

Introduction to Yoga Philosophy

1: History of Yoga and the Yoga Literature

Prof. K. S. Arjunwadkar

Background and Context of Yoga

Man minus his insatiable urge of knowledge would be little different from other animals. This urge is manifested as much in knowing the outer or objective world as the inner or the subjective one. If the first line of search is in reply to the question 'what is all this that surrounds me?' the other line is in reply to the question 'who am I?' The justification for the second search lies in the fact that the first search presumes the existence of the knower, the subject. Means for the first search are basically the natural senses of perception, backed by the mind, which man is endowed with; they are ineffective for the second search as the subject lacks characteristics the sense organs can work upon. Man has to rely exclusively on mind for the second search. He soon realised that mind as it is unable to make headway in the second line of search, for, by its very nature, it is drawn to outer objects, and this habit prevents it from grasping the inner reality. How to withdraw it from the outer world? By centuries of observations and experiments, man found an answer to this question in what we now know as Yoga, the discipline for the control of mind – which, to use modern terminology, is applied psychology or mind engineering.

Sources of Yoga

If we set aside the inconclusive views of scholars of prehistory who interpret some clay seals found at Mohenjodaro and other sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation as illustrating Yogic postures, and also attempts of others to find the likeness of Yoga in the theories of Greek philosophers like Pythagorus, clear references to Yoga and use of its terminology are found from the times of the *Upanishads*. Of the older *Upanishads*, *Katha* (I.2.12, II.3.11) and *Shvetashvatara* (II.8-9, 12) are prominent sources of Yogic material. We come next to the *Bhagavad Gita* which, besides stray references elsewhere (Ch 8), devotes a whole chapter, the sixth one, to the practice of Yoga and related problems. From this literature, it appears that the word Yoga may be an abridgement of a longer one – '*Adhyatma Yoga*' (spiritual device) as *Katha* employs at one place (I.2.12) and '*Abhyasa Yoga*' (practical device) as *Bhagavad Gita* employs in 8.8.

Etymology and Usage of Yoga

Etymologically, the term Yoga comes from the root *yuj* to yoke (even this English word is historically related in sound and sense to the Sanskrit root *yuj*), unite, join etc. and is in use in a general sense of 'a means'ⁱ as well as a special sense of 'the control of (the modes/states of) mind'. It is in the first sense that the

Bhagavad Gita applies the term to a number of means of spiritual development such as action without worldly interest, devotion, renunciation and so on; while the *Yogasutra* defines it in the second sense. The author of the *Bhagavad Gita* has a brainwave when he looks at the meaning of the root *yuj* to unite, and makes a pun on the word Yoga: 'Although called union, Yoga is in fact a separation, – separation from the union with suffering!' (6.23)

Yogasutra and its Author

Patanjali's *Yogasutra* (4th-2nd c. B. C.) is the earliest available systematic work exclusively devoted to this subject and has remained the major source as well as an inspiration for later writers on this subject. Tradition credits Patanjali with substantial contributions to three distinct areas of study: grammar (*Maha Bhashya* on Panini's work), medicine (*Charaka Samhita*) and Yoga. The common thread that binds these apparently unrelated subjects is that they are designed to achieve purity – of speech, of body, and of mind respectively.ⁱⁱ There are some amusing anecdotes about Patanjali current in grammatical tradition, and also a Sanskrit playlet on him entitled *Patanjali Charita*. Though aimed at purity of mind, Yoga deals also with such physical and physiological aspects as contribute to the control of mind. This makes room for Yogic postures and breath control, – aspects which, along with some more methods of physiological control, eventually branched off into a separate school called *Hatha Yoga* (Yoga of force) with its own methodology, as against the earlier approach termed *Raja Yoga* (Royal Yoga or Yoga of persuasion). Our present knowledge of postures and breath control comes from the tradition of *Hatha Yoga*; Patanjali treats of these topics in a cursory way. Extant works on *Hatha Yoga* do not date as back as Patanjali's work. *Hatha Yoga* will be dealt with separately as we proceed.

Outline of the Yogasutra

The *Yogasutra* consists of 195 (or according to some, 194) *sutras*ⁱⁱⁱ divided into 4 parts (*padas*), meaning quarters, named in sequence as *samadhi* (contemplation), *sadhana* (aids), *vibhuti* (occult powers) and *kaivaly* (liberation). The first and the last of these treat of the nature of the essential or immediate means (deep meditation) and ultimate object (liberation) of Yogic practice. The second part deals with the secondary level means, i. e. means leading or contributing to *samadhi*; and the third part enumerates occult powers resulting from the Yogic practice at an advanced stage.

Yoga Among Six Philosophical Systems

Yoga has been given an honourable place among the six orthodox philosophical systems in Indian tradition and is mostly aligned to the *Sankhya* system as far as the metaphysical framework is concerned. The remaining systems also make similar pairs: *vedanta* and *mimamsa*; *vaisheshika* and *nyaya*. We find in this scheme that *sankhya*, *vedanta* and *vaisheshika* are really metaphysical systems

while the remaining ones, though aligned, may be superficially, to specific metaphysical systems, do not contribute to metaphysical thought; instead, they develop disciplines useful for scientific search. Thus, *mimamsa* is hermeneutics, *nyaya* is logic, and Yoga is the technique of realisation through mind control.

© Prof. K. S. Arjunwadkar

ⁱ The word is found in Sanskrit works on politics such as Kautilya's *Arthasastra* even in the sense of secret ways of killing an enemy by poison etc. This means that basically the word has a general sense which is limited to a particular one by the area of usage, context etc.

ⁱⁱ Modern scholars are not inclined to accept this tradition as representing the truth (vide *The Yoga System of Patanjali*, James Haughton Woods, Harvard, 1914); some also regard the author of the 4th section of *Yogasutra* different from that of the first three (vide *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, Margaret and James Stutley, 1977).

ⁱⁱⁱ A class of literature which is an exclusive characteristic of Sanskrit literary tradition, and is not found elsewhere in the world. It is a brief statement, with the utmost economy of words, of essential tenets of a system. This form evolved as a mnemonic aid to the study of a system.