

Tradition Ashtanga Invocation: New Translation & Commentary

by: Michael Stone

Copenhagen 2007

Ashtanga Invocation: Practice Ideals

I bow to the two lotus feet of the (plurality of) Gurus which awaken insight into the happiness of pure Being, which are the refuge, the jungle physician, which eliminate the delusion caused by the poisonous herb of Samsara (conditioned existence).

I prostrate before the sage Patan[~]jali who has thousands of radiant, white heads (as the divine serpent, Ananta) and who has, as far as his arms, assumed the form of a man holding a conch shell (divine sound), a wheel (discus of light or infinite time) and a sword (discrimination). om

At the beginning of each yoga class at our little centre in Toronto, Centre of Gravity, we put our hands together in front of the heart, bow once to one another, and chant the following chant. It consists of two verses, the first an acknowledgement of internal lineage and the second paragraph, a visualization of the sage Patan[~]jali as the embodiment of our yoga ideals. The first paragraph comes from the Yoga Taravali, a treatise written by the great Indian philosopher Shankaracharya on the non-dual nature of mind, body and world.

The chant begins with our two palms united in front of the heart, a gentle bow and a deep inhale.

Vande gurunam charanavinde

I bow to the two lotus feet (of the plurality of) gurus

Bowing is not a common act in our culture. Bowing, literally taking the posture of humility, acknowledgement and gratefulness is not a superficial act of religious endeavour but the very heart of our spiritual attitude. In the context of this verse, we are bowing down to something simultaneously universal and particular, not an idol or imagined deity of worship, but the guru in its unlimited manifestations. There is no element in life that is not, in its depth, a teacher.

The word *guru* comes over into English as gravity. Bowing down to gravity in human forms means bowing to someone who understands the law of gravity, one who is unmoved by circumstance. Yet guru, which we usually translate as teacher, is pluralized – a rare form of the term. Its pluralization hints at two things: firstly, the fact there are many, many teachers that have come before us on this path which in essence is what makes the path recognizable. Second, there are many teachings, for many different kinds of people, and we are bowing down to the spirit of pluralism.

But then the sentence twists into a surprising conclusion. Charanavinde are two lotus feet, which are your own lotus feet. If you can visualize this, we can imagine that all of the teachers of the past, all of the possible teachings, and every form of potential wisdom that we may derive from this practice, all come down to two lotus feet which already exists in the centre of your own heart. Why look elsewhere?

Sandarasita svaatmasukhava bodhe

Which awakes insight into the happiness of pure being.

The term *sukkhā*, the opposite of *duḥkha*, refers to the sweetness of steady being. No longer caught up in fixation and aversion, we find ourselves awakened (*bodhe*) to the reality of being free in each and every moment of experience. Imagine doing your chores, your practice, your relationships, with the ease of someone taking a stroll. *Bodhe* is an

important term here because enlightenment in the yoga tradition is described as a process of awakening. Awakening from what? The more we catch ourselves acting out unconscious habits and falling asleep at the wheel of life, the further along we move on the path of awakening because we shed our habits through an ongoing process of inner renunciation.

Nihśreyase jaṅgalikayamaṇe

Complete absorption in joy is found through the jungle physician

At the centre of our karmic conflicts and tendency toward the known and conservative, is a jungle physician whose skill lies in transmuting repetition into freedom. The jungle here is symbolic of a mind and body entangled in self and its related discontent; the physician is the healer. So again, we find an image of the physician, like guru, as being located inside our own mind and body. A good teacher knows this – he or she will always hand what the students brings right back to them. The teacher is not a friend or a saint but simply one who clarifies, grounds, and assists the students in seeing his or her entanglements as the very path itself.

Samsara haḥaḥala mohaśantyaḥ

The entrapments we find ourselves in, the entanglements that put knots in relationship and contractions throughout the body, are all based on having swallowed samsara. In this verse it's said that we have swallowed a poisonous herb (haḥaḥala) of conditioned existence (samsara) which creates delusion (moha) rather than peace (śanti). The jungle physician assists in the elimination of delusion through the disentanglement of our conditioned existence. In other words, if we are caught in conditioned habits of existence, the jungle physician reminds us that those very habits are the path of yoga itself and it is through our conditioning that we can wake up to unconditioned, unmodified, reality. Ivan Illich describes the role of the physician clearly:

The medical enterprise saps the will of people to suffer their own reality.

It destroys our ability to cope with our own bodies and heal ourselves...
Our hygienic hubris is rooted in our attempt to engineer an escape from suffering. We medicalize the entirety of life.

Instead of compartmentalizing suffering we give it a central place in our practice space. The jungle physician uses the raw suffering of being alive as the path out of suffering so that we find wisdom and freedom in the giving up of our escape strategies. Yoga returns us to present experience and is not in any way an escape from the unfolding life of mind, body and relational existence.

Abahu purusakaram

Down to the shoulders he Patan[~]jali assumes the form of a man

The second part of the chant, beginning with the term abahu is a visualization of the sage Patan[~]jali, the attributed author of the *Yoga Sutra*. From the shoulders up, he assumes the form of a man and from the shoulders down, he has a stainless white serpent's tail. These two images –human form above the arms and perfectly stainless below the shoulders – describe, in essence, the nature of the spiritual life. We have in us the ability to be perfect and stainless, which in figurative terms refers to our innate capacity as humans to wake up, become ever-more compassionate, and live a life free from the turning wheels of habit. Yet we also have the tendency to shut down, cling, overcompensate, and compulsively identify with thoughts of “I,” “me,” and “mine.”

As thinking and speaking humans we use language to communicate and interact, to make meaningful sense of our experience, and also to educate. Yet language and the capacity to conceptualize also get us in to trouble. When we categorize people, abstract our experience, speak harmfully, or isolate “things,” we separate our experience from the complex web out of which it lives. We are not neatly defined or segregated from the relational reality of life.

Sankhacarasi dharinam

Holding a conch shell, a wheel and a sword

With his human hands, Patanjali is holding a conch shell, a wheel and a sword. These three objects symbolize the nature of enlightenment - the reality of a person free from lack.

The conch shell represents pure listening and the nature of pure sound. What that means in terms of practical existence is the ability to listen without preference or what we might call “free listening.” Imagine the ability to have such patience that we can listen to others without distraction or aversion even if what they are saying does not correspond to our viewpoint. Listening not only improves relationship immeasurably but also challenges us to be present with and be affected by perspectives that are not necessarily the one we cherish. Relationship is the key to yoga because listening to others always interrupts our favorite projection and indelible beliefs.

The wheel, as a mandala or chakra, represents infinite time. Like listening, time refers to patience. When we are impatient we are not aware of the time and when we are patient time dissolves into itself. When we are out of step with time there is suffering. Dukkha is the gap between time and the mind. When we are one with our actions we are unaware of the time and suddenly the stream of time and the source of time become one. When we are fully present in every moment, we become time.

Asi is the sword that in some images Patanjali is holding with two hands. It is a sword sharp on two sides and represents a mind so sharp and agile that it cuts through what is real and what is not, what is changing, what causes suffering, and what creates wisdom and compassion. In some traditions both wisdom and compassion are symbolized by a sword or a vajra, a human held thunder-bolt. When the mind becomes sharp and flexible it is clearly present. This counters the popular myth that yoga stops the thinking process. Rather, the practice of yoga clarifies our thinking processes because when we are no longer fixated and averse to what arises in awareness, we free up space and mental energy to take swift and appropriate action.

Sahasra sirasam svetam

He has thousands of radiant white heads

Blooming from the base of his skull, Patan[~]jali has thousands of white heads, each one radiant and more spectacular than the next. Patañjali is known to be an incarnation of Ādi S'esha who is the first expansion of Vishnu. We prostrate in front of the full expression of reality in symbolic form as a complete reorientation of mind, body and speech.

Pranamami Patan[~]jalim

I prostrate to the sage Patan[~]jali

The chant begins with a bow and ends with a bow. We are prostrating not to a belief system or an idol but rather we are recognizing the qualities of listening, patience, discriminative awareness and the back and forth movement between waking up from habit and being pulled down by habit, as the elements that comprise our spiritual path. Patan[~]jali, both in his yoga-sutra and in image, points us back toward our own self and through that self into the many interconnections in the web of existence that confirm our sense of being authentic selves.

No matter how many times we finish a meal and wash all the dishes, another meal brings more dishes. The practice is never complete. When we give up the notion that practice leads to something, we find a stack of dishes right in front of us. That stack of dishes is our practice. Whether those dishes consist of parenting or backbending, providing for aging parents or breastfeeding, chopping wood or fixing a tire, that is our practice in that moment. To be fully in each moment both stillness and action arise side by side. Practice moves back and forth between the two because yoga is nothing other than what is happening right here and right now.