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Spirituality: A forgotten Aspect of Yoga in Modern Time

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Abstract

This paper explores the place of spirituality in yoga from Vedic period to the present. Linking to its Vedic origin, an attempt is made to show spirituality as the key aspect of yoga that has nearly been forgotten in modern days. Its basic philosophy is to control our ever-fleeting mind dissociating it from materiality. Beginning from physical activities, it moves to mental ones and ends in spirituality that is the realization of the essence. The objective of this paper is to show how spirituality, the most essential aspect of yoga, has been forgotten in modern time. Referencing from different ancient scriptures and associating with different religions, this paper points out that spirituality is the essence of yoga practice and this aspect is dimmed and limited to physical activities at present. It is commoditized and detached from its spiritual association. Such activities have destroyed the originality of yoga. Following qualitative research design, this paper uses critical, analytical and interpretative methods for interpreting textual data to justify the claim. Critiquing the present trend of detaching yoga from spirituality, I argue for the continuity of yoga with its philosophical base. Otherwise, yoga will turn into just a form of physical exercise for physical fitness.

Keywords: Ever fleeting mind, materiality, spirituality, yoga, commodification

Introduction

As a heritage of Eastern knowledge tradition continuing from Vedic literature, yoga aims to control our ever-fluctuating mind to reach the stage of realizing ultimate truth. Now it has become a part of modern, western affluent society. People of all levels and professions are attracted to yoga and practicing it. Whether it is the east or west, yoga practice has become an important regular task. They mainly focus on different physical postures, *Asana* (posture) and breathing practices *Pranayama* (breathe control). Now yoga

is more concerned with physical fitness, treatment of physical problems and mental wellness rather than the spiritual realm. Its basic philosophy has been forgotten and superficial physical activities are tagged as yoga. In fact, the yoga that is taught and practiced today has very little in common with *Yoga Sutra* and other ancient yoga treatises like *Yoga-Yognavakya*, *Yogacara* etc. In this writing, I am drawing upon the historical root of yoga and the basic transformation it has passed through coming to modern time. My focus here is to show the detachment of yoga from spirituality, which was the prime concern in ancient times. However, it has been shadowed at present time with commodification and utilitarian purpose.

Yoga is an integrated form of physical, mental and spiritual practices, which has been in practice since Vedic period in Indian subcontinent. It aims to control fluctuating human mind in order to experience the ultimate truth about human beings and the world. As mentioned in *Yoga Yajnavakya* “Samyoga yoga yutukto Jivatma pramatmano” (Yoga is the union of Individual soul with the supreme soul). Until our mind is out of our control, peace does not matter. However, the moment we can control our mind, peace automatically follows and we are ready for a spiritual journey. As mentioned in *Yoga Sutra* (1. 1-2) “*Yogas Chittavrtti- nirodhdhya*”. “Yoga consists of the (intentional) stopping of spontaneous activities of the mind stuff” (qtd. in Zimmer 284). The focus point is the skillful control of fluctuating mental activities through yoga.

Heinric Zimmer talks about yoga in Vedic time. In the Vedic period, the sages were able to unite with the supreme soul and bring the sacred wisdom in different forms with the help of yoga. He points, “And he (sage) is able to maintain himself in the role (bringer into the form of every kind of sign instrument of sacred wisdom, charms, hymns and rites) because of the yoga technique that he attended” (80). He regards that yogic perception is what permitted the Vedic Seers (sages) to apprehend in single perception, the entirety of the Vedic revelation, which was like viewing the entire universe simultaneously in all parts. Although not mentioned in detail in Vedas, in Vedic period yoga practice was the way of revealing different aspects of human life and reality. Our Vedic texts are not the product of sense perception but revelation that was through intense yoga. Dr. Radhakrishnan defines yoga as an effort to collect all spiritual power and develop it for the realization of the transcendental truth. Yoga helps for collecting one’s self power and its utilization. “Yoga is to collect one’s all spiritual power in one place; balance it and develop it to realize the essence or the supreme being ” (qtd. in Joshi 4). Swami Muktananda has given great value to yoga, “Through intense, deep meditation (yoga) you reach a state that is beyond thought, beyond change and beyond imagination, beyond difference and duality” (qtd. in Wallis 1). The purpose of yoga is to take us to the situation, which is not influenced by any physical matter. It takes us to the state where differences and dualities will vanish, the state of existence beyond time and space. Furthermore, yoga

provides us with an expansive spiritual semantic framework of life. It becomes a means of self-improvement and self-transformation, and offers a transcendent layer of reality.

Spirituality involves the recognition of feeling or sense or belief that there is something greater than I am. Something more to being human than sensory experience; greater whole of which we are part in cosmic or divine in nature. Yoga has a strong association with spirituality. The base of yoga is the idea that there is something beyond the perception of our senses. To achieve that, we need to control our senses and ever-fluctuating mind. This association concerns various aspects of spirituality such as spiritual aspiration, search for insight and wisdom, and integrated worldview. A sense of meaning and peace, faith, compassion and eternal happiness are part of spirituality. In the case of yoga, conscious interaction, trust in transcendental truth and search for insight and wisdom are important components. Csala et al., show the linkage between yoga and spirituality. They argue that yoga has the power to take us beyond the physical world that is the spiritual world. “Yoga practice can evoke divine and transcendental experience; it offers them a possibility to transcend the here and now, which elicits the feeling of freedom” (9). All philosophers who talk about yoga believe that spirituality is the essence of Yoga. All yogic practices aim at achieving the spiritual state that sensual perception can never achieve.

Methodology

This paper follows the qualitative research design accessing data from both primary and secondary sources. To justify the claim, extensive library research was conducted using books, journal articles and reviews from both print and digital versions. Though not limited to any particular theory, this paper uses eastern intellectual traditions for exploring the ideas and spirituality is the key tool for textual analysis.

Spirituality is the key concept of eastern intellectual tradition that values something greater than this mundane life. It accepts something more to being human than sensory perception and considers that the greater whole of which we are part is cosmic or divine in nature. It is not superstition, but faith in cosmic power that controls the whole cosmology. Spirituality encourages people to have better relationship with themselves, others and the unknown. For the study of yoga, spirituality proves to be a valuable concept.

Historical Root of Yoga

When we go for the historical root of the term yoga, we find it in *Rig Veda* or Vedic *Samhita*. There is not much explanation of yoga in Vedas. However, scholars argue that in *Rig Veda* in 5.82, 7.103 and 10.136 there are references of yoga. In 5.81 of *Rig Veda*, there is clear indication of yoga. “The priests of him, the lofty priests well skilled in hymns harness their spirit, yea, harness their holy thought” (Griffith 269). Harnessing the spirit and harnessing the thought are functions of yoga here. The Vedic sacrifice was itself a

form of yoga: the chanting of the hymns and the ritual of the sacrifice serving as aids to the process of internalization. *Katha Upanishad* has the earliest extant systematic account of yoga and bridges from the earlier Vedic uses of the term. In it, we find probably the first unambiguous use of the word yoga in the teaching given by Yama to Naciketas in chapter 3. In this well-known teaching about the nature of the self, Yama begins by emphasizing the efficacy of “rites rightly performed” (3.1), before comparing the self (*Atmana*) to a rider in a chariot, with the intellect (*Buddhi*) as the charioteer and the mind (*Manas*) as the reins. The senses are compared to the horses and the sense objects to the paths. 3.5 goes on to teach that the person whose mind is uncontrolled has no control over the senses, in the same way as unruly horses beyond the control of the charioteer. 3.6 explains that the senses of a person who has understanding and whose mind is restrained obey him as obedient horses obey the charioteer. The one with uncontrolled mind and lack of understanding remains on the cycle of rebirth; he who has understanding and control over his mind (and who is “pure”) reaches the “final step from which he is not reborn again” (*Katha Upanisad* 3.8). In *Katha Upanisad* 6.10 and 6.11, we learn that: “When the five senses (...) together with the mind cease (...) and the intellect itself does not stir, that, they say, is the highest state. This, they consider to be yoga, the steady control of the senses. Then one becomes undistracted for yoga comes and goes.” (Translation Radhakrishnan). Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutra* presented a systematic description of yoga: its philosophy and practice. It has been divided into four chapters or *Padas*. First, one is *Samadhi Pada* that consists of 51 sutras. This is the main technique that yogi learns by which to calm the working of the mind. Second is *Sadhana Pada* that consists of 55 sutras. In this chapter there, we find the discussion of *Kriya Yoga* and *Ashtanga Yoga*. Third part is *Vibhuti Pada*, having 56 sutras, is about *samyama*. Last one is *Kaibalya Pada*, having 34 sutras. It is the isolated state where the content of mind is not disturbed by anything else. It is the state of *Moksha*.

There are two broader theories about the history of yoga: Linear and synthesis (“Yoga”). Linear theory regards that Yoga has Vedic origin. Hindu scholars prefer this theory. However, the synthesis theory has a different view. It does not accept yoga as purely Vedic but synthesis of indigenous non-Vedic (shamanic) practice with Vedic practice. “Yoga probably has its earliest roots in the indigenous shamanic practice of South Asia” (Wallis 3). Western scholars prefer this synthesis model. Regarding the goal of yoga there are two views. Classical *Astanga* (eight limbed) yoga system regards the goal of yoga is to achieve *Kaiballaya* and remain in the state of pure awareness. However, another view, specially supported by *Tantra*, regards the union of individual self with the cosmic Self as the goal of yoga. This group focuses on the state of meditation (*Samadhi*).

Yoga and its Pervasiveness

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* established systematic explanation of yoga both as practice and philosophy and opened the path for its proper practice. It contains 196 *sutras* (aphorisms) compiled thousands of years ago by Maharshi Patanjali. Each *sutra* provides divine knowledge to be united with the higher self. Patanjali has combined three traditions in it. From *Sankhya* he took the dualism of *Prakriti* and *Purusha*, from Buddhism he took the concept of the state of awareness, and from Vedanta he took importance of Self\ Atma\Brahma as observer (*Drasta*). Patanjali has identified five basic impurities of the mind. They are called '*Kleshas*' or hindrances of our mind. They never let our mind be free for the realization of the transcendental truth. A yogi should recognize them and move ahead to surpass them. *Abidhya* (ignorance) is the great obstacle for us. At the same time *Asmita* (ego), *Raga* (attachment), *Dweshha* (jealousy) and *Avinivesha* (fear of death) hinder our path to realize the essence. First, we should clear the hindrances of our mind then only we are prepared for yoga.

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* puts forward 'eight limbed yoga' or *Astanga* yoga. It gives high importance to the preparation for yoga mentally and physically. A person doing yoga has to pass certain processes before beginning real yoga. First, one has to follow *Yama* (restraints) and the *Niyama* (observance). Then one has to practice *Ashana* (various postures) related to various parts of the body. Along with *Asana*, *Pranayama* (breath control) is to be practiced. Then the practicing yogi has to pay attention to the way of withdrawing outgoing senses to inward (*Pratyahara*). Once *Pratyahara* is successful then the practice moves to fixing attention to one object (*Dharana*). All these stages are very important to reach the final stage (*Samadhi*), nothing disturbing from outside phenomena. The sense of detachment with any object leads to the stage of spiritual freedom called *Kaiballya*. This system focuses much on our consciousness. Our fluctuating consciousness should be taken to introspection for achieving *Kaiballya*.

Nath Yoga practices and Tantric practices especially focus on the act of arousing *Kundalini* that simultaneously arouses consciousness. *Kundelini* is the female serpent energy coiled at the base of the spinal cord of the body, whose awakening and rapid rise affects the practitioner's inner transformation. They have identified seven points in our body called *cakras*. Generally, our bodily power flows downward. If our effort with asceticism becomes able to arouse *Kundekini* the power begins to move upward from a lower point called *Muladhara*. Then it moves to *Swadisthana* (testies or ovaries) and then to *Manipura* (pancreas). Next 'cakra' is *Anahata* (heart) and moves to *Vishuddha* (throat) and then to *Ajna* cakra (third eye) and at last to *Sahasrara* (the crown) where unity to the Supreme Being takes place. This unity called *Sama rasata* or enlightenment is the ultimate blessing that one experiences.

Importance of Yoga is not limited to Hinduism; in other religions like Jainism and Buddhism, also it is important. In Jainism, it is important for liberation and purification of the self from karma. Their extreme focus is *Ahimsha*. Other qualities like austerity (*tapas*) like fasting and yoga have higher place. The goal of yoga in Jainism is spiritual upliftment. In Buddhism, yoga is valuable for detaching from *Maya* and reaching to *Nirvana*. The *Yogacara* (yoga practice) school of Mahayana Buddhism is earliest Buddhist tradition to employ the term yoga to denote its philosophical system. They follow yoga to eliminate the cognitive error that prevents liberation from suffering existence.

Spirituality Versus Materiality: Modern Perception of Yoga

The above discussion makes it clear that spirituality is the essence of yoga philosophy and practice in different religious traditions. However, the movement of yoga to modern times has passed through different changes. When we see yoga as if part of popular culture at present, we feel that something grave is missing. That missing point is spirituality. The missing point is its philosophy that always keeps yoga in touch with the spiritual realm. “The lack of extant classical yoga lineage makes a genuine modern comprehensive understanding of *Yoga Sutra* challenging because of the long standing lack of practitioners and lineage” (Schipke 6). Previously western world was unaware about yoga and other aspects of eastern intellectual traditions. Swami Vivekananda, Paramhansa Yogananda,, Sivananda, Kuvalyayananda, Hariharananda Aranya and Krisnamacharya made yoga famous in the West (White 20). Gradually, yoga became so famous in America; its commodification began. “In the United States in particular yoga has become a commodity” (White 1). This commodification has detached it totally from spirituality.

We have discussed about yoga focusing on its historical root tracing from Vedic literature. *Katha Upanishad* elaborately presents the value of yoga for life and afterlife. *Yoga Sutra* made yoga accessible and practicable to all of us with elaborate descriptions of the process. *Tantric* and *Nath* tradition focused on arousing self-power. Buddhism and Jainism also equally focused on the value of yoga for spiritual upliftment. However, if we analyze the western literature written about yoga practice we find it clear that in the west yoga is limited to physical exercise for physical and mental fitness. The philosophical aspect of yoga that focuses on spirituality has not been the part of yoga. Here we are analyzing three articles written by western scholars that clearly show that yoga in the west is not as it should be.

In the article “The state of stretching: Yoga in America” the writer Jarian Polis Schurtz seriously raises the issue of deviation in yoga. In western context, the spiritual aspect of yoga has been abandoned. “The private practice of yoga in America has dispensed with its ritual superstructure; and strong sense of spiritual discipline” (39). According to her, the ancient concept of union with the supreme soul or realization of the

essence of truth is gone now. At present essence does not count what counts is appearance. So she is in dilemma, “will we be able to choose a path of union now or will we have to wait as so many of us do in our lives, and as so many civilizations have done – until a major collapse forces our hand from our algorithmic games into a unified gesture of reverence toward the sky” (41). She finds the western society influenced so much by materialism, it is somehow impossible to return to spiritualism. Therefore, she sees the need of certain apocalyptic events to turn us back to spirituality. Otherwise, it is not possible. We are much intoxicated by materialism, and gone so far from spiritualism; normal effort cannot bring us back.

Showing his concern about the spiritual aspect of yoga J. Evola in his essay “Yoga: Immorality and Freedom” points, “the real substance and final aim of yoga are often set aside in favor of commonplace application” (224). In the name of making commonplace application, its essence has been forgotten. We accept that yoga should be used for human welfare but without detaching it from its essence. Now yoga is limited to physical training, treatment of physical and mental problems and its spiritual aspect is in shadow. Focusing superficial activities, its depth dimension is ignored. This ignoring has decreased the value of yoga itself. “In the case of yoga, if the depth dimension be set aside, little remains but an empty husk of little use not only in the practical but also in theoretical field” (225). These lines seriously show the situation of yoga at present. Its depth, the spiritual dimension has been set aside and yoga is limited to physical exercise. Because of the negligence to spirituality, both theory and practice are in deteriorating condition. The example of an empty husk is very appropriate here. Yoga without the sense of spirituality is an empty husk that cannot lead to regeneration.

Westerners do not hesitate to criticize the yoga philosophy being too spiritual and disregarding changing time. In a society devoid of spirituality and totally guided by materialism, spirituality becomes much more abstract. They forget that in every human being there are certain aspects that cannot be explained by modern science and materialism. Ian Whicher in his essay “Yoga and Freedom: Reconsideration of Patanjali’s Classical Yoga” presents his explanation of Patanjali’s classical yoga to correct certain misunderstandings. At the same time, he shows that eastern yoga tradition has a strong connection with spirituality that can not be achieved by materialistic modern man. Therefore, they blame it as excessively spiritual, isolationist and overlooking the highest potentials for human reality, vitality and creativity. The writer defends traditional yoga of Patanjali, “Patanjali’s yoga can be seen as responsible engagement in various ways, of spirit(*purusha*-self, pure consciousness) and matter (*prakriti*-the source of psychological being which includes mind, body, nature), resulting in a highly developed transformed and participatory human nature and identity, an integrated and embodied state of liberated

selfhood (*Jivanmukti*)” (272). Forgetting the essence of yoga, that is spirituality, people are attempting to justify their detachment from it by blaming yoga for being too spiritual.

Discussion of the yoga practice in ancient times in the east and modern time in west has clarified certain differences. In ancient times, from Vedic period, classical period to medieval period, spiritual quest was the essence. Every practitioner called yogi aimed to have transcendental truth either in the form of Supreme Self or inner Self. The supreme state achieved by yoga remained permanent and unaffected by any impurities. There the transcendent principle with which one communed was not the external reality in any way, but rather the highest rarefied essence of one’s being. In Vedic period, yoga was the source of all things: power to generate and power to destroy. Different tantric yogis practiced yoga for surpassing all physical boundaries. However, in modern times, especially in western societies, the essence of yoga has been forgotten. They have limited it to physical activities with certain mental practices. Spiritual realm has gone far and far from yoga practice. The articles that we discussed in previous paragraphs show that modern yoga practice is devoid of its ancient goal that was to have knowledge of transcendental truth. Certain practitioners do yoga for physical fitness, others for treatment of certain physical problems. In a few cases, mental betterment is also included but the spiritual aspect is left behind. Scholars like Jarian Polis Schurtz see the need of certain apocalyptic events to return to the spiritual aspect. For making yoga applicable to daily life, its spiritual aspect has been neglected. More than that, the westerners attempt to blame *Yoga Sutra* being too abstract and unfit for modern times. They have neglected the spiritual aspect of human beings, which cannot be controlled physically. The main cause of it is the separation of yoga philosophy and yoga practice. Yoga should not be taken just as physical activity or movement of different parts of our body. It is the combination of physical, mental and spiritual practice with a strong philosophical base. The understanding of yoga as a holistic philosophical and methodological framework, particularly concerning its fundamental spiritual nature and objectives, is often missing. On the other hand, there is an extensive body of literature, indicating that spirituality is highly relevant to human functioning and health.

Conclusion

This discussion of yoga clarifies that it originally is for spiritual purification, for unity with the supreme soul or realization of one’s true self. All the other physical and mental activities are preparation for the *Kaibalya*, a pure state. Our discussion of different texts like *Rig Veda*, *Katha Upanisad*, *Yoga Sutra* and *Nath Yoga* prove the strong connection between yoga and spirituality. The essence of yoga is not the physical and mental activities that are performed in practice but the spiritual one. Reaching to the pure state where an individual loses one’s self and unites with the supreme soul is the goal. The

discussion of the modern texts on yoga justifies that in modern time the spiritual aspect is disregarded. The true yoga philosophy is blamed as too abstract and impractical. Different changes have affected the yoga practice in the modern era. Now, yoga is very famous in both the west and the east, however, it is in its new form. Change is natural but the serious matter is the trend of forgetting its original essence. It is devoid of its spiritual realm and limited to exercise for physical fitness and mental wellness. The aspect that is more dangerous is its commodification and its use in popular culture. We need to preserve its spiritual dimension to preserve its essence. For that, we should take its philosophy to people rather than just confining to physical and mental practices. Yoga should not be separated from its philosophical or spiritual aspects. Only its philosophy and spirituality can keep it near to its original form.

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