



I

Theory and Practice

Principles of Yoga Practice and Types of Yoga Theory

Insofar as yoga practice is a form of bodily movement (and sometimes effortful absence of bodily movement), it does not require much theoretical knowledge. Although yoga is not mere exercise, intellectually it's often only a matter of knowing the meaning of words that refer to basic body parts and motions, like lifting your arms and holding your palms together. A yoga teacher conveys skills, mastery of the body, breath, and so on from his or her own first-person point of view. It's "knowledge how" rather than "knowledge that," like how to ride a bicycle or to swim as opposed to certain facts or laws that obtain. Asanas or postures and the transitions between them in a class require little theoretical knowledge, no knowledge of aerodynamics, for instance, although all movement is governed by aerodynamic laws.

Of course, in yoga practice not every body part needs to be known and identified, only those capable of being moved as targeted in the instructions of the teacher—the left hand, for example, as opposed to the spleen. One of the purposes of doing the posture called Corpse Pose, *shavasana*, is to learn to identify body parts, but not as one would in an anatomy class.¹ The main purpose of the asana is to relax the entire body and psychological system consciously, as you lie flat on your back on the floor without going to sleep. Learning to locate and relax a specific part

{ 10 } mentioned is a means to this end and is how the asana is taught to beginners in some traditions: toes, arches, ankles, heels, calves, upper and lower thighs, fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, and (to quote a contemporary teacher) “loosening hip sockets and relaxing the buttocks, moving from the tailbone and relaxing through the lumbar, the thoracic vertebrae, relaxing the back of the neck, and softening the throat, releasing any tension from the muscles of the jaws, lips, and tongue, relaxing the cheeks” [parting the lips and moving the tongue to lie away from the teeth], “feeling the eyeballs grow heavier and softer as they drop down away from the eyelids, the eyelids floating lightly above the eyes as you relax the eyebrows and forehead and make the temples grow soft and hollow, relaxing the scalp and crown of the head.”² Let me stress that these two are not the same: the ability to identify and move or relax a body part as required to do yoga, and knowing the location and function of an anatomical part, such as the pineal gland, as explained in medical science. The distinction is of enormous importance to Yoga philosophy.

Yoga teachings engage, like a “how-to” book of practical instruction, a first-person point of view as opposed to the externalist, third-person point of view of science. Thus Yoga philosophy has a touchstone in the utility of its ideas for the practices. Medical science does not have the same orientation, and although often scientific hypotheses overlap with Yoga principles, the phenomenology (how they appear or are present to consciousness) of the practices as well as of the experiences to which they lead carries Yoga philosophy into its own special area of psychological theory and, as we shall see, metaphysics.

To move more slowly, let us ask whether knowing the body’s anatomy, the bones and muscles, the pulmonary, digestive, and cardiovascular systems, could be of help in yoga practice. Shouldn’t the ideal yoga instructor, if not the weekend practitioner, know the body parts and their functions as explained in medicine? The answer is complex, and surely not entirely negative. Some such knowledge could prevent injury in imaginable circumstances (though few get injured in yoga since, unlike in sports, we attend closely to bodily feedback). Nevertheless, Yoga instructors need not be medically trained. The direction of the question is misleading. We should not lose sight of the fact that in yoga practice, as in sports, our intellectual knowledge is in the service of what we are doing.

Consider the illiterate yogin or yogini. Many unschooled in letters have without question thrived, being accomplished in the practices—for instance, the revered Sri Ramakrishna, the nineteenth-century illiterate Bengali mystic and guru of Swami Vivekananda (Vivekananda taught Vedanta to William James, among other achievements, at the Chicago 1893

Congress of World Religions, and translated the *Yoga Sutra*). To be able to pull the shoulder blades down away from the ears and relax them, for example, or to spread the toes requires no scientific knowledge whatsoever. { 11 }

Let us look at instructions and descriptions of Corpse Pose, *shavasana*, in three current yoga manuals: first one that tries to explain scientifically the relaxation process in the midst of instructions, and then two other, more traditional renditions of instructions for the same asana.

Relax completely, allowing your body to rest on the floor under the influence of gravity. When you first lie down most of the motor neurons that innervate the skeletal muscles are still firing nerve impulses, but your breathing gradually becomes even and regular, and the number of nerve impulses per second to your muscles starts to drop. If you are an expert in relaxation, within a minute or two the number of nerve impulses to the muscles to your hands and toes goes to zero. Then, within five minutes the motor neuronal input to the muscles of your forearms, arms, legs, and thighs diminishes and also approaches zero. The rhythmical movement of the respiratory diaphragm lulls you into even deeper relaxation, finally minimalizing the nerve impulses to the deep postural muscles of the torso. The connective tissues are not restraining you. Pain is not registered from any part of the body—the posture is entirely comfortable. This is an ideal relaxation.³

There are at the very least two referential expressions in this passage that are *not* phenomenological, not identifiable in a yoga practice from the inside, from a first-person point of view: “motor neurons” and “nerve impulses.” These are part of a theory, of an explanation, not of instructions telling the yoga student what to do or watch for. If they were pared away, you could be told to do the same thing. The term “respiratory diaphragm” is phenomenological; it can be identified proprioceptively in direct inner feeling and control. But in this passage the diaphragm is mentioned as part of a mechanism that, with this asana, is dissociated from conscious control. In a traditional teaching, in contrast, the diaphragm would not be in such sharp focus, the emphasis being instead on “breath energy,” *prana*, sometimes translated “life energy,” as will be explained.

Next, two “how-to” presentations of Corpse Pose that are woven into traditional Yoga theories.

In what has become the most popular asana manual in the United States, B.K.S. Iyengar, who has trained yoga teachers in Pune, India, for more than fifty years, quotes, on *shavasana*, three verses from the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (*HYP* 1.32, which describes *shavasana*, and then 4.29 and 4.30, which provide occult interpretation) along with another

{ 12 } classical text. Having just previously spelled out the physical positioning, Pandit Iyengar provides a translation of the verses along with some commentary. In the ideal Corpse Pose, one draws in the senses into a generic sense awareness (called *pratyahara*), which has no particular objects. This in turn is drawn into the breath or *prana* and then the *prana* into a deeper, essentially blissful consciousness:

In good relaxation one feels energy flow from the back of the head towards the heels and not the other way around. . . .

[From the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*:] “The mind is the lord of the Indriyas (the organs of senses); the Prana (the Breath of Life) is the lord of the mind. When the mind is absorbed it is called Moksha (final emancipation, liberation of the soul); when Prana and Manas (the mind) have been absorbed, an undefinable joy ensues.”⁴

In Iyengar’s usage and translation, “Prana” is not just the breath but an energy that flows in occult cavities and canals, not only the lungs. It animates the physical but also a subtle body. Normally the main pranic energy has an upward buoyancy, but, as the master teacher says, in Corpse Pose one begins to feel flow in the reverse direction. This is an important yogic experience. Deep breathing and *shavasana* help eliminate restlessness, agitation, and “stress,” Iyengar says, but getting rid of these in turn is part of a larger process of controlling and harmonizing the “Breath of Life,” as he translates *prana*.

Philosophers might expect that this “Prana” is bad theory. But it is clearly more a matter of direct experience than the earlier “motor neurons.” The concept may have a theoretic side, but here the word even in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*’s expanded sense has concrete meaning for yoga practice and in yogic experience.

Gestalt psychologists and others have taught us about “seeing *as*,” about how our beliefs and conventions influence our perceptual language, even basic depictions of that which we perceive. Do you see the faces in the trees, the duck or the rabbit? A doctor will see a hairline fracture in an x-ray if she thinks there is one on other evidence, and not if not. Standing on a cliff overlooking a movie set, the uninformed will see an old western town. But when told it’s just a set, a person will suddenly see the façades. Perception is theory-laden. This does not mean that we should be skeptical about tables and chairs, but it might mean that we should be skeptical about “Prana.” For theory impinges on even the lowest-level use of names to pick out something of which we are directly aware, and not everyone talks about *prana* as they do about tables and chairs.

However, in yoga it is common to become aware—directly, intimately—of objects of which formerly, before the practice, we were unaware. And this is true even though these things or phenomena are parts of ourselves, of our very own bodies or consciousness! Thus, in good faith Iyengar and many others, including myself, say that in yoga we become aware of *prana*—which is at a minimum more than filling and emptying the lungs—phenomenologically. This is perhaps most readily evident in breath and attention being directed and merging at specific spots. In any case, the claim is that pranic energy, which includes but is more than breath, is a matter of as immediate an experience as anyone’s own inner feeling of legs and arms.⁵

Before moving on to another traditional explanation of Corpse Pose, let us note that whatever the precise nature of “Prana” in Iyengar’s usage, the object of which the yogin or yogini is aware stands outside science. You will not find *prana* mentioned in any medical textbook, no “Breath of Life” as understood by Iyengar or any other traditional yoga master. Though not all agree with Iyengar overall, there is a common phenomenology of *prana*, of “life energy,” in yoga *shastra*, the traditional literature that teaches yoga practice and Yoga philosophy.

By reputation the most popular asana manual nowadays in Europe, *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*, by Swami Satyananda Saraswati of the Bihar School of Yoga, provides instructions for Corpse Pose that include a dramatic and even more controversial example of a mysterious but reputedly phenomenological item, i.e., a “spiritual center of consciousness,” or chakra. Chakras are crucial to tantric occult psychology. The instructions also include a nicely complementary *uncontroversial* phenomenon of yogic awareness, *pratyahara* (also mentioned by Iyengar; see above), “pulling the senses back from their objects.” We’ll take up the uncontroversial first.

Relax the whole body and stop all physical movement.

Become aware of the natural breath and let it become rhythmic and relaxed.

Begin to count the breaths from number 27. Mentally repeat, “I am breathing in 27, I am breathing out 27. I am breathing in 26, I am breathing out 26,” and so on to, back to zero. . . .

Duration: According to time available. In general, the longer the better, although a minute or two is sufficient between asana practices.

Awareness: Physical—first on relaxing the whole body, then on the breath and counting. . . . Spiritual: on ajna chakra [the “third eye,” or center of consciousness located between the eyebrows].

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Benefits: This asana relaxes the whole psycho-physical system. It should ideally be practiced before sleep, before, during and after asana practice, particularly after dynamic exercises such as surya namaskara [Sun Salutation, an asana series that marries breath and movement]; and when the practitioner feels physically and mentally tired. It develops body awareness. When the body is completely relaxed, awareness of the mind increases, developing *pratyahara*.⁶

This “*pratyahara*” is limb number five of the eight-limbed yoga, *ashtanga yoga*, of the *Yoga Sutra*, literally “pulling back.” At YS 2.54–55, it is spelled out as “the disconnection of the sense organs from their objects as if in imitation of the talent of the *chitta*,⁷ ‘thought and feeling’ (to be still). From that comes supreme control of the sense organs.” The *Bhagavad Gita* also has several verses on this (e.g., 6.24–27; see appendix B), as do other yoga manuals, old and new.

Such “*withdrawal* (of the senses from the objects of sense)” is the yogic equivalent of phenomenology as practiced in philosophy, it seems to me. Philosophy students, I think, will naturally like the exercise. Something similar is taught in the tradition of Descartes. It involves paying attention not to the dog that is barking but to the sound of the bark and the “canoid shape” (in the phrase of Bertrand Russell); the smell of the flower, not the flower itself; the “sense data” of colors and so on, taken altogether, multidimensionally, regarded as mere objects of the senses. In classical India as in the West, a presentation dissociated from its objective indication is viewed as having a type of objecthood (*vishayata*) where veridical experience is the same as illusion. The snake that is a rope looks real. In *pratyahara*, the rope that is real looks like an illusion. We witness sense presentations as though their objects were not there, “*pulling back* (the organs of sense)” into a generic “sense mind” (*manas*).

In the yoga studio, a modified *pratyahara* seems all that is possible, since one has to hear and trust the words of the instructor transmitted through the sound of his or her voice. One can, however, close the eyes, as one does normally with at least certain postures, and while practicing breath control, *pranayama*, by itself (as opposed to in conjunction with a flow or sequence of postures). And closing your eyes heightens other capacities, as is traditionally taught. With Corpse Pose, *shavasana*, though, mastery requires *pratyahara*, at least according to Swami Satyananda and other traditional teachers.

Just how to interpret the sense data of yoga will occupy us in the next chapter, on the mind-body problem, where we will look at top-down

approaches to the relation of theory and practice. Now, in contrast, let us look at Yoga theories from the bottom up. Through *pratyahara* and other practices, changes occur in experience; there are new phenomena. How should we think about these? { 15 }

For example, consider the obviously controversial term, “ajna chakra,” in the last quote on *shavasana*. I say it is controversial because I presume not everyone is aware of this “center of consciousness.” I would guess that among the entire human population, few would report being conscious of anything such. But there are many yogis and yoginis who are committed to its existence as a matter of immediate experience, prototypically a yoga master such as Satyananda in line with a confluence of traditional texts. It is hard to know how to interpret such experiences. But any self-respecting Yoga philosophy has to defend their possibility and their value. Of course, not everything traditionally imputed to the center of consciousness has to be endorsed. But one point of Yoga philosophy is to remove intellectual blocks (*granthi, pratibandhaka*) we might have to this or another line of yogic self-development. The *ajna chakra* is traditionally taught as the “third eye,” a mystic center of consciousness in a subtle body somehow connected with the center of the forehead, between the eyebrows (see figure 4C). It is traditionally described as luminescent, bluish or camphor white (as seen in inner vision), and comprised of two lobes or petals spanning the body’s midline. In Yoga psychology and cosmological theory, the third eye is not itself made of matter but is capable of transmitting spiritual influences on us and our physical selves. Such influences or energies are said to originate in other worlds or planes of being or from a deeper or higher self. Yoga philosophy does not necessarily endorse all of this, but it legitimates intellectual as well as practical exploration of such ideas.⁸

In much the same vein of occult psychology are the *bandhas* of hatha yoga. These, however, are physical contractions, certain muscle tightenings, which are under our direct control. Masters of yoga talk about them as both bodily and spiritual—unlike *ajna chakra*, which is said to be only spiritual and not ordinarily under our direct control. The *bandhas* are, furthermore, much exercised in hatha yoga, especially in advanced practices. They are locks (*bandha* = [psychic] lock) said to enable transition to a sense of energy flow in occult pathways and between or in and out of chakras such as the third eye. Again, unlike chakric centers of occult consciousness, *bandhas* are voluntarily exercised in asana practices as well as in breath control, *pranayama*. One does not have to believe in or be able to identify chakras in order to exercise a *bandha*.

{ 16 } Ordinarily we do not pay them much if any attention. But we do not “awaken” to their activity. We initiate their activity through conscious engaging or letting go.

There are three *bandhas* prominently referred to in hatha yoga: *mula bandha*, *uddiyana bandha*, and *jalandhara bandha*, respectively Root Lock, Stomach Lock, and Throat Lock. A fourth, *maha bandha*, the Great Lock, is the simultaneous practice of all three. Let us look again at our three manuals, in reverse order this time, starting with Satyananda explaining the *bandhas* in the tantric psychology of chakras, then Iyengar on Stomach Lock, and finally our contemporary anatomist on Root Lock.

From *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha* (see figure 4C for the chakric system that Swami Satyananda mentions and figure 4A for the theory of vital and mental bodies or “sheaths,” *kosha*, which he refers to obliquely):

These three bandhas directly act on the three *granthis* or psychic knots [which block the flow of psychic energy]. . . . The granthis prevent the free flow of prana along sushumna nadi [the central channel of tantric psychology: see figure 4C] and thus impede the awakening of the chakras and the rising of kundalini [psychic energy asleep in the lower chakras].

Brahma granthi is the first knot and . . . when brahma granthi is transcended, the kundalini or primal energy is able to rise beyond mooladhara and swadhisthana [the first two of seven chakras, linked to the base of the spine and the area above the genitals, respectively, which are said to control the survival and sexual instincts] without being pulled back by the attractions and instinctual patterns of the personality.

The second knot is vishnu granthi, associated with manipura and anahata chakras [the next two chakras, at the level of the navel and of the heart, respectively]. . . . Manipura sustains . . . the physical body, governing the digestion and metabolism of food. Anahata sustains . . . the mental body and the energy body. Once vishnu granthi is transcended, energy is drawn from the universe and not from the localised centres within the human being.

The final knot is rudra granthi which is associated with vishuddhi and ajna chakras [the next two chakras, at the level of the throat and in the middle of the forehead, respectively]. Vishuddhi and ajna sustain . . . the intuitive or higher mental body. . . . When rudra granthi is pierced, individuality is dropped, the old ego awareness is left behind and the experience of unmanifest consciousness emerges beyond ajna chakra at sahasrara [the seventh chakra located just above the crown of the head].⁹

From Iyengar's *Light on Yoga*:

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Uddiyana means flying up. The process in Uddiyana Bandha is to lift the diaphragm high up the thorax and to pull in the abdominal organs against the back of the spine. It is said that through Uddiyana Bandha the great bird prana is forced to fly up the sushumna nadi, the main channel for the flow of nervous energy, which is situated inside the meru-danda or the spinal column.¹⁰

From the *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga* by H. David Coulter, quoted earlier:

mula bandha (the root lock) is a gentle contraction of the pelvic diaphragm and the muscles of the urogenital triangle. It . . . seals urogenital energy within the body, controlling and restraining it during breathing exercises and meditation (again, this is a literary rather than a scientific use of the word "energy"). What actually happens is more easily sensed than described, so we'll begin with a series of exercises.¹¹

Here such "literary" usages are unavoidable, dare we say? Of course, according to the two traditional teachers, the literary is literal in an experiential sense. But the explanation tying the practices to occult energies and chakras is at least one level of theory higher, or more abstract, than the system of terms used to teach the exercise. Nevertheless, as with breath exercises, there can be little question that these do indeed expand one's sense of bodily energies—Iyengar's "nervous energy" and the like—to the point of developing special yogic "powers" or *siddhis* (a theme and major preoccupation of this book). The difficulty of how to square different interpretations of these phenomena is pretty apparent.

Our contemporary Yoga philosophy cannot avoid the conflict between the tantric and other traditional explanations, on the one hand, and science, on the other. One of many common texts Iyengar and Satyananda share is the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, which belongs to the fifteenth century but summarizes and echoes yogic and tantric texts of more than two millennia. In the university setting, the instinctive suspicion would be that the rich tradition of common sources would be responsible for an identical confusion on both gurus' parts, despite the insistences that chakras, etc. are experiential. Let us call this the historicist worry. We shall return to it along with the issue of a partial intersubjectivity in chapter 4 and again in appendix E.¹²

For the present, it is sufficient to note that the conflict is not just about theories, since the one camp takes as experiential what the other rejects

{ 18 } as explanatory and wrong. The distinction between the phenomenological and the theoretical applies to traditional Indian theories as much as to anatomical accounts, but no one tries through practices of controlling the breath to master medical science. The theory of the chakras, et cetera, is supposed to be backed up by rather immediate and convincing experience brought about by, or facilitated by, breath control, *bandha* mastery, asanas, and other practices, so experts tell us.

Without worrying about all the intricacies of Yoga psychology at the beginning, I should like to point out to close this section that it is the path of wisdom to give the benefit of the doubt to yogic testimony, like all testimony, especially from experts, about things with which we are unacquainted. This maxim holds for philosophers but is all the more imperative for practitioners. “Innocent until proven guilty” is to be the byword.¹³ The alternative, “Guilty until proven innocent,” is unworkable, and slightly crazy in the context of ongoing training.

We must trust our teachers. Theories range from the concrete and particular to the abstract and general, and we are not called to believe every bit of Yoga metaphysics or even psychology. However, we should not be mindlessly skeptical of claims just because we personally have not had the experience (yet!). There are of course contexts and subjects, such as God, where we might legitimately be suspicious of the interests of the testifier or guru. Consider, for example, testimony about sexual relations or religious commitment. But we shall not be able to learn very much if we should have to have a very high level of epistemic or justificational confidence in order to pay attention. (Imagine an obnoxious student in the yoga studio questioning the evidence for *prana*. “Just breathe!” my teacher would say.) Indeed, classical Nyaya (a venerable Yoga philosophy that specializes in questions about the acquisition of knowledge) holds that all knowledge from testimony fuses belief with uptake, and that unless there are abnormal conditions, real grounds for doubt, we all naturally accept—as is our right—the information we receive by being told.¹⁴

In sum, while there may be real and interesting issues for philosophy, including Yoga philosophy, concerning testimony, it is at least not unreasonable to have as policy giving the benefit of the doubt. Some rather reasonable-seeming doubts will be dispelled in later chapters, in particular chapter 2. But as we turn to a description of a contemporary yoga class, please bracket—as one would (appropriately) if one were actually to attend such a class—doubts about the objects and movements mentioned.

Extraordinary Emotion: *Bhakti* (Devotional Love), *Rasa* (Relish),
and *Ananda* (Bliss)

The discipline of devotional yoga, *bhakti yoga*, the “yoga of love” has been most famously articulated in the *Bhagavad Gita*, but also permeates tantra and almost all late Hindu religion. (The *bhakti* teaching of the *Gita* is expressed in its later chapters in particular; see appendix B.) To be sure, there are late-classical handbooks of yoga, such as the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (see appendix E), where *bhakti* is not in focus. But even

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there the “grace of the guru” figures prominently. Clearly, *bhakti* is predominant in, for example, the Kashmiri Shaivism of Abhinava Gupta (appendix D) as well as movements all over the subcontinent. It’s not at all a stretch to say that in Vedanta and Vaishnavism more generally as well, *bhakti* reigns as the most important form of yoga in contemporary India. A more qualified statement would be needed to take in tantric Buddhism, but there too *bhakti* is conspicuous.

In the idea of God or the Divine or the Buddha that is crucial, there is both a general and a personal element. The general element connects with Western philosophy’s “teleological argument,” that is to say, with the kinds of consideration that Western philosophers have taken up—the beauty and order of the workings of nature and the miracle of our own being and faculties—to prove the existence of God on the basis of analogy to human arts and crafts (design requiring a designer). The practitioner of *bhakti* goes beyond the inference to perceive the beautiful body of the Beloved everywhere, in the great sights and sounds of Earth, the Mother, but also in every contact, in every sensation, both externally and internally in thought and emotion. The things and events of nature demand not only belief—the *bhakti* yogini would insist, implicitly granting the argument (of which there is an Eastern version much debated in Nyaya¹¹)—but principally delight in the whomever or whatever is their origin.¹²

The particular element in *bhakti* is a matter of personal relationship that extends, however indirectly or in however long a line, to this origin. That is, to use the first-person language of yoga, that whoever or whatever is the stuff of the stars and the Earth and the waters of life is somehow responsible for them too, through self-transformation. The idea that that divine X could be aware of and indeed somehow care for, if not me, at least something that does relate directly to me is the crucial propositional content of *bhakti*, in my opinion. There is my personal divinity, the spark soul in my heart, my higher self, my guru, who is intimate and responsive and moves my feelings by my sense of his or her connectedness, which makes me connected too. *Bhakti yoga* is all about training the emotions, and the emotions relate to the concrete, the divine or the divine representative in the here and now. The feeling is extended, as best one can, to transform all our everyday attitudes. In this way, *bhakti* would come to infuse all that we become and do. Our lives would be different.

Thus the sense of connectedness goes all the way back, grounded in the origin, the *ishvara* or *devi* or equivalent—about which it is necessary,

{ 150 } then, to have some conception. I repeat, the particular element is more important in practicing *bhakti*, the devotional feeling rhapsodized in songs and literature. At the far end of the *bhakti* attitude is simply something or someone who need be conceived only vaguely. Nevertheless, the idea of total connection has to be there. Intimacy at the near end is divinely grounded. Thus the general is definitely intended.

Note that with the general and the particular put together, the whole universe stands as intermediary. For the Creator (mother, sustainer, etc., even emptiness) is the Creator (mother, sustainer, emptiness) of everything, the same with respect to the entire universe. Our existences conform to universal laws, exceptionless processes. The Creator has the whole to worry about, the workings of everything, and cannot be faulted for not weighting my preferences the way I do. Indeed, yogic preliminaries, such as nonharmfulness (*ahimsa*) and the other *yamas* and *niyamas* of the YS, are rules to which I have to conform to enter into the right relations that are the very essence of yoga. Thus a Yoga philosophy of *bhakti* turns to the intermediaries, the connectives joining the high and the low, which become manifest in practice.

Yoga is a matter of right relation, right alignment and connection among all the parts of ourselves. For whatever higher or deeper part there is—by definition, something of which I am currently unaware or aware only imperfectly—I need most of all a teacher, someone who knows the principles of yoga. I need a spiritual intermediary, a divine or human guru, who can show me right alignment. However found, the teacher naturally provokes a form of *bhakti*, gratitude mixed with devotion and happiness entailing confidence about our own destiny.¹³ The universe, i.e., the sequence of events in a lifetime and its collective lessons or its sheer beauty, along with the conspiracies necessary to make us see it, can play the guru's role. So too can a tradition. The position is not filled only by a human representative or a god or goddess anthropomorphically conceived. But a book from a guru of the past as well as personal divinities and *avatars* can serve, as can a living guru. Some teachers are charismatic, some not so charismatic. The essential prerequisite is having at least better connection with the divine than we have, and knowing how to bring us to know or realize it.

Classical Yoga philosophy in the *Gita* and elsewhere provides rich resources for theory of the teacher. At the high end is the notion of the *avatara*, the special divine “descent,” put forth in the *Gita*'s fourth chapter. There is a special “divine descent” into finite form to uphold a moral order and direct the world in the right ways. *Gita* 4.6–8, Krishna speaking:

Although I exist as the unborn, the imperishable self and am the Lord of beings, by resorting to and controlling my own nature I come into phenomenal being through my own magical power of delimitation (*maya*).¹⁴ / Whenever there is a crisis concerning the right way (*dharmā*), Arjuna, and a rising up of evil, then I loose myself forth (taking birth). For protection of good people and for destruction of evildoers, for establishment of the right way, I take birth age after age.¹⁵

Krishna as *avatara* is a person who is aware of himself as a manifestation of God, a person who shares somehow in God's awareness, power, and native delight.¹⁶ In the *Mahabharata* as a whole, I admit, Krishna does more than teach yoga (see the introduction to appendix B). The "establishment of the right way" mentioned in verse 4.8, quoted here, is not to be understood as only a matter of yogic guidance. But in accordance with the openness and inclusivism of our Yoga, let us explore further the concept of divine descent and the guru. The *Gita* as a yoga manual is in rather surprising agreement here with the *Yoga Sutra*, as I intend to show.¹⁷

The *Yoga Sutra* has a conception of the Lord, *ishvara*, and a version of devotional yoga. In chapter 1, a handful of distinct methods to reach mental silence are laid out (mental silence being the goal of yoga according to YS 1.2, *chitta-vritti-nirodha*, stilling of fluctuations of thought and emotion, also called calming illumination of the mind at YS 1.33). One of these methods is *bhakti*.¹⁸ YS 1.23 sums it up: Mental silence can result "from opening to (*pranidhana*, meditation on, surrender to) the Lord (*ishvara*)." Vyasa, the first commentator, glosses *pranidhana* as *bhakti*, which he says is an intense desire to be like the Lord in certain yogic characteristics and abilities.

The idea of such *pranidhana* is not as controversial in the Sanskrit commentaries as one might expect, knowing the diversity of renderings among modern translators. Still, on the idea of the Lord (*ishvara*) there is plenty of controversy among the classical authors.¹⁹ The two-word expression recurs at YS 2.45, which connects the practice with *samadhi*. Interestingly, the immediately preceding sutra, YS 2.44, says that the practice of self-study (with respect to a yogic text), *sva-adhyaya*, brings the power, *siddhi*, of achieving contact with one's preferred divinity, *ishta devata*.²⁰ A person worships the form of the One that it is easiest to worship, the form to which she or he is personally drawn, who is their teacher or the teacher of their teacher, the founder of the lineage that extends to you. (See in appendix D, in the *Kularnava Tantra*, verse 1.2: Devi tells her guru Shiva that he is "easy to love" as she requests yoga

{ 152 } teachings from him.) Others worship the forms and divinities they are drawn to. Behind them all stands the One.²¹ In the tantric understanding of all this, the form of worship is *puja*, the ceremony of celebration of the divinity. The connection is occult but nonetheless real, a particular *puja* connecting with a particular divinity, the ceremony making, so to say, the right psychic space for that particular divinity to manifest—this seems to be the tantric idea.

Skipping a couple of sutras that are systematic in character (in that they relate, or try to relate, the *ishvara* idea to the Samkhya system), we have at YS 1.26 what seems the essential conception: “The Lord is the guru even of the ancient teachers in not being limited by time.” One of the arguments for the existence of God in classical Indian philosophy is what we may call the Criteriological Argument, which goes like this. Each craft, including speech, is by definition learned from a teacher who has learned from a previous teacher, e.g., grammar that, since the world has a beginning (a crucial premise that atheists such as Mimamsakas and Buddhists reject), has to have an originator, a first guru, traditionally, Shiva, the great god (*maha deva*), the founder of yoga. Shiva sets conventions, endowing words with meaning and patterns as grammatical rules, and fixing standards for excellence in all occupations. We learn these standards from our immediate teachers, who also learned them. Learning processes have to begin somewhere. Therefore, we must suppose an Original Teacher who knows the principles intrinsically without having been taught or who originally set them. Humans are rather obviously ruled out as incapable of these tasks (setting the conventions of language, etc.), so we must conceive of a Diving Being performing them, thus a “guru even of the ancient teachers in not being limited by time.”²²

That God is the original teacher of yoga converges with the *Gita*’s notion of Brahman as the foundation of *dharma* as well as the tantric idea of an individual’s enlightenment as working for the benefit of everyone. It locks up with the Buddhist notion of the bodhisattva (as expressly pointed out by Abhinava—see appendix D: “Bodhisattvas, who are persons who know reality, appear again even after (their enlightenment) in a body that is perfectly appropriate for them in their intention, which is dharmic (righteous) and born out of concern for others’ welfare, whose only consequence would be others actually being helped”). God is impartial. Similarly, the yogin “delights in the welfare of everyone,” in the phrase of the *Gita* (*sarva-hite ratah*). Yoga brings us into right alignment, making us better sensitive to the general welfare. The principles of yoga have social ramifications.