

“Herbs as a Means to Power in Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*”  
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In the fourth *pāda*, or section, of the *Yogasūtra*, Patañjali outlines five sources of mystical power, or *siddhi*. These include *janma* (birth), *osadhi* (herbs), *mantra* (incantation), *tapas* (asceticism), and *samadhi* (contemplation). The *siddhis* bear an ambiguous relationship with *kaivalya* or “release” from *samsara*, or cyclic existence. In this paper, I will examine the role of the yogic *siddhis* demonstrated in the *Yogasūtra*, with special attention to the meaning and purpose of the term *osadhi*. Through the examination of the notion of *osadhi*, sometimes translated as “drugs,” I will provide examples of how the practice of yoga is intimately tied up with both worldly power and otherworldly liberation. The notion of *osadhi* will be connected to precursors of yoga within the Vedic tradition and successors of Patañjali in *haṭhayoga* traditions. I will lastly connect Patañjali’s notions of *siddhi*, especially those arising from *osadhi*, with broader conceptions of religious experience and ecstasy.

With respect to the issue of “triggers” of religious, or mystical, experience, there are probably few scriptural sources that compare to the description of the means to attaining supernormal powers or perfections (*siddhis*) found in the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali, fourth *pāda* or chapter, verse 1. In this passage Patañjali states: *janma-osadhi-mantra-tapaḥ-samādhi-jāḥ siddhayaḥ*. Effectively the verse can be translated as “the perfections are arisen from birth, herbs, incantation, *askesis*, and contemplation,” indicating that supernormal powers of knowing and acting arise from a variety of sources and with a range of levels of agency. These modes of knowing and acting include a range of possibilities, including the ability to fly, to see near and far, to become invisible, to know one’s own body and the cosmos. It also includes the “classical” list of the eight *siddhis*, which are referred to in YS III.45, *tataḥ-aṇima-ādi-prādurbhāvaḥ kāya-saṃpat tad-dharma-anabhiḡātaś ca*, which include smallness (*aṇimā*), lightness (*laghimā*), greatness (*mahimā*), attainment (*prāpti*), irresistible will (*prākāmya*), subjugation (*vaśitva*), lordship (*īśitva*), mastery of desire (*kāmāvasayitva*).<sup>1</sup> In this respect it is clear articulation of both the assumption of the existence of supernormal abilities and the articulation of a systematic understanding of the source of these powers.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī: “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 199-201.

In the context of the YS, researchers have often stressed that the *siddhis* should be considered aberrations from the yogic path. Eliade, for example, portrayed the YS in his work *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* in what might be considered a puritanical light: the YS, and Classical Yoga (*yoga darśana*) become the “gold standard” against which to evaluate other yogic traditions as “baroque” and so forth, whether they be Buddhist or tantric, for example. On one level, it makes sense to look at the YS as an ideal representative model for introducing the topic of yoga—it is a synthetic text that integrates the threads of many traditions in a terse and largely coherent form. The concept of *aṣṭāṅgayoga* serves as an excellent model for articulating the different dimensions of the yogic path, from the external and social dimensions to the bodily and subtle physical and ultimately internal dimensions of the tradition. Eliade, in fact, does this extremely well. However, as suggested earlier by Corrado Pensa, and more recently by scholars such as Grinshpon, White, and Lorenzen, the *siddhis*, rather than being an afterthought or an aberration to the yogic path, are an integral part of the ideological framework of yogic thought.<sup>2</sup> In part, the argument is that if yogic *siddhis* were an aberration, why commit one-fourth or more of the YS to them (a similar argument with respect to *īśvara*, *īṣṭadevatā* is possible). I am largely in agreement with this idea, and in fact, have argued elsewhere that yogic traditions tend to demonstrate an inner dynamic between what I refer to as *numinous* and *cessative* orientations. This is to say that within yoga, there are complementary orientations which integrate ascetic, world-renouncing tendencies with world affirming techniques of spiritual mastery. The intention to break free from the *saṃsāric* cycle is matched, in varying proportions, with the homologizing of the yogin with divinity, thereby encompassing *numinous* power. This distinction, in part, is in turn derived from Ninian Smart’s typology that differentiates mysticism from numinous religious experiences, a distinction which is analogous to, if not rooted in, the *nirguṇa-saḡuṇa* distinction

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<sup>2</sup> Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 161-62

in Indian philosophy. Where I would disagree with Smart is in his dichotomizing religious experience in this respect—on pragmatic grounds, if none other, inasmuch as what is referred to as mystical does not only pertain to the transcendent or ineffible. Smart’s argument also rules out ascension from form to formlessness, which might be argued as a hallmark of the mystic path, a point that may well be illustrated in the *Yoga Bhāṣya*, the commentary to YS III.50, *stānyupanimantraṇe saṅgasmayākaraṇaṃ punaranisṭaprasaṅgāt*. YS III.50 states that by most accounts details the temptation of the yogin or yoginī by heavenly inhabitants (or the promises of joy that they promise). Vyāsa, the commentator, seems to perceive that one’s attainments are noticed due to their degree of perfection, as if these temptations themselves result due to one’s mastery of these higher levels. Perhaps this should also temper our rejection of the *kaivalya* or liberation-centered interpretation of the YS. However, what can be clearly said is that within the nexus of religious, and ultimately mystical, experience found in the YS, a critical component of this is the attainment of *siddhis*, “perfections.” These *siddhis* are the roots for a range of experiences characterized as mystical across traditional boundaries and over vast geographical and temporal distances.

An interesting tangent here is to make a few important etymological and philological connections. *Pāda* or chapter 3 (of 4) in the YS is entitled *Vibhūtipāda*, the “foot” on higher powers, literally “manifestations.” These *vibhūti* are identified with *siddhi*, in YS III.37, for example. A variant on the concept of *siddhi* is that of the *siddha*, or “perfected one,” a term that has a rich history in Indian tradition, appropriated by different strata of Indian religions to talk about ideas of spiritual perfection. In the YS and Ybh this term comes up several times, and demonstrates the dynamics of the term. In YS III.32, *mūrdhajyotisi siddhadarśanam*, “[there is] seeing of the *siddhas* [via concentration] on the crown of the head,” Patañjali indicates that perception of some sort of perfection is possible through concentration on this part of the

(subtle?) body. I believe David Gordon White is on the right track suggesting that there is a connection here with Jaina cosmology, and would in fact go on further to argue that the series of verses of which this is a part indicates a correlation of the internal subtle body (*nābhi-cakre*, etc.) with inner knowledge of oneself and of the greater cosmos in perhaps a proto-tantric fashion.<sup>3</sup> Notably, as in Jaina cosmology, the *siddhas* (a term used in Jainism) reside in the upper eschelon of the anthropomorphic cosmos. On the other hand, Vyāsa's commentary to III.32 and III.50 is replete with Purāṇic-level myths of *siddhas* as a class of divine beings, connected in one verse to the *māhaṛsis*. What is consistent, and perhaps an overarching theme, is the association of yogic attainment with ascension motifs (inner and outer) which imply the deification of the yogin through the approximation of divinity as a comparable level on the cosmological scale. As I have pointed out elsewhere, this is evidenced in the relationship between meditative states in yoga and Buddhism and the *brahmā* gods and their cosmological realms. Lastly, it is important to note that we can argue as well for sociological grounds for *siddha*-hood, in that it is a form of ascetic authority, charismatic authority attained through yogic discipline, one that in the absence of ritual and institutional specialization demonstrates one's status on the spiritual hierarchy. This is often evidenced in "battles" or "contests" for magico-religious superiority (a matter to be dealt with elsewhere).

With respect to the central thrust of the YS, however, it should be noted that the means of accomplishment is *samādhi*, contemplation, sometimes referred to as *enstasis* or *meditative absorption*. YS IV.1 changes this discourse, however, pointing out that there are other means to power and the experiences that such power offers. The first is birth, which can be interpreted in light of Vyāsa to mean the miraculous type of birth characteristic of mythical personages that demonstrate the flowering of religious practice or *sādhana* in previous existences. This would be

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<sup>3</sup> White, 175-77.

the basis for supernormal powers of vision and perception, as would be found among heroic figures such as Siddhārtha Gautama or the Paṇḍavas in the Epic Mahābhārata. The second is herbs (*osadhi*), which we will return to in a moment, for now referring to the concept of a medicine or drug that engenders a particular power. The third is *mantra*, verbal incantation rooted in the Vedic corpus, but communicating a deeper ideal regarding the power of language over mind and reality. Mantra is perhaps the ideal example of the notion of *siddhi*, for it is understood that through proper acquisition of a mantra (from a guru) and through *jāpa*, repetition, one perfects the mantra in a sort of breakthrough experience. In the YS the “root mantra” is none other than *praṇava*, or OM, which is perceived to be *tasya vacakaḥ*, the speech of him, namely “the lord,” Īśvara. In this verse, it likely refers to the power of particular mantras to lead to mastery over some aspect of the conditioned world. The fourth is *tapas*, *askesis*, literally “heat,” the fire of asceticism. That *tapas* would be a perfecting force is evidenced in the YS and throughout Indian Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina literature, where profound ascetic practices contribute to magical supremacy. The last, *samādhi*, represents the yogic methodology of acquiring power and knowledge, through conditioning the mind in such a manner as to develop a one-pointed and penetrating perceptual field that masters whatever it is directed towards. This is the nature of the *samādhi-siddhi*, the sense that the mind at the level of mastery, *śamya*, comes to know its objects in such a way as to reveal their inner mechanisms and thereby give the yogin or yoginī power over them.

Among these sources, one that is particularly interesting from a theoretical perspective is *osadhi*, as it seems to be implying that herbs are a legitimate, or perhaps simply actual, means of acquiring spiritual power and the experience such powers afford. In the context of the study of religion, many of us are aware of the arguments of Huxley and Zaehner and more recently of Huston Smith and others who have supported or questioned the legitimacy and actuality of

religious and mystical experiences cultivated through the use of drugs and other substances.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that it is perhaps another point where Eliade's vision of the YS as a standard for yoga practices comes into play, as in his perception, the use of drugs in the context of yoga is perceived as a degeneration of the practice.<sup>5</sup> However, the Indian context, with its references to the *siddha*-like Keśins in the Vedas, ecstatic *soma* traditions (Soma being referred to in the R̥gveda as the “king of herbs”), and the *datura*-ornamented Śiva, appears to provide an ample range of support for the idea of psycho- if not entheogenic substances being a significant part of religious and mystical cultus.<sup>6</sup>

Vyāsa's commentary to YS IV.1 with respect to *osadhi* is a provocative one. Vyāsa seems to once again situated *osadhi* cosmologically, in this case with reference to the abode of the *asuras*, the arch-enemies of the *devas* or gods in Indian mythology. One might analogously recall the story of Hanuman rescuing Laksmana in the Rāmāyana through recourse to medicinal herbs as well. This view of *osadhi* makes it seem as if a sort of magical potion or elixir that transforms the consumer. This can in fact be connected to one of the main categories in Ayurveda, as an elixir (*rasāyana*) which brings strength, as opposed to another types of *osadhi* which removes disease.<sup>7</sup> However, it is important to note that the use of *osadhi* in the Vedic and Ayurvedic context is a complex one. Certainly one aspect of use of *osadhi* is in the making of medicinal potions and substances. However, according to Zysk, the “dominant” methodology for using herbs was and is, in fact, as amulets and talismans, as items of ritual potency that would affect the user who kept such things on his or her person.<sup>8</sup> Another use would be to use the herb

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 155-189; Houston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception* (New York: Putnam, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Bollingen, 1990 [1969]), 338-39

<sup>6</sup> Staal, 161.

<sup>7</sup> Julius Jolly, *Indian Medicine* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1977), 30

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Zysk, *Religious Medicine: The History and Evolution of Indian Medicine* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 96-102

as a sort of ritual wand in healing and other ceremonies.<sup>9</sup> It is also interesting to note that the Ṛgvidhāna advises the worship to both *osadhi* and Rudra (Vedic forerunner of Śiva) in order to protect oneself from disease and indigestion.<sup>10</sup> Ṛgveda 10.97 gives a litany of material and spiritual benefits springing for appropriate ritual use of *osadhi*.<sup>11</sup> Though these benefits are largely uniquely fit to the Vedic context (material abundance and protection from human and spiritual enemies) they extend beyond that frame to encompass a hierarchy of potency with *soma* at its head. One clear point of this is the intersection of Vedic and yogic tradition as one of the sub-threads of the YS, evidenced by other concepts such as *tapas* and *svādhyaya*. Another is that the linguistic and cultural matrix in which yoga, and *osadhi*, is situated demonstrates the integration of a number of modes of engendering transcendence of the human condition. One last point to note is that in the Pali *sūttas*, one rationale that the Buddha gives for not allowing his disciples to demonstrate their miraculous powers (gained through *samādhi*) in front of laypeople is that the laypeople will identify such powers as being equally attainable through the power of amulets and talismans, perhaps to distance his sect from its competitors who relied on such devices.

*Siddhis*, then are woven into the religious fabric of yoga, and are a critical part of the process of yogic development. As one colleague in Buddhist studies once remarked to me, the assumption is that these powers result from meditative practice, the ambiguity lies in their role within the respective traditions. In the case of YS IV.1, the means of acquiring *siddhi* is broadened to include other sources than *dhāyana* and *samādhi*. The boundary between the religious and non-religious perhaps becomes less clear, as these *siddhis* do not require a particular religious orientation, but rather appear to be neutral. There is certainly a presupposed

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<sup>9</sup> Zysk, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Zysk, 98.

<sup>11</sup> Zysk, 99-102.

overarching cosmological scheme in the YS, but that does not necessitate that those who appropriate the *siddhis* view themselves in that frame. To demonstrate this, I want to take a moment to look at the *siddhis* and their sources in a more humanistic light. This is to use the categories of Patañjali to analyze some realities perhaps closer to home. This might be thought of as a sort of “humanistic demythologizing.”

Starting with birth, cannot an argument be made for birth in a general sense being the source of worldly power? This could be looked at in a range of ways. Two notable examples would be in terms of wealth and in terms of the physical structure of one’s body. Aren’t individuals in our culture bound to some degree with respect to power by the conditions of their birth? Social darwinism aside, doesn’t wealth and political power in one’s family contextualize the ease or difficulty in attaining social prestige and power? On the other hand, do we all not face the reality of having different physical and mental capabilities? Are there not some people who are simply born intelligent, creative, strong, or at least have the potentials that other do not? Next to look at *mantra*. If we generalize mantra to the power of speech, of *vac*, don’t we find innumerable examples of how mastery of particular disciplines (law, for example), languages (Sanskrit), rhetorical skills (oratory, etc.), acting, musicianship, and so on, serve as a means to power in the world and the key to experiences of heightened emotion and intellectual engagement? With respect to *tapas*, we may well have difficulty finding immediate examples of extreme self-mortification. Nevertheless, we clearly find ourselves in the midst of a culture that embraces some very austere forms of self-discipline and conditioning (say marathon running or participating in triatholons), therapeutic aerobic exercise, and in some cases extreme dieting, as means to approaching physical and emotional mastery that often directly translates into heightened performance in occupational contexts. I would argue that contemporary yoga often fulfills such a function, as a sort of *tapas*.

With respect to our focus, *osadhi*, there are numerous clear associations. Clearly more and more as a society we look to medicines to retain youthfulness and enhance our health and well-being. The integration of herbal and broadly traditional medicines has certainly been evident as well, and one can note the purported benefits of herbal medication (improved memory, mental acuity), and the degree to which one can buy herbal-infusion teas and so forth (SoBe for example) that overtly represent their health benefits and perhaps covertly the consciousness-altering potential of these substances, especially in high quantity. The development of LSD, MDMA, and other synthetics have clearly had religious or quasi-religious implications. Cultic rock-band communities surrounding bands like the Grateful Dead and Phish and the so-called Raver culture employ substances in ritual environments, often replete with religious symbology, cultivating ecstatic states as well as elevating its own charismatic leaders.

Worth mentioning as well is the endemic use of performance-enhancing substances at all levels in athletic competition. In this case, we have the distinct motivation to move beyond the level of human capability, to break through the boundaries of speed and performance, leading to being immortalized by olympic gold or record-breaking performance. As Weber argued, the charismatic is one who through force of their character embodies sacred authority, a point that can be demonstrated through exceptional athletic performance. We may also ponder the relevance of Maslow's conceptions regarding the analogues between religious experiences and "peak performance," self-actualization and *siddhi*. Perhaps it should come as no surprise when we see the fervency of athletes with respect to their often very outward expressions of their faith on the playing field.

A last parallel to make in this humanistic analysis of *osadhi* to make would be with one of the pharmaceutical industry's greatest recent success. I am referring to erectile dysfunction

medications. With respect to *osadhi* that bring strength, there are two types.<sup>12</sup> Earlier we mentioned the first, elixirs (*rasāyana*). The second of these is aphrodisiacs (*vājīkarana*). Perhaps it should come as no surprise that human concerns would not change over the millennia, but rather that we would seek out perfection of our experience of this critical (and often ecstatic) dimension of human existence. It is interesting to note that in many contexts, sexual gratification is viewed as the means whereby a yogin is “swayed” from the path, a point intimated in Vyāsa’s commentary to YS III.50. On the other hand yoga, tantric or otherwise, may well be associated with householdership as well as asceticism. It might be argued as well that in a secularized society, sexuality exists as one of the few remaining gates to ecstasy and self-transcendence, and is clearly a domain where issues of power, mastery, and deep-seated emotive and psychological forces are at work.

Perhaps it could be argued that these points beg the question with respect to the issue of religious experience and mysticism. Clearly these are highly contested categories of interpretation, whose heuristic value has been often challenged. Likewise, there are disconnects in the interpretation of the relative valuation or devaluation of the import of the *siddhis* as a component of the *yoga darśana* and cognate traditions. There are also interesting questions to ask about the conception of supranormal powers and the degree to which they should be “demythologized” or reduced to other phenomena. One answer to these questions would be to argue for a comparative and pluralistic approach that recognizes the localized and contextual nature of the traditions we study, and at the same time is open to humanistic and comparative understandings. Though Patañjali does not use the term “mysticism,” for example, nevertheless there is clear reference to the cultivation of contemplative states, and the subsidiary acquisition of superhuman attributes. It might be argued as well that human concerns, of life, love, and death

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<sup>12</sup> Jolly, 30.

run through his conceptions of the *siddhis*, and if they are considered religious concerns, they are virtually if not, actually universal.

It is also clear that the desire for, and acquisition of power is not something fading from the religious or secular horizon. If anything, the implications of ascetic and other modalities of attaining bodily and psychic perfection seem more relevant in a cultural environment such as ours where individualist ideology thoroughly infuses the dominant worldview. In the context of yoga, power is ambiguous, as it also serves as a vehicle for liberating knowledge and intercessory action and manifestation. Perhaps this is the power that Van der Leeuw referred to as a “Kratophany,” as a manifestation of power that has mythical, cosmological, and, as I would argue, cultural relevance.