

The Importance of Yoga in Modern Context: A Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract—The concept of Yoga in India is age old. It has been accepted by the sages and monks since ancient times. Yoga and its importance are mentioned even in the philosophical thoughts of Veda, Upanishad and Gītā. But the credit of rendering it as a holistic philosophy of life goes to the propounder of yoga Philosophy, Maharshi Patañjali. Patañjali, in his yoga sutra has presented yoga as a lifestyle. He has explained yoga as a method of physical exercise and mental discipline.

Apart from early Indian philosophers, contemporary ones like swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh and Mahatma Gandhi have also given quite an importance to yoga and have regarded it as a lifestyle. In modern era the importance and utility of yoga is increased a lot because not only it helps in dealing with the incurable diseases of the body but also helps in getting rid of the mental tensions and worries which is quite prevalent these days. It also helps in building a positive approach towards life.

Yoga has now been very much accepted as a lifestyle not only in India but in abroad too. Even United Nations has declared a specific date (21 June) as "International Yoga Day" way back on December 2014. What could be a big proof of yoga's importance than this? Today the whole world has become conscious about yoga and its immense benefits. Now it is the need of the day that yoga must be popularized more and more so that it could reach to every nook and corner of the world and benefit the whole mankind.

1. YOGA - AN INTRODUCTION

The word yoga is derived from Sanskrit root "Yuj", meaning "to join" or to unite. It is a practice that connects the body, mind and spirit through different body postures, meditation and controlled breathing. Yoga is not just about bending or twisting the body and holding the breath. It is a mechanism that brings one into a state where one sees and experience reality just the way it is. Yoga enables us to experience the whole

universe as a part of ourselves, making everything one-this is the union that yoga creates. In short, it is a union of the individual consciousness with the universal consciousness.

The true essence of yoga revolves around elevating the force or 'Kundalini' at the base of the spine. It aims to achieve this through a series of physical and mental exercises. At the physical level, the methods comprise various yoga postures or 'āsanas' that aim to keep the body healthy. The mental techniques include breathing exercise or 'pranayama' and meditation or 'dhyana' to discipline the mind. The ultimate goal of yoga is, however, to help the individual to transcend the self and attain enlightenment. As the Bhagavad Gītā says, "A person is said to have achieved yoga, the union with the self, when the perfectly disciplined mind gets freedom from all desires, and becomes absorbed in the self alone."

Yoga was developed and perfected over the centuries by philosophers and mystics in India. There have been a lot of differences in respect to the antiquity of Yoga. Many scholars belief that yoga was very much in practice in India before the Aryans came. Several seals discovered at Indus valley civilization sites depict figures in positions resembling a common yoga or meditation pose. According to a famous archaeologist Gregory Possehl, the pose shows "a form of ritual discipline, suggesting a precursor of yoga." [1]. Another archaeologist Jonathan Mark Kenoyer describes one figure as "seated in Yogic position". [2]. Karel Werner writes that "Archaeological discoveries allow us therefore to speculate with some justification that a wide range of Yoga activities was already known to the people of pre-

Aryan India." [3]. Therefore Scholars think there must be some type of connection between the Indus valley seals and later Yoga and meditation practices, though there is no conclusive evidence.

The origins of the yoga school of Hinduism are unclear. Some of its earliest discussions are found in 1st millennium BCE Indian texts such as the *Katha Upanishad*, the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* and the *Maitri Upanishad*. The root of Yoga is found in hymn 5.81.1 of the *Rigveda*, a dedication to rising Sun-god in the morning (*Savitri*), interpreted as "yoke" or "Yogically control".[4]. The *Katha Upanishad*, dated to be from about the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, in verses 2.6.6 through 2.6.13 recommends a path to self-knowledge, and calls this path Yoga. [5].

2. PATAÑJALI'S YOGA

Even though yoga has been mentioned in various ancient texts, including the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gītā* etc., the credit of putting together a formal, cohesive philosophy of yoga goes to Sage *Patañjali*. *Patañjali* is known as the father of yoga because it was he who first codified the various yoga teaching around 300 B.C. In his *Yogasutra*, *Patañjali* has provided the very essence of the philosophy and teachings of yoga in a highly scientific and systematic manner. "*yogas chitta vritti nirodha*" is *Patañjali's* famous definition of Yoga. Here *chitta* implies to mind, *vrittis* to thought impulses and *nirodha* to removal. In short, it means, "Yoga is the removal of the fluctuations of the mind."

Patañjali in his *Yogasutra* has discussed about mental thought impulses very elaborately. He has discussed how people get into tension and sufferings because of these thought impulses and how our mind gets calm and stable after the removal of these so called thought impulses or *vrittis*. *Patañjali's* yoga is important not only for the ailing person but also for the healthy one. Yoga helps in achieving the stable state of mind. And when the mind is stable all the disorder gets eliminated.

Again, yoga philosophy is one of the six major orthodox schools of Indian Philosophy. It is very near to Samkhya Philosophy in that six major orthodox system. We know that in Indian philosophy salvation is considered the primary aim only with the exception of

Charvaka's school of thought. Yoga philosophy, on the other hand, is considered as a very practical philosophy as it generally talks about practical approaches of salvation. Yoga has been described in philosophy of Buddhism too. Buddhism says, "Yoga is a concentration of skilled chitta". The presence of yoga and its practice is discussed in Jaina sources too.

3. CONTEMPORARY THINKERS ON YOGA

The importance of yoga is mentioned not only in the yoga Philosophy but in other schools of Indian philosophical thought too. Apart from early Indian philosophers, contemporary ones like Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh and Mahatma Gandhi have also given quite an importance to yoga and have regarded it as a lifestyle.

Swami Vivekananda is considered a key figure in the introduction of yoga to the western world. Who can forget his speech at World's Columbian exposition in Chicago? We can only speculate about what yoga would look like in America had Vivekananda not spoken at the Columbian exposition. Vivekananda described yoga as a practice that joins a human to "reality" or "God". Swamiji has infact written a book called *Raja yoga*, which was his interpretation of *Patañjali's* yoga sutra.

Aurobindo while throwing light on yoga says that yoga is a rapid and concentrated evolution of being, which can take effect in one life-time, while unassisted natural evolution would take many centuries or many birth. Aurobindo introduced a modern synthesized version of Indian yoga and named it Integral Yoga. This integral yoga is about achieving harmony within the self and with the divine and should be practiced in and outside the studio class.

Mahatma Gandhi used to associate yoga with *anasakti* or detachment. Here Gandhi wants us to be detached from gold, money or worldly pleasures because he used to believe and very rightly so that human beings are above all this material happiness. Osho tells "Yoga is a direct and practical science beyond the limit of religion, faith and superstition. Yoga is an art of living. It is a complete medical therapy. Religion binds people but yoga teaches them the way to liberation."

Therefore we can see that yoga, its techniques and its importance are being discussed and appreciated right from the very dawn of civilization till date. And its

popularity and reputation is increasing leaps and bounds all over the world these days. It has become much more relevant too now a days as we are seeing a large number of people getting into different sorts of problems and recurrent crisis especially because of the modern lifestyle. But before I go on and explain the importance or the positive impacts of yoga in our day to day life it would be better if I first try and examine what are the problems being faced by the people of these days because of this modern lifestyle.

4. MODERN LIFESTYLE

Lifestyle in one sentence can be summed up as the characteristics of inhabitants of a particular region in a particular space and time. It includes day, to day, behaviours and functions of individuals in jobs, activities, fun and diet. But almost all the activities of this modern age people are just not proving good for them. At the end of the day this lifestyle is telling upon their health and they are being the victim of different sorts of stresses and problems.

Modern lifestyle and man's increasing dependence on technology have literally atrophied his intelligence. Not only intelligence, the effect of technology is visible on all aspects of his life. Machines, gadgets, vehicles, smart-phones, tabs, laptops, ac, blower, geyser and what not, man cannot live for a second without technology. This so called modern way of living has given man pollution, diseases, stress, competitiveness, cut-throat race for earning money, fast-food, internet etc. He literally does not have time to stand and stare. He has lost peace of his mind. As a consequence, he has become physically, mentally, socially, spiritually, and emotionally weak.

Again, in this modern way of life we do not have time to take care of our health and the consequences of our eating habits and other such important things. Only when we land into trouble we realize the bad state of affairs being the side effects of this modern life style. There is an old saying, "we are what we eat" which holds true even today. And it is no secret that due to our fast paced life we are hardly concerned of what we are eating these days. Pizzas, burgers and other fast food have become our first priority today. This is true that people are so busy in their works that they do not get time and therefore they had to bank on these foods. But if we can just wait a moment and think it over, we will realize what

kind of stupidity we are doing. We are earning for ourselves and the family but if we do not stay in a good state of health, how can we give our best to our work and then in the long run we will ourselves become the burden on our family once we get affected by different diseases because the consequences of staying on these fast foods are certainly going to land us amidst lots of health problems.

Adequate and right sleep is yet another important factor for maintaining good health. Sleeping should neither be too much nor be inadequate. All of us have been listening to this famous quote since our childhood, "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise" but no one seems to be applying this formula and especially in metro cities like Delhi. I agree that both the times and our work culture have changed and for some working late at night has become a necessity but still we cannot deny this fact that getting up early has its own benefits. And not to talk of being indulged in work only, we have just made it a fashion staying up late at night and this habit is certainly not good for our health.

Again, modern man is suffering more from physiological stress than physical stress these days. He is trying to live a successful life as per the expectations and norms of the society and is continually challenged with rapidly accumulation stresses. In this fast moving social setup, with high standard of living and innumerable changes, the individual have no time to look back and think about what is happening to his body and mind. This accumulated stress for prolonged periods leads him to the so-called stress induced disorders, like heart-attack, high BP, Diabetes, asthma, back pain and other physiological problems.

Today man is trying to control each and everything. In his quest of being modern he has reached to that level of craziness where he has started challenging nature too. Due to all this, man has reached to an alarming stage of stress and strain. He is becoming the victim of different types of physical and mental stress. Whole humanity today is living in frustration and despair being affected from different kinds of fear, stress and gangrene. In this condition of sheer trouble we need something that comes to rescue human being and help him get rid of all this and yoga comes in very handy here.

5. YOGA'S IMPORTANCE IN MODERN CONTEXT

Yoga as a practice has countless benefits that positively affect us both physically and mentally. Yoga is not just about performing some sets of *āsanas*, it is about a healthy lifestyle. The practice of yoga allows us to find stillness in a world consumed with chaos. Yoga makes our life healthy and happy. In today's polluted environment yoga is such a therapy, which has no side-effects. On the other hand different *yogāsanas* help to give immense benefit to our whole body. *Yogāsana* keeps us fit. It fills us with positive energy and develops our immunity.

Yoga is commonly practiced as a routine, which helps in improving physical fitness and sometimes as a means to stress management. There is a growing awareness that yoga can be effectively used as a therapy in treating a variety of ailments, including hypertension, diabetes, heart conditions etc. Yoga can be used for fitness, toning of the muscles, balancing, relaxation and rejuvenation, as these are some of its beautiful effects, but its true purpose is far beyond that. It is a spiritual development practice to train the body and mind to self-observe and become aware of their own true nature. In fact it will not be exaggerative to say that Yoga is important for us in many ways. It is beneficial for our physical, mental and spiritual health.

The far-reaching popularity of yoga has got a new crown in its feather after an International day for yoga was declared unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly. In September 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested United Nations to celebrate June 21 as the International Yoga Day as it is the summer solstice; the longest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. In his words, "Yoga is an invaluable gift of India's ancient tradition. This tradition is 5000 years old. It embodies 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 is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and the nature. By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help in well-being. Let us work towards adopting an International Yoga Day." [6]. And it is the impact of yoga that this proposal was passed within a very short period of time (in December 2014) with not a single country opposing

it. And since 2015 International day of Yoga is celebrated every year on 21st of June.

6. A CONTROVERSY IN THE NAME OF YOGA

When everything is going good with yoga, a controversy out of nowhere has surrounded it and its importance has now become a matter of debate. Today, we are witnessing a great bedlam in the name of yoga. Yoga's importance is something, which is clearly obvious but still all this uproar regarding yoga these days are just making this beautiful practice an apple of discord. It is ironical that at a time when yoga is increasingly being recognized around the world as an efficacious discipline that aids physical and mental well-being, the ancient Indian system is caught in a needless controversy, mainly due to its aggressive promotion by the current government. It is difficult to avoid the impression that the government is showing excessive zeal as well as a tendency to use its employees and institutions to propagate its own view of culture and tradition.

7. CONCLUSION

Yoga is a peaceful art and only those who really want to do it can perform it with peace. Trying to impose it on those who are reluctant to it is just a waste of time and energy and is not good for the social harmony too. It will rather diminish the sacred identity this art carries with it. Yoga does not talk about imposition or bondage it rather talks about liberation and being free from all the chains- be it social, mental or anything. But the government seems to be in haste and the way it is promoting yoga does not go with the core Ideology of this wonderful practice. The forceful implementation of Yoga does not go with the core philosophy of our constitution too as article 25 of Indian constitution says "all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion subject to public order, morality and health.

The idea should definitely be promoted but forcing the people to perform it will do no good. And also, it is not something which should be promoted by doing so much of propaganda. In fact People should be allowed to know and understand its importance. And the moment people will realize its true value: there will be nothing stopping this miraculous art. So the best way to deal with all this is to promote yoga, make it popular: make it accessible to every nook and corner of the

country. And then sooner or later the day will come when the whole country or in fact the whole world will stand in unanimity with this glorious practice known as Yoga.

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