

SPIRITUAL AND SCIENTIFIC ASPECTS OF YOGA

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Abstract

Yoga has gained tremendous popularity in the last few years. Yoga, today, is generally accepted and famous for its therapeutic use and a tool for physical fitness. As a serious philosophical, spiritual and scientific discipline, yoga has usually overlooked by the academicians. The present paper is an attempt to explore the spiritual and scientific aspects of yoga. It also tries to present a logical analysis of the same.

Spiritual life is the true genius of India. Those who made the greatest appeal to Indian mind are the holy sages, the '**Rishis**' who teach us that pride and power, wealth and glory are nothing in comparison with the power of spirit. Yoga is a spiritual science for the integrated and holistic enlargement and magnification of our physical, mental as well as moral-spiritual facets. Yoga is based on the philosophy that is practical and useful for our daily lives. Yoga constructs desirable physiological alternations and has sound scientific foundations. **Carl G. Jung**, the eminent Swiss psychologist described yoga as, "**one of the greatest things the human mind has ever created.**" The aim of yoga is the alteration of human beings from their ordinary form to an ideal form.

Modern research has recognized the scientific roots of yogic practices and yoga has now achieved international recognition and acclaim. The motto of yoga is to train and prepare human being for the life at the higher plane. Mere physical fitness and maintaining a sound health is not the objective of yoga-philosophy. Its aim is much-more higher than this.

KEYWORDS: Spirituality, self-realization, endurance, magnification, awakening, irresistible, therapeutic, flexibility, contractibility

SPIRITUAL AND SCIENTIFIC ASPECTS OF YOGA (FULL PAPER)

In this modern world of 21st Century, our environment is struggling for endurance and survival. We the human beings suffer more and more physical and psychological stress and strains. We cannot always control them, but can find out the ways to face them. To this end '**yoga**' is a good creation. It is an ancient discipline. It is recognized as one of the most important and valuable gift of our culture.

Yoga has gained tremendous popularity in the last few years. Yoga, today is generally accepted and famous for its therapeutic use and a tool for physical fitness. As a serious philosophical, spiritual, and scientific discipline, Yoga has usually overlooked by the academicians. In this paper, I would like to discuss the

spiritual and scientific aspects of yoga along with a logical analysis of the same.

"Spiritual life is the true genius of India. Those who made the greatest appeal to Indian mind are the holy sages, '**the Rishis**' ---- --who teach us that pride and power, wealth and glory are nothing in comparison with the power of spirit"¹ To the ancients, yoga is a complete system. The entire purpose of yoga is spiritual in nature, according to the ancient sages. Yoga as a spiritual science meant for the integrated and holistic enlargement and magnification of our physical mental as well as moral spiritual facets. Yoga is based on the philosophy that is practical and useful for our daily lives. Yoga constructs desirable physiological alterations and has sound scientific foundations. **Carl G. Jung**, the eminent Swiss psychologist, described yoga as, "One of the greatest things the human mind has ever created."²

The word yoga originated from the 'Sanskrit word **yug**' which means to yoke, join or unite. This entails unifying all facets of the individual –body with mind and soul-to achieve a balanced life. The Practice of yoga may lead to the unification of the human with the celestial. The aim of Yoga is the alteration of human beings from their ordinary form to an ideal form. The Yogic practices began in the ancient depths of India's past. From the early period, the traces of interior attitudes and disciplines were found and later acknowledged and given logical expression by Pattanjali.

The yoga philosophy is an invaluable gift to all who bent upon spiritual realizations by the great Indian sage Maharshi Pattanjali. It is a great aid to those who wish to realize the existence of the spirit as an independent principle, free from all the limitations of body, the senses, and the mind. In the words of **G.Coster**, "We need a new kind of society for psychical research.....to demonstrate the ordinary public the possibility (or impossibility) of genuine super-physical experience on this side."³

Discovering the spiritual aspect of yoga, we find that "the value of yoga, as an important method of realizing the spiritual truth has been recognized by almost all the systems of Indian philosophy. We have clear evidence of the recognition of yoga practices even in the Upanishads, the Smritis, and the Puranas"⁴. Until and unless the mind or the intellect of a man is impure and unsettled, he cannot properly understand anything of philosophy and religion. If we are to know and realize the ultimate truth, we must have a pure heart and tranquil mind. In this respect, the practice of yoga is the best way of self-purification that is the purification of body and the intellect. That is why almost all the systems of Indian philosophy insist on the practice of yoga as the necessary practical side of a philosophy of life.

According to yoga system of thought liberation (**kaivalaya**) is to be attained through the direct knowledge of the self's distinction from the physical world including our body, mind, and the ego (**vivekagyan**) but this can only be realized when we are able enough to suppress and terminate the functions of the body and senses, the manas and the intellect and finally the ego(the empirical self) and yet have self-consciousness or experience of the transcendent spirit (**Purusha**). This is the realization of the self as the free, immortal spirit which is above sin and suffering, death and destruction. In other words, it is the attainment of freedom from all pain and misery, which is the state of liberation. The yoga system lays down a practical path of self-realization for the religious aspirants and sincere seeker after the spirit. The yoga system emphasizes the importance of the practical methods of purification and concentration for realizing the self's distinction from the body and the mind and thereby attaining liberation.

It is quite surprising that man expects to derive worldly pleasures and to satisfy all his gross and subtle wants even in the name of religion, but the fact is that sensual and worldly pleasures cannot provide him the extreme bliss, ecstasy, and contentment. Only through spiritual meditation, one can lead to the path of spiritual life. Spirituality is the science of one's inner self. To lead a spiritual life, physical and mental purity is essential. This inner

awakening and the irresistible urge to follow the lofty ideal indicate the beginning of a spiritual life.

When we go further to explore the scientific aspect of yoga, we find that yoga in fact is not only a philosophy but also a highly evolved science. "Yoga is the gift of our rishi culture, is a science and art of pure lifestyle. Yoga offers man a conscious process to solve his problems. Yoga helps the man to evoke the hidden potentialities of man in a systematic and scientific way by which man becomes a fuller individual".⁵ Yoga produces desirable physiological changes and has sound scientific basis. Modern research has established the scientific basis of yogic techniques and yoga has now gained international acceptance and acclaim. "In the **Maitrayani Upanishad** also yoga is described as the method of fixing our thoughts on the object of meditation and most of the characteristics of this science have been mentioned there in this connection."⁶

Yoga refers to a science, which helps to receive an ideal physical-mental elegance and excellence of consciousness. It refers to an almost height of physical, mental, and spiritual perfection. It is a science of total transformation of life. Yoga is an experiment for expression of the truth of life. It is the scientific process of transition of mind to a state of thoughtless sub-consciousness. Yoga is the philosophy of enjoying a life filled with comfort and pleasure.

"**Pattanjali**, the great saint has propounded three steps to make mind inclined towards the **practice of yoga ---practicing renunciation, yoga activity, and yoga having eight components.**"⁷ By practicing it an individual attains the highest stage of physical, mental, social, and spiritual perfection.

Now, we have to investigate the scientific effects of these eight components as suggested by **Maharshi Pattanjali**. According to the philosophy of "**Pattanjali-yoga**," a man can not realize, spiritual truths so long as his mind is tainted with impurities and his intellect vitiated by evil thoughts. It is in the pure heart and the clear understanding that the truth of the spirit is revealed and directly experienced. -----spiritual insight can be had only when the mind is purged of all impurities and rendered perfectly calm and serene".⁸ For the purification and enlightenment of the mind, practice of "Eightfold means of yoga"⁹ is required.

The first component of yoga is known as '**Yama**' which includes **five vows: Ahinsa, Satya, Asteya, aparigraha, and Bramacharya**. The practice of these five vows are very well-known to require any elaboration, even then **Pattanjali** explains these in detail and insists upon the scrupulously following them. The reason behind this is obvious. "It is a psychological law that a sound mind resides in a sound boy"¹⁰ **Pattanjali** is also of the opinion that a person who does not control his passions and impulses cannot be physically and mentally sound. Consequently, he cannot concentrate his attention on any object when his mind is distracted and dissipated by sin and crime, and other evil propensities. This explains the necessity of complete abstention from all the evil courses and technique of life for those who are eager to self-realization.

The second discipline of yoga is 'Niyam', which consists in the cultivation of good habits like 'Sauch', 'Santosh', 'Tapas' 'Svadhaya', and 'Ishwar-Pranidhan' which are essential for internal and external purification of body and mind. 'Asana' is third step and consists in the adoption of steady and comfortable postures. 'Pranayam', the fourth components is the 'regulation' of breath. These respiratory exercises are useful for strengthening the heart and improving its function, it has now recognized by medical sciences too. The yoga goes further and prescribes breath control for concentration of the mind because it conduces to steadiness of the body and the mind. 'Pratyahar' consists in withdrawing the senses from their respective external objects and keeping them under the control of the mind. 'These first five components of yoga' are regarded as the external aids to yoga (Bahirang-Sadhan), while the last three disciplines are said to be internal to yoga (Antarang sadhan) because they are directly related to the state of self-realization. These are 'Dharana', 'Dhyana', and 'Samadhi'.

'Dharana' is a mental discipline which consists in holding or fixing the mind (Chitta) on the desired object. This ability to keep one's attention steadily fixed on some object is the test of fitness for entering on the next higher stage of yoga. 'Dhyana' is the next step which means the even flow of thought about or rather round about the object of attention. It is the steadfast contemplation of the object without any break or disturbance. Thus Dhyana reveals the reality of the contemplated objects to the yogin's mind. 'Samadhi' is the last and the final step in the practice of yoga. In it the mind is so deeply absorbed in the object of contemplation that it loses itself in the object and has no awareness of itself.

Maharshi Pattanjali has presented the eight components of yoga in a very scientific and logical way, in which each discipline (steps) is in association and harmony with other components of yogic practices. They have designed in an ascending order to reach the height of perfection or self-realization. It is to be noted that no component in isolation can lead towards the ultimate end of life. Each step of eightfold path has a scientific and rational basis for the attainment of the state of self-realization.

Modern sciences and medical researches have proved the impact of yogic practices on human body. It has been proved that "during meditation, the body is silently resting to that thought is absorbed into prana (vital force). As in dreamless sleep so here too the only sign of life is breathing. The hypothalamus recharges its energy during meditation, as it does during sleep. We may deduce from this that whereas sleep is a compensating form of rest, meditation is a conscious one, and hence contains important therapeutic characteristics."¹¹

Psychologists are also of the opinion that meditation helps us to free ourselves from emotional conflict, inner discord, and psychological passion. It completely purifies the mind and frees it from unconscious instructions. Meditation enables the inner light to manifest itself. This is responsible for the awakening of self-awareness; hence one may penetrate to the very centre of life's highest values. Meditation is the most effective method to cope with the stress and strain of modern life.

Medical studies showed that "when yogi, during meditation, was observed, he was able to reduce his oxygen consumption considerable below his basic oxygen requirements. Carbon dioxide output was also reduced. All these observations suggested that yogic meditation leads to a hypo-metabolic mental relaxation, produced in the person as a result of meditations."¹²

Practice of yoga affect each and every part of body with positive responses. Practice of various 'asanas' leads to flexibility, stability, and functional integrity of nerves, muscles, vessels, and blood capillaries. Asanas exert influence, particularly over the heart, lungs, spinal cord, and endocrine glands. Yogic asanas impart physical and mental health over the body by controlling, regulating, and balancing the effect over the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system through the regular practice of yoga. Normal physiological activities of nervous system flexibility, contractibility of muscles, vital capacity of lungs, blood circulation, etc. such biological processes are toned up.

It is evident from the above description that 'yoga' is an ideal method for purifying as well as strengthening our body and mind. It provides all-round developments. The aim of yoga is achievement of physical, mental, and spiritual harmony. The philosophy of yoga is an internal expedition which creates an awareness and understanding of oneself and leads towards self-transformation. It is a primordial science of self-development that filters our mind and body and sustains perfect balance and harmony between them. Materialistic and sensory pleasures do give us happiness but real and lasting joy (Anand) comes by strengthening and purifying our body mind-soul complex. That is why, yoga has always given due importance to our physical body, subtle body as well as soul.

The point to be noted here is that the motto of yoga is to train and prepare human being for the life at the higher plane. Mere physical fitness and maintaining a sound health is not the objective of yoga philosophy. Its aim is much more higher than this. "The aim of yoga is to explore the region of genuine super-physical experience and to reveal the reality of man and the world- the real self, the Atman as eternally pure, enlightened, and free as the only true, unchanging happiness."¹³ Maharshi Pattanjali has presented the philosophy of yoga in such a unique manner that it not only harmonize the physical and mental abilities of a person but also through the path of yoga he has tried to fulfill man's physical and spiritual needs in a logical and scientific way. I would like to conclude by saying that yoga is not only an art but is a science and a philosophy also. It is closely related to all the levels-physical, mental, social, and spiritual perfection. It is a practical method that makes life meaningful, useful, and worth living. Yoga is a multidimensional aspect and its scope has increased in the modern life of twenty first century. Yoga is reliable with our ethnicity and harmonizing to science. So, it is our primary duty to endorse it further.

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