

Iddhis: Powers Obtained from Yogic Discipline

By Benjamin Telushkin

Iddhi, the powers of Yogic discipline, is the result of one's development of their higher mind. Both the early Buddhist texts and Patanjali's Yoga Sutra warn the master against taking advantage of these abilities. The achievement of obtaining such powers bears conflict with the mentality underlying how one develops these powers. Even so, each school of thought highlights the great potential held by these powers. What is the purpose of praising an ability that one simultaneously warns against self-acknowledging? The Pali Canon sees these powers as ultimately beneficial to those ignorant of worldly truths. The Yoga Sutra also describes how the definition underlying these abilities presumes one has sacrificed desire for any self-benefit. This indicates a lack of interest to use these powers for an ego he or she has already transcended. Even if both schools hold to these same ideals, the Yoga Sutra still goes further in its explanation of the specific powers more than the Pali cannon. To Patanjali, the author of the Yoga Sutra, these abilities still hold importance even if they are not able to be misused, and offer power over physical reality, whereas the Pali cannon deemphasizes their specific nature of *Iddhi* and places all the importance on the role they offer to help others who are still under the spell of material appearance, and distinguishes it from physicality altogether.

The ultimate goal of possessing *iddhi* is tackled in the Samannaphala Sutra of the Pali Canon, where it describes the many achievements one gains and how these result from unifying our ego with others. In the Sutra's words, these *iddhis* are "the various manifestations of supernatural power: from being one, he becomes many, and having been many he becomes one; he appears and disappears; he goes without obstruction through a wall, a rampart, a mountain as if through space."¹ The sutra goes on into more details of the ability one possesses to go from any space on earth to another far away. The explanation poses an interesting interpretation of cause and effect. If one loses their ego and unifies into oneness they then can travel into the many manifestations stemming from the shared oneness. The oneness one achieves is a common source that all physical manifestations would stem back to. By reaching this state, one then can reapply their non-ego perception to any physical being, or any ego, which is no longer other than their own ego but a child of the oneness they recognize. This is the primary ability the Samannaphala Sutra describes, "With his mind thus composed... he direct and inclines it to the knowledge that encompasses the mind of others... He knows a mind with hate... a mind free of hate. He knows... a deluded mind... an undeluded mind. He knows... a constricted mind... a scattered mind."² The text gives numerous comparable examples of how this higher mind can distinguish the opposing state of mind of others. The example given further in the sutra is that the mind is like someone on top of a mountain. From their height they can see farther than anyone who lives on land.³ What *iddhi* accomplishes is the same height in a spiritual sense. The abilities of a higher mind gives one the vision into the realities of other people beyond their ego's limitation. To us, our own ego is differentiated from other egos we witness. Without this possession all other egos are as close to us as our own is before we detached from it. Ironically, detaching with what constitutes our self grants us sight into the realities constituting all other beings; a power tied into the powers of *iddhi*.

This close tie given by the Samannaphala sutra explains the limited description or emphasis placed on the content of the supernatural powers in the Pali Canon. It describes how a powerful mind can “walk on water, without sinking, as if it were earth,”⁴ and other examples of supernatural powers. All the examples in the Samannaphala sutra seem to suggest that when one transcends the limits of the ego, their powers enable them to be in any place at any time. Further examples include mind-reading, knowledge of one’s future and previous lives and so on.⁵ The Pali canon does not detail abilities as specifically as Patanjali, and the domain of their powers does not expand outside the realm of escaping one’s ego. The abilities pose the connection between ego transcendence and astral travel or celestial access, but beyond this connection details are not further exemplified. This could be connected to master of the Buddhist doctrine himself, Buddha, who practices his *iddhi* only to aid those on earth still blinded by worldly illusions. *Iddhi* gives one the power to recognize where this comprehension is lacking and with this knowledge one must bring truth to the ignorant.⁶ It seems the main purpose of explaining *iddhi* is to highlight a realm beyond the physical, a realm separate from the physical. Once there, one does not exercise the abilities for its own sake but only, like the Buddha, to aid others disillusioned in the physical world.

The Yoga Sutra ties the very same two things, loss of ego with possession of *Iddhi*, yet follows this process with describing powers over the physical realm. The Yoga Sutra writes, “From perfect discipline of the gross, intrinsic, subtle, relational, and purposive aspects of the elements of matter, one attains mastery over them. The extraordinary powers appear, such as the power to be as small as an atom, as well as bodily perfection and immunity from the constraints of matter.”⁷ The notion posed here is that freedom from the constraints of matter gives one power over matter, not away from matter. So powers such as growing to any size or shrinking to as small as an atom still reside in the realm of physicality but surpasses the limits posed by this very same reality. The purpose therefore is not strictly to suggest a master can transcend physical boundaries but the Yoga Sutra also hints that when doing so the master can alter the content of the physical realm while transcending these boundaries.

The source of obtaining this ability is the same for both traditions, connected to one’s comprehension of unity and loss of attachment to self identification. The Yoga Sutra goes on to explain how this power is related to how “one acquires quickness of mind, perception without the aid of the senses.”⁸ The perception one possesses transcends the process of our five senses. The world perceived is not one of sight, sound, taste, touch or smell. Even if it transcends these limits it still perceives the same realm, targeting the reality that before was perceived with these senses. In Millers commentary she notes how this mastery stems from the ability to distinguish material nature, *sattva-guna* from the spirit, *purusa*.⁹ The implication then becomes that the world this mind experiences is one of the spirit, a deeper representation of its reality, but still stemming from the world around us. When comparing this notion with the image in the Samannaphala Sutra where one’s being travels from the ends of the earths, surpassing lifetimes, we see an emphasis on transcending time and space, a constraint beyond any form found in the physical world. The higher mind, after sacrificing attachment to the ego, no longer dwells to concern itself with any aspect still stuck to the physical world. The *iddhi* posed in the Yoga Sutra

however still regards the physical realm, but its spiritual dimension, a higher dimension directed at the same place but reflective of a higher sphere that the Pali Canon strictly focuses upon. It also is more concerned with developing the abilities they are able to do as if the ability to do so permits one to exercise their powers. For the Pali Canon these abilities are results of spiritual achievement and practicing the implications to their full effect is not suggested or described.

Since the *iddhi* in the Pali Canon describes a state completely separated from the physical realm its powers reflect attributes without comparison to physical description. One possesses the skill to access any position in space but their actions afterwards are not described or suggested. Like exemplified with Buddha, he used his powers only to show others the nature of reality they did not yet comprehend, but he did not use *iddhi* for its own sake. This is why the specifics of the qualities of these powers are less emphasized in the Buddhist tradition and their purposes solely regard the ability to transcend time and space and all other material notions. The Yoga Sutra however emphasizes the power one gains over the material world and thus the *iddhi* described regard the physical world. They also express transcendence beyond time and space such as the ability to shrink or grow to any size yet their manifestation still focuses on material representation. Since they have a greater link to physicality they are also expressed in greater detail and more numerous because of their connection with physicality. This difference between the two does not change the more important similarity in both concepts. Even if the Yoga Sutra emphasizes master over the material world it still does so with the knowledge that one gains this *iddhi* by detaching from their ego. The Pali Canon emphasizes the same. The results both apply to other egos since by one losing attachment to their distinctive self they gain knowledge of all other selves. The inherent concept is that by returning to the oneness that stems all manifestation, one gains greater knowledge of the multiplicity that results from the common oneness. Even if the Yoga Sutra gives description of exercising these powers, the core truth remains the same; that these abilities stem from detaching from the ego and accessing the singularity that permeates the world.

Bibliography

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¹ Sarah Shaw, *Buddhist Meditation: An anthology of texts from the Pali canon* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 72.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

³ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷ Miller, Barbara, *Yoga: Discipline and Freedom. The Yoga Sutra Attributed to Patanjali* New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 70

⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.