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BEYOND KARMA: SIN IN HINDUISM

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Biography:

Winfried Corduan was born in 1949 in Germany. He earned his M.A. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a Ph.D. from Rice University. He is author to a respectable collection of books such as *Pocket Guide to World Religions*, and *Handmaid to Theology: An Essay in Philosophical Prolegomena*.

by Winfried Corduan

Christian students of world religions have often become occupied, perhaps even preoccupied, with finding the beliefs that correspond to Christian doctrines in other religions. They want to know what terms they should substitute for, say, God, the Bible, sin, or salvation, as they learn about what non-Christian religions teach. Underlying such a quest is obviously the assumption that all religions conform to a basic pattern (which frequently just “happens” to be that of Christianity), and that studying other religions means learning to insert the right concepts into their appropriate slots, as dictated by the paradigm. I do not think we need to belabor the fact that this approach can seriously distort the beliefs of other religions. However, the abuse of such a search for equivalences does not negate the fact that sometimes there are similarities that we should recognize as such.^[1]

One particularly tricky case in point is the question of whether there is an idea equivalent to the Christian concept of sin in Hinduism. One long-standing approach is to designate the Hindu idea of “karma” as carrying out the function of sin, even though “karma” in many ways differs drastically from what we Christians would mean by “sin.” Thus, Dean C. Halverson lays out a chart in which he contrasts karma and sin,^[2] pointing out the significant differences between the two (which I will state later on in this paper), but clearly beginning with the assumption that in important ways sin and karma are functionally analogous to each other. Nevertheless, by the time we have taken a closer look at the differences, one wonders how there can be any similarity or even analogy at all.

Popular presentations proselytizing for Hinduism (although they would probably reject that characterization) frequently go on from that observation that Hinduism does not espouse an idea of sin, thereby attempting to create the appearance that, therefore, Hinduism is tolerant of all actions and is not the condemnatory religion that Christianity is supposedly known to be.^[3]

In what follows, I would like to demonstrate that there is, in fact, a pretty clear notion of sin in Hinduism, which even turns out to be not all that different from what Christians mean by “sin.” However, this concept is not karma. Thus I will first show why a parallel to karma simply does

not work out and then to explicate four Sanskrit terms that actually have a more straightforward meaning of “sin.”

Why Karma is not Sin

Let me clarify that I am not taking issue with the fact that *karma* constitutes *the* major obstacle to salvation in Hinduism. My point is that the major obstacle to salvation in Hinduism is even less like sin than we might initially think. And this fact should not be terribly surprising since salvation as understood in Hinduism is nothing like salvation in Christianity. Specifically, in Hinduism salvation consists of escaping the cycle of reincarnations, while in Christianity salvation means reconciliation with God and eternal life with him.

Karma, as virtually everyone recognizes, is the cosmic law of cause and effect, according to which a person’s next life will be shaped by his actions in this life. It is the driving force of *samsara*, the cycle of reincarnations. Karma determines the consequences of our actions, rewarding the good that we did and punishing us for the evil. The apparent equivalence to sin comes into play when we observe that the accumulation of bad karma, so to speak, promotes the ceaseless suffering within *samsara*. However, this perception is a wild underestimate of the pervasiveness and power of karma.

First of all, we need to recognize that the word “karma” has a broader meaning, apart from its role in *samsara*. “Karma” more literally means “action” or “duty” and is used to refer to the obligations that a person lives under, particularly those engendered by his caste. Let us cite a few examples.

In the Rig Veda “karma” can refer to obligations, sacred duties, or just plain works or actions. Here, side by side, are some verses from the Rig Veda and their 1896 translations by Ralph Griffith, along with my analysis.

RV	Sanskrit[4]	Griffith Translation[5]	Analysis
1:11:4	<i>purām bhinduryuvā kaviramitaujā ajāyata; indro vishvasyakarmano dhartā vajrii purustutah tvam valasya gomato apāvaradrivo bilam</i>	Crusher of forts, the young, the wise, of strength unmeasured, was he born Sustainer of each sacred rite, Indra, the Thunderer, much-extolled.	The subject is Indra. He the sustainer of the world (<i>karmanas[6]</i> = genitive of the entire sacred realm (<i>vishvasya</i> =genitive of <i>vishva</i>).
1:10:19	<i>visnoh karmāni pashyata yato vratāni paspashe indrasya yujyah sakhā</i>	Look ye on Vishnu's works, whereby the Friend of Indra, close-allied, hath let his holy ways be seen.	Literally: Of Vishnu (<i>visnoh</i>), the works (<i>karmāni</i>) behold (<i>paspashe</i>)
1:31:8	<i>tvam no agne sanaye dhanānām yashasam kārum krnuhi stavānah; rdhyāma karmāpasā navena devairdyāvāprthivii prāvata mah</i>	O Agni, highly lauded, make our singer famous that he may win us store of riches: May we improve the rite with new performance. O Earth and Heaven, with all the Gods, protect us.	<i>Karmāpasā</i> , the binding works (rites), are renewed in honor of Agni.

1:55:3	<i>tvam tamindra parvatam na bhojase maho nrmnasya dharmanāmirajyasi pra viiryena devatāti cekite vishvasmā ugrah karmane purohitah</i>	Thou swayest, Indra, all kinds of great manly power, so as to bend, as't were, even that famed mountain down. Foremost among the Gods is he through hero might, set in the van, the Strong One, for each arduous deed.	<i>purohitah</i> = placed in the front; <i>karmane</i> = by deeds; Indra is at the forefront (<i>purohitah</i>) by means of fierce (<i>ugra</i>) deeds (<i>karmane</i> = instrumental case).
10:80:1a	<i>agnih saptim vājambharam dadātyagnirviiram shrutyamkarmanisthām; agnii rodasii vi carat samañjagnagnirnāriim viirakuksim purandhim</i>	Agni bestows the fleet prize-winning courser: Agni, the hero famed and firm in duty. Agni pervades and decks the earth and heaven, and fills the fruitful dame who teems with heroes.	Agni is praised for being famous (<i>shrutya</i> -“heard”) and firm (<i>sthāma</i>) in his work or work (<i>karmani</i>). The word is singular, in the locative case.

Here we see then, that “karma” has a meaning apart from samsara, which is as it should be since the Rig Veda does not express a belief in samsara as a set of rebirths. Crucial for our purposes here is the fact that this non-samsara meaning of “karma” as simply “action” or “duty” continues through all of the later periods of Hindu literature as well. That is to say, karma-as-duty does not get replaced by karma-as-generating-samsara, but the new term exists right along with the older notion.

Here are three quotations from the Code of Manu:[7]

LM	Sanskrit	Bühler Translation[8]	Analysis
1:21	<i>sarveshām tu sa nāmāni karmāni ca pradhak pradhak; vedashabdebhya eva-adau pradhak samsdhāsh ca nirmam</i>	1.21. But in the beginning he assigned their several names, actions, and conditions to all (created beings), even according to the words of the Veda	<i>karmāni</i> are actions or duties assigned by Brahman.
1:26	<i>karmanū ca vivekardha dharma adharmau vyaveccayat; dvandvair ayojayc ca imāh suravaduhravādidbhim prajam.</i>	1.26. Moreover, in order to distinguish actions, he separated merit from demerit, and he caused the creatures to be affected by the pairs (of opposites), such as pain and pleasure.	Now note that an action (a <i>ka</i>) can be correct (<i>dharma</i>) or incorrect (<i>adharma</i>), and consequences follow. [We return to this verse later in this paper.]
1:30	<i>yadā rtu lingānyrtavah svayam; eva rtuparye; svāni</i>	1.30. As at the change of the seasons each season of its own accord assumes its distinctive	Here we come to the idea that actions or duties (<i>karmāni</i>) of

	<i>svānybhipadyante tadā karmāni dehinah</i>	marks, even so corporeal beings (resume in new births) their (appointed) course of action.	being are designated for it at the outset of its life.
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So then, how does karma, the concept of action, turn into the concept of cause and effect? The key is that the actions (*karmāni*) begin to be seen as causes that, regardless of other outcomes, will also always produce certain unavoidable effects. And, if that is so, it makes sense to introduce another general category, namely exactly those consequences of actions that will invariably follow upon our deeds. Thus, in contemporary Western philosophical parlance, actions can have contingent consequences and necessary consequences. This further category of necessary consequences does, indeed, arise in the development of Hinduism. In the Bhagavad Gita, for example, there are frequent references to the fruit of karma (*karmaphala*), the certain effects of karma.

BG	Sanskrit	Sargeant Translation[9]	Analysis
2.43	<i>kāmātmānah svargaparā janmakarmaphalapradām kriyāvishesabahulām bhogaishvaryagatim prati</i>	Full of desires, intent on heaven, they offer rebirth as the fruit of action, and are addicted to many specific rites aimed at the goal of enjoyment and power.	<i>janma</i> = rebirth; <i>karmaphala</i> = fruit of action; <i>pradām</i> = offering. These terms are all nouns in the accusative case, and they are parallel to each other. In short the fruit of action is rebirth.

Now, those who know a little bit about the Gita are aware of its fundamental message, namely that people should not to work for the fruit of their karma, but to focus on Krishna himself. Why should that be the case? It is so because, as we see in the above quotation already, good deeds as well as evil ones bring about the consequence of samsara.

Everyone is familiar with the notion that as long as you do evil deeds, you will suffer seemingly endless reincarnations. Thus Krishna declares:

BG	Sanskrit	Sargeant Translation	Analysis
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16:19	<i>kāmātmānah svargaparā janmakarmaphalapradām kriyāvishesabahulām bhogaishvaryagamim prati</i>	Those cruel haters, the worst of men, I constantly hurl into the womb of demons in the cycles of rebirth.	As a sidelight, even though karma is usually portrayed as automatic and impersonal, here Krishna presents himself as the enforcer.
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However, good deeds may not result in as much immediate suffering, but they only prolong the agony.

BG 9:20-21	<i>traividya māṃ somapāh puutapāpā yajnair istvā svargatim prārthayante te punyam āsādyā surendralokam ashnanti divyān divi devabhogān. te tam bhuktvā svargalokam vishālam ksiine punye martyalokam vishanti evam trayiidharmam anuprapannā gatāgatam kāmakāmā labhante</i>	Those who know the three Vedas[10], the soma drinkers, those whose evils are cleansed, worship Me with sacrifices and seek to go to heaven. They, attaining the pure world of the Lord of the gods, enjoy in heaven the gods' celestial pleasures. Having enjoyed the vast world of heaven, they enter the world of mortals when their merit is exhausted, thus conforming to the law of the three Vedas, desiring enjoyments, they obtain the state of going and returning.	Nevertheless, even though good works may have better temporary consequences, even a stay in heaven, they will not get a person out of samsara.
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But do not for a moment think that you can trick your way out of the dilemma by simply doing nothing:

3:4a	<i>na karmanām anārambhān naiskarmyam purusoshnute na ca samnyasanād eva siddhim samadhigacchati</i>	Not by abstention from actions does a man attain the state beyond karma.	Finally, lest one think that the solution is not to perform any actions at all, such a sham maneuver would not stop the cycle of rebirths either.
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If you do evil, you will be reborn; if you do good you will be reborn; if you do neither you will still be reborn. Now, it would be instructive to follow the Gita for its proposal for an escape from samsara,

namely devotion to Krishna, but this attempted solution is not the focus of this paper.[11] My point is that if even good actions and no actions at all have roughly the same results as evil actions, then karma, even though a gigantic obstacle, is nothing like sin in this respect. The word “sin,” after all, is usually reserved for something evil. That fact is the reason, then, why karma and sin are not equivalent.

Words and Concepts for Sin in Hinduism

It would be tempting at this point to declare that since karma is not really sin, there is no “real sin” in Hinduism, as some writers have done. Robert Hume writes,

In Hinduism there is no real sin. Lamentable philosophic ignorance (*avidya*) and practical violation of caste rules are defects which will entail continued reincarnation. However, all apparent evils are overcome by immersion of oneself in the non-moral Brahma (*sic*) and by compliance with hereditary social conventions.[12]

But this is not right either. Even if Hume had phrased his observation with more sensitivity toward the diversity within Hinduism, he would still be wrong in saying that Hinduism has no “real sin.” Hume only recognizes “lamentable philosophic ignorance (*avidya*) and practical violation of caste rules,” which he considers to be “defects” only.[13] This judgment is very difficult to sustain in light of the reality of Hindu thought.

I have already speculated why this “karma-or-nothing” attitude seems to have become so deeply ingrained in Western depictions of Hinduism. Certain Eastern depictions of Hinduism undoubtedly bear at least partial responsibility, as they attempt to make a contrast between Christianity, which is seen depicted as intolerant and condemnatory, in contrast to Hinduism, which allegedly does not judge your actions.[14] So, let us take a look at some of the words and concepts that really do mean “sin” within a Hindu context. Remember as we go along that the question is not how important they are, but whether they exist in a substantial, non-trivial way, and of that there should be no question.[15]

A. Pāpa

It would be downright silly to expect any one word to carry only one specific meaning. The four terms we are looking at in this paper all have wide-ranging applications and overlap frequently. Among them, *pāpa* is perhaps the most frequently used and most obvious general Sanskrit term for “sin.” It appears to be the least technical, referring essentially to any evil act, whether one wants to place it in the context of religious transgression or just plain immoral, hurtful actions. Look at the following three quotations from the Gita:

BG	Sanskrit	Sargeant Translation	Analysis
1:39	<i>katham na jneyam asmābhiḥ pāpād asmān nivartitum</i>	Why should we not know enough to turn back from this evil?	Arjuna is calling the making war on his relative an evil.
1:36	<i>nihatya dhārtarāstrān nah kā priītiḥ syājanārdana</i>	Evil thus should cling to us having killed these aggressors.	Arjuna is referring to the action as a kind of

	<i>pāpam evāshrayed asmān hatvaitān ātatāyinaḥ</i>		
2:33	<i>tataḥ svadharmam kiirtim ca hitvā pāpam avāpsyasi</i>	Thereupon, having avoided your own duty and glory, you shall incur evil.	Now Krishna is using “p” to refer to the karmic consequences of Arjuna’s avoiding his

Thus we see that “pāpa” can refer to an evil action, the evil that happens to a person in this life because of an evil action, and the bad karma a person may incur because of an evil action. Vyasa, the mythical collector of the Vedas and fountainhead of Vedanta, is supposed to have summarized all Vedic truth by saying:

<i>Paropakāra punyāya, pāpāya parapeedanam.</i> ^[16]	“To do good to others is merit; to harm others is sin.”	“punyāya” and “pāpāya” are the dative cases of “merit” and “sin” respectively.
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B. Enas

As far as I can tell, *enas* is a term that is more likely to be associated with specifically religious violations than *pāpa*. One example can suffice here because, even though all words, including *enas*, have shades of meaning, the meaning of *enas* as “sin,” “violation,” or “trespass” is quite dominant.

RV	Sanskrit	Griffith Translation	Analysis
4:12:5	<i>mahash cid agna enaso abhiika uurvād devānām uta martyānām</i>	Even in the presence of great sin, O Agni, free us from prison of the Gods or mortals.	<i>enaso</i> =locative of <i>en</i> sin, at sin”

C. Klesha

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the meaning of *klesha* as “sin” is clearly secondary. Its primary range of meanings includes such notions as “toil,” “trouble,” “difficulty,” “hindrance,” “obstacle,” possibly even “pain” in the sense of the pain engendered by hard work, though there is a stronger word “*duhkha*” for more intense agony.

This is also the only way in which *klesha* appears in the Bhagavad Gita.

BG	Sanskrit	Sargeant Translation	Analysis
12:5	<i>kleshodhikataras tesām avyaktāsaktacetāsām avyaktā hi gatir duhkham dehavadbhir avāpyate</i>	The trouble of those whose minds are fixed on the unmanifest is greater, for the goal of the unmanifest is attained with difficulty by embodied beings.	<i>Klesha</i> appears in the first line; the second line uses the much stronger <i>duhkha</i> .
18:8	<i>duhkham ity eva yat karma kāyakleshabhayāt tyajet sa krtvā rājasam tyāgam naiva tyāgaphalam labhet</i>	One who abandons action merely because it is difficult, or because of fear of bodily suffering, performs rajastic[17] renunciation. He does not obtain the fruit of that renunciation.	Note that again <i>duhkham</i> and <i>klesha</i> are linked. Note also the appearance of <i>karma</i> in the earlier sense as an action.

Nevertheless, *klesha* also has a secondary meaning that places it into the context of “sin.” When I say “secondary,” I do not mean to imply that it is less important, only that linguistically this meaning of the word is derived from the earlier meaning. Conceptually, it plays a crucial role in many forms of Hinduism. *Klesha* in this context still means “hindrance” or “obstacle,” but now we are talking about personal mindsets and attitudes that interfere with the attainment of liberation.

The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali[18] uses the term extensively.

YSP	Sanskrit	BonGiovanni[19] Translation	Analysis
1:24	<i>klesha karma vipākāshayair aparāmstah purusha vishesa ishvarah</i>	God is a particular yet universal indweller, untouched by afflictions, actions, impressions and their results.[20]	Ishvara, the Lord of Yoga is not hindered by <i>klesha</i> (among other things). The point of Yoga is to focus on Ishvara and thus to escape bondage to the physical world.
2:2	<i>samādhi bhāvanārthah klesha tanuu karanārthash ca</i>	This discipline is practised for the purpose of acquiring fixity of mind on the Lord, free from all impurities and agitations, or on One's Own Reality, and for attenuating the afflictions	Contrary to popular misrepresentations, Yoga does not bring body and soul together, but divorces them.
2:3	<i>avidyāsmītā rāga dveshābhīniveshāh kleshāh</i>	The five afflictions are ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and the desire to cling to life	The <i>kleshas</i> function similarly to “original sin” in the sense that they are a given hindrance from which

			one must liberate himself.
2:12	<i>klesha muulah karmāshayo drshtādrshṭa janma vedaniiyah</i>	The impressions of works have their roots in afflictions and arise as experience in the present and the future births	We can reckon the kleshas also among the <i>karmaphalani</i> , the fruits of karma
4:28	<i>hānam eshām kleshavad uktam</i>	The removal of the habitual thought patterns is similar to that of the afflictions already described	The kleshas also have a noetic dimension.
4:30	<i>tatah klesha karma nivrttih</i>	From this there follows freedom from cause and effect and afflictions	Freedom from karma and freedom from kleshas are simultaneous.

D. Adharma

Let us return to one of the verses of the Law of Manu that we mentioned above.

LM	Sanskrit	Translation	Analysis
1:26	<i>karmanā ca vivekardha dharmā adharmau vyaveccayāt; dvandvair ayojayc ca imāh suravaduhravādidbhim prajam.</i>	1.26. Moreover, in order to distinguish actions, he separated merit from demerit, and he caused the creatures to be affected by the pairs (of opposites), such as pain and pleasure.	Actions are either in the absolute way of the <i>(dharma)</i> , or opposite <i>(adharma)</i> . These two in turn will affect further and reactions.

Hinduism is all about following the dharma. The dharma is personal, religious, societal, and cultural. It prescribes proper deportment, worship, rules of interaction, marriage, occupation, and the caste system, to mention just a few of its all-pervasive dimensions. Adharma refers to anything that violates the Hindu way of life, as it were. It absorbs the three previous concepts, while adding cultural infractions. Thus, evil and immorality are adharma, but so is violating social customs along the line of “this just isn’t done.” As a brief example, consider the rules of marriage. The proper ceremony is to be done by a Brahmin priest with the sacred fire in a complex ritual. It would be adharma for two persons of different castes to marry. However, if two people of the same caste go off privately and take their vows in the presence of a deity, they are within the dharma, even if their action is considered undesirable.

Conclusion

Let me reiterate that the main obstacle in Hinduism is karma and its fruits. However, this fact does not mean that karma is the same thing as sin. In fact, we have now seen that there are separate words and concepts for sin, and these sins will directly influence a person's karma.

Now if there is a lesson in all of this, it is that--all polemic to the contrary--Hindus cannot dispense with right and wrong any more than any other people can. Some people may find the idea of a religion without sin attractive, but just because someone may say that this is the case for Hinduism doesn't make it so. Hinduism recognizes the fact that humans fall short of objective standards, and that should not surprise us.

They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them. Romans 2:15

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Notes

[1] Please see my *A Tapestry of Faiths: Common Threads Among the World's Religions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009) for a larger study of this issue.

[2] Dean C. Halverson, *Compact Guide to World Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), p. 90.

[3] See, for example, George Thundiparambil, "The Source of Bias against Hinduism"
URL: http://www.indiacause.com/columns/OL_030526.htm

[4] The Rig Veda in Sanskrit, URL: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/index.htm>

[5] Rig Veda, trans. by Ralph Griffith, 1896. URL: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/index.htm>

[6] In Sanskrit, the *as* ending is frequently changed into *o* as a part of the process of producing fluidity in sound, depending on the initial consonant of the subsequent word.

[7] *Manu Smriti—Sanskrit Text with English Translation.* URL: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/7189037/Manu-Smriti-Sanskrit-Text-With-English-Translation>.

[8] The English translations are from George Bühler, *The Laws of Manu in Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 25. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm>

[9] All of the translations from the Bhagavad Gita come from Winthrop Sargeant, tr., *The Bhagavad Gita* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994).

[10] There are, of course, four Vedas. However, the fourth Veda, the Atharva Veda, is considered to be inferior, consisting to a great extent of magic spells. This pattern of 3+1 also applies to the caste system, where the top three castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishiyas) are considered to be superior to the fourth, the Shudras.

[11] I touch on this point in a different paper, which conceptually follows this one. "Words for Grace in Hinduism." Published online at <http://www.isca-apologetics.org/sites/default/files/papers/Jared%20Martinez/Corduan-WordsForGraceInHinduism.pdf>

[12] Robert E. Hume, *The World's Living Religions*, (New York: Scribner's, 1959), p. 40.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Thus, for example, George Thundiparambil states, "Essentially, there is no 'sin' included in Hinduism, let alone an 'original sin'. It is natural for humans to make mistakes that have a potential to harm other beings (not just humans), which are mentioned as *pāpa-karma*. But mistakes are no 'sins' and occur due to ignorance. But once the ignorance is removed, the mistake doesn't repeat. On the other hand, an act of "charity" (such as the 'Lord God's' command) with an ulterior motive is a misdemeanor, because that is definitely unnatural, and it is what we in the civilized world call a 'fraud'. Acts qualify according to the motivation." Thundiparambil, "The Source of Bias against Hinduism."

URL: http://www.indiacause.com/columns/OL_030526.htm Nevertheless, as with all religious claims, we profit from examining whether this theoretical claim is genuinely true for the religion as it is usually practiced, and I dare say that it is not.

[15] Please keep in mind that English translations of Hindu texts are not necessarily reliable in undertaking this kind of investigation. They may use "sin" where it does not literally belong, or they may avoid the term where it clearly appears in the original. The venerable translations of the 19th century, e.g. the 50-volume *Sacred Books of the East*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879-1910) often intentionally copied Christian phraseology, and more recent translations may be slanted one way or the other.

[16] Even though this statement is quoted widely, it does not seem to be attached to one specific written work.

[17] "*Rajas*" refers to one of the three characteristics of human beings, the three *gunas*. Its nature is active and energetic, and it is opposed by *tamas*, darkness and dullness. The third *guna* is *sattva*, balanced and composed being.

[18] *Yoga Sutras of Maharshi Patanjali* (Fairfield, Iowa: Maharishi University of Management Press, 1998).

[19] Translations by BonGiovanni. URL: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/yogasutr.htm>

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