

Holism in Yoga: Some Reflections on Yoga Sutra

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Abstract

Holism has emerged as a major concern among scholars of different streams of knowledge to resolve key concerns related to human nature in a cohesive manner and to prop-up inter-disciplinarity among different streams of knowledge. However, there is lack of approaches which can provide understanding of issues and concerns of current society in a holistic manner. Against this backdrop, the present paper examines attributes of holism in the objective, process, and overall theoretical model as espoused in most famous treatise of Yoga-Yoga Sutra by famous Indian seer Rishi Patanjali.

Introduction

The process of understanding of genesis of knowledge has been of prime concern in different paradigmatic traditions. How to describe and explain the world? Should we opt to reductionist course or holistic path? Recently, there has been a lot of debate about utility and relevance of knowledge produced through reductionist approach. This approach has complicated knowledge and created barriers among different streams of knowledge and also limited understanding of the world (Bradie, 2002). We are not able to weave together different inputs that we get from different theories in different disciplines. Day-by-day the knowledge is diversifying and our understanding is getting constrained (Garfinkel, 1981). For instance, we have many specialties in allopathic system which has led to depth of knowledge but with missed understanding of wider context of life about how to achieve health and generate greater happiness while living in consonance with demands of surroundings (Cmich, 2009).

In view of this backdrop, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists have raised voice for holistic understanding (Bradie, 2002). But, western understanding due to its' mind-body dichotomy has been unable to address this problem (Mellor, 1982). There has been some related search in Indian view of life. But, unfortunately, there is as such no explicit understanding of how Yoga can provide holistic understanding of world and explain different

physical and psychological processes at multiple levels of beings. Therefore, present work has ventured at creation of understanding about how Yogic model can provide deeper and wider understanding of our existence both. By inculcating understanding espoused in Yoga, there can be possibility for increased understanding of linkages between different types of phenomenon.

Holism in Objective of Yoga

Holism can be deciphered in whole of the journey of Yoga. The meaning of the word 'yoga' in itself states this holistic intention. It comes from a Sanskrit root word "yuj" that means 'to join' or 'to integrate. Thus in a general sense, yoga is meant for inculcation of integration among the different aspects of our personality, relating with our-self, our family, friends and nature while living each and every moment of our life with full absorption and in most integrated way. In transformational sense, it indicates to the experience of oneness or unity with our inner being which is characterized by ultimate truth, being and bliss (SAT, CHIT and ANAND) but not merely in a manner of a transcript of the external world which can be presupposed or assumed to be related with occupying something, that makes us experientially incomplete and limited to the subjective feelings of sorrow, insecurity, fear and separation which results into lack of experience of whole, inner peace, tranquility, wisdom. The essence drawn from the meaning of yoga is that it is intended to help human being to become aware of their whole nature.

This oneness in awareness can be achieved only by realizing unity of our phenomenal self with our true self attained after dissolving false identities fabricated by ‘*chittavrittis*’ [1.4]. Thus there is oneness in its purpose as demonstrated in its purpose to deal with these ‘*vrittis*’ as sole objective [1.2] to attain self-realization [1.3]. As stated in third sutra, the paramount aim of yoga is realization of *DRSHTTA* state of one’s being which is characterized by following key characteristics.

- It is a state of perfect equilibrium.
- It is at this state, when unity in the consciousness is experienced and perception is intuitively derived rather than being limited by past experiences [1.48-1.50].
- Awareness in its full depth about external and internal as well as of those aspects which are beyond external and internal attainability due to limitations imposed on sensory channels is achieved when a practitioner attains *DRSHTTA* state of being.

Holistic Process in Yoga

For dealing with existential fragmentation, yoga developed a process for the discovery of pure consciousness which is a holistic experience in itself as free from ‘limited identities’, which are considered to be ‘evolutes of primal matter’ [1.4]. This holistic process removes the ‘false identities’ systematically which disturb the state of inner balance and harmony. By starting with the gross levels [2.1-2.9] of these false identities and gradually discerning deeper and deeper [2.10-2.11] our holistic nature is revealed. [3.56]

The holistic process of yoga consists of strategies addressing the different levels of human being including social, physical, mental, and spiritual levels. This process involves identifying and then eliminating all that would contribute in disintegration, so it becomes a continuous process requiring constant vigilance about all the aspects of life. Its eight steps create an orderly process of self-transformation beginning on the level of

physical body and eventually involving the subtler levels of life. The initial steps of yoga are meant to remove the limitations and imperfections of the sensory processing which is known to be biased because of the contextualization of the processing person, whose presuppositions, attitudes and motives constrain and bias perceptions. The last three steps are aimed primarily, at attaining holistic reality which is transcendental and ultimate.

It goes on to propose principles of yogic abstinence and observance, prescribed in yogic text as *Yama* and *Niyama* so that the yogic practitioner is not self-centered but also sees the pros and cons of good and bad effects of his conduct and the practitioner’s life remains balanced in terms of its introvertedness and extroversion. Practicing *Yama* and *Niyama* besides acting as an antidote for the feeling of hopelessness and loneliness, which may come in the absence of proper relationship with the world around, also contributes to the dissolution of conscious emotional conflicts. Further *Yama* and *Niyama* are prerequisites for *Asana* and *Pranayama*, because their practice yields stilling of emotional agitation

Asana makes the body to function harmoniously, restores the natural reciprocity of the visceral functions and leads to the emotional stability and psychological well being by moderating the functions of the autonomic nervous system. *Pranayama* induces a rhythm by balancing the breath as it is concerned with deliberate manipulation of breathing mechanisms along with the increased awareness of pressure changes inside the cavity of chest and abdomen. Ordinarily the pattern and the rate of breathing are irregular, increasing during excitement and decreased during sluggishness. These variations produce disturbance in concentration and meditation. There are two types of *pranayama*; one is for cleansing the *nadis* and other is for uniting *prana* and *apana* leading to the opening of *sushumna nadis* allowing the *kundalini* to go through it. The fourth step is for sensory withdrawal from extrovertedness for being able to sit and concentrate properly to deal

with the unconscious emotional conflicts by practicing *dharana*, *dhyana* and *Samadhi*. *Dharana* is one-pointed concentration [3.1] *Dhyana* is extended form of *dharana* in which there is only one *vritti* rousing in *Chitta* i.e. one object in the focus of attention [3.2]. *Dhyana* increases the awareness of one's mental processes. Through *Dhyana* (meditation), stresses and tensions are released and nervous system is brought into balance. The scope of *Dhyana* (meditation) ranges from simple relaxation to profound realization. Although a highly cognitive and sometimes emotional activity, *Dhyana* (meditation) immerses the whole person in a psychophysical experience. This increased awareness combined with the manipulative techniques of *Dhyana* (meditation) gradually restores the psychological function back to its healthy, harmonious and balanced state. Then the last step is *Samadhi*-a state of complete meditation and undifferentiated being ness. In *Samadhi*, a person is self-actualizing and has more capacity to create and control positive and negative psychological resources; so as to deploy them for performing efficiently.

Theoretical Model

Yoga proposes a holistic theoretical model in its conceptual vision for generating a synthetic approach towards life. Yoga as system propounds its holistic views about human life and the cosmos as interrelated. According to the yoga there are two essential principles *Purusha* [consciousness] and *Prakriti* [matter]. *Purusha* is pure consciousness having no qualities or characteristics of its own-a base of unity and coherence to the experience. *Ishwar* is regarded as *special Purusha*- who is beyond sorrow and karma laws, perfect, infinite, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent and eternal. There is multiplicity of *Purusha*. *Prakriti* is the material basis of the person's being, in primordial state termed as *mahat*; the further differentiation is proceeded by the inter play of *Gunas* leading to the formation of *panchabhutas*- inert and characterless mass which then becoming subtler take the form of *tanmatras*. Side-by-side further of differentiation of *Prakriti* leads to creation of senses and *Antahkaran*

Chatushtaya – *Mann*, *Budhi*, *Chitta* and *Ahankaar*. Now when these evolutes of matter are associated with the *Purusha*, they become conscious. The *Chitta* functions as other parts of *Antahkaran* - *Mann*, *Budhi* and *Ahankaar*. all the conscious and unconscious processes are grounded in *chitta* operating through *vrittis*. These *vrittis* are impelled by *panchkleshas*- *avidya*, *asmita*, *raag*, *dvesh* and *abhinivesh* [2.3] in the presence of these *kleshas*, each performed action leads to certain impressions in *chitta* called as *sanskara*, a conscious or unconscious programming to act further in the same way leading to the momentary excitations and depressions as pleasure and sadness and *vasanas* which denote to the value ascribed to an action or object. These *Vasanas* and *Sanskras* tend to effect one's cognitions and behavior by rousing *vrittis* which enables it to attend to attend to some objects and others not. *Vrittis* which are categorized into five types as *pramaan*, *viparyay*, *vikalpa*, *nidra* and *smriti*, distort the perception of reality- as limited and contextualized. When these *vrittis* get controlled then there is enhancement in awareness- a primary requirement for holistic perception. Yoga further conceptualizes a state in which the knower merges with the known; this is the state of *Samadhi*- a state of perfect equilibrium.

In essence, yogic model has seven distinguished features.

Firstly, it is not meant merely for developing only one aspect of life i.e. as only being related with the body fitness as it is today misconceived as an exercise programme but moves beyond that in cherishing holistic intentions.

Secondly, it does not instruct to deny or repress any of the 'vrittis' often depicted as fluctuations or as modifications of mind in the western notions but suggests to utilize them to achieve peace and harmony in the life [1!5]

Thirdly, this yogic view aims at achieving state of pure consciousness and pays special attention to transcendental aspects of self which is conceived by sankhya view as ever-existing unity with Brahma i.e. ultimate consciousness.

Fourthly, yoga believed in the uniqueness of the individual that is why many paths and practices are prescribed for spiritual upliftment.

Fifthly, yoga conceptualizes human being not merely as a composition of body and mind makes further categorization of human experience and existence in it's interconnectedness.

Sixthly, the yogic conception of life is deepening and broadening both at the same time. From its very inception by instructing for yama and niyama yoga recognizes social and moral aspects of healthy behaviors and attitudes as essential. Besides this yoga identifies the ultimate state of existence as *drshita* state as it declares that the cause of all sufferings is the identification of *purusha* with the *prakriti* [2.17]

Seventhly, yoga philosophy expounds that there is one great, all powerful and all knowing consciousness in the universe called *purusha* and

our innermost self is very part of that. Thus yoga provides a spiritual connotation also to the understanding of life in its deepness.

Conclusion

Thus what we see is that each step is inter-related in an integrative manner. There is great deal of overlap and permeability between these steps. Each is essential for achieving holistic state of consciousness. The eight steps of yoga are also holistic in terms of their effects as each of them produces physical, mental and spiritual evolution either directly or indirectly. There is need to address benefits of Yoga from a transformational viewpoint and in an innovative way so that its true and holistic significance could be realized.

References

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