

## New Light on Patañjali

by Dominik Wujastyk

This is an exciting time for yoga studies because in the last ten years a number of crucial new discoveries have been made about yoga's history. These have rewritten our understanding of yoga's evolution, both as a philosophy and as a physical practice. The first of these new insights is about the identity of the oldest explanation of yoga philosophy.

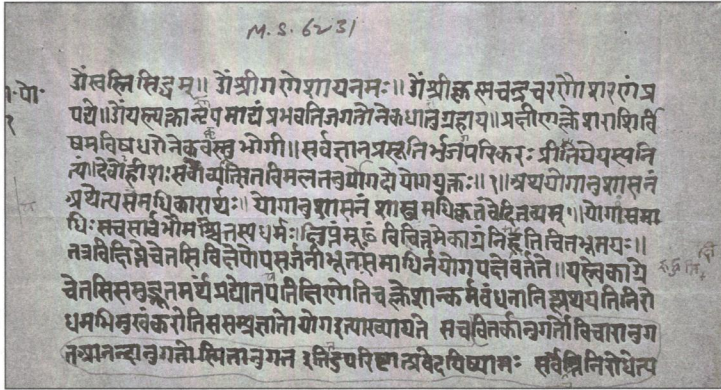
The foundation work of yoga philosophy is called the *Yogasutra*. Patañjali was the person who composed this text in the Sanskrit language. This is a difficult text, full of references to complex philosophical ideas. On top of that, it is written in short, pregnant statements of just a few syllables in length called *sūtras*. There are fewer than 200 of them. How could the whole of yoga philosophy be encapsulated in such a short, telegrammatic treatise?

The *sūtra* format was not new when the *Yogasūtra* was written. For hundreds of years, scholars in ancient India had presented their thoughts in this form. *Sūtra* texts on grammar, etymology, law, Buddhist philosophy and other subjects existed. Patañjali picked a format with which his audience would be familiar. At the same time, it was normal for such compact works to be accompanied by a commentary, to unpack the contents and

explain the meaning of the work for people who didn't have the benefit of direct contact with the author. Sometimes the author himself would write such a commentary. At other times, a pupil would write it, or even someone who lived many years after the author's time.

The oldest commentary on the *Yogasūtra* is called simply *The Explanation* (*bhāṣya*). Modern scholars have debated the status of *The Explanation* for over a century. A general consensus existed until recently that this commentary was written centuries after Patañjali by someone called "The Editor" (*vyāsa*). People argued about how

well The Editor had understood Patañjali's thought. Many people felt that the commentary was too difficult or too far removed from the *sūtras*. They tried to understand the *Yogasūtra* by



itself, feeling that they preferred to engage with the voice of the master, Patañjali, even if his words were brief and cryptic.

Now, Professor Philipp Maas, of the University of Leipzig, has solved the problem of the identity of The Editor. In a brilliant piece of detective work, for which he earned a PhD in 2006, Maas showed compellingly that the mysterious Editor was none other than Patañjali

himself. *The Explanation* was not separated from the *Yogasūtra* by hundreds of years. The *Yogasūtra* and *The Explanation* belong together as a single great work of philosophy composed by a single author. In *The Explanation* we have Patañjali's own, personal explanation of the meaning of each *sūtra* that he wrote. Furthermore, Maas showed that every scholar in ancient and medieval India up to about 1000 CE took this view as self-evident. It was only in later centuries that doubts crept in and that the false idea of two separate authors gained ground.

Professor Maas has also been able to clarify the date during which Patañjali lived. Through a series of historical investigations, he has confirmed the date as being between 325-425 CE, about 1600 years ago. This date had already been generally accepted in scholarly circles. However, before Maas's work there were still some doubts and many popular authors had made wild guesses about Patañjali's date that varied by thousands of years. Maas has put the argument for 325-425 CE on a firmer footing than ever before.

With these two discoveries – that Patañjali himself explained his own sutras and that he lived in about 400 CE – many other points about the history and philosophy of yoga fall into place.

These discoveries are not the only news about yoga coming out of the universities today. New light is being thrown on Patañjali's relationship to the Buddhist philosophers of his time, on the origins of *haṭha* yoga, on the entangled histories of Indian yoga, *ayurveda* and alchemy and on the strange pathways by which ancient Indian yoga reached the high streets of

Europe and North America, to mention just a few active research areas today.

## Bibliography

Maas, Philipp (2006), *Samādhipāda: das erste Kapitel des Pātañjalayogaśāstra zum ersten Mal kritisch ediert = The First Chapter of the Pātañjalayogaśāstra for the First Time Critically Edited* (Aachen: Shaker).

Maas, Philipp (2013), "A Concise Historiography of Classical Yoga Philosophy," in Eli Franco (ed.), *Historiography and Periodization of Indian Philosophy* (Vienna: University of Vienna). This article explains his 2006 German research in English, and gives an overview of how Yoga studies have evolved in modern times.

Maas's articles can be downloaded free from his page at [Academia.edu](http://Academia.edu).

## Further exploration

- An excellent reference point for some of the newest research on Yoga is the website [ModernYogaResearch.org](http://ModernYogaResearch.org), led by Elizabeth De Michelis.
- A major new team project on *Haṭha* Yoga, at London University, led by James Mallinson, can be explored at [hyp.soas.ac.uk/](http://hyp.soas.ac.uk/).
- The Luminescent, a blog by Jason Birch and Jacqui Hargreaves, is full of news and fascinating historical insights: [theluminescent.blogspot.ca](http://theluminescent.blogspot.ca).
- The University of Vienna's project on Yoga, Ayurveda and Alchemy, headed by Dagmar Wujastyk, can be explored at [AyurYog.org](http://AyurYog.org).

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