

The Psychological Approach of Yoga

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Abstract

According to Maslow's self-actualization theory, we strive to achieve our inner potential, which may or may not result in success. The "light I have" is the unique ability to become the best we can be.

Current research shows that psychology has examined the numerous parts of the mind, but without investigating the underlying wholeness of consciousness. Consequently, there is no consensus within the field of psychology about the nature of the mind and how it can be developed. Thus, it is not surprising that the applied aspect of psychology – psychotherapy or counselling – is also diverse and divided.

It is said that counselling and psychotherapy were developed in the western countries and imported to India from the western literatures. Some five thousand years ago, however, Lord Krishna narrated the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna, which remains present in its basic form even today. It is important and acceptable in today's context to try and find out the secrets of this Gita. The Gita defines the mind and also suggests a path of wellbeing for the healthy mind. The Bhagavad Gita contains easy and practical methods to control desires, lust and attraction, which are psychological, appropriate and practical. The Gita's psychology says that desires and lust are not destroyed when fulfilled. Instead, they become insignificant under the influence of higher thoughts.

The psychological approach of Yoga is an approach to psychology based on the Indian yogic traditions, the characteristic spirit of the Indian scripture known as the Vedas. It is a psychology, therefore, rooted in Indian philosophy and a life-affirming spirituality.

Introduction

This paper looks at a particular aspect of human nature known as the psyche, the source of our human potential. Human psychological growth – along with comfort and gratification in one's relationship with self, family, work and society – includes recognition of the yearning for meaning, purpose and transcendence of self-consciousness as part of our nature.

Another important point to notice here is that this paper is not the result of much academic research in this area, but rather is mostly based on my own personal experience and insights emerging from my therapeutic work with clients, and my passion for learning about the Vedas, which are the source of Yoga. It only seeks to investigate the psycho-spiritual dimensions of the word "Yoga" from old

texts. For this reason, it explores (on a very elementary level) the origin and hidden potential of this word, exploring its impact and consequences on humanity.

We might already have an idea of what Yoga is but, before we can benefit from its unique underlying qualities, it is important to recognise its true worth and contribution to the development of psychological growth. Yoga is not an idea or concept that is a creation of the wondering mind. Rather, it is the knowledge of the mind, which can lead us to the proper understanding of Mind and help us develop the ability to control our mind instead of mind controlling us. Perhaps it is difficult even to imagine what it is like to be able to control our mind. It is much easier to be sitting on the back seat while mind drives us around and hence deny our

potential to be whole human beings. Ironically, it is through such an engagement with one's self, the world and reality that one is able to achieve a transcendent happiness. Equanimity, a deep sense of wellbeing and happiness, is attainable through proper knowledge and practice in everyday life. Whenever the word “Yoga” is used in a loose sense or superficially, it loses its depth and, therefore, we do not find the source of light and thus remain in the dark.

The objective of this paper is to explore the psychological approach of Yoga. The psychology of yoga is a science for the welfare of humanity. It helps achieve a better understanding of body, mind and spirit, and leads towards complete fulfilment of a meaningful life.

Yoga is the most practical school of Indian philosophy. The word Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root yuj, which means “to unite”. It is the Sanskrit ancestor of the English word “yoke”. Hence, it comes to mean a method of spiritual union. To achieve such union is to reach the state of perfect Yoga. Christianity has a corresponding term, “the mystic union”, which expresses a similar idea. The Yoga system provides a methodology for expanding one's individual consciousness to universal consciousness. There are various schools of Yoga, for example: Bhakti Yoga, Jñāna Yoga, Karma Yoga and Kundalini Yoga. It is quite a deep and vast subject, and it would not be possible or practical to discuss all these various approaches to Yoga here. This paper, therefore, focuses on the most comprehensive approach, known as The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Patanjali was the first sage to systematise the philosophy and practice of Yoga. There are various commentaries on this text, Vyāsa's being the most ancient and profound. Bhoja, one of the classical commentators, defines Patanjali's use of the word Yoga as “an effort to separate the Ātman (the Reality)

from the non-Ātman (the Apparent)” (Prabhavanda & Isherwood, 1953, 1, cited in Malpan, 1992, 98). One who practises Yoga is called a Yogi.

The Yoga system is highly practical. It discusses the nature of mind, its modifications and impediments to growth, afflictions and the method for attaining the highest goal of life – kaivalya (absoluteness). Since this method is described in eight steps, it is also known as Astānga Yoga, the eightfold path.

According to Patanjali, Yoga is the control of the modifications of the mind. He realised that it is the mind that leads a person to bondage or to liberation; that most human problems are mental and that the only remedy to solve them is mental discipline. The mind is also the link between consciousness and the physical body. This is the reason that 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 the teaching of Vedanta. In Samkhya philosophy, the mind is categorised into three functions or parts (lower mind, ego and intellect). But in Vedanta philosophy, the mind is divided into four parts: lower mind, ego, intellect, and “mind-stuff” or chitta (the store house of memories). In Yoga, however, the mind is studied holistically and the term citta is used to denote all the fluctuating and changing phenomena of the mind. According to Yoga, the mind is like a vast lake, on the surface of which arise many different kinds of waves. Deep within the mind is always calm and tranquil, but one's thought patterns stir into activity and prevent it from realising its own true nature.

These thought patterns are the waves appearing and disappearing on the surface of the lake of the mind. The more one is able to calm one's thought patterns, the more the inner state of the mind is unveiled. It is not very difficult to calm down the waves of thought patterns on the surface of the lake of the mind. It is, however, very difficult to calm down those arrhythmic and destructive waves of thought patterns that arise from the bottom. Memories are like time bombs buried in the lakebed of the mind that explode at certain times and disturb the entire lake.

There are two main sources for the thought waves arising: sense perception and memories. Like lake water when it is still and clear, one can see deep down, to the bottom of the lake. In the same way, when one's thought patterns are quietened, one's innermost hidden potentials within are also uncovered. According to Samkhya and the Bhagavad Gita Nature (Prakriti) is composed of the three gunas, they exist in all objects and natural products. Since the mind is composed of the elements of the three gunas which are tendencies or modes of operation, known as *tamas* (destruction), *rajas* (creation), and *sattva* (preservation). *Sattva* encompasses qualities of goodness, light, and harmony. "Guna" literally means property, quality, merit, virtue, etc. The gunas are primarily responsible for our predominant traits, actions and modes of behaviour. Under their control people lose their ability to discern truths, their essential nature or their true Selves. The admixture (*panchikarana*) of the gunas and the elements (*mahabhutas*) is well explained in the *Paingala Upanishad*.

In Yoga, the mind is described in five stages, depending on the degree of its transparency: disturbed (*ksipta*), stupefied (*mūḍha*), restless (*viksipta*), one-pointed (*ekāgra*), and well-controlled (*niruddha*). The first three stages of mind are negative

and act as impediments on the path of growth and exploration. At this level, one experiences pain and misery, and all kinds of unpleasant emotions. But the next two stages are more calm and peaceful. All the modifications are found in the earlier three stages. In the one-pointed and well-controlled states, there are no modifications at all. In the one-pointed and well-controlled state of mind (*ekāgra*), there is a predominance of *sattva*, the light aspect of *Prakriti*. This is a tranquil state near to complete stillness, in which the real nature of things is revealed. This fourth state is conducive to concentration, and the aim of the Yoga system is to develop or to maintain this state of mind for as long and as consistently as possible. In the well-controlled state of mind (*niruddha*), there is no disturbance at all, but a pure manifestation of *sattvic* energy. In this state, consciousness reflects its purity and entirely in the mirror of mind, and one becomes capable of exploring one's true nature. Only the last two states of mind are positive and helpful for meditation, and many Yogic practices are designed to help attain these states. When all the modifications have ceased, and the state of stillness is acquired, then *Purusa* (Consciousness) sees its real nature reflecting from the screen of the mind.

The Yoga system categorised the modifications of mind into five classes: valid cognition, invalid cognition, verbal cognition, sleep, and memory. All thoughts, emotions and mental behaviours fall into one of these five categories, which are further divided into two major types: those that cause afflictions (*klesha*) and those that do not cause afflictions (*aklesha*) and are in themselves afflictions, they are harmful modifications. Valid cognitions and memories are not considered to be causes of affliction and are not harmful for meditation.

The sources of valid cognition are perception, inference and authoritative

testimony. False cognition is ignorance (avidya). Ignorance is mistaking the non-eternal for the eternal, the impure for the pure, misery for happiness and the non-self for the self. It is the modification of mind that is the mother of the klesha or affliction. Ignorance has further four offshoots, known as I-am-ness, attachment, hatred/aversion and fear of death, which is the urge of self-preservation.

Verbal cognition is the attempt to grasp something that actually does not exist, but is one's own projection. Fantasies like Alice in Wonderland are mere verbal cognitions that do not correspond to the fact and only cause the mind to fluctuate, whereas sleep is a modification of mind in which one's relationship with the external world is cut off. But the dreaming and waking states are not accepted as modifications, since the dreaming state is occupied with verbal cognitions, and the waking state is occupied mainly with valid cognitions and invalid cognitions. Memory, the fifth and final mental modification, is the recall of impressions stored in the mind.

The modifications of the mind are caused by impediments, namely sickness, incompetence, doubt, delusion and confusion. These impediments disturb the mind and produce sorrow, restlessness, and a dysrhythmic breathing pattern. Yoga provides a method for overcoming these problems and controlling the modifications of the mind. Patanjali states that the mind and its modifications can be controlled through practice (abhyāsa) and detachment (vairāgya). Abhyāsa, or practice, means a particular type of effort or technique through which the mind maintains stillness. Perfection in practice is attained through sincerity and persistence. On the other hand, vairāgya or detachment here does not mean withdrawing oneself from one's environment. Rather, it means to have no expectations from external world

objects. Detachment means to eliminate identification with nature and to understand oneself as pure self, as a self-illuminating conscious being.

According to Swami Rama (1985), the most ancient commentary known to the modern world on the Bhagavad Geeta is that of Shankaracharya (A.D. 788-820). In his view, the phenomenal world is illusory, and taking it to be real creates bondage and suffering. According to the Bhagavad Geeta, between the body and soul (Atma) is the mental life, which needs to be understood in its totality in order to enable one to live in the world while remaining undisturbed by worldly fetters. The skill is developed as one learns to coordinate different faculties and modifications of the mind, which means that one should always follow the dictates of conscience and not do anything against it. When one acts in a manner contradictory to what one feels and thinks, a person becomes disorientated and nothing can bring a sense of peace and joy.

The Bhagavad Gita contains 18 chapters, each describing a different aspect of the process of self-transformation. The aim of the Bhagavad Gita is to teach the aspirant how to establish equanimity, both in his internal life and in his activities in the external world; to help him develop tranquillity within, and to explain the art and science of doing actions skilfully and selflessly. Our psychological life needs profound and deep study of the Mind if we are here to free ourselves from the quagmire of emotionality, egotistical preoccupations and self-delusion, and if we are to realize our fullest potentials for the enfoldment of consciousness.

The perennial psychology of the Bhagavad Gita deals with analysing and training the internal processes of the human being, so that one becomes creative in the external world and attains a state of tranquillity at the same time. That which needs detailed

analysis, understanding and enfoldment is the mental life, which is vast in its characteristics. The outside world can be mastered only when the inner potential is systematically explored and organized. Without understanding one's inner potential, it is not possible to function effectively and harmoniously in the external world, for all things happen within before they are experienced externally.

The Bhagavad Gita contains in condensed form all the philosophical and psychological wisdom of the Upanishads. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna bestows his nurturing wisdom to his dear disciple, Arjuna. Sri Krishna imparts all the wisdom of the Vedic and Upanishadic literature through the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. Rather than imparting a new trend of thought or expounding a new philosophy, Sri Krishna modified and simplified the Vedic and Upanishadic knowledge. He speaks to humanity through his dialogue with Arjuna. The word Arjuna means "one who makes sincere efforts" and the word Krishna means "the centre of consciousness". A person who makes sincere efforts inevitably obtains the knowledge that directly flows from the centre of consciousness.

The unique dialogue between Sri Krishna and Arjuna deals with all aspects of life. It is useful for modern therapists, psychologists and philosophers to study the Bhagavad Gita in order to understand the way Sri Krishna counsels Arjuna. Like many patients who seek therapy, Arjuna is in a state of despair and feels unable to cope with the situation before him, so he seeks Sri Krishna's advice and guidance. But there are major differences in the way Sri Krishna treats Arjuna and the approaches used by psychotherapists today. Like many clients in psychotherapy, Arjuna is not at first receptive to the guidance of his preceptor, Sri Krishna. But, after his initial arguments with Sri

Krishna, Arjuna finally begins to listen to the teachings imparted to him. It is important to stress here that modern therapists and teachers need to establish rapport with their clients and students, who will be more receptive to advice when a sincere and friendly atmosphere is created.

Modern psychotherapists attempt to help the client modify his conscious attitudes, and unconscious processes and behaviours, but the analysis lacks the depth and profundity found in the Bhagavad Gita. Most modern therapists do not explore the purpose and meaning of life. They are loath to discuss and give advice on basic philosophical issues, such as activism versus pacifism, one's duty in life, and the nature of life and death. They limit the depth and range of counselling and focus primarily on bringing out the patient's complex. Most modern psychologists do not go to the root of the problem by analysing and understanding the fundamental cause. They deal with specific problems and symptoms, and the untouched cause then expresses its agony in different ways. They work in this way because of lack of knowledge and time, and fear of becoming involved with the unknown. By contrast, Sri Krishna presents a philosophical foundation for understanding the purpose of life and the way to live harmoniously, and he offers Arjuna practical advice on living and on coping with the world. The Bhagavad Gita tells us about the importance of doing the right thing, of conquering our own darkness regardless of the cost or struggle. These are only a few examples of the richness in yoga psychology. One could cite many more examples, but the point being made here is that these traditions have lost their value and richness in the modern world. We all know our thoughts create our reality; these traditions had a special effect on people when they were followed with total dedication and deep understanding of their meaning. It is hard to judge the value of an act without

precisely referring to what lies behind it: the energy of life or human activity is believed to be in the intention behind the motivation.

These esoteric yoga traditions need to be taken seriously and require deep, meaningful understanding in order to get the desired results. Adopting a narrow and shallow view will result in distortions. Distortion is also a two-way process. It not only devalues the ancient esoteric knowledge, it also misguides and confuses the practitioner by misinformation and one cannot be sure of getting the desired results. In some Yoga and meditation classes in the west, people are not given clear, proper instructions even about sitting postures and what it means to be watchful of your breath (prana), and what are the pros and cons are of these systems. Meditation and Yoga systems demand intense training and discipline, and eventually this leads to integration into one's true being. This is the main purpose behind them: the total unfolding of human potential. Unfortunately, in the traditional psychology in the west these systems are not used properly. Meditation is mostly confused with concentration, while yoga is muddled with stress management and fitness exercises.

The general assumption seems to be that drug therapies and techniques that lead to behavioural change will also initiate shifts in mental processes and states. Until the advent of cognitive, existential, phenomenological, humanistic and transpersonal perspectives, little effort was devoted to the rigorous study of inner mental states and processes, and embodied cognition.

The psychology of yoga, however, concentrates on the exploration of the function and operation of the mind, as well as methods to free the individual from suffering. Since the psychology of yoga is inwardly focused, it may appear to be

narcissistic or nihilistic, but it offers “therapy” for everyone who is prepared to work towards obtaining optimal functioning and psychological wellbeing. It is only through inner development that an individual is able to see his or her place in the larger context as a part of the whole, which can lead to improved relationships with self, others and the environment.

Western science has relied on Reductionism. This can be useful in certain applications, but it certainly is not helpful in understanding the person as a whole. Human beings cannot be reduced to parts, but must be understood within the context of the whole. The Yoga system acknowledges that individuals first have to decide to seek change in themselves through inner exploration – restructuring and cultivating mental processes – although the guidance of others who have experienced the process is important.

In yoga psychology, the whole being is treated – the focus is not merely on the obvious problem. This Yoga method leads one to become a therapist for himself. It is not Atman or the external world that creates confusion, but one's mental life. The internal and the external are two inseparable aspects of one single life. Practice should be modelled in such a way that it does not lead the aspirant from one extreme to another. As C. G. Jung recognised: “Even a happy life cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word ‘happy’ would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness.”

The psychology of Yoga is an ancient wisdom revealing how one can master various dimensions of consciousness and transform from suffering to freedom. It is a science about changing people's lives towards complete fullness.

Most of us are trying to live a deeper and meaningful life, but moving nowhere because of not applying proper principles

for integration and transformation. Yoga psychology reveals how this can be reached by simple and easy steps. Yoga psychology answers all questions of our body, emotions, feelings, thoughts,

dreams, desires, nature and our true purpose in life. Most of us are living a one-dimensional life and Yoga psychology takes us to a multidimensional life of fulfilment and meaning.

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