

What is Yoga?

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Introduction

It is well known in today's world that among the many popularly known universal ideas which originate from Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma, Yoga and Meditation are foremost. Meditation however, is part of Yoga. So, let us focus on Yoga first.

Millions of people around the world are into yoga in some form or the other. Therefore, it is important that we not only have a good knowledge of yoga, but also practice it. This is particularly important for Hindus since Yoga has originated from Hinduism. In spite of its popularity it is uncertain whether everyone understands the full scope of yoga.

Questions such as

- (1) Is yoga physical, mental or spiritual?
- (2) How much of yoga is physical and how much is non-physical?
- (3) Is yoga based on religion?
- (4) Does yoga give miraculous powers?
- (5) Does yoga cure diseases ... etc are often asked.

We should note that human beings around the world, from time immemorial, have asked even deeper questions such as:

- (1) Who am I?
- (2) Why am I born?
- (3) Where am I going after death?
- (4) What is the purpose of life?
- (5) How to deal with the mind?
- (6) How to be happy and peaceful?

It is seen that yoga provides answers for all these questions. These questions come to all human beings at some point in their life.

This article presents an overview of yoga as a process based on its full scope encompassing body, mind and spirit. Hopefully, this article will not only lead to answers for the questions raised above, but also inspire readers to go further into yoga. It is the aim of this paper to show that yoga is essential for all human beings for development in physical, mental and spiritual domains that brings fulfillment in life.

What is Yoga?

There are several answers to this key question:

- (1) Yoga is the restraint of mental operation (process).
- (2) Yoga is the disconnection of connection with suffering.
- (3) Yoga is balance (equanimity).
- (4) Yoga is said to be the unification of the web of dualities.
- (5) Yoga is the union of Individual self (through mind restraining process) with the Universal Self.

It is evident from these definitions that the process of yoga is essential to all human beings whose inherent nature is to seek happiness and become free from miseries and suffering.

In the light of these various definitions, yoga can be described in different forms as below. However, these forms are inter-related.

- (1) Bhakti yoga (through devotion),
- (2) Karma yoga (through self-less action),
- (3) Jnana yoga (through self-enquiry and knowing),
- (4) Mantra yoga (through mantra),
- (5) Naada yoga (through transcendental sacred vibrations),
- (6) Raja yoga or Ashtanga yoga (through eight-limb approach), etc.

Yoga has existed from Vedic times and its importance is described in several scriptures. In Upanishads such as Shvetashvataropanisat and Kathopanishat, yoga is referred as an essential means to achieve happiness. In Kathopanishat, for example, it is advised: **“Treat the self as the person seated in the body as the chariot. Then, treat the intellect as the driver (charioteer), the mind as the reins and the senses as the horses. The one who has control of mind directed by intellect thereby controlling the senses leads the person to the spiritual goal. Otherwise a person’s life will be as of a chariot driven by uncontrolled horses.”**

Also, in the Bhagavadgita which is known as Yoga Shastra i.e. a scripture on Yoga, Lord Krishna emphasizes that the goal of everyone should be to achieve yoga, or state of equanimity. He beautifully describes the blissful state of a yogi (i.e. one that has achieved yoga). Then through Arjuna, He advises everyone to become a yogi. Lord Krishna says “Tasmat yogi bhava Arjuna” (therefore, become a yogi).

Maharishi Patanjali has made great contributions in removing impurities in three domains namely through ayurveda in body for good health, through commentary on Panini’s grammar for good speech and through yoga for

achieving pure mind. We are grateful to Maharishi Patanjali for systematically presenting a comprehensive process of yoga through Ashtanga yoga.

The treatise on Yoga by Maharishi Patanjali is known as “Yoga-Sutras” (Aphorisms on Yoga). A sutra (aphorism) is a very cryptic statement with deep insights and it is easy to memorize. The Yoga- Sutras contain 196 aphorisms divided into four paadas (chapters). They are

- (1) Samadhi Paada (On spiritual absorption), 51 sutras
- (2) Saadhana paada (On spiritual practice), 55 sutras
- (3) Vibhooti Paada (On manifestation of powers), 56 sutras and
- (4) Kaivalya Paada. (On liberation), 34 sutras

The well-known eight steps of Yoga occurs in these yoga sutras. Further, the various details about operation of mind and obstacles for development are described. In addition, the yoga system also provides a philosophy.

In the vision and words of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru, founder of Ashtanga Yoga Vijnana Mandiram, Mysore, India,

“The chief aim of Yoga is to experience the inner spiritual world having realized the truths through the knowledge of process of manifestation of self, senses and body and based on one’s own full spiritual development by tuning the outward looking self (mind) inwards through the path of Sushumna (the central naadi channel in the spine)”

The process of yoga encompasses all aspects of human life namely physical, psychological and spiritual. The yoga process of Patanjali is referred as “yoga-darshana” and is essentially developed on practical basis. In the vision and words of His Holiness Sriranga Priya Swamiji of Ashtanga Yoga Vijnana Mandiram, Mysore, India,

“Yoga-Darshana is a practical discipline comprising of the conclusions and proclamations of enlightened seers (yogis) whose main concern was helping seekers (sadhakas) to attain the normal state called Yoga in which the perceiver is established in the real state and this is an inner experience of the inner world.”

Yoga- darshana, along with its sister Samkhya-darshana of Maharishi Kapila, forms part of the six-systems of Indian philosophy, or Bharatiya darshana shastras. The other two pairs are Nyaya of Maharishi Gotama with Vaiseshika of Maharishi Kanaada, and Poorva Mimasa of Maharishi Jaimini with Vedanata of Maharishi Vyasa. It is noted that Vyasa Maharishi wrote a commentary on yoga of Maharishi Patanjali. Among these six systems, yoga through its eight limbs is highly practical and scientific, in the sense that it is universally applicable to all human beings encompassing body, mind and soul.

It is said that although the philosophical basis of both samkhya and yoga is similar; they refer to macrocosm (universal level) and microcosm (human level) respectively. The yoga system refers to 26 principles with 25 referring to a human being and the 26th referring to Ishwara or God Principle. The 25 principles are

- (1) Purusha (individual soul) ,
- (2) Prakriti (primordial matter),
- (3) Mahat (intellect),
- (4) Ahamkara (ego-identity),
- (5) Manas (mind),
- (6-10) the five Sensory organs namely ears, skin, eyes, tongue and nose,
- (11-15) the five Motor organs namely speech, hands, feet, evacuation and reproduction,
- (16-20) the five elements of Subtle perception namely sound, touch, color, taste and odor, and
- (21-25) The five Gross elements namely space, air, fire, water and earth.

Thus, it is seen that the three levels of a human being namely physical, psychological and spiritual are described through these twenty-five (25) principles.

From this constituent description of a human being, *an important question arises: how does perception occur?* The answer is: The internal instrument (antahkarana) operates in the process of perception in a four-fold manner:

- (1) First, the mind (manas) gathers information through the senses. The mind by nature is wavering and is indecisive.
- (2) Second, the information is examined by the individual's intellect (buddhi), which is discriminating and is decisive.
- (3) Third, a decision is made and is identified and related to self through ego-sense (Ahamakara).
- (4) Finally, the resulting impressions are retained and recorded in consciousness (chitta).

The recording of the resulting impression by the chitta through this process of perception is analogous to an iron ball in a red-hot flame, where the flame takes the shape of the round red-hot iron ball. An individual's chitta obtains the impressions from the world of experience of objects through the senses and the gate of the mind. A clear mind is analogous to a clear lake which lets the light of the sun pass through to see objects as they exist, without contamination.

It is the aim of yoga to achieve purity and clarity of manas (mind), buddhi (intellect) and chitta (consciousness). This removal of impurities allows the

individual to realize and remain in original and normal state of uncontaminated joy and bliss.

The five modes of acquiring knowledge described by Patanjali Maharishi are:

- (1) Pramana (true cognition based on three means of validity namely direct perception, inference and verbal testimony from a trust-worthy person),
- (2) Viparyaya (false cognition),
- (3) Vikalpa (merely verbal based cognition),
- (4) Nidra (through sleep) and
- (5) Smriti (through memory).

Also, various operations of the mind (referred as vrittis) are given by five modes.

Among these the three undesirable modes are:

- (1) Kshipta in which mind is wavering through happy, turbulent and unhappy states,
- (2) Moodha in which mind is operating in negative states, and
- (3) Vikshipta in which mind appears positive but can be taken over by the negative tendencies.

The two desirable states are:

- (4) Ekaagra in which single minded absorption in God (Paramaatman) and
- (5) Niruddha which is beyond the state of single mindedness with total restraint of mental operation.

It is also important to note that Maharishi Patanjali has given the various obstacles that a seeker could face in one's own all-round development and the final realization through yoga. The nine primary obstacles are:

- (1) Disease (Vyaadhi),
- (2) Mental laziness (Styana),
- (3) Doubt (Samshaya) ,
- (4) Lack of enthusiasm and delusion (Pramaada),
- (5) Lethargy (Aalasya),
- (6) Reluctance to give-up the craving of sense-pleasures (Avirati),
- (7) Erroneous perception (Bhranti-darshana)
- (8) Despair due to progress in concentration (Alabdha bhoomikatva) and
- (9) Inability of retaining a level of concentration once obtained (Anavasthitatva).

Furthermore, there are five additional obstacles:

- (1) Avidya or wrong knowledge obtained on the basis of temporal taken as eternal,
- (2) Asmita or false notion based on the wavering mind identified as self,
- (3) Raga or passion due to attachment to pleasures,
- (4) Dvesha or aversion resulting from disliking of things, pain, etc. and
- (5) Abhinivesha or instinctive fear of death and its causes.

Thus we see that Maharishi Patanjali has given us very important details regarding the mental operations and the obstacles to be overcome in the path of yoga. It is clear that overcoming these obstacles will help in all aspects of life.

Ashtanga Yoga (Eight-limbs of Yoga)

The eight-steps from yoga sutras of Ashtanga (i.e. eight-limbs) Yoga are briefly indicated below. These form the practical aspect of the process of yoga.

1. YAMA: This step contains five sub-steps, which need to be practiced in the domains of thought, speech and action.
 - (a) Non-Violence (Ahimsa)
 - (b) Truthfulness (Satya)
 - (c) Non-Covetedness (Asteya)
 - (d) Continence (Bramhacharya)
 - (e) Non-receiving (Aparigraha)

2. NIYAMA: This step also contains five sub-steps, which need to be practiced in the domains of thought, speech and action.
 - (a) Cleanliness (Shoucha)
 - (b) Contentment (Santosh)
 - (c) Austerity (Tapas)
 - (d) Scriptural Study (Svaadhyaya)
 - (e) Surrender to God (ishvara Pranidhaana)

These two steps when practiced fully, provide the seeker the self-control and disciplines which becomes the preparation to the next two steps

3. ASANA (Postures)

4. PRAANAYAMA (Regulation of Vital Force)

In Asanas, the body is held steady in postures drawn from observing animals and nature such as a tree, mountain etc. In Pranaayama, control of vital forces is focused through proper regulation of breathing under strict supervision of a qualified Guru.

5. PRATYAAHARA: in this step, the yogi practices withdrawing the mind from senses and multiplicity of thoughts. The withdrawn mind is then directed towards inner-self.
6. DHAARANA deals with the development of the ability of the indrawn mind to focus and concentrate on a Sacred Object (such as vision of the Guru, chosen Deity, and other Sacred forms).
7. DHYAANA referred as meditation, is continuous contemplation or concentration on the Sacred Object. Meditation is to be achieved like a lamp (steady mind) in the absence of flickering wind (wavering worldly thoughts).
8. SAMADHI: This step refers to an experience of transcendental state of balance and deep spiritual absorption. This is an individual internalised experience. There are various states of experiences.

Concluding Remarks

Yoga deals with providing answers (based on practice) for the basic questions of life. Various aspects of Hinduism (Sanaatana Dharma) namely rituals, mantra japa, music, dance, etc can also be seen as related to the process of yoga. The important tools of a human being namely mind, breath, speech, and body are used in the process of yoga to achieve the highest goal of human life namely God Realization, resulting in Pure Bliss.

Thus we see that yoga is not merely restricted to poses and acrobatic postures with impressive demonstrations. The sole purpose of yoga is the realization of original and normal state. Yoga should transform one's life. In the vision and words of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru:

“The customs and habits, the dress and ornaments, the manners and etiquette, the conceptions of right and wrong and of good and evil, the learning, literature and the various arts like music, the political thoughts, views regarding all actions and the consecratory ceremonies, etc., of the Indians (Bharatiyas), are all permeated like the warp and woof by Ashtanga Yoga.”

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