

The Mind According to Yoga: An Overview

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The Central Mystery

Yoga philosophy holds that effects do not arise out of nothing. The future arises out of the past, and both apply to the same object, characterising it by its genesis and its destiny.¹

By the same token an end can influence a beginning. If you formulate a goal, you can decide on the appropriate first and subsequent steps to achieve it. In fact, we all are purposeful beings: our bodies are purposeful, and each smaller part within this whole, be it system, organ or cell, is purposeful. The purpose of life common to all life forms, from bacteria to plants and animals, seems to be the perpetuation of life itself.

It is only in human beings that purpose beyond living by instinct is conceived and pursued, as part of culture. We possess a mind uniquely capable of abstract thought and of solving problems by deliberation and deduction. This mind is at once a marvel and a mystery: what exactly is the mind, and what is its purpose? Why are we conscious of our own thoughts and emotions? Why do we exist at all?

The answers to these questions which probe the heart of our existence set the goal of Yoga. – a goal so lofty that it seems to loom beyond the realm of the achievable. It is nothing less than suspending the operations of the mind, at which point there is a state of being in which the soul appears in its true nature.²

So says the classic work on Yoga, the Yoga Aphorisms (*Yoga Sutra*) of Patanjali. Written some 2000 years ago, this work continues to shine its light on the subject down to modern times. It is helped by a writer of the 4th century, Vyasa, who clarified and expanded on Patanjali's concise statements in an engaging and authoritative commentary.

Here I outline Yoga philosophy by looking at some of the questions posed above and presenting the answers it gives concerning what life is all about. For Yoga does indeed posit answers and it could be said that, as human nature appears to have remained essentially unchanged over millennia, they are as relevant to us in the conditions of the modern world as ever they were. Only a bridge to understanding needs to be made through the use of current words and images. Thus, while drawing on the two authors, Patanjali and Vyasa, as the source of knowledge about Yoga philosophy, I shall also try to place it in the context of modern perceptions.

Why the Mind?

Why do we have a mind at all?

Yoga philosophy holds that the mind is an instrument of understanding, and that understanding has two paths, external and internal. The former leads to comprehension of the universe, while the latter brings knowledge of the inner world of the spirit, that is, the soul. These distinct, contrasting paths are described in terms of a twofold purpose of the

world as presented to our minds: experience and enlightenment leading to spiritual freedom.³

Each person as a living being is steered, as it were, by what is called its "inner instrument", consisting of the thinking faculty, the mind, and its adjuncts, ten subsidiary faculties whose function is perception and motor activity. These are the five senses (smell or nose, taste or tongue, sight or eyes, touch or skin, hearing or ears) and the five instruments of action (grasping or hands, locomotion or feet, speech or voice, reproduction or genitals, excretion or anus).

The sense organs are designed to perceive specific stimuli from the outside world, and their spheres of operation do not overlap. Thus the nose perceives odour, the tongue flavour, the eye form-and-colour (simultaneously), the skin contact, and the ear sound. These five are considered to have a one-to-one match with the constituent elements of the universe: earth, water, fire, air and space.

The relationship is rather more complex than that, as earth, the first element in this list, has all the properties of the preceding ones (flavour, form-and-colour, contact, sound) in addition to its own special property (odour), and the succeeding elements have four, three, two and one respectively of the five properties. This is not mysticism, but represents an early attempt at explaining the diversity of phenomena: this is done by postulating different proportions and combinations of the five elements, which can be understood as the principles of solidity, fluidity, light-and-heat and gaseousness. What this analysis brings out clearly is the interrelation between ourselves and the universe around us which is our home as well as the fabric and framework of our existence.

It is worth taking a closer look at the relationship between the mind and the senses. When the mind is quiet, the senses stop being active and become quiet.⁴ One of the branches of training in Yoga deals with sensory control, described as withdrawing the senses from their objects. The key to this is mastery of the mind.

The mind operates at different qualitative levels: it can be distracted, dull, variably distracted (i.e. sometimes steady), focussed or controlled.⁵ These levels can vary either in time or with training.

When the senses are not busy connecting to external objects and the mind is not engaged in activity that makes it restless, the result is tranquillity. This is a prerequisite for meditation, for it is only with serenity securely in place that it is possible to explore the inner core of being, undisturbed by the outer world. And meditation, according to Yoga, is distinct from the levels of mind found in normal life.⁶

But before we get beyond the everyday mind we need to understand its functions.

What is the Mind?

The mind oversees every aspect of the workings of the body: physical co-ordination, physiological process, sensory activation and control, nervous reaction, hormonal function and emotion. But beyond that it rules in another realm entirely, that of thought. Cerebral thinking encompasses two broad but overlapping categories: abstract and creative. The

former includes ideas based on logic, such as deduction and mathematics. The latter embraces ideologies, religion, artistic expression, intuition and play. Problem solving arguably belongs to both. All these intellectual processes are supported by the ability to communicate through language and to retain memories of experiences and facts. They are also supported by that integral part of the life process, deep sleep.

Yoga philosophy is largely concerned with ways to control the mind, and has therefore considered in depth what the mind is and how it works. The conclusions it puts forward are both fascinating and illuminating.

The Yoga literature describes the components forming the basic shape of the mind and the modes in which it operates. They can be likened, to take a modern analogy, to the hardware and software of a computer, and together they set the parameters which determine its functions and activities. There are five components and five modes.

The components of the mind are characterised as afflictions (*kleshas*), or more precisely, the causes of affliction and suffering. The first of these is ignorance of the distinction between the spiritual soul and the material mind (*avidya*). The second is the sense of individual identity (*asmita*). Then there is a pair of psychological dispositions: attachment (*raga*) and aversion (*dvesha*) with regard to objects, people and ideas. Finally there is the will to live or the survival instinct (*abhinivesha*). The first component, ignorance, is the most fundamental and gives rise to the others.⁷

The modes of the mind relate to modes of cognition or understanding. The first is valid or correct cognition (*pramana*), which may be based on direct perception through the senses, logical inference or the testimony of reliable authorities who transmit knowledge that they themselves can attest to. The second is incorrect cognition (*viparyaya*), which is not founded on the real form of an object and is shown to be false by a subsequent accurate cognition. More than some kind of unintended misperception, such as mistaking a rope for a snake (to take a classic Indian example), this is considered to be a distinct mode of the mind which is a manifestation of the root affliction, ignorance. The third is conceptualisation (*vikalpa*), which is the cognition based on the constructs of language rather than objective reality. The fourth mode is deep sleep (*nidra*), defined as the mental state based on the experience of nothingness where there is an absence of objects for the mind. Lastly comes memory (*smrti*), defined as the retention of what is experienced.⁸ The mind moves between these five modes rather as one tunes in to different radio stations.

This analysis of the structure and functions of the mind gives a systematic framework for understanding the various intellectual and emotional processes that constitute its input and output.

It is the guide for any therapeutic work which seeks to alleviate mental and emotional stresses by means of Yogic practices.

Yogic Practices for the Mind

There are various types of Yogic practices, all impinging on the mind in different ways. *Asanas* (postures) deal with psychosomatic aspects and affect mood, confidence and focus. For example, forward bends bring calmness as the front brain rests in a downward position. Backbends are exhilarating; they also strengthen the nerves as they access the

anterior spine. Inverted poses where the brain and heart are below the legs encourage concentration, serenity and a balanced attitude to life.

Pranayama (breath control) deals with the link between mind and breath, using the breath to enhance mental focus and introversion. At the same time breath control relaxes the hold of the senses on the mind, opening the door to the practice of withdrawal of the senses from external objects (*pratyahara*). This is done with the help of the back brain, which has the power to witness and observe rather than to be involved in actions.

The back brain, which allows a witnessing state of consciousness, is the key to meditative states (*dhyana* and beyond) which are the culmination of Yogic practice. These involve the progressive shedding of cognitive and emotional functions so that the person becomes completely absorbed in the meditation, losing all sense of individual identity. The goal is to experience of the soul: to exist as one's spiritual being. Indeed, Yoga philosophy states that consciousness *is* the soul itself⁹ and is utterly distinct from, though generally confused with, the mind. It considers that the state of deep, dreamless sleep is a pristine experience of the soul and aims deliberately to replicate this experience in waking life.

Yoga Psychology Applied

Yoga philosophy teaches that the root cause of suffering is ignorance of a person's spirituality. It holds that the mind is material, not spiritual, and as such is ever-changing and full of desires and aversions which cause people to act. These actions create consequences which, according to the law of karma, binding people to this world of suffering (and, further, to reincarnation in an eternal cycle of birth and death). The sense of personal existence and the instinct to cling to life augment this process.

Because the mind is material it partakes of the three qualities of matter (light, darkness or inertia, and activity) which manifest psychologically as intelligence, dullness and passion in an ever changing flux. Emotions in full flow become enemies of the mind: desire, anger, greed, delusion, pride and envy. Yoga practice aims to master the emotions and cogitations of the mind and bring it to a state of balance and peace.

Emotions and thoughts are connected to energy plexuses (*chakras*) in the body, such as the heart centre, the solar plexus in the abdomen and the sexual centre. Life stresses and habits often cause these centres to go out of balance, becoming blocked or overactive. Yoga addresses such imbalances through cleansing and harmonising methods. Anxiety, for example, is allayed by forward bends which calm the gut. Fear and depression are lessened through backbends which expand the chest and relieve compression of the lungs and heart. Inverted poses encourage the flow of blood to the head, revitalising the sense organs and variously focusing, energising or calming the brain.

Yoga philosophy teaches detachment and equal-mindedness in the face of both success and failure and suggests ways to bring this about – through breathing, contemplation of good lives, compassion, and so on.¹⁰

All these Yogic actions and experiences leave imprints (*samskaras*) on the mind-body complex and repeated practice changes the subconscious make-up of the mind. Many students who have been smokers find they stop smoking without effort as they no longer feel the need for it. Similarly, they change their diet, become less angry and more tolerant

because they feel calmer and more confident in themselves. They gain a perspective on their problems and an inner strength to deal with them.

This brief overview has only touched on Yoga's many tools for understanding and relieving psychological stresses and disorders.

¹ *Yoga Sutra 4.12*

² *Yoga Sutra 1.2-3*

³ *Yoga Sutra 2.18*

⁴ *Yoga Sutra 2.54*

⁵ *Yoga Sutra 1.1 Commentary*

⁶ *Yoga Sutra 1.1 Commentary*

⁷ *Yoga Sutra 2.3-4*

⁸ *Yoga Sutra 1.6-11*

⁹ *Yoga Sutra 2.20*

¹⁰ *Yoga Sutra 1.32-39*

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