

Exploring Origin, History and Traditions of Yoga: An Analytical Study

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Abstract:

The word 'Yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'Yuj', meaning 'to join' or 'to yoke' or 'to unite'. Yoga is the art of living. As per the Yogic scriptures the practice of Yoga leads to the union of individual consciousness with that of the universal consciousness, indicating a perfect harmony between the mind, body and spirit. The one who attains this equilibrium, oneness or harmony is said to be in a state of Yoga, and is said to be a Yogi. Self-realization is the ultimate aim of Yoga. This is the state in which one overcomes all kinds of sufferings and attains liberation and supreme bliss. As for the origin, history and traditions of Yoga, it seems to have started with the very dawn of human civilization. Lord Shiva is considered as Yogiswar whereas Lord Krishna is considered as Yogeswar. It is said that several thousand years ago, on the banks of the lake Kantisarovar in the Himalayas, Aadiyogi Shiva imparted the profound knowledge to the seven seers. Thereafter the seers imparted the knowledge of yoga to their disciples. Thus with the passage of time several traditions of Yoga began and the teachings of yoga were passed on from Gurus to their disciples for the wellbeing of the humanity. Thus the Yoga that we know today was being practiced in Bharat since time immemorial.

Key words: Yoga, self-realization, wellbeing, seers, gurus, traditions

Introduction

Talking of global Indian heritage, yoga is perhaps the most recognized one, having travelled all over the world for every one's wellbeing. Yoga is a legacy of an ancient and continuous 5000 yrs. old Indian civilization and yet quite modern with the backing of science.

It is said that yoga was a divine gift revealed to the ancient sages so that mankind could have the opportunities to realize its divine nature and that the divine tradition of yoga began with the very resonance of Vedic richas (Vedic mantras) in the caves of Devatma Himalayas, and with the very first ray of

civilization the divine light of yoga spread in human life.¹

It was slowly evolved and developed by the ancient sages, not only in India but all over the world; because our sages knew that alike the rising sun which illuminates the snow-covered Himalayas, the light of yoga would diminish the impudence and ignorance of human life. The reason – the ultimate source of light and power is the supreme lord only and the radiance of yoga would enlighten not only the light of an individual but the entire mankind.²

Generally the teachings of yoga were passed on from Guru to their disciples. In this way there was a clear understanding

of the techniques and aims of yoga. As, the Guru, through his personal experience, could guide the disciples along the right path and away from any confusion and misunderstanding. Through personal experience, realized yogis and sages were able to guide sincere aspirants along the right path, removing any confusion, misunderstanding and excessive intellectual contemplation. Thus the yoga that we know today has been being practiced in India since time immemorial.³

Description of Yoga in Ancient Scriptures and its Origin

There have been much debate among scholars over the questions like when did yoga originate? Who did originate yoga?

The Vedas are considered the oldest book of the world. The first use of the root of yoga is found in hymn 5.81.1 of Rigveda where it has been interpreted as “Yoke or” “union.”⁴

But if we consider the beginning of yoga from the Vedas it would not be true. Why? Because the verses of the Vedas were heard by the rishis, seers in states of meditation and Samadhi, and therefore are regarded as revealed scriptures. This shows that even before the Vedas yoga existed in the Universe in some form or the other.

In Yagyavalkya Samriti (125) and Mahabharat (12/349/65) also Hiranyagarbha is stated as the originator of yoga:

“Hiranyagarbho yogasya vakta nanyah puratanah”⁵

Meaning : Hiranyagarbha was the first being to reveal or (to speak of) yoga.

In another context in Mahabharat (12.342.96), Hiranyagarbha has been described as omnipresent and powerful.⁶

The 121st verse of the 10th chapter of the Rigveda is known as Hiranyagarbha verse.⁷ The Ramayan declares him as the soul of the entire Universe.⁴ This whole description makes it clear that Vedic tradition accepts yoga as the one propounded by God himself. This shows that yoga is as old as the Universe and has been gifted for the betterment of mankind by God himself. It is said that even Lord Brahma had to perform tapa (austerity) to create this universe. And it is a well-known fact that austerity (penance) performed by Lord Brahma is nothing else but an integral part of yoga itself. Highlighting the divine tradition of yoga Goswami Tulsidas writes:

***Tapabala racheyi prapanchu bidhata,
Tapabala Vishnu sakal jaga trata.
Tapabala sambhu karahi
sanghara, Tapabala seshu dharai
mahibhara.*⁸**

Meaning: by the power of penance the creator makes the world; by the power of penance Vishnu protects it, by the power of penance, sambhu brings about its dissolution; by the power of penance, again, sesa supports the burden of the earth. He further writes: **“Tapa Adhar sab sristi bhavani”⁵**

Meaning: in fact, the entire creation, Bhawani rests on penance. He again highlights the divine tradition of yoga when he writes:

**“Matu pitahin bahubidhi samujhyi,
Chalin uma tap hit harshai.”⁹**

Meaning: then, after consoling her parents in every possible way, uma gladly went away to practice penance.

How the tradition of yoga has been flowing since time immemorial can be understood well in the light of what Lord Krishna says in the Gita:

“I taught this immortal yoga to vivasvan, (sun-God) vivasvan conveyed it to manu (his son); and Manu imparted it to (his

son) Iksvaku.¹⁰ Thus transmitted in succession from father to son.¹¹

The same ancient yoga has this day been imparted to you (Arjun) by me, because you are my devotee and friend; and also because this is a supreme secret.”¹²

Three Basic Traditions of Yoga

There are said to be three main traditions of Yoga:

1. Brahma (creator of the Universe) : Brahma ji is considered the creator of the Universe. He is also called Adipurusa and Rajpurusa. The yoga originated from him is called Rajyoga. Maharshi Patanjali the incarnation of Lord Brahma organized the tradition of Rajyoga in a systematic manner in his yoga sutra.
2. Vishnu (who protects the universe) is considered the originating symbol (or token of) all the Vedas. The yoga originated from him is known as vedic yoga. Lord Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu is considered the propounder of vdic yoga. It is he who organized the tradition of vedic yoga in a systematic manner. Srimad Bhagvad Gita is the book establishing and continuing vedic yoga; by Lord Krishna.
3. Shiva (who brings about its (universe) dissolution) is considered the propounder of the third tradition of yoga. In yogic literatures He is known as the Adinath. The yoga which originates from him is called Hatha yoga. Gorakhnath is considered the incarnation of Lord Shiva, who for the establishment and orientation of Hatha Yoga wrote many books on Hatha Yoga: Gorakh Shatak,

Goraksh Padhati; Yoga vija, Siddh Siddhant Paddhti.¹³

A careful observation of these traditions show that these three traditions are the main traditions of yoga and all other traditions are merged with these three traditions or in other words we can say that these three traditions have incorporated or included in themselves all other traditions of yoga.

History of Yoga

Thus we find that yoga has a long history and its tradition has been transmitted since time immemorial. In archaeological excavations made in the Indus valley at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro (the harrapan culture can be dated at least as far back as 3300 BC) now in Pakistan, various statues have been unearthed depicting people practicing yoga. They show Lord Shiva (the mythological originator of yoga) and his consort Parvati, sitting in various asanas and practicing meditation. These ruins were once the dwelling places of people who lived in the prevedic age. These discoveries allow us therefore to speculate with some justification that yoga was practiced by the people of this age.¹⁴

The first books to mention yoga were the ancient Vedas. In fact the verses of the Vedas were revealed by yogis in states of meditation or Samadhi. It is for this reason that the Vedas are regarded as revealed scriptures. The rishis did not compose the verses but acted as transmitters through which these revelations were expounded. The Vedas are regarded as the first yogic text, for they illustrate, even in an indirect manner, the essence of yoga. The Rigveda, the oldest book in the world speaks of ‘yoking the mind to the ultimate truth’. The word yoga occurs in various forms in the Vedas like Rigveda 1. 34.9, ¹⁵ Rigveda 2. 8.1¹⁶, Rigveda 5. 43.5.¹⁷

History and ever flowing Traditions of Yoga

The science of sound was clearly recognized by the seers of the Vedas for they mention various mantras that can be used for the attainment of both material as well as spiritual goal. In conclusion, we can say that the concept of yoga was known in Vedic times (2000-1500 BC) in one form or another. During this period the experiences of yoga were known but the science of yoga had yet to be systematized. After the Vedas we have yoga in Upanishads in different forms. Thirdly it is *The Bhagvad Gita* which is a classic text on Yoga. In the Gita we have the confluence of the yogic paths like Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga etc. It is in The Bhagvad Gita where we have some excellent definitions of yoga:

Samatvam Yoga Uchayate (The Bhagvad Gita II, 48) the equality or equanimity is called yoga.¹⁸ One of the best example that we have in the Gita is: ***“Yogah Karmasu Kausalam”*** (The Bhagvad Gita, II, 50”) Meaning: Yoga is skill in action.¹⁹ Thus we see the direction and tradition of yoga by reference to the ancient texts like Vedas, Upanishad and Gita.

Credit goes to Maharshi Patanjali for codifying yoga who wrote the text called the yoga sutras, 200 BC and defined yoga as ***Yogaschitvritti Nirodhah***.²⁰ Acharya Sankar authored some classic texts on yoga such as *vivekachudamani* (crest jewel of wisdom), *Aparokshanaubhuti* (direct experience of reality) and the *Atmabodha* (knowledge of the self).

Shankacharya was a man who had extensively practiced yoga for himself and knew through personal experience the significance of yoga. Other saints who contributed to yoga in the middle ages were Kabir, Tulsidas, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu etc.

In the medieval period Hatha yoga was evolved and became very popular through the nath cult. Hatha yoga laid a great emphasis on preparing the body as a vehicle for attaining the higher spiritual experiences. It is this yoga which has become so popular throughout the world. Some of the traditional and important texts may be mentioned as siddha siddhanta paddhati, Goraksa Shataka, Hath yoga pradipika, Gheranda Samhita, Shiv Samhita etc. It is said that in the 6th century BC, when Lord Buddha's influence brought the ideals of meditation, ethics and morality to the fore and the preparatory practices of yoga were ignored, The Indian thinkers soon realized the limitations of this view.

Contribution of Modern Yogis to Yoga Traditions

The age-old tradition of yoga continuous even today without any break or uninterrupted. In modern times yogis like Sri Ram Krishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Ram Teertha, Maharshi Aurobindo, Maharshi Raman, Swami Satyanand Saraswati, Swami Shivananda, Yugrishi Sri Ram Sharma Acharya, Swami Rama, Swami Niranjana Saraswati, and Swami Ramdev made a remarkable contribution in popularizing yoga. Let us have a glance at some remarkable yogis of the era.

One of the greatest yogi who appeared in the modern era was Sri Ram Krishna Paramhansa (1836-1886) Sri Ram Krishna was an embodiment of integral yoga. He used to say, “Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga are the paths by which you can realize God.

Later on the spiritual teachings of Sri Ram Krishna Paramhansa was spread globally by his disciples like Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda made yoga popular worldwide. The ground for its introduction to the west was laid in 1893 when Swami Vivekananda, a great yogi and disciple of Sri Ram Krishna

Paramhansa addressed the world parliament of religions in Chicago. His books (compiled from lectures given around the world) on the four yogas: Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Jnana Yoga) are very influential and still seen as fundamental texts for anyone interested in the practice of yoga.⁶

Another great yogi who made a remarkable contribution in the tradition of yoga was Maharshi Aurobindo (1872-1950). Sri Aurobindo propagated the practice of integral yoga. This is Aurobindo's synthesis of the four main yogas: Karma Yoga, Jnana yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Raja Yoga. Maharshi Aurobindo taught that the transformation of world-consciousness is possible through a spiritual journey of discipline and yoga.

His writings notably, the synthesis of yoga, The Essays on the Gita, Savitri, The Secret of the Veda, and the Life Divine are just the ocean of yoga in which any lover of yoga can have a yogic bath aimed at self-realization.

Sri Raman Maharshi (Dec. 30, 1879-Apr. 14, 1950) . Sri Ramana's teachings about self-enquiry, the practice he is most widely associated with, have been classified as the path of knowledge (jnana yoga)

Swami Shivananda (1887-1963) was one of the greatest yoga masters of modern times. He was known to have said "An ounce of practice is better than tons of theory. Practice yoga, religion and philosophy in daily life and attain self-realization."⁷

This ideology continues to guide the work of the Satyananda branch of his lineage. Swami Shivananda toured India, inspiring people to practice yoga and lead a divine life. He founded the Divine life society in Rishikesh in 1936. Another great yogi who appeared in this era was Paramhansa Yogananda (1893-1952)

Paramhansa Yogananda was a practitioner of Kriya Yoga. Paramhansa Yogananda describes Kriya Yoga as the "airplane route to God". Tapa (penance), swadhyaya (self-study), Ishvara Pranidhana (devotion) together form yoga. Kriya Yoga is not a matter of doing but of being aware of everything that one may be doing.

His Guru Swami Yukteswarananda Giri, (the disciple of Lahiri Mahashaya) who trained Paramhansa Yogananda in Kriya Yoga, explained, "the west in high in material attainments, but lacking in spiritual understanding.

Another great yogi who appeared in this era was *Yugrishi Sri Ram Sharma Acharya* (1911-1990). In recent history of India Yugrishi made an attempt to revive the tradition of Rishis (Rishi-Parampara). His three fold path Upasana-Sadhana_Aradhana (USA) became a roadmap for spiritual aspirants worldwide. He authored over 3000 books.

Swami Ramdev Maharaj is a modern yogi who has contributed a lot in spreading yoga worldwide. TV channels and mass media contributed a lot in promoting yoga worldwide.

Conclusion

Thus we find that Yoga is as old as the universe and the origin, history and traditions of Yoga, seems to have started with the very dawn of human civilization. Lord Shiva is considered as Yogiswar whereas Lord Krishna is considered as Yogeswar.

The age old traditions of yoga are like the ever flowing holy Ganges.

The list of the yogis is endless. The number of yoga books runs into the thousands.

We have only given a brief glimpse of the history and traditions of yoga.

To sum up, yoga (which is a way of living, a divine pathway to a healthy and

pure body, mind and soul) has become an integral part of Indian culture and tradition.

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