

## Who Was Patañjali?

One of the tasty mysteries so often served up by scholars of Indian literary and philosophical history is: how many Patañjalis were there: one, two—or more? Was Patañjali a surname?

Seven monumental works in Indian literature are attributed to Patañjali. The best known of these is the *Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali*. As is usual in these matters, unanimous agreement is unthinkable. However, an army of formidable scholars contends that before undertaking this ultimate description of human psychology and spiritual potential, he wrote the *Mahābhāṣya on the Aṣṭadhyāyī of Pāṇini*. The *Mahābhāṣya* is a set of detailed commentaries clarifying *The Aṣṭadhyāyī of Pāṇini*, the most ancient and comprehensive of all Sanskrit grammars. In the process, Patañjali greatly clarified Sanskrit and, no doubt, cleared the way for his subsequent volume. It is a rare luxury for a scholar to be able to define his language of use at a cultural level before beginning his main work.

In addition to the *Yoga-Sūtra* and the *Mahābhāṣya*, Patañjali (or Patañjalis) has been credited with a number of works, some yet to be translated into Western languages. Among them:

the *Patañjala*, a treatise on alchemy;  
the *Adhirā-karika* on the *Sāṅkhya* (one of the six schools of orthodox philosophy);  
the *Nidana-Sūtra* on liturgical music;  
a volume on metrics;  
an exposition on anatomy and medicine;  
the *Sri Chidambaśvara Nitya Puja Sūtram*: the rituals and mantras of the Vedic ceremonies conducted at the Nataraja Temple in Cidambaram

Speculation about Patañjali's time period ranges from 150 BCE. to 200 CE., with some authorities confidently placing him around 1000 BCE. or earlier. Widest agreement centers around 200 CE. Various sūtras in the *Mahābhāṣya* provide clues in the debate about when and where this Patañjali lived. Eminent Sanskrit scholar, Sir Ramakrishna Bhandarkar, notes that the Patañjali of the *Mahābhāṣya* makes references in to the city of Pataliputra, and from this infers that he was at least a frequent visitor if not a resident.

While Patañjali is sometimes called “the father of Yoga,” he is not the founder of Yoga itself. The most commonly held theory is that he compiled, edited and organized the existent material into a synthesis that was so comprehensive, and expanded by his original contributions, that pre-existent work has been forgotten. Some textual analysts point out that specific sūtras in both volumes attributed to Patañjali were probably later contributions. In the case of the *Yoga-Sūtra*, debate centers around linguistic structures characteristic of different periods. In a sense, the more we endeavor to establish him historically, the more mythical he becomes.

Mythologies surrounding Patañjali abound. He is so intimately associated with the serpent manifestation of Viṣṇu, called *Ādiśeṣa* or *Ananta*, that one legend asserts that Patañjali actually was an incarnation of *Ādiśeṣa*. Other stories relate that when he was born, he fell (*pat*) into the hollow of the hand or the hands in prayer (*añjali*) of Pāṇini, Śiva, or mother Goṇikā (a devout hermit woman), in the form of a small snake. Statues and bas-reliefs of Patañjali continue the *Ādiśeṣa* symbology. He is represented with the upper

body of a man, the lower body of a serpent, and with five hoods of Ādiśeṣa spread over him. His incarnation came to a close when he was swallowed by a python—probably one of his disciples. If nothing else, Patañjali's life is a parable of consistency.

The symbology of the serpent is open to a number of interpretations and some confusion. Modern Christian biblical tradition presents the serpent as a snake and holds it forth as a symbol of evil, temptation into desire, and the dark side of Creation. Actually, the Hebrew term in Genesis refers to a small red dragon that figured in later mystic poetry, most notably William Blake's. In most other cultures the serpent is the symbol of wisdom and esoteric lore. Certainly Patañjali and Yoga qualify in these latter respects.

Ādiśeṣa symbolizes manifold functions. He represents the force of gravity in the Hindu cosmology as well as the “coiled” cosmic energy latent in human beings, the *kundalini*, which is called the serpent-power. Kundalini might be said to be the energy latent in matter—a relationship with tremendous potential for release of light—that we know as atomic activity. The statues depicting Patañjali's body configuration may be graphic and emphatic representations of his utter mastery of the kundalini, mastery of his internal physiological processes (and hence, his mind), and mastery of the physical plane as symbolized by gravity. The five hoods of Ādiśeṣa symbolize his mastery of the five senses and their inability to distract him from his spiritual focus. His alternate name, Ananta, means endless or infinite and refers not only to his length, but his quality of consciousness.

Patañjali is occasionally represented in groups of sages and demigods in temple statuary of southern India. He is one of the two sages to whom Śiva specifically manifested himself as Naṭarāja (Lord of the Dance) in His cosmic dance of Creation that spun the universe into motion and maintains its coherence. The Natarāja Temple in Cidambaram, where Lord Śiva is reputed to have revealed Himself as the Cosmic Dancer, has a special bond with Patañjali and he is well represented in statuary in the temple complex.

Whatever his manifestation and whatever the “facts” about his life, Patañjali was one of the most gifted humans ever to grace this planet. The treasures he bestowed on humanity are so profound that it is unlikely that we have more than glimpsed their full measure.