

The Concept of Yoga in Ancient Indian Philosophical Thought

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Abstract

Samkhya and Yoga are considered to be two of the many schools of philosophy that originated over the centuries. They had common roots in the non-Vedic cultures and traditions of India. The orthodox Hindu philosophies of Samkhya, Yoga, Vedanta, Nyaya as well as the non-orthodox, nastika systems of Lokayata, Jainism and Buddhism can all be seen as representing one stream of spiritual exercise in ancient India, in contrast to the bhakti traditions and Vedic ritualism which were also prevalent at the same time. The Upanishadic Jnana traditions and Vedic rituals can be seen assimilated in the philosophy of jnanamarg, bhaktimarga and karmamarga outlined in the Bhagavadgita. The common aims of all the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy are to describe the nature of the external world and its relationship to the individual, to discuss the ultimate reality or brahman and the goal of life and means for attaining this goal. In this attempt, they divide the study into two categories- the study of manifest reality and unmanifest reality. Yoga philosophy is one of the six major orthodox schools of Hinduism. Sanskrit literature often refers to the Yoga school of Hinduism simply as Yoga. It is closely related to the Samkhya school. The works of the Yoga school with the aim of physical, mental and spiritual betterment have greatly influenced all other subsequent schools of Indian philosophy. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali is one of the key texts of the Yoga school.

Key Words: Samkhya, Yoga, moksha, Yoga Sutras, Patanjali, Astanga Yoga, Raja Yoga, Kriya Yoga, Karma Yoga, Asana, Posture, Metaphysics, knowledge, mind, liberation.

Yoga is the most practical school of Indian philosophy and it discusses the nature of mind, its modifications, hurdles to growth and the method for attaining the ultimate goal of life- kaivalya or moksha. The Yoga Sutras incorporated the teachings of many other Indian philosophical systems prevalent at the time. The word Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root 'yuj', which means 'to unite'. It is one of the practical disciplines for knowing the self. Terminologically, the word Yoga implies 'practice of something with complete involvement' and hence, various schools of Yoga have emerged as Indian philosophical traditions. They include: Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, Kundalini Yoga etc. The highly practical Yoga system provides a methodology for expanding one's individual consciousness to universal consciousness. Historically, for several centuries, the Indian yoga school was dominated by various other Yoga texts and later, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali came to be regarded as one of the authoritative texts. In the 20th century, the western practitioners of yoga elevated the Patanjala Yoga Sutras to a status it never knew previously. The various texts and philosophies that dominate the Yoga school of thought include: The Bhagavadgita, Yajnavalkya Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Tantric Yoga, Mantra Yoga, Pasupata Yoga etc.

Patanjala Yoga Sutra

Patanjali was the first muni (sage) to systematize the philosophy and practice of Yoga and Patanjala Yoga was the most comprehensive school of Yoga. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are 196 Indian sutras

(aphorisms). They were compiled prior to 400 B. C. by Sage Patanjali, taking materials from older traditions. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali was one of the most translated ancient Indian texts. It has been translated into about forty Indian languages and two non-Indian languages- Old Javanese (Central Java Island) and Arabic. Among the various commentaries on the text, Vyasa's is being considered as the most ancient and extensive. The text remained in obscurity for nearly 700 years, i.e., from the 12th to 19th century, and gained popularity and momentum in late 19th century due to the efforts of Swami Vivekananda, the Theosophical Society and others. It gained prominence again in the 20th century. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali is a foundational text of the classical Yoga philosophy of Hinduism.

The text Yoga Sutra has been attributed to the sage Patanjali. However, much confusion surrounds Patanjali, because the name is also credited to be the author of the classic text on Sanskrit grammar named Mahabhasya. Yet the two works are completely different in subject matter. Similarly, there is no common opinion among the authors about the exact date of the text. While some authors fix the date to be about 400 B. C., whereas others argue that "a number of scholars have dated the Yoga Sutras as late as the fourth or fifth century B.C, but all such arguments are problematic". M. Desmarais states that the text may have been composed sometimes between 1st century B.C. and 3rd century A.C. Phillip Maas, in his A Concise Historiography of Classical Yoga Philosophy, argues that Patanjali's composition was entitled as Patanjaliyogasutra and consisted of both sutras and bhasyas. Sutras were written by Patanjali and bhasyas were later incorporated by Vyasa. Hence, the compilation of Patanjali's sutras and the Vyasabhasya, is called Patanjaliyogasutra.

Text of Yoga

The Yoga Sutras are a composite of various traditions. The levels of Samadhi taught in the text resemble that of Buddha. According to Feuerstein, the Yoga Sutras can be divided into two different parts:

- a) Astanga Yoga (Eight Limbs Yoga) (Raja Yoga) and
- b) Action Yoga (Kriya Yoga or Karma Yoga)

The Kriya yoga part is contained in chapter 1, 2 (1-27 sutras), 3 and chapter 4. The 'eight limb yoga' is described in chapter 2 (sutra 28-55) and chapter 3 (sutra 3 and 54). Patanjali divided his Yoga Sutras into four chapters or books (pada), containing in all 196 aphorisms, divided as follows:

- a) Samadhi Pada (51 sutras): It refers to a blissful state where the yogi is absorbed into the One i. e. kaivalya. The author describes yoga and then the nature and the means to attaining samadhi. This chapter contains the famous definitional verse: Yogas citta-vritti- nirodhah that is 'Yoga is restraining the mind-stuff (citta) from taking various forms (vrittis)'.
- b) Sadhana Pada (55 sutras): Sadhana means 'practice' or 'discipline'. Here the author outlines two forms of Yoga: Kriya Yoga (Action Yoga) and Ashtanga Yoga.
- c) Vibhuti Pada (56 sutras): Vibhuti means 'power' or 'manifestation'. 'supra-normal powers' or siddhi can be acquired by the practice of yoga. It is considered as a tool of achieving various perfections or siddhis. The temptation of acquiring supra-normal powers should be avoided. The purpose of using samadhi is not to gain siddhis but to achieve kaivalya (liberation). Siddhis are but distractions from kaivalya and hence, discouraged. Siddhis are but maya or illusion.

- d) Kaivalya Pada (34 sutras): Literally it means 'isolation', or emancipation or liberation. It is used

interchangeably with moksha or liberation, which is the goal of yoga. The kaivalya pada describes the process of liberation. To attain the ultimate goal of life by transcending all barriers, the Yoga philosophy of Patanjali proposes two methods, they are as follows:

Kriya Yoga or Action Yoga

Kriya or Karma means action, work or deed. It also refers to the spiritual principle of cause and effect. The intent or action of an individual is called cause and the influence that it makes on the future of that individual is called effect. Good intent and good deed contribute to good karma and future happiness, while bad intent and bad deed contribute to bad karma and future suffering. Karma is closely associated with the idea of rebirth. Karma in the present affects one's future in the current life, as well as the nature and quality of future lives- one's samsara. Kriya Yoga, which means the yoga of purification, is a three-fold discipline composed of the practices of:

- a) Austerity: Practicing choice or control in selecting actions that will be helpful in attaining liberation. The greatest of all austerities is to perform one's duty without expecting for fruits.
- b) Study of the Scriptures: It includes self-study and japa or reciting mantra, besides believing in the teachings of authoritative scriptures.
- c) Surrender to God: Performing one's action for the sake of God or selfless duty or nishkama karma.

Astanga Yoga or Eightfold (Limbs) Paths of Yoga

Realization of the highest state requires a one-pointed and well controlled mind free from all worldly desires. Attachment to worldly objects is the main cause which produces all the modifications of the mind. Therefore, Yoga teaches how one can develop self-control over one's body, desires, emotions, thoughts, and external activities that perturbs mind. Such control over mind and body replaces imperfections with virtues and make up a code of social and moral laws that regulates one's relationships with others. The eight components of this system are:

Yamas or Five Restraints

Yamas are ethical rules. They are designed to calm one's relationship with oneself and others. Each of the above self-restraints help in the personal growth of an individual. The five yamas listed by Patanjali in Yoga sutra are:

- a) Ahimsa: Nonviolence, non-harming other living beings. It is not merely not doing physical violence but also practicing non-violence in thought, speech and action. The virtue of non-violence and non-injury to others leads to the abandonment of enmity, a state that leads the yogi to the perfection of inner and outer amity with everyone and everything.
- b) Satya: Non-lying, truthfulness or non-falsehood. One should be truthful to oneself and to others in thought, speech and action.
- c) Asteya: Non-stealing. Practicing of non-stealing mentally, verbally and physically.
- d) Brahmacharya: Chastity or control over senses. One who dwells in brahman is called brahmachari. It is selectively performing only those activities that are helpful in achieving the highest goal of life.
- e) Aparigraha: Non-possessiveness. It is an inward attitude. It is not non-possession of anything. It only means one should not be attached to what he has.

Niyamas or Five Observances

The five niyamas regulate one's habits, behaviour and observances and thus regulate the personality. Like the yamas, the niyamas also help in the personal growth of an individual. The niyamas are:

- a) Sauca: Purity, clearness of mind, speech and body. It refers to both physical and mental purity.
- b) Santosa: It means contentment, acceptance of others, acceptance of one's circumstances as they are or optimism for self. It is a mental state. The practice of contentment should be coordinated with selfless action.
- c) Tapas: It is persistence or perseverance or austerity. All those activities that increase spirituality in man constitute tapas.
- d) Svadhyaya: Study of scriptures such as the Vedas, listening to saints and sages, study of self, self-reflection, introspection of self's thoughts, speeches and actions.
- e) Isvara Pranidhana: Contemplation of the Isvara or God or supreme being, brahman. It means surrender to the true self or ultimate reality.

Asana or Posture

An asana is what is steady and pleasant. Motionless and agreeable form (of staying) is asana (yoga posture). Asana is thus a posture that one can hold for a period of time, staying relaxed, steady, comfortable and motionless. Patanjali does not list any specific asana, except stating, "posture one can hold with comfort and motionlessness". The posture that causes pain or restlessness is not a yogic posture. The postures are broadly divided into two major categories:

- a) Postures of physical well-being or cultural poses, and
- b) Postures for meditation or meditative poses

The commentators on Patanjali Sutras state only few postures that are helpful in meditation, but later yoga schools developed, described and commented on numerous postures. Vyasa, for example, in his Bhasya suggests 12 asanas including padmasana. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika describes 84 asanas, stating four of these as most important: padmasana (lotus pose), sukhasana (easy pose), svastikasana (auspicious pose), and siddhasana (accomplished pose). The Gheranda Samhita, (is a Sanskrit text of Yoga in Hinduism. It is one of the three classic texts of Hatha Yoga- the other two being the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Shiva Samhita) discussed 32 asanas, while Svatantra describes 15 asanas.

Pranayama or Control of the Vital Forces

Pranayama is made out of two Sanskrit words 'prana' meaning breath and 'ayama' means restraining, extending, stretching etc. Pranayama is the practice of consciously regulating breath that is inhalation and exhalation. This is done in several ways, inhaling and then suspending exhalation for a period, exhaling and then suspending inhalation for a period, slowing the inhalation and exhalation, consciously changing the time/length of breath (deep, short breathing). Patanjali lists four kinds of pranayama: external or bahyavrtti, internal or abhyantaravrtti, Intermediate or bahya-bhyantara-visayaksepi, and chaturta.

Yoga texts say that prana is the creator of all substances and the basis of all functions. The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad says that the thread of prana runs through and holds together the whole universe. This thread is the cause of the creation, sustenance and destruction of all substances in the world. Depending

on its function in different organs, prana is divided into ten types. They are prana, apana, samana, udana, vyana, naga, kurma, krkala, devadatta and dhananjaya. Of these ten, the first five is the most important.

- a) Prana: It means that which draws in or takes in. The life force that receives the fresh cosmic vitality from the atmosphere activating lungs, nostrils etc. is called prana. As long as prana is in its normal state, all the organs function properly. Yogic texts say, “one who knows prana knows the Veda’s highest knowledge”, and one of the Upanisads proclaim that prana is brahman.
- b) Apana: It is the excretory vital force. Expulsive movements occurring in the bowels, uterus etc. and all other kinds of excretions are due to the function of apana.
- c) Samana: It is the digestive and assimilating force that makes food suitable for absorption and then assimilates it. This vital force is seen in the entire body, not just in the digestive system.
- d) Udana: It means energy that uplifts. All physical activities that require effort and strength depend on this vital force.
- e) Vyana: It is the contractile vital force. It pervades the whole body and governs the process of relaxing and contracting the voluntary and involuntary muscles. The ears, eyes, neck, nose, ankles and throat are said to be the main centers of this vital force in the body.

Pratyahara or Withdrawal of the Senses

Pratyahara is a process of withdrawing or controlling of the senses that is, one's thoughts from external objects, things, person, situation. In outward activities the mind contacts external objects through the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Pratyahara is turning one's attention to one's true self, one's inner world, experiencing and examining self. It is not consciously closing one's eyes to the sensory world; it is consciously closing one's mind processes to the sensory world. Pratyahara empowers one to stop being controlled by the external world, make one's attention to seek self-knowledge and experience the freedom innate in one's inner world. Vyasa says, when the senses are disconnected from their objects, they dwell in the mind, hence, withdrawal of the senses actually means withdrawal of the mind. Once the modifications of the mind are controlled, it is not necessary to make any effort to control the senses.

Dharana or Concentration

Dharana is derived from the word ‘dhr’ which means “to hold, maintain, keep”. It means concentration or fixing the mind (not sensory organ) one-pointedness. It is a process through which one withdraws the mind from all directions and concentrate on inner self. It is holding one's mind onto a particular inner state, subject or topic of one's mind. It is fixing the mind on a mantra or one's breath or an object one wants to observe, or a concept or idea in one's mind. Patanjali says concentration is an internal process that take place in the mind and is directed by the will. It is an attempt to calm down an agitating mind.

Dhyana or Meditation

Dhyana is contemplating, reflecting on whatever dharana has focused on or profound meditation. If the concentration is on one object, dhyana is observation of that object. Dhyana is integrally related to dharana, one leads to other. Dharana is a state of mind, dhyana the process of mind. Patanjali defines dhyana as the mind process, where the mind is fixed on something, and then there is “a course of uniform modification of knowledge”. Adi Shankara, in his commentary on Yoga Sutras, distinguishes dhyana from

dharana, by explaining dhyana as the yoga state when there is only the “stream of continuous thought about the object”, Dharana is focused on one object, but aware of its many aspects and ideas about the same object. Thus, in the dhyana state the mind becomes fully one-pointed, and it starts expanding into a superconscious state and finally samadhi state.

Samadhi or Spiritual Absorption

Samadhi literally means “combining with or union”. It is oneness with the subject of meditation. In the samadhi state there is no distinction between the actor of meditation, the act of meditation and the subject of meditation. It is that spiritual state when one's mind is so absorbed in whatever it is contemplating on, that the mind loses the sense of its own identity. The thinker, the thought process and the thought become one with the subject of thought. It is the highest state of peace and happiness. Samadhi is of two kinds, with and without support of an object of meditation.

- a) Samprajnata or Savikalpa or Sabija Samadhi: It means meditation with support of an object. It is further divided as savitarka (deliberation), savichara (reflection), sananda (bliss) and sasmita (I-am-ness) samadhi.
- b) Asamprajnata or Nirvikalpa or Nirbija Samadhi: It means meditation without an object, which leads to knowledge of brahman and self. According to Patanjali this is the highest state of samadhi.

The Yogic View of Mind

According to Patanjala, Yoga is the control of the modifications of the mind. Since, it is the mind that leads a person to bondage or liberation, Patanjali places great emphasis on the study of the mind and provides all the possible means to control its modifications and unfold its great power for higher attainment. Theoretically, the Yoga system is based on the same tenets as Samkhya philosophy, and it also assimilates the teachings of Vedanta. In Samkhya, the mind is categorized into three functions or parts- lower mind, ego mind and intellect mind. In Vedanta, it is four- lower, ego, intellect and citta, the storehouse of memories. In Yoga, however, the mind is studied holistically, and the term citta is used to imply all the fluctuating and changing phenomena of the mind. The mind is an evolute of prakriti, it is composed of the elements of sattva, rajas and tamas. The relative proportions of these three qualities determine the different states of citta, the mind.

Metaphysics of Yoga

The metaphysics of Patanjali is built on the same dualist foundation as the Samkhya school. The universe is conceptualized as of two realities in Samkhya Yoga schools: purusa or self or soul or atman or spark of the brahman (consciousness) and prakriti or body (matter). Jiva (a living being) is considered as a state in which purusha is bonded to prakriti in some form and combinations of various elements, senses, feelings, activity and mind. During the state of imbalance or ignorance, one of more constituents overwhelm the others, creating a form of bondage. The end of this bondage is called liberation, or moksha by both Yoga and Samkhya school of Hinduism.

Theory of Gunas

The ethical theory of Yoga school is based on yamas and niyamas, as well as elements of the guna theory of Samkhya. Patanjali adopts the theory of guna from Samkhya. Guna theory states that three gunas

are present in different proportions in all beings, and these three are sattva guna (goodness, constructive, harmonious), rajas guna (passion, active, confused), and tamas guna (darkness, destructive, chaotic). The fundamental nature of beings is a consequence of the relative proportion of these three gunas. When sattva guna predominates an individual, the qualities of lucidity, wisdom, constructiveness, harmonious, and peacefulness manifest themselves; when rajas is predominant, attachment, craving, passion- driven activity and restlessness manifest; and when tamas predominates in an individual, ignorance, delusion, destructive behaviour, lethargy, and suffering manifests. The gunas theory underpins the philosophy of mind in Yoga school of Hinduism.

Stages of Mind

The mind is described in five stages, depending on the degree of its transparency: disturbed mind (ksipta), stupefied mind (mudha), restless mind (viksipta), one-pointed mind (ekagra), and well-controlled mind (niruddha). Disturbed mind is one which is dominated by rajas and tamas qualities. Tamas guna dominates the stupefied mind and in the restless mind there is a predominance of rajas. In this state the mind runs from one object to another, resting nowhere. Hence the first three stages of mind are negative and only experiences pain and misery. They act as hurdle in the path of growth. But the next two stages are more positive, calm and peaceful. In one-pointed and well-controlled mind there is the predominance of sattva qualities, the good or light aspect of prakriti and there is no disturbance at all. When all the modifications cease and the state of stillness is acquired, individual reaches Samadhi state or liberation.

Modification of Mind

The Yoga system categorizes the modifications of mind broadly into two classes: harmless (aklista) and harmful (klista). Harmless modifications are further divided into:

- a) Valid or True cognitions: The source of valid cognition are perception, inference and authoritative texts.
- b) Memory (depending on their nature): Memory is the recall of impressions stored in the mind.

Harmful modifications are further divided into:

- a) False or Invalid cognition: It is ignorance (avidya). It is mistaking the impure for the pure, misery for happiness, body for self or atman.
- b) Verbal cognition: It is the attempt to grasp something that actually does not exist but is one's own projection.
- c) Sleep: Sleep is a modification of mind in which one's relationship with the external world is cut off.

Means of Knowledge

The Patanjali's system of Yoga, like the Samkhya School, relies on only three of the six pramanas, as the means of gaining reliable knowledge. These include pratyaksa or drstam (direct sense perception), anumana (inference), and sabda or aptavacana (verbal testimony of the sages or sastras). Unlike few other schools of Hinduism such as Advaita Vedanta, Yoga does not believe in the following three pramanas: upamana (comparison and analogy), arthapatti (postulation, deriving from circumstances) and anupalabdi (non-perception, negative or cognitive proof).

Overcoming Mind Modifications- Liberation

Yoga provides a method for overcoming the problems that human mind encounters when it comes to contact with external objects. Patanjali states that the mind and its modifications can be controlled through practice (abhyasa) and detachment (vairagya). Samkhya school suggests that jnana (knowledge) is a sufficient means to moksha, Patanjali suggests that Yoga (practice of yoga sutras) combined with knowledge is the path to moksha. Patanjali holds that ignorance is the cause of suffering in samsara. Liberation, like many other schools, is removal of ignorance, which is achieved through knowledge and self-awareness. Samadhi is the state where divine knowledge is achieved, the process of becoming aware of purusha and true self. This awareness is eternal, is moksha-the final goal in Hinduism. Patanjali begins by stating that all limbs of yoga are necessary foundation to reaching the state of self-awareness, freedom and liberation or kaivalya.

Samyama State

Patanjali uses the term samyama to describe the combined state of concentration, meditation and samadhi. Through the practice of samyama one can develop perfections or attain knowledge of purusha, prakriti and brahman or liberation. In other words, this state helps man to explore higher and higher states of consciousness in his journey of spiritualism.

The Concept of God

Patanjali accepts the existence of God. God is a perfect supreme being who is eternal and all-pervading. He is free from all karmas and unaffected by ignorance or desire. Patanjali differs from Samkhya school by incorporating the concept of a personal god (Isvara, a special self) into his Yoga philosophy. Hindu scholars such as Adi Shankara, as well as many modern scholars describe Yoga school as 'Samkhya school with God'. Patanjali's concept of Isvara functions as a guide for aiding the yogin on the path to spiritual emancipation.

Comparison between Samkhya and Yoga

The Yoga Sutras are built on a foundation of Samkhya philosophy, and are generally seen as the practice while Samkhya is the theory. The influence of Samkhya is so pervasive in the sutras that many historians have gone to the extent of denying independent categorization to Patanjali's system, preferring to refer to it as Patanjala Samkhya, similar to the position taken by the Jain writer Haribhadra in his commentary on Yoga. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras accept the Samkhya's division of the world and phenomena into twenty-five tattvas or principles, of which one is purusha meaning self or consciousness, the others being prakriti (primal nature), buddhi (intellect or will), ahamkara (ego), manas (mind), five buddhindriyas (sensory capabilities), five karmendriyas (action-capabilities) and ten elements. The second part of the sutras, the sadhana, also summarizes the Samkhya perspectives about all seen activity lying within the realm of the three gunas of sattva (illumination), rajas (passion) and tamas (lethargy).

The Yoga Sutras diverge from Samkhya by the addition of the principle of Isvara or God which is interpreted to mean that surrender to God is one way to liberation. In the Sutras, it is suggested that devotion to Isvara, is the most efficient method of achieving the goal of Yoga. Another divergence from Samkhya is that while the Samkhya holds that knowledge is the means to liberation, Patanjali's Yoga insists on the methods of concentration and active striving. The aim of Yoga is to free the individual from the clutches of

matter, and considers intellectual knowledge alone to be inadequate for the purpose- which is different from the position taken by Samkhya. However, the essential similarities between the Samkhya and Patanjali's system remained even after the addition of the Isvara principle, with Max Muller noting that "the two philosophies were in popular parlance distinguished from each other as Samkhya with and Samkhya without a Lord". The Bhagavadgita is considered to be based on this synthetic Samkhya-Yoga system.

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