

Art of Yoga: Science, Philosophy and Consciousness

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Abstract

Yoga is both experimental and experiential system of knowledge preached and practiced by India's ancient sages. The yoga as an applied philosophy enables man to lead a perfect life keeping him fit and healthy through hath yoga (practising yoga asana) and mentally blissful happiness through chittavrittinirodha (practising ashtanga yoga). It considers the mind a faculty and an instrument to attain spiritual accomplishments. Pancha kosha is one of the earliest conceptualizations of the physical and spiritual transformations in the body of the human beings. A gradual process of moving the vital force through the five nonfigurative sheaths and resolving imbalances reveal the understanding of the nature of the self as one with universal consciousness. The abstract principles of the kosha theory, in tandem with tangible practice of ashtanga yoga and hath yoga are used as a diagnostic tool for yoga therapy in the recent time.

Key words: ashtanga yoga, panchakosha, universal oneness, paravidya, yoga therapeutics.

Introduction

Advaita philosophy says Truth is the Absolute Reality and the only One. Every other thing starts from this and finally espouses this Universal Oneness. Yoga is the synonym for the unique ancient Indian knowledge system. It elaborates on the philosophical and practical (physical) guidelines to understand the symbiotic relationship between the mind, body, and soul of human beings. It finally enables the practitioner to move beyond the mind and body through *chitavrittisnirodha*, the inhibition of those activities of the mind by which it gets entangled in a world of matter and objects, and liberates the Self (the soul) to attain union with the Absolute. According to Indian philosophy, man is essentially divine. The ancient

rishis addressed the man as *Amrtasya Putraha* (Child of Immortality) (Rigveda, 10.13.1)¹. Swami Vivekananda (Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda CWSV 2016, 1:12)² in a speech at Chicago on 19th September 1893, advised the people, "It is a sin to call man a sinner. It is a standing libel on human nature". He reiterated, "If the veil of ignorance removed, the divinity manifests itself; man is potentially divine. Yoga helps manifest the perfection already in man. The yoga practices take the yogi to the realm of *paravidya*, removing the difference between the knower and known, to attain *Brahmanjana* or Moksha or One with the Absolute. Lord Krishna while advising Gita to his disciple Arjuna, says that this

knowledge system called yoga, which was dawned on or revealed to the ancient sages, in the course of several eons lost to the world, is reinvented through Gita (Yardi, 2002)³.

This (yoga), handed down the line, the royal sages knew,

By the great afflux of time, this Yoga was lost, O scorcher of the foes.

This same ancient Yoga has been taught by Me today; for you are my devotee and friend.

This (Yoga) is the supreme secret.

Bhagavath Gita, IV: 2 and 3.

The great teacher, Patanjali, later codified the knowledge of yoga, scattered in the different ancient scriptures like Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, known as the Yoga sutra. Adi Sankaracarya mentioned various methods and types of Yoga, for liberation depending on the disposition of the aspirants. A comprehensive study of Adi Sankaracarya's works by Bhate (30-36)⁴ states that according to Sankaracarya, *Bhakti yoga, Raja yoga, Hatha yoga, and Tantra yoga* are a means to Jnana Yoga (knowledge) for the attainment of emancipation. Swami Vivekananda during his stay in America after the epoch-making speech at the world Religious Conference held in Chicago, had taken regular classes to his devotees on the Patanjali's Yoga sutra and given its extensive interpretations in the form of *Karma yoga* (Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, CWSV, 1:29-116)⁵, *Raja yoga* (CWSV, 1:117-304)⁶, *Jnana Yoga* (CWSV, 2:56-281)⁷ and *Bhakti yoga* (CWSV, 3:31-76)⁸. It was for the first time Vivekananda had exposed to the modern world, the ancient knowledge system of India. Annie Besant (1926)⁹ pointing out the importance of yoga in the education system of ancient India says, "The highest Hindu intellectual training was based on the practice of yoga and produced as its fruit those marvellous philosophical

systems, the six *Dersanas* and *Brahma Sutras*, which are still the delight of scholars and the inspiration of Occultists and Mystics. Recently, the Prime Minister of India, Sri Narendra Modi, when he addressed to the U N General Assembly on September 27, 2014, described the importance of the yoga, and its efficacy in changing the lifestyle of the people to create a more habitable and sustainable world. He stated that yoga embodied the unity of mind and body, thought and action, restraint and fulfilment, harmony between man and nature, a holistic approach to health and well-being. It was not about physical exercises but about discovering the sense of oneness with the self, the world, and nature. As a consequence of his speech, the UN General Assembly in December 11, 2014, decided to spread the message of yoga and declared to observe June 21 as the International Day of Yoga. A record number of 177 countries, including 47 Islamic countries, co-sponsored the resolution.

Yoga empirical and experiential

The word yoga has its origin from the root 'yuj' which means 'to unite or join together'. The path of yoga is long and strenuous. The process and procedures had already been established and the results proven by the practicing Yogis. However, it takes years of intense practice and concentrated contemplations for several years, a whole life time or even periods beyond (birth and rebirths), to attain the final destination, the union with the Ultimate Reality or the Absolute. Even in the contemporary modern era one can find quite a number of practicing yogis who can vouch the experiential level they have reached. And those who are sincerely and meticulously practicing yoga say that they clearly experience its efficacy and would never bother the time and the strain because the journey itself is revealing and tempting. Spirituality as well as physical fitness is the core principle of yoga. The ancient Indian literature give vivid

description of the life and work of many yogis (those who practiced yoga and have contributed to this knowledge system) that include seers, great teachers, religious leaders, philosophers, theists, atheists, rationalists, moralists and amoralists. Indian social set up based on yoga principles and philosophy has taken care of its members fullest expression to lead a happy and satiating as well as an harmonious coexistence within the span of his life for which is divided into four phases or *ashramas* ; 1.*Brahmacharya*, 2.*Garhasthya*, 3.*Vanaprastha* and 4.*Sanyasa*. *Brahmacharya* is the period of education; *Grihasthashrama* emphasizes house hold life; *Vanaprastha* to discharge his obligation to the society and finally *Sanyasa* to renounce the worldly desires and concentrate steadfastly to attain moksha.

The duration of each ashrama is up to 25 years, never the less, it may vary depending on the intrinsic strength of the individual and sometimes due to precarious intellectual development at the early stages that supersedes or surpasses the earlier phases to reach advanced stages of enlightenment. Usually, people remain in the entire life either in the second or third stage. Hieun Tsang from China, a student of the ancient Nalanda University (629-645 C E.), recorded in his travelogue that he saw many students, after completing the usual term of 12 years of higher studies, continuing their education for another one or two or even three terms, leading a lifetime brahmacharya phase. Those scholars were *Naishtika Brhmacharis* who dedicated themselves to lifelong studentship and celibacy in the quest for knowledge (Pillai and Devi, 2014)¹⁰. Keay (1959)¹¹ describes the studentship of the *gurukul* system of education in India during the Vedic period, “.... He shall remain a student for twelve years to study one Veda or if he studies all the Vedas, twelve multiplied with four, that is, 48 years”. At the same time, a large population remains as *grihasthashramis*

forgoing the other two stages, thus leading a responsible household life. Yet another group gifted with their inborn intrinsic energy, at the stage of *brahmacharya* itself, attains the yogic power at the early stage and becomes spiritual gurus or seers leading the life of a karma yogi. Yoga is the philosophy of body, mind and intellect based on the principle, 'a sound mid in a sound body'. Regular practices help inhibition of those activities by which the mind gets entangled in a world of matter and objects. The methodology of yoga, both artistic and scientific, enables the reconstruction of the self by discipline and ,at the same time, enables realization of the Self through meditation . The end and aim of Yoga are to realize the Truth, for which one must go beyond relative knowledge.

Methodology: Experimental and Experiential

Swami Vivekananda emphasized the importance of meditation and yogic practices outlined in the Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali for manifesting our mental abilities and powers. Yoga enhances the power of concentration by helping to focus the scattered mental and emotional energies to one point. He explains,” The powers of mind are like rays of light dissipated; when they are concentrated, they illumine. This is our only means of knowledge”¹². Swamiji was the first to demystify yogic practices, divest of it’s supposed esoteric and mystery through his lectures convincing its philosophical depth, its psychological sophistication, its scientific precision and above all its pragmatic pitch. In Vivekananda’s opinion there is no knowledge without the power of meditation.

Yoga was an integral part of the curriculum in the ancient system of Education. It was mandatory not only for the students but also for the teachers. Higher the level of the learner, the higher the intensity is the practice of Yoga. Yoga is also a universal knowledge system practised in India invariably by the ascetics and the ordinary men; the

difference lies in the level of practice and intensity depending on the physical, mental and intellectual attainment one seeks to attain. The modern *Raja yoga* of Vivekananda or the *Ashtanga yoga* of Patanjali teaches yoga principles and practices systematically following the eight limbs, *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*. *Yama* is controlling the mind by avoiding externals. The five social restraints of *Yama* are *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (chastity) and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness).

Niyama is not allowing the mind to wander in any direction through five moral observances: *saucha* (purity), *santosh* (contentment), *tapas* (austerities), *svadhyaya* (self-study), *ishvarapranidhana* (devotion or surrender). The next is *asana*. It is to flex the muscles and loosen the joints for maximum flexibility and movement of the organs necessary for action. Select the most natural and best-suited posture to keep the individual in a position for a long time with great ease to practice the following four steps. The fourth step is *Pranayama*, restraint of the breath, followed by *pratyahara*, withdrawing senses from their objects. All these five stages prepare the ground for meditation which is the kernel of the yoga system. Meditation can train the mind to focus its outgoing tendencies to a fixed point and hold it for long by sheer force of will. There are three stages in meditation. The first is *dharana*, concentrating the mind upon an object. When concentration becomes stronger and stronger and does not waver so much, it is called meditation. *Samadhi* is the highest stage of meditation to reach a stage when the difference between others and me is lost. Of course, the end and aim of yoga are to realize the Absolute. The eight processes are for restraining the mind and training for its concentration. "He who is possessed of supreme knowledge by concentration of mind must have his senses under control,

like spirited steeds controlled by a charioteer", says Kathopinashad. Modern psychological studies also have proved infinite possibilities of the human mind.

According to Vivekananda, "When the mind is concentrated and turned backward on itself, all within us will be our servants, not our masters. The Greek applied their concentration to the external world and the result was perfection in arts and literature. The Hindu concentrated on the internal word, upon the unseen realms in the Self and developed the science of yoga. Yoga is controlling the senses, will and mind. The benefit of its study is that we learn to control instead of being controlled. Mind seems to be layer on layer. Our real goal is to cross all these intervening strata our being and find God. The end and aim of Yoga is to realize the God. To do this we must go beyond the relative knowledge, go beyond the sense-world" (CWSV, 6:133)¹³.

The concept of *Pancha kosha* described in *Taittiriya Upanishad* is one of the earliest conceptualizations of the human being. *Pancha* means *five*, and *kosha* means *sheath*. It is a gradual process of moving inward through the five sheaths and resolving imbalances to reveal a clear understanding of the nature of the self as one with universal consciousness. The description of *pancha kosha* in *Taittiriya Upanishad* is highly symbolic; the fuller exposition taught in the yoga tradition comes from later *Vedantic* texts such as *Vivekacudamani* or *Vedantasara of Sadananda*. Central to *Vedantic* philosophy, the concepts of *brahman* and *atman* had a key influence on the development of the *kosha* model. *Pancha kosha* refers to the yoga philosophy that there are five layers of awareness in which all experiences are filtered. Man is a multidimensional entity with the soul (*Atma*) as the core. *Atma* is an abstract entity encased within five different sheaths (*koshas*), one after the other interrelated, intertwined and integrated, termed *annamayakosha*, *pranamayakosha*,

manomayakosha, vijnanamayakosha and anandamayakosha (the physical, vital, mental, intellectual and blissful) together constituting the integrated individual.

At the centre of these five layers is *atman*, known as the true Self. Since these layers encompass all aspects of existence, from gross to transcendental, *pancha kosha* also provides a model to address physical, psychological and vital energy imbalances. The bliss of an individual is said to arise when all five sheaths are integrated and balanced. The real goal is to cross all these intervening strata of a being and come in union with the eternal Self, the veil of *maya* (illusion) is lifted, and then the sense of separation between *atman* and *Brahman* (universal consciousness) is dissolved by Self-Realization. Hath yoga is another system of the yoga parallelly developed since antiquity in India, the aim of which is the same as that of *Raja yoga* or *ashtangayoga*. It gives importance to physical regime and vital energy; while *ashthanga yoga* gives importance to internal plane and control of mind. *Chithavrihithinirodha*, through concentration and meditation is the process of Patanjali's yoga sutra. Gheranda Samhita, Hatha Yoga Pradipika and Shiva Samhita are the three classic texts of hatha yoga. Hath yoga practised as a health science is followed for spiritual enlightenment also. Physical exercise and breath control are the procedures for the hatha yoga practices. For the efficient movements of joints and flexibility of muscles as well as cleanliness of external and internal organs and for the functional efficiency of the organ systems, hatha yoga follows different unique processes and procedures. Six practices (*shat kriyas*) prescribed for cleaning the internal organs, *trataka* for ocular cavity, *neti* for nasal tract, trachea and lungs, *kapalabhati* for skull and brain, *dhouti* for alimentary canal and stomach, *nauli* for small intestine, and *basti* for large intestine and rectum. In hath yoga pranayama or vital energy flow has

eight different types. They are *soorya bhedanam, ujjayi, seethkari, sithali, bhasthrika, bhramari, moorcha and plavini*. Through pranayama, the enhanced flow of oxygen and its availability to all organs and cells increase the vital energy transmission in the body.

Yoga therapy developed a package of psychophysiological procedures that combat and prevent susceptibility to tension and fatigue. The common principle is that, 'a sound mind in a sound body'. *Pancha kosha* encases all vital aspects of being and the hatha yoga invigorates these *koshas* in succession to ensure a perfect life on earth. This principle of the *kosha* model and hath yoga are used as diagnostic tool and therapy in recent times. Admitting the positive effect of yoga on health recently many Indian Universities and Institutions have framed curricula exclusively for Yoga studies to offer programmes at Certificate, Diploma, PGDYT, UG, PG and PhD levels, including courses like the ancient wisdom of Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Patanjali Yoga Sutra, Hath Yoga and Gheranda Samhita along with modern scientific-based anatomy, physiology, psychology, therapeutic, research methodology, and teaching skills. Several studies and research have been conducted prescribing yoga practices for the treatment of corporal and psychological weaknesses (Shaffer, LaSalvia and Stein, 1997; Feuerstein, 2002; Parshad, 2004; Taneja 2014; Bhavanani, 2017)¹⁴⁻¹⁸. The following are therapeutically proven efficacies of Yoga practices.

Stress relief: The practice of yoga is well-demonstrated to reduce the physical effects of stress on the body. The body responds to stress through a fight-or-flight response, which is a combination of the sympathetic nervous system and hormonal pathways activating, releasing cortisol – the stress hormone – from the adrenal glands. Cortisol is often used to

measure the stress response. Yoga practice has been demonstrated to reduce the levels of cortisol. Most yoga classes end with *savasana*, a relaxation pose, which further reduces the experience of stress.

Pain relief: Yoga can ease pain. Studies have shown that practicing yoga *asanas* (postures), meditation or a combination of the two, reduced pain for people with conditions such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, auto-immune diseases and hypertension as well as arthritis, back and neck pain and other chronic conditions

Elasticity: Tendons and muscles lengthen, increasing elasticity.

Increased strength: Yoga *asanas* use every muscle in the body, increasing strength literally from head to toe. A regular yoga practice can also relieve muscular tension throughout the whole body.

Weight management: While most of the evidence for the effects of yoga on weight loss is anecdotal or experiential, yoga teachers, students and practitioners across the world find that yoga helps to support weight loss. Many teachers specialize in yoga programs to promote weight management and find that even gentle yoga practices help support weight loss. People do not have to practice the most vigorous forms of yoga to lose weight. Yoga encourages development of a positive self-image, as more attention is paid to nutrition and the body as a whole. Regular yoga practice was associated with less age-related weight gain.

Improved circulation: Yoga helps to improve circulation by efficiently moving oxygenated blood to the body's cells.

Cardiovascular conditioning: Even a

gentle yoga practice can provide cardiovascular benefits by lowering resting heart rate, increasing endurance and improving oxygen uptake during exercise.

Presence: Yoga connects us with the present moment. The more we practice, the more aware we become of our surroundings and the world around us. It opens the way to improved concentration, coordination, reaction time and memory.

Inner peace: The meditative effects of a consistent yoga practice help many cultivate inner peace and calm.

Conclusion

In yoga therapeutic system, an individual has viewed holistically rather than the one-dimensional specialist approach to treatment. Based on the principles of the yoga knowledge system for the wellness of the body and concentration of mind, and integrating the physical, physiological, psychological knowledge and biomedical practices of modern medicine recently, India has developed yoga therapy an acceptable alternate treatment system for individual illness and social wellness. Yoga is an integrated knowledge system for the wellness and self-actualization of human beings hence it is both systematic and transcendent. Yoga is the philosophy of mind. Ancient Indian wisdom considers the mind a faculty and an instrument to attain spiritual accomplishments. It is the only knowledge system that clearly defines the *paravidya* (*spiritual*), and *aparavidya* (*phenomenal*) also prescribes a scientific methodology for the fulfilment of *paravidya* or the union with the Absolute or Moksha.

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