three terms of note were most likely understood by the people of that time period. In addition, *īśvarapraṇidhāna* was already described in the first chapter with an inclusion of *svādhyāya* as *japaḥ*, etc.
- 17 – YS 3.7: *trayamantaraṅgaṃ pūrvebhyaḥ* | “These three [*dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna*, *samādhi*] are internal limbs compared to the previous ones [*yama*, *niyama*, *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *pratyāhāra*].”
- 18 – YS 2.30: *ahiṃsāsatyāsteyabrahmacaryāparigrahā yamāḥ* | “Non-harming, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-grasping are the restraints.”
- 19 – YBh 2.30: *tatrāhiṃsā sarvathā sarvadā sarvabhūtānāmanabhidroḥaḥ, uttara ca yamaniyamātanmulāstasiddhiparatayaiva tatpratipādanāya pratipādhyante, tadvadātarūpakaraṇāyaivopādīyante* | “Here non-harming means non-harming to all beings at all times and in all places. The other abstentions and observances are rooted in it. Since they exist for the accomplishment [of non-harming], they are taught for the sake of teaching it. They are instructed to establish the purity of non-harming.”
- 20 – For example, Vijñānabhikṣu interestingly claims that *prāṇāyāma* serves as a type of penance for the harm that one inevitably commits through daily living (T. S. Rukmani, *Yogavārtikka of Vijñānabhikṣu*, vol. 2, *Sādhanapāda*, p. 189).
- 21 – See note 19 above for the *bhāṣya* portion.
- 22 – YS 2.31: *jātidēśakālasamayānavacchinnāḥ sārvabhaumā mahāvratam* |.
- 23 – Concluding the section on options for one-pointed concentration, Patañjali finally states: *yathābhimatadhyānād vā* | “Or from any [object of] concentration

that is desirable.” I mention this to show Patañjali’s great lenience on the topic of suitable objects for concentration. This is obviously not the type of language employed for the *yamas*.

- 24 – *YS* 2.33: *vitarkabādhane pratipakṣabhāvanam* | “Upon intrusion by contrary thoughts, [one should] develop the opposite.”
- 25 – *Sūtra* 2.34: *vitarkā hiṃsādayaḥ kṛtakāritānumoditā lobhakrodhamohapūrvakā mṛdumadhyādhimātrā duḥkhājñānānantaphalā iti pratipakṣabhāvanam* |.
- 26 – See note 22 above: *duḥkhājñānānantaphalā* (“unending suffering and ignorance”).
- 27 – For example, see *Sūtra* 3.33.
- 28 – Eating the flesh of a roadkill carcass is one such example.
- 29 – Indic traditions recognize the impossibility of living without the performance of some unavoidable acts of harm. For this reason liberation can be considered the ultimate perfection of non-harming, as one ceases to cause harm through the habitation of a body.
- 30 – Which is not to say that non-“factory farm” manipulation and slaughter of animals escapes the category of *hiṃsā*.
- 31 – *YBh* 1.30: *steyamśāstrapūrvakaṃ dravyāñāṃ parataḥ svīkaraṇam* | “Stealing is the usurping of another’s goods not authorized by sacred texts.”
- 32 – The obvious parallel is *YS* 1.14, which discusses the difficult process of training (*abhyāsa*) the mind for cessation: *Sa tu dīrgha kālanairantaryasatkārāsevitō’dṛḍhabhūmiḥ* | “But developed over a long period, without interruption, and with utmost attention, it [*abhyāsa*] becomes firmly grounded.”
- 33 – The only exception is when truthfulness results in greater harming. For example, if an intruder enters one’s house with the intention of causing harm to one’s family, one is not impelled to be truthful concerning the whereabouts of family members.
- 34 – Edwin Bryant, “Ahimsa in the Patanjali Yoga Tradition,” p. 46.

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