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Plato in the Light of Yoga

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One of the reasons that interest in Plato has persisted for 2,500 years is that his dialogues are multifaceted and complex. There are a variety of useful and interesting ways to approach and interpret Plato. Despite this plethora of interpretations, I plan to look at Plato from an atypical perspective. In this essay, I propose to interpret the dialogues of Plato through the lens of Yoga philosophy. I am not making any historical claims alleging transmission of ideas from India to Greece. I am claiming, however, that seeing Plato's thought through the categories of Yoga is both a neglected approach and an illuminating one. Certain themes in Plato that are often ignored stand out more prominently and become more intelligible when we examine his dialogues from the perspective of Yoga philosophy. For example, the geographical section of the *Phaedo* (108c–115a) is an obscure and elusive passage that has provided difficulty for interpreters of Plato. If, however, we utilize certain themes in Yoga philosophy in interpreting that passage, both the excerpt itself and its connection to major topics in the dialogue become more comprehensible.

One of the major themes in the *Phaedo* that receives little attention from scholars is the theme of liberation. Interpreters of Patañjali are far more likely to emphasize the concept of liberation than interpreters of Plato. That liberation is a prominent theme in Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtra* is acknowledged by scholars of Yoga. In contrast, Plato's attention to the theme of liberation in the *Phaedo* has received considerably less attention from Plato scholars. I shall attempt to fill that lacuna by discussing the role of liberation in Plato's philosophy, paying special attention to the *Phaedo*. If we see liberation as a central theme in that dialogue, other passages, often neglected and overlooked by scholars (e.g., the geographical section mentioned above), begin to make more sense in the context of the *Phaedo*.

I shall begin by discussing the concept of liberation in Indian thought. In *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Eliade states: "It is not the possession of truth that is the supreme end of the Indian sage; it is liberation, the conquest of absolute freedom."<sup>1</sup> The Sanskrit word 'moksa' is often translated into English as freedom or liberation. Sometimes, 'apavarga' is used (e.g. *Yoga-Sūtra* II.18). But the term Patañjali seems to prefer is 'kaivalya', which means independence, aloneness, or isolation. Patañjali frequently discusses the nature of *kaivalya* in the *Yoga-Sūtra*.<sup>2</sup> He specifically connects *kaivalya* with the cessation of ignorance or *avidyā* (II.25) and the inclination toward discriminative knowledge or *viveka* (IV.26). The final sutra of Patañjali's work (IV.34) defines and explains the ultimate state of *kaivalya*.

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Patañjali's commentators acknowledge and recognize the central role of *kaivalya* or liberation in his thought. For example, in *Patañjali and Yoga*, Eliade states: "The conquest of this absolute freedom constitutes the goal of all the Indian philosophies and mystic techniques, but it is above all through Yoga, through one of the manifold forms of yoga, that India believes that the goal has been reached."<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Zimmer,<sup>4</sup> Ernest Wood,<sup>5</sup> Bhoja,<sup>6</sup> Swāmi Hariharānanda Āranya,<sup>7</sup> and Georg Feuerstein<sup>8</sup> all support the idea that seeking deliverance (or liberation or release) is absolutely central to Yoga.

The emphasis on liberation we find in the secondary literature on Yoga has no parallel or counterpart in the secondary literature on Plato. Plato's commentators do not underscore the role of *luisis* (freedom or deliverance) in Plato's writings. The dialogue which deals most directly with Plato's concept of liberation is the *Phaedo*. Yet, there is relatively little scholarly commentary on the role of liberation in that dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the lack of attention to liberation that one finds in most of the secondary literature, Plato himself goes to considerable lengths to describe philosophy itself as liberating. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates repeatedly claims that the philosophical soul seeks release. Socrates states (*Phaedo* 67d): "And the desire to free the soul is chiefly, or rather only, in the true philosopher. In fact the philosopher's occupation consists precisely in the freeing and separation (*luisis kai chorismos*) of soul from body."<sup>10</sup> In discussing purification, Socrates states that purification consists in "separating the soul as much as possible from the body" (67c). When that occurs, the soul is "freed from the shackles of the body" (67d). Later in the dialogue (82e–83a), Socrates sums up his view:

Every seeker of wisdom knows that up to the time when philosophy takes it over his soul is a helpless prisoner, chained hand and foot in the body, compelled to view reality not directly but only through its prison bars, and wallowing in utter ignorance. And philosophy can see that the imprisonment is ingeniously effected by the prisoner's own active desire, which makes him first accessory to his own confinement. Well, philosophy takes over the soul in this condition and by gentle persuasion tries to set it free.<sup>11</sup>

Plato's image in the *Phaedo* of the soul as a "helpless prisoner, chained hand and foot in the body" is developed in the Allegory of the Cave (*Republic* VII.514a–518d).<sup>12</sup> In that allegory, the prisoners, who are chained and fettered in a dark cave, can only see the shadows cast on the wall of the cave. Eventually (515c), one of the prisoners is delivered or freed (*luisin*) from bondage.<sup>13</sup> The allegory of the cave is not only similar to the passage in the *Phaedo* quoted above, it also bears a striking resemblance to the myth at the end of the *Phaedo*. In that myth, people, believing themselves to be living on the surface of the earth, are actually living beneath the earth in hollows.<sup>14</sup> Socrates states:

Philosophy East & West

Although we live in a hollow of the earth, we assume that we are living on the surface, and we call the air heaven, as though it were the heaven through which the stars move. And this point too is the same, that we are too feeble and sluggish to make our way out to the upper limit of the air. If someone could reach to the summit, or put on wings and fly aloft, when he put up his head he would see the world above, just as fishes see our world when they put up their heads out of the sea. And if his nature were able to bear the sight, he would recognize that that is the true heaven and the true light and the true earth. (*Phaedo* 109d–e)

This image in the *Phaedo* of living beneath the surface of the earth in a darker and less pure region is precisely the image we find in the Allegory of the Cave. In the *Phaedo*, the inhabitants of the lower world are “feeble and sluggish.” In the Allegory of the Cave, they are chained and bound. In the *Phaedo*, we have a very clear image of freedom when Socrates describes the person who reaches the summit as the person who is able to “put on wings and fly aloft.” In the Allegory of the Cave, we have the image of a prisoner who is released from the chains and climbing out of the cave onto the surface of the earth.

Socrates makes it very clear that the prisoners in the Allegory of the Cave are similar to us. When Glaucon points out (515a) that Socrates is painting a strange picture with strange prisoners, Socrates responds, “They are like us.” Just as the prisoners are surrounded by darkness, we are “in the dark,” that is, in a state of ignorance. Moving out of the cave into the sunlight represents the ascent of the soul from a state of ignorance to a state of illumination. It also represents the transition from bondage to liberation. Therefore, in Plato’s thought, there is a connection between liberation and illumination on the one hand and ignorance and bondage on the other. At both the beginning of the allegory (514a) and at the conclusion of the allegory (518b), Socrates makes it clear that the central focus of the allegory is *paideia* (learning or education). At 515c, Socrates makes clear the connection between the prisoners’ situation and ignorance when he says: “Consider then what deliverance from their bonds (*lusin desmon*) and the curing of their ignorance (*iasin aphrosuneis*) would be if something like this naturally happened to them.”

Plato then describes the liberation of one of the prisoners. This is the flip side of the passage I quoted earlier from the *Phaedo* (82e) where Socrates describes the soul as “a helpless prisoner, chained hand and foot in the body, compelled to view reality not directly but only through its prison bars, and wallowing in utter ignorance (*amathia*).” In the *Phaedo* passage, Plato connects imprisonment with ignorance; in the *Republic* passage, he connects deliverance from bondage with the cessation of ignorance. It seems clear, therefore, that, for Plato, we are imprisoned by our ignorance, and with wisdom comes liberation.

That ignorance is the main source of our bondage is also a central

Jeffrey Gold

theme in Yoga. Eliade repeatedly states that, in Sāṃkhya Yoga, ignorance is the cause of our bondage and knowledge is the cause of our liberation.<sup>15</sup> For example, he states:

The wretchedness of human life is not owing to a divine punishment or to an original sin, but to *ignorance*. Not any and every kind of ignorance, but only ignorance of the true nature of *Spirit*, the ignorance that makes us confuse Spirit with our psychomental experience... For Sāṃkhya and Yoga the problem is clearly defined. Since suffering has its origin in ignorance of 'Spirit'—that is, in confusing 'Spirit' with psychomental states—emancipation can be obtained only if the confusion is abolished.<sup>16</sup>

Eliade later quotes the *Sāṃkhya-Sūtra* (III.22, 23), which states: "Through knowledge, liberation; through ignorance, bondage."<sup>17</sup>

Patañjali himself makes it clear (*Yoga-Sūtra* II.2–4) that ignorance (*avidyā*) is not only one of the obstacles (*kleśas*) to *samādhi*, it is the source or breeding ground of all the other obstacles. Later in the *Yoga-Sūtra* (II.23–26) Patañjali points out that the (false) identification of *puruṣa* (self) with *prakṛti* (phenomenal world) is caused by ignorance (*avidyā*). Finally (II.25–26), he states that the dispersion of ignorance and the practice of discrimination (*viveka*) lead to liberation (*kaivalya*). Thus, for both Plato and Patañjali, ignorance is the cause of our bondage and knowledge is the source of our liberation.

Furthermore, although I wouldn't want to say that the knowledge that Plato seeks is identical to the knowledge Patañjali seeks, there are some striking similarities. Patañjali defines ignorance (*avidyā*) as follows (*Yoga-Sūtra* II.5): "Avidyā consists in regarding a transient object as everlasting, an impure object as pure, misery as happiness and the not-self (*anātman*) as the self (*ātman*)."<sup>18</sup> The Yogi with discriminative knowledge (*viveka*) would, therefore, not confuse the transient with the eternal, the pure with the impure, misery with happiness, and the not-self with the self. Similarly, Plato's philosopher would not confuse the transient, impure world of the senses with the eternal, pure world of the Forms.<sup>19</sup> Nor would Plato's philosopher confuse misery with happiness (although the ignorant, unjust person is characterized by Plato as someone who makes precisely that confusion).<sup>20</sup> Lastly, Patañjali's point that ignorance confuses the self and the not-self can also be found in the Allegory of the Cave.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it appears that Plato and Patañjali not merely agree that knowledge is essential for liberation, but also hold similar views concerning the type and content of the knowledge required.

To summarize, both Plato and Patañjali place liberation in a central place in their philosophy. Second, both associate liberation with wisdom and bondage with ignorance. Third, both speak of the wise person as the one who can distinguish the eternal from the transient, the self from the not-self, and misery from happiness.

Philosophy East & West

How is liberation achieved? For Patañjali, we must begin with his classic definition of Yoga (*Yoga-Sūtra* 1.2): “Yoga is the suppression of the modifications of the mind (*Yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*).” How are the modifications or fluctuations quieted, calmed, or suppressed? Once again, Patañjali is clear (*Yoga-Sūtra* 1.12): “Their suppression (is brought about by) persistent practice (*abhyāsa*) and non-attachment (*vairāgya*).”<sup>22</sup> This view is repeated virtually verbatim in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.<sup>23</sup>

I will begin with a discussion of *vairāgya* or detachment. Patañjali defines detachment as follows (*Yoga-Sūtra* 1.15): “When the mind loses all desire for objects seen or described in the scriptures it acquires a state of utter desirelessness which is called detachment.” The term translated as “desirelessness” is *virṣṇa*. That term is also translated as “without thirst” or “without craving.” Thus, detachment requires a lack of thirst, craving, or desire for objects. The *Bhagavad Gītā* presents a similar view.<sup>24</sup> The *Yoga-Sūtra* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* identify detachment with the loss of desire. When we turn to Plato, an emphasis on detachment and desirelessness is also evident. In the *Phaedo*, after Socrates defines death as the separation of the soul and the body, he discusses the philosophical life (*Phaedo* 64c–68b). In that discussion, Socrates makes it clear that the philosopher is not concerned with the so-called pleasures (*hedonas*) connected with food and drink, sex, fancy clothing, and other bodily adornments (*Phaedo* 64d). At *Phaedo* 65c–d, it is pointed out that the philosophical soul seeks to be alone, independent, separate, and detached from bodily desires. In terms of the previously mentioned pleasures (food, drink, sex, etc.), Socrates maintains that the philosopher “finds no pleasure in such things” and “thinks nothing of physical pleasures” (65a). Like Patañjali’s sage, who acts without thirst or without craving, Plato’s philosopher is detached from pleasure and pain and unmoved by desire and aversion. Therefore, desirelessness and detachment are not simply central concepts in Yoga, they also play a role in Plato’s thought. In a passage that connects desirelessness with liberation, Socrates states (*Phaedo* 66c): “Wars and revolutions and battles are due simply and solely to the body and its desires. All wars are undertaken for the acquisition of wealth, and the reason why we have to acquire wealth is the body, because we are slaves in its service.”

Earlier, I pointed out that, for Patañjali, there are two ways to calm the modifications in the mind. Having looked at one of the ways (detachment), let us now turn to the second, namely persistent practice. Patañjali states (*Yoga-Sūtra* 1.13): “Exertion to acquire *sthiti* or a tranquil state of mind devoid of fluctuations is called practice.”<sup>25</sup> A great deal of material found in books 2 and 3 of the *Yoga-Sūtra* is devoted to a discussion of Yogic practices. All eight limbs of Yoga are to be practiced. For example, posture (*āsana*), control of breath (*prāṇāyāma*), sense-withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*), concentration (*dhāraṇā*), and meditation (*dhyāna*)

Jeffrey Gold

all involve diligence, effort, discipline, and practice. Vyāsa (commenting on Patañjali's sutra II.28) insists that it is through practice that ignorance is reduced, impurities are attenuated, and discriminative enlightenment is attained.<sup>26</sup>

Practice is also central in Plato's thought. "It may be that the rest of mankind are not aware that those who apply themselves correctly to the pursuit of philosophy are in fact practicing nothing more nor less than dying and death."<sup>27</sup> Philosophy is the practice of death and dying. For Plato, that means that the philosopher must practice separating the soul from the body. Socrates says that "real philosophers train for dying . . ." (*Phaedo* 67e).<sup>28</sup> This training or practice is, as odd as it sounds, a philosophical pursuit, and as a philosophical pursuit, it is associated with the search for truth. Socrates asks: "Then when is it that the soul attains to truth?" (*Phaedo* 65b). He answers that the soul attains truth through reasoning (*logizesthai*) (*Phaedo* 65c). He continues:

Surely the soul can best reflect [reason] when it is free of all distractions such as hearing or sight or pain or pleasure of any kind—that is, when it ignores the body and becomes as far as possible independent, avoiding all physical contacts and associations as much as it can, in its search for reality. (*Phaedo* 65c)

In his discussion of the forms, Socrates makes the following (very similar) point:

Then the clearest knowledge will surely be attained by one who approaches the object so far as possible by thought (*dianoia*), and thought alone, not permitting sight or any other sense to intrude upon his thinking, not dragging in any sense as accompaniment to reason: one who sets himself to track down each constituent of reality purely and simply as it is by means of thought pure and simple: one who gets rid, so far as possible, of eyes and ears and, broadly speaking, of the body altogether, knowing that when the body is the soul's partner it confuses the soul and prevents it from coming to possess truth and intelligence.<sup>29</sup>

Plato's point that the soul can reason, think, and reflect most clearly when not distracted by the senses is very similar to Patañjali's emphasis on *pratyāhāra* or sense-withdrawal. In the *Yoga-Sūtra* (II.54), Patañjali characterizes *pratyāhāra* as the mind and the sense organs withdrawing themselves from their respective objects. This is similar (though not identical) to Plato's point that the soul reasons best when it withdraws itself from the senses and their objects.

The preceding passages from the *Phaedo* make it clear that the philosophical pursuit of truth is accomplished only when the soul reasons, reflects, and thinks. Two points seem to follow from this. The first point is that reasoning, thinking, and reflection require practice and training. The second point is that, for Plato, the soul reasons best when it is isolated or withdrawn from the body.

Philosophy East & West



To summarize briefly, it seems to be the case that, for Plato, liberation requires knowledge. Knowledge depends on one's ability to think and reason clearly. Thinking and reasoning clearly require that the soul be isolated from the body. This isolation of soul from body is similar to Patañjali's point that liberation requires the destruction of the union or alliance between *puruṣa* (self) and *prakṛti* (phenomenal world). Patañjali says (*Yoga-Sūtra* II.25): "The dissociation of *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* brought about by the dispersion of *Avidyā* [ignorance] is the real remedy and that is the Liberation of the Seer."<sup>30</sup> Vyāsa has an interesting commentary:

When *Adarśana* [ignorance, lack of discernment] ceases, the alliance of *Buddhi* [intelligence, which is part of *prakṛti*] and *Puruṣa* ceases and there is complete cessation of bondage for all time, which is isolation of the Seer, *i.e.* state of aloofness of *Puruṣa* and non-recurrence of future contact with the *Gunas*.<sup>31</sup>

It appears, therefore, that liberation requires the total isolation and aloofness of *Puruṣa* for Patañjali, and it requires the total isolation and aloofness of soul for Plato. Furthermore, this isolation demands training and practice. For Patañjali, we must, among other things, practice breath control and meditation. Are there any parallels to these practices in Plato? At first glance, it does not appear that Plato advocates *prāṇāyāma* (breath control) or meditation. However, if I may conclude this essay in a daring manner, I would like to suggest a symbolic interpretation of the eschatological myth that occurs at the end of the *Phaedo*. Such a symbolic interpretation points in the direction of a Plato who both alluded to and advocated practices akin to meditation and *prāṇāyāma*.

Like the other three eschatological myths in Plato,<sup>32</sup> the myth at the end of the *Phaedo* (107d–114d) begins with a discussion of the wanderings of the soul after death. Whereas all four myths in Plato include a discussion of the "judgment" of the soul, only the myth in the *Phaedo* has an extended geographical description of the earth. Socrates describes the earth as filled with hollows, underground rivers, and subterranean passages. My hypothesis is that Plato's very detailed description of the earth is not an attempt at giving an accurate geographical account of the earth; it is rather a symbolic discussion of what Eliade calls "mystical physiology."<sup>33</sup> I am suggesting that when Plato is talking about the earth, he is really discussing esoteric physiological states of human beings. In discussing the mystical physiology of Yoga, Eliade states:

The body—both the physical and the 'subtle'—is made up of a certain number of *nāḍīs* (lit., 'conduits,' 'vessels,' 'veins,' or 'arteries,' but also 'nerves') and of *cakras* (lit., 'circles,' 'disks,' but usually translated 'centers'). Simplifying slightly, we could say that the vital energy, in the form of 'breaths,' circulating through the *nāḍīs* and that the cosmic energy exists, in a latent state, in the *cakras*.<sup>34</sup>

Jeffrey Gold



Just as Eliade speaks of vital energy or breath circulating through the *nāḍīs* (conduits) and *cakras* (centers), Plato speaks of hot and cold rivers flowing in and out of hollows and channels deep within the earth. For example, at *Phaedo* 111c–e, Socrates states:

In the earth itself, all over its surface, there are many hollow regions. . . . All these are joined together underground by many connecting channels, some narrower, some wider, through which, from one basin to another, there flows a great volume of water—monstrous unceasing subterranean rivers of waters both hot and cold—and of fire too, great rivers of fire, and many of liquid mud. . . .

Plato's description of hot and cold energy flowing through channels and basins is remarkably similar to Eliade's description of vital energy flowing through *nāḍīs* and *cakras*. Socrates goes on to point out that the movement of the waters is caused by an oscillation inside the earth (*Phaedo* 111e). He then quotes Homer, who refers to Tartarus as the earth's deepest chasm into which all the rivers flow (*Phaedo* 111e–112a). Given this symbolic interpretation, Tartarus would represent what Eliade calls the *mūlādhāra cakra*. Eliade states: "The *mūlādhāra* (*mūla* = root) is situated at the base of the spinal column, between the anal orifice and the genital organs (sacrococcygeal plexus)."<sup>35</sup> Plato's great rivers of fire remind the reader of *kuṇḍalinī*. Eliade states: "The awakening of the *kuṇḍalinī* arouses an intense heat. . . . [T]he part through which the *kuṇḍalinī* passes is burning hot."<sup>36</sup> In both Plato and Yoga, we have a picture of hot and cold energy (in the form of water, air, and fire) surging through channels, conduits, and hollows.

For Plato (*Phaedo* 112a–b), the streams that surge to and fro are accompanied by air, wind, or breath inside the earth. "And just as in our breathing the air is constantly flowing in and flowing out, so in the interior of the earth the wind swaying about with the waters, and entering or leaving a given place, causes gusts of appalling violence."<sup>37</sup> Plato goes on to say that the waters and air flow through many channels but eventually "discharge themselves back into Tartarus, some with long winding courses through many lands, others more direct. . . . [S]ome complete a full circle, winding round the earth once or more than once, like snakes, descending as low as they can before once again plunging into Tartarus."<sup>38</sup> After plunging into Tartarus, the rivers then flow uphill (*Phaedo* 112d–e). My hypothesis is that Plato is carefully describing, using coded language, a meditation technique that appears to involve moving hot and cold energy up and down the spinal column through the *cakras*. Like Patañjali, Plato is careful not to put too many details in writing. This should not be surprising, because if Plato had been privy to the esoteric secrets found in Pythagoreanism or especially the Orphic mystery religion, he would have exercised the utmost care and written

Philosophy East & West

cautiously. Virtually every standard interpretation of the *Phaedo* acknowledges that the *Phaedo* was heavily influenced by Pythagorean and Orphic doctrine.<sup>39</sup> And, although our knowledge of Orphism is limited, we do know that the Orphic cult practiced secret rites of initiation and purification.<sup>40</sup> Secret initiation rites of a Mystery religion are specifically mentioned by Socrates at *Phaedo* 69c–d. In view of this, I am putting forth the bold hypotheses that (1) these secret Orphic rites may have included something analogous to meditation and *prāṇāyāma*; and (2) Plato, throughout the geographical section of the myth in the *Phaedo*, was speaking symbolically and guardedly about these Orphic techniques.

Why offer such bold hypotheses? The reason I advance these hypotheses is the explanatory power they offer. My hypotheses can explain a section of the *Phaedo* that has not yet adequately been explained. Standard interpretations of the *Phaedo* admit that the geographical section at the end of the dialogue is mythological.<sup>41</sup> Hackforth and Bluck both insist that it is symbolic.<sup>42</sup> For example, Hackforth states: “Plato has given his myth a metaphysical symbolism as well as an eschatological.”<sup>43</sup> However, Hackforth does not back up his general claim with any specific interpretations of the symbols. He makes no attempt to explain the numerous detailed descriptions involving hot and cold running water, hollows, Tartarus, and so forth. Nor does any other interpretation that I have read. In short, the standard interpretations claim that the end of the *Phaedo* is mythological and symbolic, but provide no explanation, interpretation, or translation of the symbols. My interpretation, however, can give quite specific and detailed explanations of the hollows, the hot and cold currents, the rivers of fire, and Tartarus. All of these symbols represent very specific internal states or processes akin to the mystical physiology described in Eliade. The hollows represent *cakras*; the hot and cold currents, *prāṇa* and *apāna*; the rivers of fire, *kuṇḍalinī*; and Tartarus, the *mūlādhāra cakra*.

Furthermore, my hypothesis can explain why that very peculiar geographical discussion belongs in the *Phaedo*. Other commentators provide no explanation of the relevance of that section to themes in the *Phaedo*. But, on the Yogic interpretation of Plato, the main theme of the *Phaedo* is liberation. The esoteric physiology at the end of the *Phaedo* provides a specific technique of meditation and *prāṇāyāma* that one can use as a means of acquiring liberation. According to Eliade, Yoga teaches techniques of meditation that are indispensable tools used in the acquisition of liberation.<sup>44</sup> Paramahansa Yogananda also describes meditation as a technique for liberation.<sup>45</sup> I am suggesting that Plato makes the same connection.

Another hermeneutical benefit of this interpretation concerns the Socratic doctrine of the unity of virtue. Many commentators have offered

Jeffrey Gold

interpretations of the unity of virtue as it appears in the early Socratic dialogues, especially the *Protagoras*.<sup>46</sup> Fewer commentators have noticed the appearance of that doctrine in the *Phaedo*. However, the unity of virtue is discussed by Socrates at *Phaedo* 69a–c. What is interesting, for these purposes, is that in that passage, Socrates draws a direct connection between true virtue and the secret rites of initiation and purification found in the Mystery religions. My suggestion is that the five virtues discussed by Plato represent the five lower *cakras* found in Yoga philosophy. Given standard descriptions of those *cakras*, the following correspondences come to mind: self-control is correlated with the earthy, heavy, constrictive nature of the *mūlādhāra cakra*; justice with the watery, nurturing, healing of the *svādhiṣṭhāna cakra*; courage with the fiery, intense energy of the *maṇipūra cakra*; piety with the devotional nature of the heart or the *anāhata cakra*; and wisdom with the intellectual nature of the throat, tongue, and mind represented by the *viśuddha cakra*.<sup>47</sup> The doctrine of the unity of virtue is that all the virtues are the same. My hypothesis is that the reason that the virtues are identical is that each true virtue represents the *susumnic* or balanced state of the relevant *cakra*. At *Phaedo* 68c–69b, Socrates contrasts true virtue from what is commonly or popularly called virtue (e.g., bravery through fear or temperance through desire). These popular concepts of virtue would represent the imbalanced state of the relevant *cakra*; true virtue would represent the balanced state. The meditation technique hinted at in the geographical section of the *Phaedo* is a technique whose aim is to balance the *cakras*.

Let me conclude this essay with a brief suggestion about how reading Plato through the lens of Yoga might bear further interpretative fruit. If we understand that Plato's main emphasis is on liberation, we may be able to combat and reject the common interpretation of Plato as anti-body and anti-life. Since the time of Augustine, Plato has often been characterized as a hater of the body. For example, Hackforth speaks of Plato's "disdain or even hostility toward the 'flesh.'" <sup>48</sup> He also speaks of Plato's "contempt for all that empirical world which is apprehended through the senses."<sup>49</sup> If, however, we focus on Plato's view on liberation, we get a very different Plato. The desire to be liberated from the body is very different from hating the body. Gandhi desired liberation from the British, but didn't hate the British. Teenagers may desire freedom from their parents without hating them. Furthermore, given Plato's own views, the desire to be liberated from X is not only different from hating X, it is incompatible with hating X. Hatred is a form of aversion, and aversion is simply another desire (a desire to avoid). Given Plato's views on detachment from desire, it is hard to imagine that he would advocate hatred of desire. Hatred is incompatible with detachment. What Plato objects to is enslavement. Recall Socrates' claim at *Phaedo* 66c: "All wars are undertaken for the acquisition of wealth, and the

Philosophy East & West

reason why we have to acquire wealth is the body, because we are slaves in its service." It is liberation from desire, not hatred of desire, that Plato advocates. If you hate something, if you desire to push something away, it's got you, and you are not free of it. Plato's emphasis on liberation helps us to avoid the caricature of Plato as a philosopher who hates the flesh.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that reading Plato through the eyes of Patañjali bears much interpretative fruit. First of all, it restores the place of importance that liberation holds in Plato's thought. Secondly, it helps us to see the connection between liberation and wisdom in Plato's thought. Thirdly, it connects the concepts of practice and detachment to Plato's views on liberation. Fourthly, it sheds light on the geographical section of Plato and draws a connection between the unity of virtue and that geographical section. Finally, it presents a more charitable interpretation of Plato than the standard ones that present Plato as one who despises the flesh.

## NOTES

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- 1 – Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 4.
- 2 – Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra* II.25; III.49–51; III.55; IV.26; and IV.34.
- 3 – Mircea Eliade, *Patañjali and Yoga* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969), pp. 6–7.
- 4 – Heinrich Zimmer states that Yoga "outlines practical techniques for the gaining of release" (*Philosophies of India* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951], p. 280).
- 5 – Ernest Wood says: "Often and often the goal of the yogi is described in yoga literature as 'liberation'" (*Yoga* [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962], p. 62).
- 6 – Bhoja, in commenting on a section of the *Yoga-Sūtra* (IV.22), stated that "any knowledge whose object is not deliverance is valueless." See Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, p. 13.
- 7 – Swāmi Hariharānanda Āraṇya, in an introduction to a translation of

Jeffrey Gold

the *Yoga-Sūtra*, states: "That is the ultimate goal of Yoga, which is perpetual peace of mind or Kaivalya Moksa, i.e. liberation" (*Yoga Philosophy of Patañjali* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983], p. xxiii).

- 8 – Georg Feuerstein, in an introduction to a translation of the *Yoga-Sūtra*, explains that philosophy (in the *Yoga-Sūtra*) is "more than what is commonly understood by that term." Feuerstein goes on to state that, for Patañjali, philosophy contains "strong ethical prescriptions and above all, includes a method for the systematic transformation of consciousness with the ultimate purpose of achieving 'liberation'" (*The Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary* [Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1989], p. 6).
- 9 – For translations with commentaries, see: David Gallop, *Phaedo: Translated with Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo: Translated with an Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); and R. S. Bluck, *Plato's Phaedo: Translated, with an Introduction, Notes, and Appendices* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955). In these texts, neither the introductory essays nor the specific comments on the relevant sections of the *Phaedo* reveal sensitivity to the importance of the concept of liberation. See Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo*, pp. 3–24, 41–43, 48–51, 56–57; Bluck, *Plato's Phaedo*, pp. 1–36, 46–47; and Gallop, *Phaedo*, pp. 79–98. For books about the *Phaedo*, see: Ronna Burger, *The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); David Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Paul Stern, *Socratic Rationalism and Political Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato's Phaedo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); and Kenneth Dorter, *Plato's Phaedo: An Interpretation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982). With the exception of Dorter (pp. 10, 19–22), the concept of liberation is downplayed or ignored in these texts.
- 10 – Plato, *Phaedo* 67d. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the *Phaedo* are taken from the Hugh Tredennick translation. That translation may be found in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).
- 11 – See also *Cratylus* 400c, where Socrates attributes the view that "the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is incarcerated" to the Orphic poets.
- 12 – For an expanded treatment of this allegory as an allegory of liberation, see Jeffrey Gold, "Bringing Students out of the Cave: The First Day," *Teaching Philosophy* 11 (1) (March 1988): 25–31.

- 13 – All translations of the *Republic* are by G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Republic* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974).
- 14 – *Phaedo* 109b–110b.
- 15 – Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, pp. 9, 13, 14, 15, 18, 28.
- 16 – *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 17 – *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 18 – Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the *Yoga-Sūtra* will be from Swāmi Hariharānanda Āraṇya.
- 19 – In the *Phaedo* (78c–80b), Socrates distinguishes the world of Forms from the physical world. The Forms are invisible, unchanging, pure, and eternal. Physical objects are changing, visible, impure, and transitory. At *Phaedo* 79c, Socrates points out that when the soul uses the instrumentality of the body (e.g., sight or hearing) to be aware of the visible, transient world, it “loses its way and becomes confused and dizzy, as though it were fuddled.” Socrates continues (*Phaedo* 79d) by stating that the soul achieves wisdom or understanding (*phronesis*) when it investigates “the pure and everlasting and immortal and changeless.” At the end of book 5 of the *Republic* (475b–480a), Socrates distinguishes the lover of sights and sounds from the lover of wisdom (the philosopher). At 480a, Socrates identifies the lover of sights and sounds as the lover of opinion or doxophilist. The lover of sights and sounds, who is unaware of the Form of the Beautiful, believes in beautiful things but not Forms (476c). Socrates says that that person is in a dream state. The philosopher, however, is able to distinguish Forms from sensible particulars and is very much awake (476d). In short, the philosopher is able to discriminate the pure from the impure and the eternal from the temporal. The philosopher doesn’t confuse reality with appearance, shadows and illusion from substance, or the dream state from the waking state. This is remarkably similar to Patañjali’s view that ignorance is the confusion of the transient with the eternal, the pure with the impure.
- 20 – For example, at the end of book 1 of the *Republic* (354a), Socrates concludes his argument with Thrasymachus by stating: “So the just man is happy, and the unjust one is wretched.” This is despite Thrasymachus’ claim that (344b) “when a man, besides appropriating the possessions of the citizens, manages to enslave the owners, as well, then . . . he is called happy and blessed, not only by his fellow-citizens but by all others who learn that he has run through the whole gamut of injustice.” For Socrates, the ignorant, unjust tyrant, despite appearances, is actually wretched. In Socrates’ and Jeffrey Gold



Plato's view, ignorant and unjust people may think they are happy when, in fact, they are not. This theme is found in both the *Republic* and the *Gorgias* (especially in the discussion between Socrates and Polus, at 461b–481b).

- 21 – At the beginning of the allegory, when Socrates is describing the darkness and the fetters, he points out (*Republic* VII.515a) that the prisoners (who are “in the dark”) cannot see themselves or each other. Since the allegory is symbolic, and vision and sight are symbols that represent illumination and knowledge, the fact that the prisoners can't see themselves seems to imply that they lack self-knowledge or self-awareness. That the prisoners who are ignorant lack self-knowledge seems similar to Patañjali's idea that victims of *avidyā* confuse self with not-self.
- 22 – Translation by Dr. I. K. Taimni, p. 20.
- 23 – In chapter 6 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, when Arjuna points out to Krishna (VI.34) that the mind is restless and impetuous, as difficult to control as the wind, Krishna responds (VI.35) that it is difficult to curb the restless mind, but it is possible through constant practice and detachment.
- 24 – In chapter 2 of the *Gītā*, Arjuna asks Krishna for a description of the man of stabilized mentality. The concept of stabilized mentality is something like the notion of a calm, serene, peaceful, unwavering mind. Krishna's description of the sage with these qualities is as follows:

55. When he abandons desires,  
All that are in the mind, son of Prthā,  
Finding contentment by himself in the self alone,  
Then he is called of stabilized mentality.

56. When his mind is not perturbed in sorrows,  
And he has lost desire for joys,  
His longing, fear, and wrath departed,  
He is called a stable-minded holy man.

57. Who has no desire towards any thing,  
And getting this or that good or evil  
Neither delights in it nor loathes it,  
His mentality is stabilized.

71. Abandoning all desires . . .  
Man moves free from longing,  
Without self-interest and egotism,  
He goes to peace.

Philosophy East & West

This passage serves to reinforce the idea that stabilization of the mind (calming the fluctuations of the mind) requires both desirelessness and nonattachment. The passages in the *Bhagavad Gītā* emphasize repeatedly that the sage whose mind is stable abandons, lacks, or has no desires. (All translations of the *Bhagavad Gītā* are from Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972].)

- 25 – Patañjali continues his discussion of practice as follows (*Yoga-Sūtra* I.14): “That practice when continued for a long time without break and with devotion becomes firm in foundation.”
- 26 – For Vyāsa’s commentary on the *Yoga-Sūtra*, see Swāmi Hariharānanda Āraṇya. Vyāsa’s commentary on this particular sūtra is found on pp. 203–204.
- 27 – *Phaedo* 64a (Bluck translation).
- 28 – *Phaedo* 67e (Hackforth translation).
- 29 – *Phaedo* 65e–66a (Hackforth translation).
- 30 – Translation by Dr. I. K. Taimni, p. 198.
- 31 – Swāmi Hariharānanda Āraṇya, p. 198.
- 32 – The four eschatological myths in Plato are: *Phaedo* 107d–114d; *Republic* X.614b–621a; *Phaedrus* 246c–257b; and *Gorgias* 523a–527e.
- 33 – Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, p. 239.
- 34 – *Ibid.*, pp. 236–237.
- 35 – *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- 36 – *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- 37 – *Phaedo* 112b (Hackforth translation).
- 38 – *Phaedo* 112c–d (Hackforth translation).
- 39 – For example, see Bluck, *Plato’s Phaedo*, pp. 47, 52, 127, 195–196; Hackforth, *Plato’s Phaedo*, pp. 4–6, 15, 38, 42, 172, 185; Bostock, *Plato’s Phaedo*, pp. 11–14, 29; and Dorter, *Plato’s Phaedo*, pp. 177–178. For two excellent sustained discussions on Orphism and the Orphic influence on Plato, see Douglas J. Stewart, “Socrates’ Last Bath,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 10 (July 1972): 253–259, and W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 307–332.
- 40 – See Stewart, “Socrates’ Last Bath,” p. 253; Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*; and Dorter, *Plato’s Phaedo*, pp. 177–178.

Jeffrey Gold

- 41 – See Bluck, *Plato's Phaedo*, p. 127, and Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo*, pp. 167, 171–175.
- 42 – Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo*, p. 174; Bluck, *Plato's Phaedo*, p. 127.
- 43 – Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo*, p. 174.
- 44 – Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, pp. 14–15.
- 45 – According to Yogananda: "A Yogi who faithfully practices the technique [a kriya yoga meditation technique] is gradually freed from karma" (*Autobiography of a Yogi* [Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship Publishers, 1974], p. 275).
- 46 – See especially Terry Penner, "The Unity of Virtue," *Philosophical Review* 38 (January 1973): 35–68, and Gregory Vlastos, "The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*," *Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1972): 415–458.
- 47 – For descriptions of these *cakras*, see Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, pp. 241–245.
- 48 – Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo*, p. 4.
- 49 – *Ibid.*, p. 5.