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Animating Samadhi: Rethinking Animal-Human Relationships Through Yoga

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Abstract

This paper seeks to move us beyond the commonly held images of Hindu (and Jain) traditions associated with animal protection, namely, the principle of *ahimsā* (non-harming) and the worship of the “holy cow.” Approaching the theme of animal protection through Yoga theory and practice, which in turn draws from the ancient Sāṅkhya *darshana* (philosophical vision), my aim is to show how important features of Sāṅkhya-Yoga could help to address the urgent crisis of animal exploitation and environmental degradation.

The central argument of this paper is that Yoga traditions, in their acknowledgement of consciousness as foundational to existence as a whole, provide processes and methods for elevating individual human consciousness in ways that have direct bearing on collective animal and human well-being. These processes and methods are informed by Sāṅkhya’s triadic modal mapping of consciousness: Of the three modalities of behavior and experience, the luminosity and balance of *sattva-guṇa* is favoured over the passion of *raja-guṇa* and the inebriety of *toma-guṇa*. From this perspective, among animal species, cows are considered to be representative of and characterized in their behavior by *sattva-guṇa*. Hence their protection by human beings is understood as integral to both the cultivation of *sattvika* (illumined) consciousness in human society and the expansion of what may be called the “circle of protection” that is the basis of human civilization.

By seeing animals in general as sensate, conscious beings that are progressing on the path of Yoga, the ultimate aim of classical Yoga practice – the attainment of *samādhi* (perfect absorption) -- takes on significance for animal-human relationality, extending Yoga’s potential for environmental healing far beyond the pursuit of individual yogic accomplishment.

We talk of wild animals; but man is the only wild animal. It is man that has broken out. All other animals are tame animals; following the rugged respectability of the tribe or type all other animals are domestic animals; man alone is ever undomestic, either as a profligate or a monk. —G. K. Chesterton¹

Chesterton’s observation about human wildness, written in the early twentieth century, becomes exponentially more germane as our collective death-wish for planet earth

looms ever closer to becoming fulfilled. An increasing clamour of voices are raised in urgent, well-founded cries for worldwide reform to brake and reverse this self-destructive juggernaut of human so-called “progress.” Yet despite the best efforts of increasing numbers of well-meaning activists, humankind seems unable to stop itself. It is as if we are fundamentally unequipped to curb our appetite for consumption. We have indeed broken out, and we go forth, breaking all that lies in our path, bringing one species after another to extinction and endangering human well-being as we know it.

In recent years, a few scholars of South Asian traditions have explored meditational and yoga practices as potential contributions to the discourse on animal-human relationships, a key component of the broader environmental protection discourse.² Here my aim is a modest one—to join with and underscore these efforts, pointing especially to aspects of Yoga, including its philosophical underpinnings in Sāṅkhya philosophy, as an important resource for this effort. My argument will revolve around two key notions of classical Yoga (especially as articulated in the Patañjali Yoga Sūtras [PYS], but also in the Bhagavad-gītā [Bg] and Bhāgavata Purāṇa [BhP]). First, the starting point for discussion on animals as beings with which or with whom humans might have relationships must be the acknowledgement of consciousness as foundational to all creaturely existence; and second, classical Yoga’s underpinnings in Sāṅkhya provide a valuable map and mode of conceiving human well-being that can serve well to extend Yoga’s potential for environmental healing, by recovering Yoga’s traditional associations with animal relationality.

The Yogi who became a Deer

I will begin with a story from the Bhagavata Purana (5.8), an important sacred Sanskrit text of India.³ The ancient King Bharata, having renounced his kingdom, entrusting it to his sons, retires to the forest to practice yoga. Over time, Bharata makes notable progress in his practices of yogic meditation. But one day, hearing the roar of a lion as it attacks a pregnant deer, he interrupts his meditation to save and shelter the deer’s suddenly birthed fawn. With his attention now turned increasingly to the needs of the fawn as he raises it, his affection and attachment for the animal are aroused; but his protective sentiments come at the cost of his meditational practices. Indeed, so much does he become absorbed in thinking of the deer as it playfully prances about his hermitage and then strays out of his sight into the forest, Bharata’s life ends with the deer filling his thoughts; and so, we are told, Bharata’s subsequent birth is necessarily from the womb of a deer. Then, by virtue of the yogic practices of his previous life, Bharata, despite being in the body of a deer, is able to remember his previous life of yogic discipline. Eventually, in his (human) life that follows that of his life as a deer, Bharata attains the perfection of his yoga practices that he had undertaken two lifetimes previous.

I will return to this story later, but for now I want only to illustrate a relevant basic presupposition of classical Indic thought that we do well to keep in mind.

Consciousness and Transmigration

As is widely known, yogic traditions of South Asia (including those associated with Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu thought and practice systems) subscribe to the notion of multiple successive lives involving some sort of “transmigration” or “metempsychosis,” whereby death’s apparent finality is understood to mask sustained individual existence through countless births within the variety of life-forms we see in this world. And what upholds this view is the acceptance of consciousness as the indestructible reality in which all existence rests: Especially in both Jain and Hindu traditions (in contrast to the Buddhist notion of *anatta/anātman* – “no-self”), it is understood that we and all creatures, including plants and microbes, are ever-existent individual sentient beings who inhabit one body after another, as a car driver might abandon one car to sit in and drive another car without herself being thereby changed. Thus the understanding is that we are souls, or selves (*ātman* or *jīva*) who possess bodies; *not*, as is commonly thought, that we are bodies that possess souls. Further, all yogic traditions are agreed that the human life-form provides a unique opportunity for souls to attain, or rather recover, pure consciousness, thereby permanently ending an otherwise endless repetition of births and deaths.

The notion of “pure consciousness” is, in turn, rooted in the very ancient Sāṅkhya system of Indian thought. According to Sāṅkhya, the passive but conscious self (*puruṣa*) has become deeply entangled in the active but non-conscious matrix of matter or primordial nature (*prakṛti*), resulting in a perpetual condition of suffering. For our present purposes, to be noted is Sāṅkhya’s threefold typology of primordial nature in three fundamental modalities (*guṇas*) or constituents. Loosely comparable to the Chinese Taoist notion of *yin* and *yang* as ever-interacting fundamental cosmic principles, the notion of *guṇas* differs not only in there being three rather than two constituents, but in their gradation in terms of desirability for elevation of consciousness. Thus, according to this scheme, in the practice of yoga, the constituent of illumination, balance, and goodness (*sattva-guṇa*) is to be pursued and consciously cultivated, whereas the constituent of aggression, passion, and nervous energy (*rāja-guṇa*) is to be overcome, and the constituent of darkness, inertness, and ignorance (*tamo-guṇa*) is to be avoided altogether.⁴

Yoga practice in its classical form presupposes the necessity to make a determined effort to mould one’s life so as to be sustained by the constituent of illumination, by which the immediate goal of yoga—to gain mastery of one’s own mind—becomes possible. In the pursuit of this world-orientation, *sattva-guṇa*, the *yogī* will typically seek natural surroundings, accommodate him or herself to the life of the forest with all its animals, observe vows of nonviolence (*ahiṃsa*) through keeping a vegetarian

diet and the like, and may possibly maintain and protect cows, which are, because of their harmless and productive nature, likewise associated with the *sattva-guṇa* constituent.⁵

To understand in more detail how Yoga may help us to rethink animal-human relationality, it will be useful to briefly consider each of the eight limbs or stages of classical Yoga practice in this context.⁶

Progressing up the Yoga Ladder

The first two limbs of the classical eight-limb yoga system are called *yama*—restraints—and *niyama*—practices. Patañjali specifies each of these in a further five categories, and all of them combined may be regarded as setting the ethical foundations of yoga, first by a set of negative directives (avoiding all kinds of violence, untruth, theft, possessiveness, and sexual incontinence) and then by positive directives (maintaining purity, mental satisfaction, austerity, scriptural recitation, and religiosity). Combined, these prohibitions and practices serve as the basis for maintaining a strong connection with *sattva-guṇa*, the illuminative constituent of nature. Important for us in the present context is that all the elements of these two limbs combined—not just *ahimsā* (nonviolence), the first principle of restraint—serve to enable the yoga practitioner to overcome the deeply rooted tendency toward predation—the propensity that humans have, as sentient beings, to sustain ourselves by victimizing other beings, whether vegetable, animal, or human. All the classical Yoga traditions would agree that if the predation tendency is not curbed, there can be no substantial progress in the raising of consciousness nor can there be a development of positive relationality with the natural world. In Chesterton’s words, we remain “wild”.

Yoga’s third limb, *āsana*, or postures, disciplines the *yogī’s* physical body in ways meant ultimately to minimize the body’s tendency to disturb the mind with its concerns for sustenance, reproduction, and protection. Today, in largely urban yoga studios, it is mainly this third practice (sometimes combined with the fourth, controlling the breath) that has become popular (unfortunately, for the most part ignoring the initial two and remaining five limbs of yoga practice).

One aspect of *āsana* practice of interest for our context is what may be called the imitation of animals. In his study of the classic yoga text, Patañjali’s Yoga Sutras, Christopher Chapple discusses this, relating it to shamanic practices of imitation and identification with animals. More broadly, he notes that a wide range of cultures have been known to venerate animals, perceiving in the many species varieties of special powers which, it has been believed, can be harnessed by particular practices such as masquerading as animals and imitating them. Chapple quotes Mircea Eliade:

Imitating the gait of an animal or putting on its skin was acquiring a superhuman mode of being . . . by becoming this mythic animal, man becomes something far greater and stronger than himself . . . He who, forgetting the limitations and false

measurements of humanity, could rightly imitate the behavior of animals—their gait, breathing, cries, and so on—found a new dimension in life: spontaneity, freedom, “sympathy” with all the cosmic rhythms and hence bliss and immortality.⁷

Animals of each species possess particular abilities and sense powers which we, accustomed to think in terms of evolution theory, tend to regard only in terms of survival advantage. All such abilities—be it a dog’s powers of smell and hearing or a bird’s powers of flight and sight—can, however, also point to the heightened sensitivities of consciousness said to be obtained through yoga.⁸

In later yoga tradition (from roughly the fifteenth century) various yoga *āsanas* take on names of animals. Cow, tortoise, rooster, peacock, lion, serpent, rabbit, locust, crow, eagle, frog, dog, and scorpion are a few examples of animals associated with particular *āsanas*.⁹ And while one might see these animal associations as mere convenience mixed with a measure of projection, alternatively, one may appreciate the *āsanas*’ potential for evoking qualities we associate with the respective animals. Chapple observes, “. . . the naming of Yoga postures is more than merely a convenient, descriptive artifice . . . the relationship between sacred power and the human cannot be divorced from the harnessing of the deep images evoked by intimacy with the animal world.”¹⁰

Usually practiced in conjunction with certain *āsanas* is the fourth yoga limb, namely *prāṇāyāma*, literally “extention, or restraint, of vital air.” By these practices breathing can be deepened and steadied, increasing one’s ability to concentrate. Regulating the breath forces one to become conscious of it, allowing one to become aware of one’s dependency on breath and one’s commonality with all creatures who share in the act of breathing to sustain life. Advanced *yogīs* are said to be able to radically slow their breathing—thus imitating certain animals in hibernation—to extend their life duration, while radically reducing the metabolic demands of the body.¹¹

Then comes the fifth limb of yoga, *pratyāhāra*, the practice of consciously withdrawing the senses from sense objects, a practice compared in the Bhagavad-gītā with the habit of the tortoise to withdraw its limbs into its shell when it perceives danger. The progressing *yogī* is always cautious with respect to sense activity, knowing that sense objects are potentially dangerous means by which to lose her or his connection with the *sattva-guṇa*, nature’s constituent for illumination. Although *pratyāhāra* appears to be characterized by withdrawal from the world, because it disengages one from specific sense objects it facilitates the ability to abide in the conscious self, with the end effect of opening one to reciprocation with other conscious beings from a deeper level than is normally possible, beyond identification of self and other with temporal bodies.

The final three limbs of eight-limbed classical Yoga, namely *dhāranā* (concentration), *dhyāna* (meditation), and *samādhi* (absorption) are increasing degrees of perfecting one’s conscious attention, to the point that human sentience reaches its

fullest potential.¹² On this level of consciousness, in terms of perception of other beings, one is said to experience what I will call radical universality and radical particularity: “radical universality” is the direct realization of all living beings’ ultimate equality as super-temporal, indestructible conscious beings. As the Bhagavad-gītā puts it (6.8, 6.9, 5.18), the yogī “sees pebbles, stones, and gold as the same,” “sees friends, enemies, saints and scoundrels as the same,” and “sees a learned sage, an elephant, a cow, a dog, and a dog-eater as the same.” By “radical particularity” I mean the realization that each and every one of the infinite number of creatures is unique, each possessing a permanently unique relationship to the supreme conscious entity, referred to generically as Īśvara or Bhagavān.

Bharata teaches a king

With this quick sketch of the eightfold yoga system in the context of human-animal relationality, we can return to the story of the yogī, Bharata, who takes birth as a deer following his life as a yogī. In the context of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, in which the story is narrated, its main didactic purpose is usually taken to be cautionary for the would-be *yogi* listener or reader, a warning not to squander the rare opportunity that human birth provides.

But I want to suggest an alternative way of reading the story that serves my purpose of reflection on human-animal relations through yoga. In my reading, the consequence of Bharata’s care for the deer is not a failure or a detour; rather, it is an essential lesson that he needs to receive in order to complete his yoga schooling. He needs to experience, in the fullest sense of the term “experience” as *in-habiting*, what it is to be a non-human animal, but to do so with heightened yogic awareness. Thus, Bharata’s story represents a progression of consciousness that becomes complete only when one has gained empathic experience of animal existence through yoga.

In fact the Bhāgavata Purāṇa’s continuation of this story is significant (BhP 5.9-14) as indicative of how yoga practice has been framed by this text’s tradition within a wider, political context. In his next life, following that of the deer body, Bharata is born into a family of brahmins (priests) in which, from a young age, he feigns mental incapacity in order to be excluded from social interactions and hence from the distractions of worldly life. In his apparent ineptitude he is conscripted into a team of palenquin carriers for the local king, Rahūgana. But the king’s anger is aroused by Bharata’s irregular pace, caused by Bharata’s efforts to avoid stepping on ants as he walks. An altercation ensues, ending in the king’s recognition that, despite appearances, Bharata is an extremely wise sage to whom Rahūgana eagerly submits himself for instruction in higher knowledge.

What the conclusion of this story suggests is that a king—a ruler of humankind—having listened submissively to the teachings of an advanced *yogī*—a homeless resident of the forest—learns the higher truth about the nature of living beings,

qualifying him to properly execute his royal duty as protector not only of the human citizens of his kingdom, but also as protector of all living creatures in his kingdom. By such knowledge it becomes possible for the head of state to enact what the Bhagavad-gītā calls *loka-saṁgraha*, literally “holding the world together” or “sustaining the world,” or, in other words, acting appropriately and effectively for the world’s welfare. In this what might be called “yogic vision” of human-animal harmony, both the *yogī* and the king are essential agents for the sustenance of the world, each honouring the other. The *yogī* has profound realization of the higher truth of universal and particular consciousness, and he or she lives in, represents, and exemplifies *sattva-guṇa*, nature’s constituent of illumination, goodness, and balance. The king, on the other hand, has martial power to wield for protection of all beings, and because of his association with *rājo-guṇa*, nature’s constituent of action, energy, and passion, he is able to effectively provide protection for his subjects, both human and non-human.

Together, the *yogī* or mystic visionary, and the king, or head of state, serve to sustain the world in what Indic traditions call *dharma*—higher law that facilitates the progress of all beings toward fully illuminated, divine consciousness. In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the sustenance of the world through dharma is a persistent theme, and as an important text in the theistic yoga tradition—especially *bhakti-yoga*, the “yoga of devotion”—it portrays ultimate reality as the supreme, all-powerful and loving person, the *uttama-puruṣa*, who is ultimately responsible for *loka-saṁgraha*, the welfare of the world. In this role, various *avatāras* (divine descents) of the supreme person (referred to typically as Vishnu, or Nārāyaṇa, or Krishna) enter the world at crucial moments in order to set aright, or re-establish, principles and practices of dharma and yoga. Significantly, some of the *avatāras* appear in the forms of various animals. So, for example, in primordial times, as the earth is submerged in the cosmic waters, Vishnu appears as Varāha—a cosmic boar—who dives into the nether regions to recover the earth on his tusks. But this is a longer story which need not detain us. Suffice to note that in the vision of yogic perfection elaborated in the theistic traditions of India, there prevails an understanding of divine, human, and animal interaction that brings the three categories intimately together as a celebration of the divine, sustenance and liberation of the human, and protection of the animal dimensions of being. In this scheme, although humans may have “broken out” as the “wild animal”, there is real hope that they—we—can, as Mahatma Gandhi put it, “be the change we wish to see” in the world, and thus to bring about the conditions for appropriate and pleasing relationships between animals and humans, affording genuine well-being for the world as a whole.

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Kenneth Valpey is a research fellow at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (Oxford University) and has also been a regular visiting scholar at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies' Professorship in Indian Religions. In addition to his book *Attending Kṛṣṇa's Image: Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Murti-sevā as Devotional Truth* (Routledge 2005; Recensia 2013) he has published articles on Hindu and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava thought and practice in the *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies*, the *Journal of Hindu Studies*, and the *Beide Journal of Philosophy* (University of Peking). A chapter on 'Iconology and Worship' in the *Continuum Companion to Hinduism* has been published in 2011 and, in collaboration with Dr. Ravi M. Gupta, an edited volume, *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Sacred Text and Living Tradition* (Columbia University Press, 2013). As a practitioner of bhakti-yoga in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava

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¹ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Electronic Classics Series, (Pennsylvania State University, p. 132. Quoted in *The Critic*, Summer 1994, p. 83).

² See, for example, Callicott et al, 1989; Callicott and McRea, 2014; and Chapple, et al, 2000.

³ The Bhāgavata Purāṇa is by far the most widely known and commented of the several texts of the Purāṇa genre. It is particularly associated with and foundational for certain Vaiṣṇava (Vishnuite) traditions, and enjoys present-day popularity, especially through oral recitations. For an introduction to the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, see Gupta and Valpey (2013, and forthcoming).

⁴ The Bhagavad-gītā, especially chs. 14, 17, and parts of 18, elaborate on the Sāṅkhya notion of *guṇas*, with an implied emphasis on the relative superiority of *sattva-guṇa* to the other two. However, it also emphasizes the necessity to transcend *sattva-guṇa* if one is to attain the perfection of yoga practice. A somewhat different but relevant perspective is articulated by Arya (1986:30): All three constituents are necessarily always present, but for one in whom *sattva-guṇa* predominates, *raja-guṇa* serves to energize, impel, and overcome stagnation; and *tamo-guṇa* serves to stabilize one's consciousness.

⁵ It should be noted that *ahimsā*, which Mahatma Gandhi made famous by his application of it in the campaign for Indian independence, is the very first prerequisite for the successful practice of yoga. Reflecting this sense of *ahimsā's* importance, the sacred scripture Mahābhārata (e.g. 1.11.12, Vulgate edition) refers to it as the "highest dharma" (*ahimsā paramo dharmah sarva-prāṇābhṛtaḥ smṛtaḥ*), whereby dharma indicates, broadly speaking, the duty of human beings to participate appropriately in the maintenance of the world around them. Significantly, for animal protection discourse, the Mahābhārata also (esp. at 3.297.55) also specifies "non-cruelty" (*ānṛśamsya*) as the highest dharma (Hudson 2006:267n.14).

⁶ The eightfold yoga system is summarized in Patañjali Yoga Sūtras (PYS) II.29, followed by elaborations from II.30 through III.7. See Chapple (2008) or Bryant (2009) for helpful translations and discussions of the text.

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) p. 460. Quoted in Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2008), ch. 4, location 674 of 3387 (Kindle ed.).

⁸ The nature of perception is an important theme in Yoga philosophy; in particular, the tradition speaks of "yogic perception" (*yoga-pratyakṣa*), as a power accessible for the *yogī* who has attained perfect trance (*samādhi*), in which "reality (*sad* or *sat*) is accurately seen only by the inner self directly in concentration without the intervention of the senses, mind and buddhi [intelligence]" (Arya 1986:85).

⁹ Indeed, according to some yoga traditions, there are potentially as many yoga *āsanas* as there are living species, namely, 8,400,000, by traditional reckoning.

¹⁰ Chapple, 2008, ch. 4, location 717 of 3387 (Kindle ed.).

¹¹ However, in contrast to the parallel with hibernating animals' physical condition of slow breathing, it would be understood that the *yogī's* awareness, unlike that of a hibernating animal's, would be highly awakened (or, in terms of the *guṇa* typology, the *yogī* would be situated in *sattva-guṇa*, whereas the hibernating animal would be situated in *tamo-guṇa*).

¹² The Bhagavad-gītā, vv. 20-23, summarizes the characteristics of this state as follows (Schweig's translation, 2010:97-98, ignoring line-breaks): "That place where thought comes to rest, held steady by the practice of yoga; And where, seeing the Self by the very self, one becomes satisfied within the self; That boundless happiness beyond the senses, which is grasped through discernment; That place where one knows this, indeed, is established in it and does not swerve from the truth; And which having obtained, one is mindful that no other gain is greater than this; Situated in which one is not shaken even by heavy suffering—Let this be understood as the disjunction from one's conjunction with suffering—this is called yoga. One is to be absorbed in yoga with determination, such yoga being without discouraging thought."