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Pythagoras of Samos



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(BC: 569-475)**

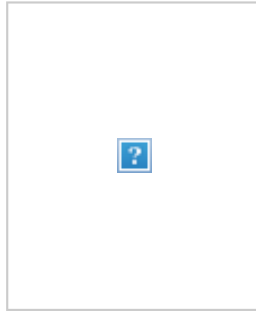
From Pythagoras to Patanjali

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ABSTRACT. *In 1978, while studying Sanskrit and 10th Century Tibetan in India, I read the Patanjali Yoga Sutras. I saw in them affinities to ideas I associated with Pythagoras. I suspected a relation that is closer than mere coincidence. Some Sanskrit textbooks mention certain changes in consonants when Sanskrit was Paninized into what we now call Classical Sanskrit, such as the /r/ changing to /l/. Based on these and some investigated consonant transitions in Sanskrit place-names from West to East of the Indus (River) I applied these changes to the name of 'Pythagoras' and compared the result with 'Patanjali'. There appeared for me an argument in favor of interpreting 'Patanjali' as a phonetic transition from 'Pythagoras'. This, with some arguments based on text content and certain historical events, has convinced me that this hypothesis has strength enough for serious consideration.*

INTRODUCTION. An ambition of Aristotle was to unite the learning of the entire world. Alexander the Great was inspired by this idea and ancillary to his world conquests proceeded to carry it out. Alexander started his conquest of the known world in 334 BC. A few years later he founded the city of Alexandria in Egypt. With this city named after himself, he founded the first great library for uniting the

learning of the known world. Other cities were founded by him, some named Alexandria, and with them he founded libraries. They functioned as book depositories, translation centers, and became great centers of learning.

In his interest to introduce Greek culture to conquered countries Alexander had Greek books copied and translated for his newly founded libraries. One of the great sources of Greek influence on Eastern culture is Bactria (conquered by Alexander in 328 BC), situated north of the Hindu Kush Mountains. This is where Alexander married Roxanne in one of the largest wedding ceremonies ever recorded in the annals of history (10,000 Greek soldiers married 10,000 Persian women). The territory is now divided between Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmen. Its capital, Bactra (now Balkh, Afghanistan) may have cradled the Zoroastrian religion. The Seleucid Empire took over this area after Alexander's death. This dynasty was founded by one of Alexander's Macedonian generals, Seleucis I, who inherited the ambition to unite the cultures and learning of the entire world. He strongly supported the Alexandrian libraries.

Bactria became independent under Diodotus I, 238 BC. This independence was maintained until it was overrun by Sakas,

130 BC.

SANSKRIT. There is clear evidence that Sanskrit was not a natural language of old India. Current belief is that it came into India proper (the territory that today we know as India) with the Aryan invasions. The Dravidians of old India were driven south. Sanskrit became the adopted language of Indian scholars and used the way Latin was used in medieval times by Europeans. Panini increased the difficulty of establishing definitive texts when he ‘normalized’ the Sanskrit language into some 3000 rules. This was followed by a concerted effort of many scholars to ‘normalize’ all Sanskrit texts in accordance with the Panini Sanskrit Sutras. Very few texts are left unscathed by this artificial purification of Sanskrit. The Rgvedas likely escaped this Paninization because the Bramin wanted to conserve their holy scriptures in their original form. Even Panini bowed to conform by including many rules that only refer to Rgveda structures.

Ancient Persian and unscathed Sanskrit are not very different. This does not necessarily imply that all Sanskrit texts derive from the ancient Persian culture. One of the functions of the Alexandrian libraries was to translate Greek

texts into Persian. The violence of history has made it difficult to measure the extent of this achievement.

It is not far-fetched to assume that much of the Greek influence on Indian religion, philosophy and literature comes through the Alexandrian translations. Much of this is documented but there is more work to be done. The Hindu caste system likely comes from a Greek source. In Plato's *Timaeus* (§24), Critias describes four castes: priests, warriors, artificers, shepards-hunters-husbandmen. The Indian castes correspond rather well to these recorded by Plato. There are Indian gods that seem to be modified forms of Greek gods or Greek mythic characters. These and other studies are open ground for further work.

It is quite likely that Pythagorean texts were available to Alexander the Great. If this is the case then it is probable that the available Pythagorean texts were stored, copied, and translated in his libraries. Therefore, these Pythagorean texts were likely available in local language translations. This is consistent with the original intent behind Alexander's library system. The Pythagorean exoteric school was open to all, but the esoteric school was secretive. We do not know the details of policy for the secret documents in Alexander's libraries.

Secrecy functions counter to the goal to unite the learning of the entire world. Even if the libraries began by respecting Pythagorean secrets, time and events may have withered the secrecy.

These Alexandrian libraries were still functioning under the Seleucid Empire when the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali became known to Indian commentators circa 200 BC.

These great libraries of Alexander the Great have all been destroyed. Their demise represents a tragic loss to world history. We only have echoes of what these great learning centers had been.

PYTHAGORAS. Pythagoras is known as a Greek philosopher and mathematician, born in Samos. Sources indicate that he was influenced by the early Ionian philosophers Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes. We have hearsay evidence that in revulsion for the tyranny of Polycrates (c522 BC) he left Samos. He settled in Crotona, a Greek colony in Italy. There he founded a school that promulgated what we have come to know as Pythagoreanism.

Pythagoras claimed to remember all of his previous existences. He claimed to be Euphorbus, a warrior in the Trojan War.

The date for Pythagoras is difficult to pinpoint, though we are more sure of the epoch. Present belief is c582—500 BC. Most scholars accept that there is adequate historical evidence for the existence of Pythagoras.

PATANJALI. There is great difficulty in trying to correlate Patanjali with Indian literature of any certain epoch. For Dasgupta there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Patanjali did not write his *Yoga Sutras* later than about 200 BC. Though this helps establish a guess for when the work began to influence Indian authors, it provides no reliable proof that the work originated in India. It helps the claim that the work comes forward and appears in ancient times when the Alexandrian libraries were still in full operation, but the date remains inconclusive. Furthermore, from Dasgupta's lengthy discussion of sparse evidence we cannot deny the possibility that these *Sutras* were not of Indian origin.

Following the arguments of Dasgupta it becomes apparent that Patanjali does not have a well-defined position in the

historical context of India. There is not even one scrap of evidence concerning where he was born or where he died or, for that matter, how he lived his life. It is very difficult to place the time of his works. Though dating early Indian works is often problematic, for this case it seems that the difficulties are generated because Patanjali was not Indian. In this regard there are some further speculations that may prove interesting.

LINGUISTIC TRANSITION: Stripped of the later Sanskrit notes and commentaries, the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali may well represent a rendering of one of the lost Pythagorean scriptures.

Crossing the Indus (River) from West to East the name 'Pythagoras' could have changed to 'Patanjali'. There is a documented phonetic transition that suggests an argument in favor of interpreting 'Patanjali' as a phonetic variation of 'Pythagoras'. One of the case studies for geographic spread in Pike's Phonetics considers the changes in consonants of ancient languages from West to East across the Indus. This proposed phonetic transition only includes a few consonants in place-name words, i.e., the vowels are ignored. The best documented changes are, the rho changes to /l/ the final

sigma is dropped. For the other consonants, the theta likely changes to a /t/, and the gamma may relate phonemically to /ng/ that derives from the digamma form. These changes transliterate 'Pythagoras' into 'Pytangola'. Reasoning backward suggests that 'Patanjali' comes from 'Patagaris', 'Pathagaris', 'Pathagalis', or etc. It seems there is a close correspondence here that is perhaps too close for coincidence.

Translating a Pythagorean text into ancient Persian would give a rendering very close to what we call Sanskrit. Vedic Sanskrit has the /r/ sound but this often changes to /l/ in Classical Sanskrit. Neither form of Sanskrit has the theta sound. Patanjali is only available in the Classical Sanskrit.

It seems that there is a substantial probability that the name 'Patanjali' is a phonetic transition of the name 'Pythagoras'.

BELIEFS

Basic beliefs common to Pythagoras and Patanjali:

1. Immortality of the soul.
2. Transmigration of the soul.
3. Liberation of the soul through study and discipline.

PYTHAGORAS (c582—500 BC). There are no known extant works of Pythagoras. There are several references to Pythagoras in works of his contemporaries or near contemporaries. Xenophanes (c570 BC) satirized his belief in transmigration of souls, portraying a scene in which Pythagoras claims to recognize the spirit of a dead friend in a dog that is being beaten. No Pythagorean literature before the time of Plato has been found. To date we only know his philosophy and his life through fragments left from his disciples and other authors. Aristotle teaches us that his contemporary Pythagoreans were divided, some teaching one thing and some another. There is abundant but questionable information from the Christian era.

The Greeks contrasted order and disorder in the terms Cosmos and Chaos. The Pythagoreans worshipped Apollo, the guardian of order and moderation. Dionysius was the god of disorder and immoderation. Pythagoreans claim that Pythagoras was the first to call the world Cosmos, “from its inherent order.” For the Pythagoreans the Cosmos is a living-breathing creature, the universal soul. The Cosmos is a unity, immortal, and divine; a person is divided into a body that is mortal, and a soul that is not mortal. The soul is a fragment of the divine, a part of the universal soul that

animates a mortal body. If this divine fragment identifies with the body it inhabits, then it is contaminated by the body. This identification confines the soul to the body. This places the soul in a state of disunion with the universal soul. If the soul is contaminated in this way, then after the death of its body it must enter a new body of man or animal. The soul must continue in the cycles of reincarnation until it is cultivated and purified, prepared for a union with the universal soul of which it is a part. These notions show a kinship with the beliefs revealed in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali.

The belief in the transmigration of souls leads to a sense of kinship and sympathy for all animal life (life with souls, anima is Latin for soul). This sense of kinship and sympathy for all animal life provides the rationale for the Pythagorean prohibition of eating meat.

Purity of soul is a form of 'ceasing to adhere', a kind of detachment from the body; detachment from the senses, the emotions, the intellect. It was to be sought by silence, self-examination, abstention from flesh and beans, and the observance of other formalities that the Pythagoreans defined for their discipline.

In the works of authors who cite Pythagoras, there are references to the practice of silence, today referred to as the “Pythagorean Silence.” What precisely this silence is has remained a mystery for us.

For self-examination, one is reminded of Socrates who said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” This is consistent with the Pythagoreans. They required frequent self-examination.

The abstention from flesh eating was consistent with the transmigration of souls. The abstention from beans is usually read with a snigger, but today we have a likely story about what species of beans were referred to and why they were forbidden. It also suggests to us that Pythagoras was color-blind.

The fava bean has a long history in the agriculture of Italy. It was farmed there even in the time of Pythagoras. Recently it was discovered that this bean has a malicious effect on people who are color-blind. Even its pollen weakens them, makes them sleepy, they faint, and in some cases it functions as an outright poison. Little wonder that the bean was

forbidden. It is said that Pythagoras was chased to the border of a (fava) bean field and refused to enter. He was captured.

Pertinent to the general thesis here, I have discussed two aspects of the Pythagoreans that relate to the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, namely, the characterization of the immortality of the soul and the use of silence to purify the soul (assimilation to the divine). The Pythagorean role of mathematics in understanding order of the cosmos is not a concern of the *Yoga Sutras*. For this Pythagorean use of mathematics, the *Timeaus* of Plato is a good source.

Basic doctrines of Pythagoras:

1. Obedience.
2. Practice of Silence.
3. Frequent self-examination.
4. Periods of fasting.
5. Plain attirement and modest possessions.

PATANJALI. Patanjali's yoga aims at attaining an awake state in which ordinary mental activities, such as will, imagination, belief, and perception are suspended in a form of silence.

One could characterize his *Yoga Sutras* as a manual for learning how to shut up. It is a form of self-control. ‘Control’ is one of the valid renderings of the Sanskrit term ‘yoga’. Indians call the yoga of Patanjali, Raja Yoga. Many regard it as the highest and most difficult yoga to master.

Patanjali makes a sharp distinction between immortal soul and mortal body, just as the Pythagoreans do.

The object of this yoga is to free the individual from those attachments to the material world that deteriorate the perception of the connection between self and the Universal Psyche. This renders the eternal element (the psyche) more visible, and this purifies its influence. This is a probable meaning for what is meant by the Pythagoreans to “cultivate and purify” the soul.

Basic doctrines of Patanjali

1. Restraint.
2. Withdrawal from sense objects (silence).
3. Concentration, meditation.
4. Periods of fasting.
5. Posture, respiration.

CONCLUSIONS SUMMARY. In sum, from the West we have evidence of an historical figure named Pythagoras, we have fragments of his philosophy and beliefs as represented by other authors, including contemporaries or near contemporaries, but have no recognized extant text from this person. From the East we have the extant text of an author named Patanjali writing in a manner consistent with the beliefs we know are Pythagorean, but we have no recognized references to his life, to his historical existence, there are only references to his text. This is consistent with the assumption that the author lived in the West and his work survived in the East in a different language. This gives added weight to the conclusion that the passage of the text was from West to East. The rationale for this conclusion is increased by the discovery of the phonetic transition that occurs from West to East over the Indus (River). Historical events and purposes associated with the Alexandrian libraries add plausibility to the argument.

If the arguments are correct, then when the name ‘Pythagoras’ was transliterated into a language East of the Indus River, his name was rendered finally as ‘Patanjali’. If this is the case, then the Sanskrit rendering of this source

using the 'Patanjali' name-form may have preserved for us the content of a Greek work originally written by Pythagoras himself. Even if the Greek source text had no part written by Pythagoras himself, we could argue that at least it is the rendering of a text from the Pythagoreans who practiced this remarkable form of silence.

Stripped of the later Sanskrit notes and commentaries, the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali may well represent a rendering of one of the great lost Pythagorean scriptures.

This paper does not exhaust the possible connections between Pythagoras and Patanjali. Readers are invited to participate in finding more relationships.

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