

November 2013

# Mysticism in Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras and in Carl Jung's Psychology

Harold Coward  
*University of Victoria*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Coward, Harold (2013) "Mysticism in Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras and in Carl Jung's Psychology," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 26, Article 7.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1546>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact [cbauman@butler.edu](mailto:cbauman@butler.edu). For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact [omacisaa@butler.edu](mailto:omacisaa@butler.edu).

# Mysticism in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* and in Carl Jung's Psychology

## Harold Coward

### University of Victoria

IN this article we will examine the understandings of mysticism as offered by Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* I:41-51 and Carl Jung's Western psychology. For our purposes, mysticism is not to be understood as something "misty," vague or emotional (to list but three current misinterpretations). Rather, as understood by the great mystics of all religious traditions, mysticism is experienced as something like sensory perception – only more direct and more vivid! In Patañjali's *Yoga*,<sup>1</sup> for example, mysticism is a case of intuition or supersensuous perception (*pratibhā*) from which distorting emotions have been purged by disciplined meditation. While Western philosophers such as Bertrand Russell have attempted to dismiss mysticism as merely subjective emotion, or the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud as an "oceanic feeling,"<sup>2</sup> Patañjali's claim is just the opposite. According

to his *Yoga* psychology, mystical experience is a case of the direct supersensuous perception of reality. The Western psychologist Carl Jung made a serious attempt to read and understand Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*. Thus it is of interest to compare to Jung's understanding of mystical experience with that of Patañjali. We will begin with Patañjali.

#### I. Mysticism in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*

India's traditional psychological understanding of human nature and its mysticism is rooted in Kapila's Sāṅkhya School (c. 500 BCE)<sup>3</sup> and Patañjali's *Yoga* School (c. 200-300 CE).<sup>4</sup> Within Indian thought, conceptions such as *karma* (memory traces from previous actions or thoughts) and *saṃsāra* (rebirth) are taken as basic to all Jaina, Buddhist and Hindu schools. So also there are certain common conceptions about the psychological processes

---

Harold Coward is Professor of Religious Studies and Founding Director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, Canada. He received his Ph.D. in Religious Studies at McMaster University under Professor T.R.V. Murti. A specialist on the Grammarian Philosophy of Bhartrhari and Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras*, Dr. Coward has authored many books of comparative religion on themes such as pluralism, oral and written scripture, environmental ethics, and health care. His 20 authored books include *The Sphota Theory of Language* (1980), *The Philosophy of the Grammarians* (1990), *Pluralism in World Religions* (2000), *Scripture in World Religions* (2000), *Yoga and Psychology* (2002), *T.R.V. Murti* (2003), and *The Perfectibility of Human Nature in Eastern and Western Thought* (2008). His most recent edited book, *Religious Understandings of a Good Death in Hospice Palliative Care*, was named "Book of the Year for 2012" by the American Journal of Nursing. Harold Coward was founding Editor of this journal and played a major role in establishing the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies.

Mysticism in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* and in Carl Jung's Psychology 49

of human nature (e.g. the existence of cognitive traces or *saṃskāras*) which are seen to exist in and through the specific differences of the various schools as a kind of commonly understood psychology.<sup>5</sup> Probably the most complete presentation of this traditional Indian psychology is to be found in the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, and it is from this source that the following overview is presented, with special attention to Y.S. I:41-51.

Yoga starts with an analysis of ordinary experience. This is characterized by a sense of restlessness caused by the distracting influences of our desires. Peace and purity of mind comes only when the distractibility of our natures is controlled by the radical step of purging the passions. But if these troublesome passions are to be purged, they must be fully exposed to view. In this respect, Yoga predated Freud by several hundred years in the analysis of the unconscious. In the Yoga view, the sources of all our troubles are the karmic seeds (memory traces) of past actions or thoughts, heaped up in the unconscious or storehouse consciousness, as it is called in Yoga, and tainted by ignorance, materialistic or sensuous desire, as well as the clinging to one's own ego. Thus, it is clear that traditional Yoga Psychology gives ample recognition to the darker side of humans – the shadow consciousness.

At the ego awareness level of consciousness, Yoga conceives of human cognition on various levels. There is the function of the mind in integrating and coordinating the input of sensory impressions and the resurgent memories of past thoughts and actions (*saṃskāras*). These may all be thought of as “learned” if we use behaviouristic terminology. But then there is the higher

function of the mind in making discriminative decisions as to whether or not to act on the impulses that are constantly flooding one's awareness. This discriminative capacity (*buddhi*) is not learned, but is an innate aspect of our psyche and has the capacity to reveal our true nature. This occurs when, by our discriminative choices, we negate and root out the polluting passions (*kliṣṭa karmas*) from our unconscious until it is totally purified of their distracting restlessness – their “pulling” and “pushing” of us in one direction and then another. Once this is achieved by disciplined self-effort, the level of egoic consciousness is transcended since the notion of ego, I or me (*ahaṃkāra*), is also ultimately unreal. Once the ego or *ahaṃkāra* is rooted out, desiring also disappears and the final level of mystical human nature, pure or transcendent consciousness (*puruṣa*), is all that remains.

For Patañjali there are five prerequisite practices and three ultimate practices. The prerequisite practices include: (1) self-restraints (*Yamas*: non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy, and absence of avarice) to get rid of bad habits; (2) good habits (*niyamas*) to be instilled (washing of body and mind, contentment with whatever comes, equanimity in the face of life's trials, study and chanting of scriptures, meditation upon the Lord); (3) body postures (*āsanas*) such as the lotus position to keep the body controlled and motionless during meditation; (4) controlled deepening of respiration (*prāṇāyāma*) to calm the mind; and (5) keeping senses (e.g. sight, hearing, touch, etc.) from distracting one's mind (*pratyāhāra*) by focusing them on an object or point of meditation.

The ultimate practices are: (1) beginners spend brief periods of fixed concentration

(*dhāraṇā*) upon an object (usually an image which represents an aspect of the divine that appeals to one, e.g. Īśvara, Śiva, Krishna, Kālī); (2) as one becomes more expert, concentration upon the object is held for longer periods (*dhyāna*) and the sense of subject-object separation begins to disappear from one's perception; (3) *Samādhi* occurs when continuous meditation upon the object loses all sense of subject-object separation – a state of direct intuition or becoming one with the object is achieved.

Through these yogic practices one has weakened the hold of the egocentric memories and desires (*karmas*) from the conscious and unconscious levels of one's psyche, and the discovery of the true self has begun. Four levels of object *samādhi*, each more purified than the last, may be realized through repeated practice of yogic meditation. The final state (*nirvicāra samādhi*) occurs when all obstructing ego desires have been purged from the psyche which is now like a perfectly clear window to the aspect of the divine (e.g. Īśvara, Śiva or, for a Western Christian perhaps a cross) which has served as the object of meditation. According to the *Yoga Sūtras*, any image will do. The divine image is only an instrument to aid in the direct experience of the transcendent – at which point the image or object is no longer needed. This objectless *samādhi* is Patañjali's Yoga understanding of the ultimate mystical perception and the realization of release from rebirth.

## II. Mysticism in the Analytical Psychology of Carl Jung

Writing his "Late Thoughts,"<sup>6</sup> Carl Jung puts down his own personal religious experience as clearly as may be found

anywhere in his writings. There is no doubt that Jung's experience is highly mystical. All around himself Jung felt the forces of good and evil moving, but, in the end, the only thing that really mattered was the degree to which the individuated self could transcend these opposing forces.

It seems to have been Jung's view that as an isolated ego, a person would never succeed in reuniting the opposing forces. Those forces within the personality would simply overpower one's ego, and chaos would ensue. What saves us from this fate, said Jung, is the fact that deep within each of us is the God-image which is the psychological foundation of our psyche. The God-image or archetype is inherent in the collective unconscious as the primal stratum or foundational matrix. Jung's most significant religious experience did not focus on the reconciling of God and humans, but rather with the reconciliation of the opposites within the God-image itself. Jung's approach here is psychological and not theological. When asked in a BBC interview whether he believed in God, Jung replied "I do not believe, I know!"<sup>7</sup> By rooting his approach in the direct experience of knowing God rather than having a religion based on the affirmation of conceptual statements of belief, Jung was following an approach he first encountered in Patañjali's Yoga but later found to be also present in Western medieval Alchemy. Mystical experiences, Jung felt, may have a powerful effect upon a person. The forces involved arise from the unconscious and transcend the finite ego so that,

He cannot grasp, comprehend, dominate them; nor can he free himself or escape from them, and therefore feels them as overpowering. Recognizing that they do

Mysticism in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* and in Carl Jung's Psychology 51

not spring from his conscious personality, he calls them *mana*, *daimon* or God.<sup>8</sup>

What is of interest for this discussion of mysticism is not so much the theological argument assumed (which Jung worked out in detail in his *Answer to Job*), but rather the psychological dynamics indicated. Jung's analysis shows mystical experience to occur when the finite, conscious ego is inwardly replaced by God, with God being understood as a personification of the numinous qualities of the unconscious. And here Jung is not making a metaphysical claim that God either exists or does not exist. Jung is simply observing that the processes involved in our experience of God are those of the unconscious and the external world. To put it simply, if we assume that God exists then the way he acts upon us in overpowering mystical experiences is through the psychological processes of the unconscious – particularly via the God archetype.

A good illustration of this process is offered by Jung in his essay *The Holy Men of India*.<sup>9</sup> There Jung describes mysticism as the shifting of the center of gravity from the ego to the Self, from man (as Jung puts it) to God. This, observes Jung, is the goal of *The Exercitia Spiritualia* of Ignatius Loyola – to subordinate “self-possession” (possession by an ego) as much as possible to possession by Christ.<sup>10</sup> Just as Christ manifests the reconciliation of the opposites within God's nature, so also does the person who surrenders his life to Christ overcome the conflict of the opposites within and achieves unity in God. As Jung puts it, for the Christian, God appears empirically in the suffering of the world, in the pain produced by the conflict between the opposites.<sup>11</sup> One who would identify with God, therefore, does not seek to escape from the suffering of the world's

conflicts, but rather gives up one's ego and identifies with Christ. By attempting to unite mystically with Christ, says Jung, “I enter the body of Christ through his scars, and my ego is absorbed into the body of Christ. Then like St. Paul, I no longer live but Christ lives in me.”<sup>12</sup> Jung takes special care to urge that the preceding statement not be understood to mean identity, namely that “I am Christ,” but rather only that, as Paul said it in *Galatians 2:20*, that He lives in us. In terms of psychological dynamics, the finite ego has been subordinated to the self.

A detailed description of the arising of the self in Jungian theory is rather complex. It is Jung's view that each of us shares in three different levels of consciousness; the conscious level of the ego; the dreams, memories, and repressions which comprise the personal unconscious; and the predispositions to universal human reactions, the archetypes, which compose the collective unconscious.<sup>13</sup> It is of course the notion of the archetypes and the collective unconscious which is the trademark of Jung's thought. And it is the idea of a “master archetype,” namely, the “self” or “God” archetype that is fundamental for Jung's analysis of mysticism.

Of all the archetypes, it is the “self” or “God” archetype that has the power to encompass all aspects of life in a way that is integrated and mature. To be comprehensive, both conscious stimuli from the external environment and internal impulses from within the personal and collective unconscious must be included. If one remains fixated on the conscious ego, its limited internal and external awareness will result in only a small portion of the stimuli available from all three-levels of consciousness being included. In most ordinary

experience there is only experience of the conscious level of ego awareness. Being grounded in the collective experience of humankind, and being present within the unconscious of each person, the archetypes are the psychological mechanisms that enable us to get out from the too narrow encapsulation of our conscious egos and move toward mystical experience.

The archetypes are constantly trying to “raise up” or “reveal” some of the basic wisdom of humankind. But this requires the action of the thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuiting functions of the psyche. First there is the encounter of some external stimuli, for example, the seeing of an ordinary wooden cross on a building in a Christian culture. Initially the cross has no mystical significance and functions only at the ego conscious level as a secular sign to designate the building as a church. But over the years as one matures, the cross image gradually acquires more significance and is carried, by the process of intuition, deeply into the psyche until the level of the collective unconscious is reached. There the God archetype, which has all the while been struggling upward to reveal itself, resonates sympathetically with the cross image in its Christian content of the crucified Christ. With the help of the other psychic functions (thinking, sensing, and feeling) the God archetype is given further individuation, using both the person's own creativity and the materials presented by a particular cultural tradition until the mystical revelation occurs.

Jung observes that initial indications often appear in dreams,<sup>14</sup> when the symbol being created first reaches the level of the personal subconscious. One becomes vaguely aware, perhaps for the first time, that the cross image

is something much more than merely a sign to indicate that a building is a church. Rather than the church building, the cross and the figure of Christ simply being seen as routine parts of everyday life to be manipulated by the ego for its own purposes, the cross is now sensed as being *numinous* – as having a power and meaning about it that causes the conscious ego to pale by comparison. As the cross symbol becomes more complete, and the God archetype achieves full individuation at the level of conscious awareness, there occurs what Jung describes as a shift in the center of gravity within the psyche from the ego to the self. This is the mystical moment of illumination when the ego becomes aware of the larger and deeper collective dimension of consciousness and reality. In religious terms it may be variously described as a sudden or a gradual awakening – a moment of synchronicity.<sup>15</sup> But the key is that whereas previously things were experienced in a narrow egocentric way, now it is a sense of profound identity with the universal “self” which dominates. One is simultaneously united on the various levels within the psyche and taken out beyond the finite limitations of the ego. Thus, the mystical character of Jung's “self”-realization experience. However, as with Patañjali's Yoga, Jung felt that the aid of a *guru* was often needed for such self-realization. For both Yoga and Jung the *guru* functions not to feed in otherwise unknown external knowledge, but to help the devotee discover the knowledge that is already present within.<sup>16</sup>

### III. Conclusion

Both Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* and Carl Jung's Western psychology provide an analysis of mystical experience (defined as something like sensory perception only more direct and vivid)

as fundamental to the ultimate levels of religious experience. Patañjali describes the mystical state of mind as one in which one's mind (*citta*) is so intensely focused upon the object of meditation (e.g. Īśvara, Śiva, Kālī or perhaps a cross) that the ordinary feeling of being separated from the object is overcome. There is a sense of being one with the object. In Jung's mysticism where the cross often serves as meditative point of focus, it seems that the cross becomes experienced on deeper levels becoming intensely meaningful and in some sense a spiritual symbol that mediates and integrates reality. Patañjali's Yoga, however, expects that the finite object, which is a limited symbol and therefore only partially able to mediate or manifest reality, must in the end be transcended. Only then can reality be fully "seen." It is this final state of unlimited congruence with reality (objectless *samādhi*) that is held by Patañjali to be the highest mystical state. And it is just such a state which some Western scholars, such as Jung, consider to be psychologically impossible since it requires that the knowing ego, as one of the finite objects within consciousness, be transcended – a state in which there is no knower to experience it and thus for Jung and most Western thought is psychologically impossible.

While Patañjali's penultimate state of object *samādhi* would seem to accommodate Jung's conception of Christian mysticism, Patañjali's final state of objectless *samādhi* is rejected by Jung as not psychologically possible – you cannot have an experience without an individual ego (knower) to experience it. From the Hindu perspective of Patañjali, the Christian experience of God through Christ appears as a limited mystical experience that

ultimately needs to be transcended. Of course, this is also an argument Patañjali's Yoga has within Hinduism with the *Bhakti* or devotional schools (e.g. Rāmānuja) who hold object *samādhi* to itself be ultimate.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Patañjalīyogadarśanam*. Varanasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakasana, 1963. For a readable English translation see Rama Prasada, *Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras*. Allahabad: Bhuvaneshwari Asrama, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. by Joan Riviere. London: The Hogarth Press, 1975, p. 2. <http://dx.doi.org/2027/mdp.39015013203560>

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Larsen, *Classical Sāṃkhya*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979. Chapter 1. <http://dx.doi.org/2027/mdp.39015012104942>

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Woods, *The Yoga System of Patañjali*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1966, p. xix for the date offered by Woods. <http://dx.doi.org/2027/uc1.32106001619797> Hereafter cited as Y.S.

<sup>5</sup> See Jadunath Sinha, *Indian Psychology: Cognition*. Calcutta: Sinha Publishing House, 1958, pp. 334-366. <http://dx.doi.org/2027/uc1.b4305325>

<sup>6</sup> C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York: Vintage, 1965, cp. XII. <http://dx.doi.org/2027/mdp.39015062422053>

<sup>7</sup> BBC Interview of C. G. Jung by Laurens van der Post. "The Story of Carl Gustav Jung – Mystery that Heals," BBC-TV, 1972.

<sup>8</sup> *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, op. cit., p. 336.

<sup>9</sup> C. G. Jung, "The Holy Men of India" in *Collected Works* (hereafter C. W.), vol. 11: 576-586. <http://dx.doi.org/2027/mdp.39076006587468>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 581.

<sup>11</sup> C. G. Jung, "The Process of Individuation in the Exercitia spiritulia of St. Ignatius Loyola,"

54 Harold Coward

June 1939 – March 1940, unpublished Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Lectures, Zurich (E.T.H. Lectures), pp. 122-123.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> It is of interest to note in passing that after some decades of neglect modern Western psychology in the 1990's returned to a serious examination of "consciousness" as perhaps the most foundational concept to be understood – thus opening the way for a new dialogue with both Jung and Yoga. See *The Nature of Consciousness*, ed. by Ned Block, Owen Flanagan and Gwen Guzeldere. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> C. G. Jung, "Psychology and Religion," *C.W.* 11:23ff.

<sup>15</sup> For more on Jung's understanding of synchronicity in religious experience see Harold Coward, "Taoism and Jung: Synchronicity and the Self," *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 46, 1996, pp. 477-496. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1399493> See also Robert Aziz, *C. G. Jung's Psychology of Religion and Synchronicity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the *guru's* teaching in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 4.5.15, and *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, op. cit., p. 188.