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YOGA AND THE MAHĀBHĀRATA: ENGAGED RENOUNCERS

Christopher Key Chapple

The Mahābhārata serves as a didactic text, a cautionary tale about epic figures who veer from the course of dharma. It employs a device of nested stories that inculcate the prime values of Indian tradition. The Mahābhārata also seeks to reconcile the tension between the life of those who seek ultimate religious fulfillment through renouncing the world, and those persons who remain within the world seeking to uphold truth, nonviolence, and justice.

This essay examines three accounts that contribute to the discussion of Yoga-related practices in the Mahābhārata, with a focus on nonviolence (*ahimsā*) and austerity (*tapas*). The first pertains to a conversation between a brahmin ascetic named Jājali and a wise, nonviolent merchant named Tulādhāra, narrated by Bhīṣma on his funeral pyre. The second centers on the vow of Sāvitrī as she practices *tapas* to save the life of her husband. In the third, Bhīṣma praises the vow of *ahimsā* as expressed through the abandonment of flesh foods. These stories will be summarized and then discussed in light of the tension between renunciation of the world and active involvement within the world.

The renouncer or *sādhu* follows a very specific life pattern in Indian tradition. Such an individual abandons his or her name, caste status, and means of support to take up an itinerant life devoted to study. Patrick Olivelle has provided excellent translations and analyses that document this mainstay of religious renunciation that constitutes the third phase of life, a stage in which one withdraws into the forest and enters a community of like-minded persons.¹ The Buddha and the Jina typify this inward-driven spiritual quest and although they developed monastic communities separate from Vedic

and Brahminical traditions, Hindu exemplars of renunciation can be found in the historical personages of Shankaracharya and Jñāneshwara and in the more contemporary examples of Ramana Maharshi, Nityananda and countless others. Several film documentaries attest to the ascetic lifestyle in India, including the recent work *Naked in Ashes*.²

As part of the path of renunciation, one engages in techniques of Yoga. These techniques seek to purify the individual of incipient worldliness and generally conform to a set of well-recognized practices. The Vedic practice of *tapas* is fundamental to Yoga, and linguistically pre-dates the term Yoga by several hundred years. The *Ṛg Veda* credits *tapas* with creating the world (X:129) as well as providing ascent to a heavenly realm (X:154).³ In the later *Shatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, Prajāpati performs *tapas* to separate the earth from the heavens, to create both gods and mortal beings, and to initiate the process of sacrifice (VII:1).⁴ In the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, Death uses *tapas* to form the world, the directions, humans, cattle, and eventually the cosmic horse, which serves as the world-regulating subject of the great horse sacrifice (I:1).⁵ All throughout the early literature of the Indian tradition, *tapas* serves the dual role of accounting for the creation of external realities, and inspiring the individual to see the power of creation within one's own body. Yogic practices such as chanting, *prāṇāyāma*, and *āsanas* tend to increase bodily heat. From this endeavor, one enters into a creative modality that in a sense echoes the beginning point of the world itself. Sacrifice generates creative heat and links the individual to the originary moment. As we will see in some of the stories below, taking upon oneself a vow can transform one's circumstances, a key feature of Yoga.

The Yoga tradition finds explicit mention in several passages of the Mahābhārata, as documented by John Brockington and many others.⁶ Brockington notes that "yoga techniques were widely diffused already throughout the period of the epics" and that "there is no book of the Mahābhārata from which [the mention of yoga or yogins is] absent."⁷ Yoga also permeates the text implicitly, with references to yogic practices part of the overall cultural context that guides the sensibilities of Indian tradition. The text repeatedly mentions the use of vows (*vrata*) by key characters in order to achieve a specific goal. Sometimes an individual takes this vow for the purposes of self-improvement or self-strengthening. In other instances, one takes up a vow for the sake of another person or for the sake of a higher good. In the instance of Kṛṣṇa's advice on the battlefield, one can even take a vow not to follow conventional morality in order to attain a desired end.

Yoga in this study refers to its broad usage as expressed in two primary modalities: the taking on of extraordinary vows (*vrata*) that generate creative heat (*tapas*) with world-altering results, and the observance of nonviolence (*ahimsā*), the foundational ethical precept of Indian traditions. After exploring three narrative examples, two philosophical issues will be discussed: the complex relationship between renunciation and worldliness, and the role of narrative (particularly with happy endings) in communicating core values of the tradition.

Two of the stories that we will explore were told by Bhīṣma, who himself presents an example of the interesting conundrum of making life decisions, and who exemplifies the second reason for taking vows cited above. Bhīṣma renounced his claims to kingdom and also renounced access to sexual relationships. Although a legitimate heir to the throne, he abdicated this privilege in order to allow his father to marry. He took a vow to withdraw from the political sphere and also took a vow of celibacy so that his stepmother's progeny could ascend to become rulers. Despite the numerous difficulties that arise, he never strays from his vow. However, he certainly does not renounce family life. He remains involved with affairs of state, and even arranges, by force, for the marriages of his half-brothers.

Bhīṣma plays a crucial role in the narrative. He also provides some of the best stories that inform the listeners and readers of the Mahābhārata about the history and traditions of India. Bhīṣma's vows advance the unfolding of the drama and, like the characters in the stories he tells, he sees his Yoga not as an opportunity to retreat from the world, but as a necessary means to fulfill his destiny. Bhīṣma reminds the reader that the Mahābhārata respects *sannyāsa* but places highest value on the story of the world to be lived and told within the world.

1. A Nonviolent Tale

In response to a question from Yudhiṣṭhira regarding the nature of righteousness and dharma, Bhīṣma tells the tale of an encounter between a brahmin ascetic named Jājali and a man named Tulādhāra, a merchant (and perhaps a Jaina). Jājali had devoted years of his life to the most austere of penances: complicated fasts, protracted periods of silence, and such utter disregard for his body that he no longer bathed and his hair became matted. During one particularly stringent phase in the forest he abstained

from all food while sustaining himself on air alone; he remained in a standing position, like a post, with no movement whatsoever. A pair of Kuliṅga birds nested in his locks. Months passed. The birds mated, and from the eggs on Jājali's head young birds hatched and learned to fly. All the while Jājali stood stationary. But finally, after they had fully matured and abandoned their safe haven on his head, Jājali allowed himself to rejoice, and proclaimed that he had won great merit by his noble deed, and that no one was his equal.

The gods, however, heard his boast, and a voice from the sky told him that his virtue and merit were surpassed by Tulādhāra, a shopkeeper in the city of Banaras. Jājali then went in search of this wise man and found him at his haberdashery. Tulādhāra greeted Jājali knowingly, and told him that he knew of his austerities and that he knew about the birds that had been born on his head. He also chided the brahmin for his pride, and asked how he might be of service to him.

Jājali, in the style of the Upaniṣads, asked Tulādhāra to tell him of correct morality and the ways of knowledge. Tulādhāra's response, in praise of nonviolence, covers a wide range of issues. He replies that "harmlessness towards all creatures" is the highest morality. Because of his commitment to his lifestyle, he says he never cheats anyone, and never quarrels or holds grudges. Reminiscent of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he proclaims "My scales are perfectly even, O Jājali, with respect to all creatures . . . I cast equal eye upon all creatures . . . I see no difference between a clod of earth, a piece of stone, and a lump of gold."⁸

He claims that by following this vow, he has no fear of creatures, nor do creatures fear him. He claims that by speaking truth and by practicing the dharma of nonviolence, one enjoys even greater fruit than that gained by sacrifices or penances. He criticizes those who castrate bulls and pierce their noses and force them to serve as beasts of burden. He claims that "in every creature that is endued with the five senses live all the deities . . . The goat is Agni. The sheep is Varuna. The horse is Surya. Earth is the deity Virat. The cow and the calf are Soma. The man who sells these can never obtain success."⁹ He equates acts of injury done to animals to abortion, and notes that Nahuṣa, who had both killed a bull and caused a foetus to abort, thereby brought diseases to creatures and was barred from religious rites. He even condemns agriculture as harmful to creatures and earth.

Jājali protests that Tulādhāra's teachings run counter to the natural order of things, and that they seem quite heretical. Without support of food, he

states, the world will come to an end. In response, Tulādhāra states that nature provides abundantly. Appealing to a Golden Age of long ago, Tulādhāra tells of days when crops sprouted forth from the earth without cultivation. He assails the greed that has overtaken people and forced the proliferation of needless and harmful rituals and sacrifices. He condemns covetous priests who assist at ceremonies for the “misguided” and have as their end material gain rather than liberation. He urges the use of rice-balls to replace animals at Vedic sacrifices. He also tells Jājali that the birds that currently circle overhead are the very ones that he reared on his head far from this place. Jājali calls to them, and, at the close of the tale, the birds affirm Tulādhāra’s teaching of nonviolence as the true path of liberation.

This story of Jājali and Tulādhāra, because of Tulādhāra’s profession as a merchant in nonviolent goods, his description of the uniqueness of each living being, his critique of farming, and his insistence that animal sacrifice must be abandoned, strikes one as perhaps theologically inspired by Jainism. Though Dumont has posited that the practice of nonviolence and its attendant vegetarianism was introduced into Hindu society from Buddhist and Jaina renouncers,¹⁰ this passage emphasizes the observance of nonviolence by laypersons, and highlights a key theme of the Mahābhārata: the integration of the highest spiritual values into daily life.

2. The Vow of Sāvitrī

Yogic vows provide graphic and sometimes fantastic illustrations of the efficacy of mental strength. One such story is told in the third book of the Mahābhārata, the Book of the Forest (*Āraṇyakaparvan*). Yudhiṣṭhira, the head of the Pāṇḍavas and older brother of Arjuna, asks his teacher Mārkaṇḍeya if there has ever been a woman as great as Draupadī, who took all five Pāṇḍava brothers as husbands. Mārkaṇḍeya replies that indeed a woman rivaled Draupadī in her devotedness, and her name was Sāvitrī. Sāvitrī was born to the King Aśvapati after he had performed great austerity in honor of the goddess Sāvitrī in hopes that she would reverse his accursed childlessness. His wish having been fulfilled, he named his daughter after the goddess. She grew up to be a beautiful maiden, but did not readily attract a husband. After many adventures, she chose Satyavat, a Shālva prince whose father, King Dyumatsena, had been dethroned because of blindness. King Aśvapati’s advisor Nārada, having reviewed the marriage candidate, decided that he indeed was worthy, being splendid, wise, handsome, noble and

friendly. However, the seer foresaw one major flaw, a great impediment to the wedding that Sāvitrī so fervently desired. In one year's time, Satyavat's life would expire, leaving Sāvitrī a helpless widow. Despite the many protests of her father and his advisor, Sāvitrī could not be dissuaded from her choice and soon married Satyavat.

The newlyweds joined Satyavat's family, which had been banished to a forest retreat due to King Dyumatsena's handicap. Unfortunately, the young bride Sāvitrī could not be happy, as she continually thought of her beloved husband's imminent demise. Months passed until finally, four days before the appointed date of death, Sāvitrī took on a vow of extreme *tapas* and stood in one place, not moving for three days and three nights. In honor of her steadfastness, Satyavat's family and the holy men at the retreat gave her special blessings.

A few hours after she had completed her sacrifice, Satyavat decided to go into the forest to gather fruit and Sāvitrī was, of course, quick to follow. After working for some time at picking fruit and splitting wood, the prince became weary and lay down on the ground, his head on his wife's lap. Suddenly, the red-eyed Yama, the God of Death, appeared with his noose and snatched from the chest of Satyavat a person in the likeness of the prince but merely the size of a thumb. Satyavat's body stopped breathing and began to stiffen. Yama set off with his catch and then turned, advising Sāvitrī to arrange her husband's funeral. But the devoted wife refused to be left behind and, by the power accumulated by her *tapas* the three days and three nights before, ran in fast pursuit of Yama. After she made her plea, Yama, impressed with Sāvitrī's devotion to her elders and husband, granted her a boon, with the stipulation that it could not include the release of her beloved. Without hesitation, she asked that her father-in-law's sight be restored. This was granted and Yama set off again, holding the thumb-sized Satyavat tightly in the noose. Undaunted, Sāvitrī persisted in following. Surprised by her perseverance, the God of Death granted three more boons, again stipulating that they not include a request for the return of Satyavat's life. She then asked that Dyumatsena be reinstated as king, that her own father be blessed with more offspring, and that she herself give birth to children. These were granted. Yama again departed, but Sāvitrī, in a show of strength, convinced him to stop and made the following impassioned speech:

The strict (*santah*) always abide by the Law,
The strict do not tremble, nor do they despair.

The meeting of strict with strict bears fruit,
 From the strict the strict expect danger.
 With their truth do the strict give lead to the sun,
 With their penance the strict uphold the earth.
 The strict are the course of future and past,
 They do not collapse in the midst of the strict.¹¹

Awed with her fine elocution, Yama granted her one final wish, omitting any conditions. Sāvitrī seized the opportunity and successfully procured the release of her husband. Husband and wife were reunited; King Dyumatsena regained his eyesight and his reign; Sāvitrī's father and mother produced more offspring; and Sāvitrī herself "over a long period of time . . . gave birth to a hundred gallant and never-retreating sons, who increased her fame."¹²

Through strict adherence to her vow to save her husband, Sāvitrī was able to reverse the course of fate. Despite the fantastic hyperbole, the story underlines a distinctly *kṣatriya* philosophy based on human voluntarism. The holding firm of a vow, often associated with *tapas* and in this case referred to by Sāvitrī's being strict (*satī*), is used not for the purposes of transcendence but to secure happiness within human life, generating a power that transforms the course of karma and brings about new worlds of being for Sāvitrī and her family.

3. Bhīṣma Praises the Vow of *Ahimsā*

For our third story, we return to another discourse by Bhīṣma that appears in the *Anuśāsanaparvan*, which includes various teachings of a philosophical nature. This section of the text begins with the teacher Bṛhaspati giving teachings on nonviolence. In response, Bhīṣma advocates various degrees of vegetarianism. Bhīṣma condemns eating meat, saying that it is like eating the flesh of one's own son. Yudhiṣṭhira raises the objection that the rules of funeral ceremonies mandate the eating of meat. In reply, Bhīṣma appeals to *Manu*, who states that the vegetarian is the "friend of all living beings." He also cites the sage Nārada who praised restraint from eating meat. Yudhiṣṭhira acknowledges that Manu did assent to the use of meat for ancestral ceremonies. However, he indicates that this is exceptional and not normative.

Bhīṣma suggests abstaining from flesh foods for fixed periods, particularly

when the moon is waxing in the month spanning September and October. He notes that numerous warriors from the Mahābhārata refrained from eating meat during this period, and rather like a contemporary beer commercial, claims that this accomplishment caused them to be “encircled with beautiful women!” Bhīṣma notes that vegetarianism spares one from rebirth as an animal, and states that it should be practiced both by renouncers and by those active in the world.

Though these chapters comprise a didactic message, Bhīṣma employs narrative to make his point about the importance of vegetarianism. As part of his rhetorical strategy in chapter 116, Bhīṣma personalizes the practice of vegetarianism, referring to specific sages and cultural icons:¹³

11. The seven seers, the Vālakhilyas,
and the Marīcipas who have great wisdom
all praise abstention from meat, O King.
12. The sage Manu has said
that the one who does not eat meat
and does not kill nor cause killing,
is the friend of all living beings.
13. The one who refuses meat
is not overpowered by any beings and
is trusted by all that are born;
such a one should be eternally esteemed by *sādhus*.
14. Nārada, the restrained one whose self is dharma,
has said that whoever wishes to increase his flesh
with the flesh of another falls into ruin.
15. Bṛhaspati declared that the one
who refrains from meat and honey is distinguished
through austerity, giving, sacrifice.

He employs dramatic imagery in pleading his case, suggesting that vegetarians need not fear the dark and can anticipate a long life:

26. Meat is not born of grass, wood or rock.
Meat arises from killing a living being.
Thus, in the enjoyment of meat there is fault.
27. The beloved, sincere, truthful gods
have in hand (for nourishment)
oblations, sacrificial offerings, and nectar.
(By contrast), consider the tortuous,
unrighteous ways of flesh eating demons.

28. O King, in not eating meat
one goes without fear in moonlight
or in the dreadful, dangerous darkness
or in the twilight approach of night
or at the crossroads or in the assemblies of people.

29. If there were no meat-eaters,
there would be no killers.

A meat-eating man is a killer indeed,
causing death for the purpose of food.

30. If meat were considered not to be food,
there would be no violence.

Violence is done to animals
for the sake of the meat-eater only.

31. Because the life of violent ones
is shortened as well (due to their deeds),
the one who wishes long life for himself
should refuse meat, O splendid one.

32. Those fierce ones who do violence to life
are not able to go for protection (when they need it).
They are to be feared by beings as beasts of prey.

According to Bhīṣma, meat-eating promotes general anxiety, while abstaining from flesh foods and thereby holding the vow of nonviolence advances one toward a heavenly realm:

34. The one who desires to increase
his flesh with the flesh of another
lives in entrenched anxiety
and is born here and there.

35. Those great vow-keeping seers have said
that those who do not eat meat are great,
are progressing to heaven,
and are bringing good fortune, renown, and long life.

As with our other stories, this vow is to be undertaken not for the sake of renouncing the world, but to enhance one's experience, quality of life, and length of life. According to Bhīṣma, the story of a vegetarian is a happy story!

Conclusion

In assessing these stories from the perspective of classical Yoga, both *tapas*

and *ahimsā* play prominent roles. In Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*, *tapas* results in "the destruction of impurity and the perfection of the body and senses" (YS II:43).¹⁴ We can see the results of *tapas* in the peace of mind attained by Tulādhāra, the radiance and power generated by Sāvitrī, and the long life earned by vegetarians. *Ahimsā* results in "the abandonment of hostility" (YS II:35). Bhīṣma states that vegetarians are able to live without fear and that the practice of nonviolence results in "beauty, perfection of limbs, long life, intelligence, lightness, accomplishment, and memory" (Mbh XIII:116.8).

All three stories underline social relations within the epic, with the first discussing caste, the second addressing issues of gender, and the third confronting what in modern parlance would be the issue of speciesism. In the first story, the sage Tulādhāra seems to adhere to Jaina religious precepts and social practices, grounded in nonviolence (*ahimsā*). In the second story, the austerity (*tapas*) practiced by Sāvitrī, like that practiced by Draupadī at the conclusion of the first game of dice, changes the narrative and highlights the otherness and power of women in the social order. The third narrative, in the form of a discourse by Bhīṣma, challenges dietary social norms, suggesting that the transcendent powers obtained through a flesh-free diet can enhance the prestige of persons in any caste, and subverting the emphasis on power and violence that generally pervades the epic.

In the first scenario, a lowly merchant gains spiritual ascendancy. In the second scenario, a woman overcomes the course of fate. The third scenario signals potential universal access to spiritual purification. These stories serve as paradigmatic examples of how the ethical values associated with the practice of Yoga are inculcated within society. Yoga advocates the cultivation of opposites (*pratipakṣa-bhavanam*) for overcoming mindless repetition of activities that lead to suffering (*duḥkha*). In these narratives on the yogic practices of nonviolence and austerity, the protagonists actively change the course of their karma in order to construct states of auspiciousness for both themselves and others. By critiquing the norms of society, which generally promote violence and conformity, and by setting out on a counter-cultural course, these heroic figures establish new exemplary patterns of behavior.

The Mahābhārata presents a tragedy, a war that divides and decimates a family. As Mahātmā Gandhi has noted, this story does not glorify war but serves as a deterrent to war through its grisly descriptions of deceit, treachery, and bloody violence. The winners of the war do not enjoy the spoils of victory and eventually perish, destined to serve time in hell. The dramatist Jean-Claude Carrière captures Karṇa's lament about the sorrow of war:

Flesh and blood rain from the sky.
 Bodiless voices cry in the night.
 Horses weep. One-eyed, one-legged
 Monstrosities hop across the land.¹⁵

Despite the overall dour tone of the epic, it nonetheless includes many stories that attest to the resilience of the human spirit. As noted by Laurie Patton, stories with a happy ending hold great appeal,¹⁶ and the Mahābhārata abounds with multiple instances of such tales. For instance, Yudhiṣṭhira is able to bring his dead brothers back to life by answering the riddle: “What is the greatest marvel? Each day, death strikes and we live as though we were immortal. This is what is the greatest marvel.”¹⁷

The great irony of Yoga in the Mahābhārata can be found in its celebration of action in the world. In instance after instance, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* as well as in the various protestations of Yudhiṣṭhira, heroic figures extol the virtues of renunciation, only to be rebuffed by higher authorities and their own conscience. Epic Yoga does not allow for a wholesale rejection of the world, but rather requires full involvement. Through dharma, Yoga allows one to gain boons, to restructure the world, to bring peace into the world. To inspire adherence to the values espoused by the text, the narrator employs numerous stories to show the efficacy of persons in altering their destiny, improving their status through the application of austerity, nonviolence, and other life-altering vows.

Through enduring the purification of suffering in hell, even the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī manage to arrive at a domain of happiness. In the last scene of the epic, the principal characters have returned to their “own natures,” indicating that Karṇa has gone to the sun, Bhīma to the wind, Draupadī to the goddess Shrī, and so forth. Having attained to this blessed state, they are free from further birth. “Having renounced the body, they have conquered heaven through meritorious word, thought, and deed.”¹⁸ Just as Tulādhāra, Sāvitrī, and the vegetarians prevail in conquering the negative effects of their karma, so also the ultimate liberation of the Pāṇḍavas suggests that following one’s story and holding true to one’s values results in liberation.

Notes

1. Patrick Olivelle, tr., *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

2. See www.paradisefilmworks.com
3. Ralph T.H. Griffith, tr., *The Hymns of the R̥gveda* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973 reprint).
4. Julius Eggeling, tr., *The Satapatha Br̥hmaṇa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972, reprint of Clarendon Press edition, 1882).
5. Robert Ernest Hume, tr., *The Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931).
6. See "Yoga in the Mahābhārata" by John Brockington in *Yoga: The Indian Tradition*, ed. by Ian Whicher and David Carpenter (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 13-24. See also "Yoga-technique in the Great Epic" by E. W. Hopkins, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1901, vol. 22, pp. 333-379, and Peter Schreiner, "What Comes First (in the Mahābhārata): Sāṃkhya or Yoga?," *Asiatische Studien/ Études Asiatiques*, 1999, Vol. 53, pp. 755-777.
7. Brockington, op. cit., pp. 15, 23.
8. K. M. Ganguli, tr., *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa Translated into English Prose* (Calcutta: Bharata Press, 1893), XII: CCLXII, p. 234.
9. Ganguli, op. cit., XII: CCLXII, p. 236.
10. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 149.
11. J.A.B. van Buitenen, tr., *The Mahābhārata III: The Book of the Forest* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 772.
12. Van Buitenen, op. cit., p. 778.
13. Translations by the author, based on Vishnu S. Sukthankar et al., eds., *The Mahābhārata for the first time critically edited*, fascicule 34 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1963).
14. Christopher Chapple and Yogi Anand Viraj (Eugene P. Kelly, Jr.), *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: an Analysis of the Sanskrit with Accompanying English Translation* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1990).
15. Jean-Claude Carrière, *The Mahābhārata: A Play Based upon the Indian Classic Epic*, tr. from the French by Peter Brook (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 151.
16. Comments at Conference on Epic Constructions: Gender, Myth, and Society in the Mahābhārata, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, July 7-9, 2005.
17. Carrière, op. cit., p. 105.
18. Mahābhārata XVIII:4.19, tr. by author.