

Yoga and Rebirth: A Way towards Understanding Life

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Abstract—Yoga helps one to remain mindful which acts as a door towards going beyond the shackles of worldly affairs and being alert about the true nature of reality. This paper is based on some of the views of Shri Ramakrishna, expressed by means of fables and parables, which in a way will facilitate one's understanding of the discursiveness of life along with some implicative bearings. Rebirth on the other hand, has been understood in the form of an inevitable outcome of life process by many schools of Indian Philosophy. Attachment towards material possessions leads one towards suffering. It all begins with desire, which is never ending in man – this encompasses the problems faced by urban population, including different forms of suffering related to high stress levels, often leading towards heart related diseases, untimely death et al. Rebirth can be understood in various ways, one amongst the many could be by means of Yoga abhyasa. In order to be able to control one's own life, to begin with, one requires mastering the ways of controlling her mind's fleeting nature. The fleetingness of the mind can be rightly addressed and dealt by the practice of Yoga or yoga abhyasa. In fact, yoga abhyasa has shaped many schools, in India, which give training to the common mass, showing ways of dealing with the highs and lows of mundane life. An important aspect of this paper reflects upon the challenges, which the origin and development of Yoga has faced in the Indian context, in a way emphasizing upon its real nature, at the same time not completely ruling out its practical limitations in the India. The final section will address the nature of Yoga abhyasa as adopted by the Indians, which has implications of its own when seen in the light of Shri Ramakrishna's ideologies.

1. INTRODUCTION

"In a certain place the fishermen were catching fish. A kite swooped down and snatched a fish. At the sight of the fish, about a thousand crows chased the kite and made great noise with their cawing. Whichever way the kite flew with the fish, the crows followed it. The kite flew to the south and the crows followed it there. The kite flew to the north and still the crows followed after it. The kite went east and west, but with the same result. As the

kite began to fly about in confusion, the fish dropped from its mouth. The crows at once let the kite alone and flew after the fish. Thus relieved of its worries, the kite sat on the branch of a tree and thought:

'That wretched fish was at the root of all my troubles. I have now got rid of it and therefore I am at peace.'

As long as a man has the fish, that is, worldly desires, he must perform actions and consequently suffer from worry, anxiety, and restlessness. No sooner does...he renounce these desires....As he does renounce them..his activities fall away and he enjoys peace of soul.¹

2. UNDERSTANDING YOGA

Individuals often get drawn towards yoga, since they consider it to be an abode for them. An abode, where all their worries can take rest and their physical health can be taken care of. Practice of Yoga not only leads on towards physical awakening of man, but also nourishes one's mind. In other words it has a huge impact towards spiritual beginning of man. It all begins internally, in the sense that yoga practice is based upon certain ethical precepts, which have to be mentally conceptualized, which extends further in to physical activities. A gap gets created in between the monotony of everyday life and the spiritual aspect of man. Not that the mundane life is any less important but the some of its futilities takes a bigger shape in creating a mental blockage towards nourishment of the spiritual side of man. Disciplining one's own self and slightly digressing towards the spiritual aspect, not only helps one create an inner balance but also maintains order amongst the externalities. *Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Bhramhacharya, aparigraha* are the *Yamas* are the precepts of Social discipline. Abiding by the *Yamas* not only makes one

¹ Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 16, Ramakrishna Math Road, Madras 600 004 :: India.

more socially responsible but also creates an awareness regarding her own responsibility of taking care of her own. An individual who is ready to care and work towards her own well being is one step ahead of the others who are not. A self aware person is ready to move on to the second level of life, bearing responsibilities for her family, society and nation at large. The preparation for this change does not only require immense amount of determination, self-control, faith in one's goals but disciplining oneself is the key-word in the process.

Desire leads on towards a lot of problems, faced by man and these problems are interlinked with many graver issues. Thus, having control over desires seems to be important for which an internal discipline requires to be set forth. The *Yamas* train man to achieve a state where one is able to go beyond the level of endless desires. The sense of self-contentment cannot be injected into one's system; it can only arise from within by practicing the *Yamas*. The list of *Yamas* laid above may not be treated as a complete list of required practices; it is subject to further addition of relevant practices and analysis. Desire, again which is the root cause of all suffering in man is based upon greed for material wealth. The hunger for material possessions is immense in man and due to this one is ready to breach trust, move on the path of dishonesty and cause any amount of harm towards fellow human beings. Greed for everything which does not belong to one self can lead towards fatal consequences at times when the object of desire does not remain restrained by the non-living things but even includes human possessions. When one wish to own over someone else's beloved, it becomes problematic. Thus, restraining one's self and conserving energy for higher, meaningful goals seems to be important. Purposeless lecturing and discussions over superfluous matters leads one towards negative degradation of the human.

Precepts of individual discipline are vital as the self-preparatory aspect of yoga is vital. *Niyamas* are based on precepts individual discipline. *Niyamas* include *Sauca*, *Santosa*, *Tapas*, *Svadhya*, *Isvara pranidhana*. Cleanliness of the mind and the body are both vital towards achieving higher goals. External cleanliness should not act in the form of a veil in hiding internal filth. For cleansing one's own mind, one requires to get rid of too much of anything including anger, ego, greed, lust

etc. Remaining contented with what one has, requires to be practiced. In fact, this practice of self-contentment can only be strengthened by the help of upliftment of the spiritual side of man by grounding it on religious tone and contemplating on one's own self. Acknowledgment of the good and bad aspect of oneself, at the same time paying attention towards one's limitations is vital towards self-understanding. Limitations are there within man, since they are finite by nature, but at times there is a lack of acknowledgment of this finitude. There is an infinite principle, higher than man, which acts in the form of canopy over the multiple small selves.

'There can be no lamp-light unless the oil, wick and flame are brought together'

If one analyses the above, the essential meaning of the practice of yoga can be obtained from it. The steps of mental and physical disciplining have to be consecutively followed by the practitioner, keeping in mind that an ordered way of functioning has to be followed by one. Having control over both the mental and the physical aspects of life is important, and for being mindful about both one requires to bring the fragmented parts of her attention into order. The fleeting tendency of the mind has to be prohibited, which could only come by practice. In order to obtain knowledge about the self or about the external world, one requires leading a virtuous life, while practicing yoga. In this way, the preparatory level of the mind can be laid upon a steady foundation. In undergoing the development of mental and personal aspects of man, Yoga plays a pivotal role, and is founded on the *Yamas* and *Niyamas* which act as the base on which Yoga is founded upon.

3. YOGA AND LIFE

Yoga and life has a very deep connection. The ethical precept which forms the ground for Yogic *sadhana* rightly addresses the superficialities of Urban life and helps one to deal with it. Success and failure in performances, in a way decides one's position within the society, which at times are being controlled by parameters. Yoga is understood as disciplined, unselfish activity, in that it produces none of the evil results which actions might produce.² Other methods of salvation are

² The Meaning of Sankhya and Yoga
Franklin Edgerton

widely discussed, in the sources like the Gita. The yogin, the believer of Yogic methods, is stated to be prior to the believer of the ways of knowledge, adherent of asceticism, penance, and the adherent of the ritualistic method, who depends on (religious, sacrificial) "works".³

4. YOGA AND SOCIETY: INTERRELATION

Many interviews have been conducted by scholars working in this field, in order to unveil the mental states of Yoga students. They had largely emphasized upon high levels of personal contentment, good health, and individual spiritual achievement as fruits of yogic practices. Some of them expressed a sense of clarity of thoughts, which they had achieved by regular practice of yoga, which includes cases of clearing up of feelings and discussions centered upon vulnerabilities of family dependability. It helps one, realize the stages of development of what one feels, redefining the meanings of what one feels initially and how it has acquired its current form, which in a way does not let build up any tension of uncertainty, minimizing uneasiness. These self-understandings are crucial both at the times of distress and others, building cornerstones for higher goals of honesty and responsibility. *Being honest and responsible requires knowledge of the self; otherwise, one would not know what one was honest and responsible for.*⁴

There are instances of how yoga helps one to handle responsibilities and maintain a balanced mode of living. Yoga strengthens one's mind, and helps maintain balance with those living around you. It helps one to divide one's attention, in the right direct direction, channelizing the energy in ways towards fulfilment. De-stressing the individual by allowing her to remain mindful about all her doings, and pulling back the mind from things, which are unwarranted, superfluous and amounts to nothing more than cluttering of the mind. As a result of which one becomes responsible, not only

towards one's own existence but also towards her near and dear ones, which extends further towards the community in which she lives. It can be said that Yoga in a way does not delimit the potentials and acts as an ingredient in society building, enhancing smooth functioning of the society based firmly on mutual respect, sense of belongingness and self care and caring for the others. Both strength and willingness to cooperate with others run through the nerves of the ones engaged in a Yogic mode of living. Receptivity towards changes and openness for new additions are entailed both at a societal level and the wider political level, leading to wards upliftment of the downtrodden sections. Thus, Yoga helps one in knowing thyself, which helps one in realizing her shortcomings and work on them, giving her life a more meaningful face to it. *Yoga is about the interrelations within the self, and these naturally extend to those between yourself and others. ..*⁵

Yoga helps one visualize things in a new way, this change of viewing the old happens due to an attitudinal difference. Individuals seem to start questioning the accepted ways of living and start looking through the missed bits of it.

The Yoga instructors often speak about the importance of harmony among body, mind and spirit, and the relationship among different parts of the "body-mind-spirit complex. If one part of this trio goes out of order, it would affect other parts. For example, injury to the minute's hand of a clock would show an impact upon the overall time displayed by it. Thus the interrelation and maintaining harmony within this trio is crucial. This could also be understood in the light of the socio-economic aspects of a state, both are equally crucial while enumerating its development as a whole.

Yoga instructors not only teach their students about the importance of good health but also emphasizes upon the requirement of doing so, for the sake of their family, society, community-local and global. This sense of caring, belongingness and the feeling of gratitude come naturally to the Yoga practitioner, not required to be forced upon them. If Yoga is considered as a means of livelihood for many, it is important to note that the individuals tutoring Yoga are serving mankind and

Source: The American Journal of Philology, Vol. 45, No. 1 (1924), pp. 1-46

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³ *Ibid.*, pp.5

⁴ Yogic Meditation and Social Responsibility

Author(s): Andrew B. Kipnis

Source: Buddhist-Christian Studies, Vol. 14 (1994), pp. 111-125

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Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1389827>

Accessed: 22-09-2017 16:10 UTC, pp.120-124

⁵ *Ibid.*

paving a better future world. It is a treasure, which acts as a bridge in merging the gap in between the developing and developed counterparts of the globe, uniting them on the lines of compassion, care and reevaluation. Discipline is the ground on which this union happens, as the moral sensitization not only leads towards individual character building, but also helps one realize themselves as a part of the bigger whole.

Yoga acts a mirror for the society, yoga as a practice was useful for the task of social reflection. It acts as a tool for self discovery, to discover her emotions, her social situation, and from there towards an ethical decision making. Individual values are created and maintained in social contexts. If the self is socially constructed, then introspection is socially relevant. The origin of human beliefs which acts as a ground for socially relevant thoughts plays a key role while in yoga it does not. Yoga students contemplate on emotional and spiritual grounds, it leads towards emotional upliftment, leading towards one's introspection, intertwined with social introspection. *Self-revelation and emotional self-discovery unconnected with social responsibility only reveals their lack of understanding of how such practices could form basis of social reflection.*⁶

Yoga is harmonious with social responsibility, which could fit myriad religious practices and experiences, including Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Judaic origin. Yoga may be may be defined as a way of life, as an individualized experience. It is as an assortment of the cultures and subcultures that practice it. Self realization is the essence of Yoga. It helps one realize the unknown, supreme power, freeing oneself from the grasp of *dukkha*.

It is a goal and a means of attaining it.

5. REBIRTH

But for all this, the reader can clearly see here the supreme purpose of the true Yoga, which is the attainment of immortality, de-conditioning. Students of these subjects well know that in Yoga, as in Indian metaphysics in general and still more clearly in Buddhism, immortality has a quite special meaning. In a certain sense, every man is immortal, for according to the doctrine under consideration, death does not end him, but his life is reproduced in an indefinite series of

rebirths. The purpose of Yoga is to destroy this immortality, replacing it by that pertaining to a state free from all conditionality, whether cosmic or divine. Yoga is indeed cognition as understood by scholars, which gives the immediate revelation of reality.

One does not learn Yoga by oneself; the guidance of a master (guru) is necessary. The yogin begins by forsaking the profane world (family, society), and, guided by his guru. This world is rejected because it is known that more exists beyond temporality, suffering. In religious terms, it could almost be said that India rejects the Cosmos and profane life, because it thirsts for a sacred world and a sacred mode of being. Every cosmic form ends by disintegrating; Now, whatever becomes, changes, *"All is suffering for the sage,"* writes Patanjali (Y.S., II, 15). But Patanjali is neither the first nor the last to record this universal suffering. Long before him the Buddha had said that: "All is pain, all is ephemeral." Human experience of whatever kind engenders suffering. Yet, to repeat, this universal suffering does not lead to a pessimistic philosophy. This universal suffering has a positive value. Man, moreover, is not alone in suffering; pain is a cosmic necessity. Man possesses the capability of passing beyond his condition and thus abolishing suffering. Scholars of Yoga philosophy, declares that any knowledge whose object is not deliverance is valueless. The point of departure of Yoga meditation is concentration on a single point, *ekagrata*, whether this is a physical object (the on a single point, *ekagrata*, whether this is a physical object (the space between the eyebrows, the tip of the nose, something space between the eyebrows, the tip of the nose, something luminous, etc.), or a thought (a metaphysical truth), or God (Isvara), makes no difference. According to Yoga the human being is completely at the mercy of psycho-mental associations. The senses or the subconscious continually introduce into consciousness objects that dominate and change it. Associations disperse consciousness, passions do it violence, the "thirst for life" betrays it by projecting it outward. Even in his intellectual efforts, man is passive; for the fate of secular thoughts (controlled not by *ekagrata* but only by fluctuating moments of concentration) is to be thought by objects. Under the appearance of thought, there is really an indefinite and disordered flickering, fed by sensations, words, and memory. The first duty of the yogin is to think ? that is, not to allow himself think. This is why, according to

⁶ *Ibid.*

Patanjali, yogic technique implies several categories of physiological practices and spiritual exercises, which one must have mastered if one seeks to obtain *ekagrata*, and, ultimately, the highest concentration, samadhi. In the "classic" Yoga exposed by Patanjali, there are eight such types of techniques. We cannot discuss them all, but we must say something of the most important ones, i.e. asana (bodily attitudes and postures), pranayama (the rhythm of respiration), *dharana* (yogic concentration) and samadhi. Asana, pranayama, and *ekagrata* succeed in abolishing the human condition. Motionless, breathing rhythmically, eyes and attention fixed on a single point, the yogin experiences a passing beyond the secular modality of existence. He begins to become autonomous in respect to the Cosmos; external tensions no longer trouble him; sensory activity no longer carries him outward, toward the objects of the senses; the psycho-mental stream is no longer invaded or directed by distractions, automatisms, and memory: it is "concentrated," "unified." The yogin returns to himself, takes, so to speak, possession of himself. This state is that of yogic concentration (*dharana*). If the purpose of *ekagrata* is to arrest the psycho-mental flux and "fix it on a single point" ? *dharana* realizes such a "fixation" for the purpose of comprehension. Patanjali's definition of *dharana* is: "fixation of thought on a single point." By prolonging this concentration for a fairly long time, one obtains dhyana, the yogic meditation. The final result and the crown of all the yogin's efforts and exercises is samadhi, a term which can be translated by "union, totality, absorption in, conjunction, en-stasis." Samadhi is a modality of being peculiar to yoga. This paradoxical state makes possible the self-revelation of the Self, and makes final liberation a reality. Through samadhi, the yogin realizes the "absolute isolation" (*kaivalya*), that is the liberation of the Self from the illusory dominance of the psycho-somatic experience. It would be wrong to regard this mode of being of the Spirit as a simple "trance" in which consciousness is emptied of all content. For, on the contrary, at such a moment consciousness is saturated with a direct and total intuition of Being. It is often been said that Yoga starts from this presupposition: man suffers because he confounds the Self with psycho-mental experience, that is to say he confuses the Spirit with the innumerable states of consciousness. Man is conditioned as long as he is a slave of his psycho-somatic dynamism. He is the object,

and not the subject of existence. In order to become free, master of himself, he must control his psycho-mental flux and finally stop it. The yogin intends to suppress the states of consciousness because he wants to attain a stage where thought will be free and no longer conditioned by psychic. In other words, he tries to change radically his mode of being. He wants to be free. As we said at the beginning, thousands of years of experience have shown to the Hindus that the activity of the unconscious raises an obstacle insuperable for all attempts to achieve de-conditioning. This is the reason why Patanjali and others emphasize the importance of *vasanas*, the subliminal latencies. The concept of *vasana* entirely agrees with the "unconscious" as described by modern depth psychology. Yoga does not believe, like Samkhya and Vedanta, that metaphysical knowledge alone is sufficient to free man of illusion and suffering. For Yoga, the problem is more complex, for the following reason: the states of consciousness that are to be mastered are only the actualization of the *vasanas*, of the latencies. Because of their very nature, the *vasanas* are forced to become manifest, that is to say to nourish continuously the psycho-mental stream. By various techniques, the yogin tries to penetrate into his unconscious, in order to know its mechanism and to annihilate it. This means that before the West, Yoga identified the principal reason of human conditioning in the unconscious. But the yogis were not satisfied simply with the objective study of these conditionings. The yogis made an effort to control and master the activity of the unconscious. On this point lies the great importance of Yoga for Western thought. The unconscious and the techniques that were developed to work with its dynamisms are recent discoveries in the West. But India disposes of long discoveries in the West. But India disposes of a long practical experience in this field. It is useful to study these practices, experience in this field. It is useful to study these practices, to find out in how far de-conditioning is achieved. Yoga followed this long and difficult path in order to obtain perfect autonomy, integral freedom. It's ideal is to realize what certain Western psychologists call "consciousness as witness," that is a consciousness that is no longer engaged in psycho-mental dynamism. It is the paradoxical stage of the *jivanmukta*, of one who is "liberated in life," who lives in an "eternal present," outside of Time. In other words, the sufferings of the flesh did not harm the Spirit. Above

all, this means to do away with psycho-somatic conditionings.

Karma is described by Patanjali as a memory trace recorded⁷ in the unconscious by any action or thought a person has done. The Westerner should especially note that for Yoga a thought is as real as an action-in fact, in the Yoga view, we think first and then act, and thought therefore is of primary psychological importance. The karmic memory trace (*samskara*) remains in the unconscious as a predisposition towards doing the same action or thought again in the future. Sufficient repetitions of the same action or thought produce a strengthening of the predisposition (*samskara*), and the establishing of a "habit pattern" or *vasana*. Such a karmic habit pattern or *vasana* is the Yoga equivalent for the modern psychological notion of motivation. The unconscious, in Yoga terminology, is nothing more than the sum total of all stored-up karmic traces from the thoughts and actions done in this and previous lives. Many similarities with the ancient Yoga of Patanjali are found when the development of recent thinking regarding memory, motivation and the unconscious is reviewed. Whereas for the Lockean psychologists, each newborn begins life with an empty mind, a *tabula rasa*, as it were, Yoga psychology emphasizes that at birth the mind (*citta*) carries with it a storehouse of *vasanas* habit patterns built up over a beginningless series of previous lives. While Woodworth's notions of memory and drive seem restricted to the personal experience of one lifetime, Patanjali's Yoga accounts for memory and in terms of this and all previous lives. The difficulty which Locke, Woodward, and their followers encounter in this regard, which is not a problem in Yoga, is the question of how to account for the many drives or instinctual patterns of behaviour which the new-born child evidences immediately at birth and before any learning has taken place. The Leibnizian approach in modern psychology, with its assumption that mind is genetically active rather than passive, seems to avoid this last-mentioned difficulty-and in some ways to be closer to the Yoga notion of *vasanas*. Much the dynamic

psychology which has characterized European thinking is based on the assumptions of Leibnitz. For Leibnitz a child begins life not as a passive wax tablet, but as consciousness composed of inherent seed ideas which actively structure incoming stimuli and in so doing achieve greater actualization and motive force. Thus for Leibnitz, as for Yoga psychology, there are degrees of consciousness, since the ideas grow from petites perceptions, which are to some degree unconscious, into their full flowering or actualization in conscious awareness. Implicit in thought of Leibnitz, therefore, are the notions of inherent psychological structures and their resulting drives as well as various degrees of conscious awareness. As we shall see, much of this thinking is carried over into the psychological theories of Freud and Jung. Although the Leibnizian tradition in modern psychology seems, on balance, to have a good deal in common with the notion of karma, there is one aspect of Yoga that is quite out of step Leibnitz-that is, the Yoga notion of the *purusa*, or self as an individual consciousness, unchanging and eternal, which shines forth undimmed once obstructing karma has been removed. Such a notion of the self seems totally foreign to modern psychology whether it be of a Lockean or Leibnizian cast. If the karmic processes of Yoga prior to the realization of *kaivalya* are taken as the point of focus, then it appears that there is much in common between the Leibnizian tradition within modern psychology and Patanjali's Yoga.

6. THEN COMES THE TIME FOR ACTION

"Do you know my attitude? Books and things like that only point out the way to reach God. After finding the way, what more need is there of books and scriptures? Then comes the time of action

A man received a letter from home informing him that certain presents were to be sent to his relatives. The names of the articles were given in the letter. As he was about to go shopping for them, he found that the letter was missing. He began anxiously to search for it, several others joining in the search. When at last the letter was discovered, his joy knew no bounds. With great eagerness he opened the letter and read it. It said that he was to buy five seers of sweets, a piece of cloth, and a few other things. Then he did not need the letter any more, for it had served its purpose. Putting it aside, he went out to buy the things. How long is such a letter

⁷ Psychology and Karma
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necessary? As long as its contents are not known. When the contents are known one proceeds to carry out the directions.

In the scriptures you will find the way to realise God. But after getting all the information about the path, you must begin to work. Only then can you attain your goal.”⁸

The above summarizes it all.

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