

Philosophy, Psychology, Physiology, and Spirituality of Meditation: A Brief Note on Pātañjala Yoga

Hari Shankar Prasad

Professor & Head, Department of Philosophy
University of Delhi
E-mail: prof.hsprasad@gmail.com

Introduction

Undoubtedly, India is not only the birth place of the idea of Yoga and its practices, but it has also been the cradle of their development and the integral part of the Indian civilization and intellectual tradition since the Vedic–Upaniṣadic age followed by the Jaina, *Buddhist*, and other Asian cultural traditions in China, Japan, Sri Lanka, and the Middle East on Yoga and meditation. Technically, the two terms, Sanskrit 'Yoga' and English 'meditation,' do not mean the same thing, although they belong to the same discipline. Whereas Yoga means a mystical union of a particular state of the purified mind and the ultimate nature of reality, meditation means a series of techniques to achieve this union as a goal. Both Yoga and meditation are related to the various stages of the development of mind and that way in the process, each state of mind requires a unique meditative technique. In the Indian Yoga traditions, the three technical terms, which are key concepts and give the integrated idea of the modern use of meditation, are *yoga*, *samādhi*, and *dhyāna*. I will explain them along with some of their cognate terms in our discussion, but I will be mainly confined to Patañjali's Yoga.

It will be clear from the following discussion that for various reasons, it is neither possible to define precisely the term 'meditation' nor to find a common theory of meditation across the traditions. But one thing is common that meditation thinkers recognize the centrality of mind, which is the essential part of living human beings. It is a fact and also the first person singular experience, that the nature and function of human mind is most complex unlike any other sentient or insentient being. Realizing this fact, in the

Dhammapada the Buddha characterizes the mind as the forerunner of all actions, their controller, and the creator of the world out of itself.

History of Yoga and Meditation

In the post-Vedic period of the early Upaniṣads, for the first time, the Yoga theory and practice got prominence, although they must have had their origins in the deep past, thousands of years before the Upaniṣads. In the subsequent period, the two opposite streams of thought – the orthodox Brāhmaṇism promoted by the Upaniṣadic thinking and its allied schools, and its heterodox Śramaṇism led by the renunciants of Sāṃkhya, Jainism, and *Buddhism* were engaged in promoting their own views. The credit of working out the Yoga theory and practice goes to the *Buddhist* renunciants, whose *Samatha–Vipassanā* formulation started with the Buddha in the 6th century B.C., and later the systematized *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali, within the metaphysical framework of the early Sāṃkhya with crucial deviations, in the 1st–2nd century C.E. Needless to say, Patañjali's commentators developed the Yoga philosophy in great details. On the other hand, the systematization of Sāṃkhya philosophy was done by Īśvarakṛṣṇa in the 4th century C.E. To limit my present discussion on Yoga, I will not touch upon the Jaina and the *Buddhist* Yoga philosophy, or for that matter any other yoga tradition.

However, just to have an idea, let us look into the *Buddhist* Yoga tradition developed through various forms of literature. Historically, it began with the Nikāyas, which are the records of the Buddha's discourses, whose views were gradually developed in the subsequent Pāli Abhidhamma, Sanskrit Abhidharma of early Vasubadhu, Prajñāpāramitā texts followed by Nāgārjuna, and

Yogācāra school led by Maitreya, Asaṅga, and later Vasubandhu and their commentators. In the later period, the Yoga theory and practice were elaborated by Kamalaśīla in his text *Bhāvanākrama*. There are many other prominent attempts made by the later *Buddhist* scholars, which are too many to mention here.

It is of utmost importance to note that despite sharp doctrinal differences between Brāhmaṇism (schools having Upaniṣadic lineage) and Śramaṇism (heterodox schools), to a great extent they followed the common formal structure of Yoga practice. This commonality is discernible even in the modern concepts of meditation that are greatly influenced by Indian and other east Asian Yoga traditions (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, etc.), which have evolved and flourished under Indian influence.

Since meditation is a complex generic term, it does not say anything about a specific meditation view and way of practice, which involve their own cultural and doctrinal frameworks. Yet there is a wide scope for cross-cultural comparison. However, every meditative tradition has its own cultural and metaphysical contexts, purpose, method, and goal. Actually, the goal decides the course of agent's action to relate himself/herself to his/her desired ultimate reality. It may be religious, spiritual, psychological, desire for inner transformation, and physiological for personal benefits like perception of God for a devotee, overcoming of emotions, transformation of self for development of personality, and physiological transformation for bodily relaxation respectively. On the contrary, a neuroscientist would be interested only in the empirically grounded scientific analysis of the mechanisms of meditative practices, and their consequences.

Philosophy of the Pātañjala Yogic Meditation

Philosophy is not only a worldview or a discipline of conceptual analysis, but also a way of life, a meaningful and blissful life. The *YogaSūtras* of Patañjali, being the most systematized philosophy and guide for the practice of Yoga, it has been considered by all subsequent thinkers of meditation as the most authentic model of meditative techniques. Moreover, to understand its doctrinal framework, we will have to understand the Sāṃkhya metaphysics, which admits two fundamentally separate principles – pure consciousness (*puruṣa*) and the raw materiality (*prakṛti*), from which everything

evolves, which together constitute our sentient existence. Whereas *puruṣa* is passive, *prakṛti* is active in its both states, unmanifested (*avyakta*) when it is implicitly active (*sama*) and manifested (*vyakta*) state when it is explicitly evolutionary (*visama*). Thus, *prakṛti* is always dynamic whether it is in the state of equilibrium or in the process of evolution. Again, whereas the *puruṣa*, who is present in each individual, is unchanging (note that there is a plurality of *puruṣas*), *prakṛti* is constituted of three basic factors (*guṇa*) – *sattva* whose characteristic is intelligibility, *rajas* whose characteristic is activity, and *tamas* whose characteristic is inertia. However, each one of these *guṇas* stands for different processes individually as well as in combination of the three. According to Sāṃkhya, the mere presence of *puruṣa* causes evolution in *prakṛti* and this way the equilibrium of the three *guṇas* is disturbed and different types of evolutes in different combinations of these *guṇas* are produced. In a hierarchical scale, intelligence (*buddhi*) is the first evolute, which is pre-dominantly *sattva*. Likewise, down the line, in the move, the pre-dominance of intelligence decreases and the pre-dominance of other *guṇas* increases. In this manner, ego (*ahaṃkāra*), mind (*manas*), subtle essences (*tanmātra*), and gross elements (*mahābhūta*) are created. But in every case, there is all-pervasive co-presence of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. The Sāṃkhya metaphysics maintains that the whole evolution is for the sake of *puruṣa*. (Larson, 23). In this sense, the *puruṣa* is involved in some significant way in the process of evolution, although not directly and knowingly. It is always a problematic mystery. But how to explain the presence of sentience-element in the hierarchical evolutes of *prakṛti* like intelligence, ego, and mind? Let this remain unexplained because of my certain constraints.

Now, it is important to note that the *Yogasūtra* differs from Sāṃkhya position by introducing a technical term "*Citta*" (mind), which incorporates within itself the three qualitatively hierarchical evolutes – *buddhi*, *ahaṃkāra*, and *manas*. It is also the most crucial factor for the theory of meditation. Bryant (p. 52) succinctly explains Patañjali's this ingeniousness:

The Yoga school, while using the terminology of *buddhi* in particular, but also of *ahaṃkāra* and *manas*, differs somewhat from that of Sāṃkhya in conceiving these three as interacting functions of the one *Citta*,

mind, rather as three distinct metaphysical layers. *Citta*, then, as the term used by Patañjali and the commentators to refer to all three of these cognitive functions combined, is one of the most important terms in the *Yoga Sūtras*. Most importantly for the understanding of Yoga, the pure consciousness, is cloaked in the psychic layers of this *Citta* (as are the gross elements of the material body). The *puruṣa* is not only completely ontologically and metaphysically distinct from the *Citta* but potentially separable and autonomous. Indeed, such separation is the very goal of Yoga, a goal that is known by such terms as *mokṣa*, *mukti*, *hana*, and *kaivalya* – all synonyms of “freedom.”

Moreover, the most difficult part of Yoga philosophy is to explain the relation between *Citta*, which is materiality, and *citi*, which is pure consciousness, both of which seem to be the two modes of the same primordial reality, i.e. consciousness, for the common man who is under the spell of ignorance. The discipline of the Yoga (*yagānuśāsana*, cf. *Yogasūtra*, I.1) has many benefits in our worldly life, but the transcendent goal to liberate oneself from all kinds of worldly suffering and bondage is the ultimate purpose for the meditator, and that is possible in Sāṃkhya–Yoga system through discriminatory knowledge (*vivekajñāna*).

Yoga and the Process of *Samādhi*

Patañjali defines it as: *yogas cittavṛttinirodhaḥ* (I.2), i.e. Yoga consists in the withdrawal and stilling of mind’s proliferation, and its purification. According to his commentator Vyāsa, Yoga is *samādhi*, which is the all-pervasive character of the mind in all its five modes (*vṛtti* = *bhūmi*). (cf. *yogaḥ samādhiḥ; sa ca sārvaḥśāstrānāṃ Cittasya dharmah; kṣipraṃ muḍham vikṣitam ekāgraṃ niruddham iti Cittabhūmayah* (I.1). Elsewhere, etymologically ‘yoga’ means the union of two principles or modes of existence like individuality and divinity, or individual soul and God. But here it means ‘*Cittavṛttinirodha*’ or ‘*samādhi*.’ Since *Cittavṛtti* has no externally ontological counterpart and it is purely a series of perpetual mental states, it has only epistemic character and so it can be shown ontologically empty. Now, the question is how to devise a methodology, which can initiate and develop the process of *samādhi*, which requires lots of settings, such as:

- A desire to overcome the mind-generated suffering and a belief in the Yogic method;

- Preparation for initiating the process of *samādhi* under the guidance of a yoga adept, who requires to know the very temperament of the candidate;
- Knowledge of the Yoga metaphysics, purpose, and goal;
- Selection of an appropriate object (*ālambana*) of *samādhi*, and so on.

Key Technical terms

A person interested in Yoga theory and practice must be clear about the meanings of some crucial technical terms, such as:

yoga, samādhi, samprajñāta, dhyāna, samāpatti, bhūmi, ekāgratā, samprajñāta-samādhi, asamprajñāta-samādhi, sabīja-samādhi, nirbīja-samādhi, viraka, vicāra, ānanda, asmitā, abhyāsa, vairāgya, vivekabuddhi, kaivalya, and so on.

It must be kept in mind that yoga or *samādhi* process develops slowly but carefully in a qualitative progression in respect of *Citta* (*buddhi, ahaṃkāra*, and *manas*) from lower to higher, defiled to undefiled, ignorance to knowledge, anger to love, external to internal, self-indulgence to self-renunciation, egoism to altruism, suffering to bliss, and bondage to liberation.

Four Foundational *Sūtras*

Let us consider the following four foundational *Yoga Sūtras* for a better understanding of Pātañjala Yoga. These *Sūtras* along with its commentaries give an excellent elaboration of the progressive development of the yoga practice:

(1) *vitarka-vicāra-ānanda-asmitā-rūpa-anugamūt samprajñātaḥ //I.17//*

Translation (Bryant, 53): *Samprajñāta* [*samādhi*] consists of [the consecutive] mental stages of: absorption with “physical awareness,” absorption with “subtle awareness,” absorption with “bliss,” and absorption with “the sense of I-ness.”

(2) *kṣīṇa-vṛtter-abhijātasyaiva-maṇer-grahīṭ-grahaṇa-grāhyeṣu tat-stha-tad-añjanatā samāpattiḥ. //I.41//*

Translation (Bryant, 54): *Samāpatti*, complete absorption of the mind when it is free from its *vṛttis*, occurs when the mind becomes just like a transparent jewel, taking the form of whatever object is placed before it, whether the object be the knower, the instrument of knowledge, or knowledge.

(3) *tatra-śabdārthajñāna-vikalpaiḥ-saṅkīrṇa savitarka samāpattiḥ. //I.42//*

Translation (Bryant, 55): Savitarka *samādhi*, "samādhi absorption with physical awareness," is intermixed with the notions of word, meaning, and idea.

(4) *smṛti-parisuddhau-svarūpaśūnyevārthamātra-nirbhāsā nirvitarkā. //I.43//*

Translation (Bryant, 56): Nirvitarka [samāpatti] "absorption without conceptualization" occurs when memory has been purged and the mind is empty, as it were, of its own [reflective] nature. Now only the object [of meditation] shines forth [in its own right].

There are several technical words used in these *Sūtras* and each one has a special cognitive and phenomenological meaning. Further, the process of *samādhi* starts with the choice of an object of meditation, which may be physical or emotional, external or internal, imaginary or virtual, secular or religious, etc. Now, suppose a practitioner chooses a physical object, say, a book and cognizes it. In this cognitive process, there are three components – knower (*grahītr* = *pramātr*), knowledge instrument (*grahaṇa* = *pramāṇa*), and knowable object (*grāhya* = *prameya*). A very important point to note here is that whereas in an externalist realistic system like Nyāya, these components are externally independent, in Pātañjala Yoga-sūtra (I.41), they function within the domain of the mind (*Citta*). This shows that Patañjali's analysis of *Citta* follows phenomenological method.

The Yogic Process of 'Get-out'

After understanding the nature and functioning of the mind – which consists of *buddhi*, *aḥamkāra*, and *manas* – we have to understand that mind is the seat of external and internal sensory impressions, memory, predispositions, knowledge, ego, judgment, reason, positive and negative emotions, happiness and sorrow, self-awareness, self-reflection, self-transformation, aesthetic sense, and so on. In this sense, the mind is endowed with the seed (*sabīja*) of these mental factors. All these factors deposited in mind generate uncontrolled proliferating activities in it, which are the sources of suffering and bondage. This can be called 'Get-in' process of mind, which is in the process of depositing the predispositions of all types – sensory, conceptual, linguistic, reifying, psychological, ethical, religious, cultural, ideological, etc.

Further, *prakṛti* consists of both mind and body. *Puruṣa* is pure consciousness and independent from *prakṛti*, but it is naturally reflected in *buddhi*, when *buddhi* is in its pure *sattva* form. In other words, in this state, mind is just like a transparent jewel (*maṇi*) or mirror in which *puruṣa* is reflected, because of which mind comes to know *puruṣa*. In return, *puruṣa* sees his own image in the mind, which is not consciousness, rather a mode of materiality. Then comes the issue of liberation, which defines the separation of *citi* and *Citta*.

The purpose and goal of yoga is to achieve freedom from suffering, which requires cleansing of mental factors mentioned above. Since they are exclusively epistemic with no ontological element, it is possible through analysis of the mind and its factors, and practice of yoga – which step by step stills the mind, empties its predispositions, stabilizes it, creates spontaneity in its nature, and then goes for the final stage of single-mindedness (*ekāgratā*) – to overcome these factors. At the ultimate stage, it is ensured that all the predispositions of mind 'get-out' of the mind for ever, i.e. they are burnt completely beyond the possibility of revival. This is called seedless state (*nirbīja*). In this context, Patañjali presents two kinds of *samādhi* – *samprajñāta samādhi* and *asamprajñāta samādhi*. The former is still within the domain of the activity of *Citta*, whereas the latter is transcendent to the former. Each of the four *Sūtras* listed above is about a specific process and type of *samādhi*, which is also called *samprajñāta samādhi*. *Samādhi* is an act and also a state of mind, which focuses or concentrates on the chosen object when it is cognitively engaged and *samprajñāta samādhi* shows that character of *samādhi*, which involves the insight (*prajñā*) arising from it; it grasps and absorbs every form of reality from grossest to subtlest; and provides proper stability.

Again, a very crucial point to note here is that the practice (*abhyāsa*) of every *samprajñāta samādhi* discloses the mental and so ontologically empty character of every object of the meditation. This knowledge of emptiness leads to detachment (*vairāgya*) from all objects, both external and internal. Finally, the result of the yogic practice, *Cittavṛttinirodha*, is that it leads to psychological and physiological transformations in terms of psychological peace, spiritual bliss, and physical relaxation.

Bibliography

Primary Text

- Pātañjala Yogadarśana, with Vyāsbhāṣya, its Hindi translation, and Suvishada Hindi Vyakhya by Swami Hariharananda Aranya, edited by Ranashankara Bhattacharya, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.

Secondary Sources

- Bryant, Edwin F. (2016). 'Samādhi in the Yoga Sūtras,' in Halvor Eifring (ed.), Asian Traditions of Meditation, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 48–70.
- Larson, G.J. and Bhattacharya, Ram Shankar (ed.). (1987), Sāṃkhya: A Dualist Tradition in Indian Philosophy, Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, Vol. IV, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass.