



The status of patañjali-yoga in the Indian philosophical tradition

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Abstract

Yoga, as a system of philosophy and way of life, is one of the most ancient and noble gifts of India to the world. Yoga is more common among people as a physical exercise that helps one to tame his mind and body. Yet in the philosophical tradition of India it has an important status as any other school of thought. This article addresses Yoga as it is a philosophical discipline where the antiquity of Yoga as a word and concept, the contribution of Patañjali to the system of Yoga, the nature of Yoga as it is defined by Patañjali in his *Yogasūtras* and *aṣṭāṅgayoga* are elaborated. Its metaphysical affinity with the system of Sāṅkhya is detailed. A special attempt is done to address the age old enigma of Yoga namely the status of God in Yoga on the basis of teachings of Patañjali in the *Yogasūtras*.

Keywords: philosophical tradition, patañjali-yoga, physical exercise

Introduction

There are nine schools in the philosophical tradition of India which are broadly divided into two groups namely orthodox and heterodox. The division is based on the acceptance of the Vedas as the fundamental source of authenticity. The orthodox (accepting Vedas) systems are Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā and Upaniṣads or Uttara-Mīmāṃsā. The heterodox systems are Cārvāka, Jainism and Buddhism. Each of these schools (*darśanas*) took different views of life regarding its origin, cause and cessation of suffering, the ways to attain the supreme happiness, nature of the highest knowledge and the Absolute Reality behind the world of appearance and so on. Though these systems vary in the said details, one of the common features is that they are basically oriented to liberation with an exception to the school of Indian Materialism, Cārvāka. While proposing a way of liberation these systems also give philosophical explanations of the universe, but it is only accidentally. The character of this liberation in fact is the realization of the true nature of the Individual Self that wrongly identifies itself with the material attachments projected on it for its real nature.

Yoga, one of these nine schools is well discussed throughout the world especially in the present state of affairs. This article is an attempt to locate the status of Patañjali-Yoga in the philosophical tradition of India. The methodology is analytical. The very definition of Yoga given by Patañjali in the *Yogasūtras* is discussed here and the nature of God according to this school also is elaborated.

Yoga

The antiquity of Yoga as a word and concept is as old as Vedas. “The tradition of Yoga is very ancient. It is certainly

pre-vedic. The discovery of an image in Yogic posture in the ruins of Mohenjodaro in Sind (Pakistan) is a strong evidence to support that the Yogic cult is of hoary antiquity [1].” Even though Patañjali is considered as the founder of the system of Yoga it is not his original invention and even he does not claim it. For, the very first sutra of the text is; “*athayoganusāram*” by which Patañjali points out that, the matter of discussion is of ancient origin and he is not the inventor, but a student who has understood it in its appropriate depth under his own instructor and is now skilled to convey his understanding with his followers.

Yoga as the term and the concept is seen in Vedas, Upaniṣads, and other Indian texts and it has a variety of meanings too. The term Yoga is an etymological derivation of the Sanskrit root *yuj* which means to join. The meaning of the word ‘to join’ demands further interpretation since to join is to join with something. What may be that metaphysical end to which the Yogin should join? While analyzing the history of the concept of Yoga in Upaniṣads and the Epics this question gets better clarity.

“In the Pre-Upanishadic times, in the Vedas and the Brahmanas, the word Yoga has a meaning that shifts between profane and religious. From the meaning of yoking it gradually slides into metaphorical meaning of repression and subjugation of the senses. This change of mentality brings about the spiritualization of the notion of Yoga, which becomes a mental discipline in the service of spiritual liberation [2].” “The essential content of Yoga contained in the described Epic texts are namely; (a) closing of the impression of the outside world (b) the suppression of the thinking process (c) and finally the emergence of real Yogic experience

¹ Narendranath Sharma, *Yoga karnika*, p. xiii.

² Gaspar M. Koelman, *Patanjali yoga, From Related Ego to Absolute Self*, p.4.

on the shining forth of the Ātma [3].” Here it is clear that in the original usage of the word and the concept, the metaphysical end of the Yogic practice is Ātma; in other words self-realization.

Yoga in essence is acknowledged by all the schools as a technique of asceticism, which in its climax can lead one to a naturalistic mystical experience. It is a physiological and mental discipline in its primary nature. According to Śankarācārya the usefulness of Yoga is primarily mundane rather than spiritual. Its spiritual nature is only secondary [4]. This practical nature of Yoga made it a part of all other schools for the attainment of right vision (*samyagjñāna*). In accepting Yoga, even the orthodox heterodox distinction was not an obstacle at all. Thus, in non-Vedic Indian cults such as Jainism and Buddhism the practices of Yoga - meditation and the like play an important role in lifting man to the nobler heights. But different mentors have described Yoga in the way suitable to them. Thus, in the course of history Yoga acquired different labels like, Kriya-Yoga, Jñāna-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Hatha-Yoga etc.

Yoga, in its theoretical existence, is intimately connected to Sāṅkhya. Yoga is spiritual action and Sāṅkhya is knowledge. Sāṅkhya is theory and Yoga is practice. “Yoga mostly accepts the metaphysics and epistemology of Sāṅkhya. Yoga accepts the three pramāṇas - perception, inference, and testimony of Sāṅkhya and also the twenty-five metaphysical principles. Yoga believes in God as the highest Self distinct from other selves. Hence it is sometimes called *SeshvaraSāṅkhya* or theistic Sāṅkhya as distinct from classical Sāṅkhya which is *nirishavara* or atheistic [5].” It accepts the concepts of Duality in the existence of eternal Prakṛti consisting of *tattvas* and the eternal ātman (Puruṣa), attributeless and unattached.

Patañjalī and Yogasūtras

Patañjalī-Yoga is also called Rāja-Yoga. The originality of Patañjalī in understanding the traditional concept of Yoga is that he defined it in relation to mental activity. “He analyses the functioning of the mind and cites innumerable means within one’s grasp to bring order to a turbulent mind. Patanjali explains how such a mind makes a man extraordinary in his potential and wisdom [6].”

Patañjalī elaborates the concept of Yoga in his work, *Yogasūtras*. As the name indicates the text is written in *sūtra* literature. “Sūtra is defined as that style which has few words, yet is free from ambiguity, full of essence, universal in context, and affirmative. Its style condenses that they must be conquered. To overcome them, Yoga gives the eightfold path of discipline (*aṣṭāṅgayoga*).

The *Yogasūtras* in the second chapter 29th sūtra onwards discusses the *aṣṭāṅgamārga* in detail. *Yamanyamāsanaprānāyāmapratyāhāradhāranādhyānasamād hayoṣṭāvāṅgāni*. Among the eight fold means the first five are called external aids (*bahiraṅgasādhana*), while the remaining three are called internal aids (*antaraṅgasādhana*).

Yama

It includes the five great vows of Jainism. It is abstention from injury through thought, word, or deed (*ahimsa*), from falsehood (*satya*), from stealing (*asteya*), from passion and lust (*brahmacarya*) and from avarice (*aparigraha*).

Niyama

It is self culture and includes external and internal purification (*śauca*), contentment (*santosha*), austerity (*tapas*), study (*svādhyāya*) and devotion to God (*Īśvarapraṇidhāna*).

Āsana

It means steady and comfortable posture. There are various kinds of posture which are a physical help to meditation. This is the discipline of the body.

Prāṇāyāma

It means control of breath and deals with regulation of inhalation, retention and exhalation of breath. It is beneficial to health and highly conducive to the concentration of mind.

Pratyāhāra

It is control of the senses and consists in withdrawing the senses from their objects. Our senses have a natural tendency to go to outward objects. They must be checked and directed towards the internal goal.

Dhāraṇa

It is the fixing of the mind on the object of meditation like the tip of the nose or the mid-point of the eyebrows or the lotus of the heart or the image of the deity. The mind must be steadfast like the unflickering flame of the lamp.

Dhyāna

It means meditation and consists in the undisturbed flow of thought round the object of meditation (*pratyayaikatānātā*).

Samādhi

It means concentration. This is the final step in the Yoga. Here the mind is completely absorbed in the object of meditation. In dhyāna the act of meditation and the object of meditation remain separate. But here they become one. It is the highest means to realize the cessation of mental modification which is the end. It is the ecstatic state in which the connection with the external world is broken and through which one has to pass before obtaining liberation, the message to a terseness that cannot be corrupted [7].” The first step of receiving instruction from the guru in this tradition of literature is to by-heart the sutras. Only after by-hearting them as exactly as the teacher recites it, that their meaning is expounded to the student.

The sutras of Patañjalī are presented in four chapters. The first chapter is called *Samādhipāda*. This chapter defines Yoga and its characteristics and discusses the problem encountered in reaching the state of Yoga and ways in which these problems can be handled. The second chapter is *Sādhana-pāda*. It describes the qualities necessary to change the mind effectively and gradually from a state of distraction to one of attention and why these qualities are important and what the

³ Erich Frauwallner, History of Indian Philosophy Vol. I, p. 109.

⁴ Narendra Nath Sharma, *Yoga karnika*, p. xii.

⁵ Chandrarahar Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, p. 169.

⁶ T.K.V. Desikachar, Patañjalī’s Yogasūtras An Introduction, Preface-ii.

⁷ Ibid. Preface-i.

practice of them entails. *Vibhūtipāda* is the third chapter where Patañjali describes the capacity of the mind, which, through the various practices described in the earlier two chapters can achieve a state free from distractions. Such a mind can probe deeply into objects and concepts. Fourth and the final chapter is called *Kaivalyapāda*. Patañjali presents here the possibilities for a person with a highly refined mind. The mind is basically a servant and not the master. If the mind is allowed to play the role of master, whatever the achievements of the individual there are bound to be problems ultimately and serenity will be beyond that individual's reach [8].

As in the case of any other text in sutra literature, many commentaries have been written on the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali too. The most important among them is the earliest namely, the *Bhāṣya of Vyāsa*, belonging to the 7th or 8th century. This is the basis of all subsequent commentaries. Concerning the date of the text debates are not yet settled. "The question is much debated as to whether, Patañjali, author of *Yogasūtras*, is the same person or not as the Patanjali who wrote *Mahabhashya*, a work on Sanskrit Grammar. If the identity of the two is assumed, then *Yogasūtras* must belong to pre Christian era. If the identity is denied, the *Yogasūtras* should be dated sometime in the 4th or 5th century A.D [9]."

Yoga as Cittavrittinirodhah

Yoga, a word with much interpretative nuances, is defined by Patañjali as the cessation of the modifications of the *citta*. "Yoga is the ability to direct the mind exclusively towards an object and sustain that direction without any distractions [10]. The cessation is attained through meditation or concentration and that itself is also called Yoga (*yogahsamādhīh*).

'*Citta* means the three internal organs as it is stated in the Sāṅkhya school namely, *buddhi* or intellect, *ahaṅkara* or ego and *manas* or mind. *Citta* is the first evolute of Prakṛti and it has the predominance of the *sattvaguna*. It is in itself unconscious. Since it is the first evolute it is the finest and the nearest to Puruṣa, and it has the power to reflect the Puruṣa and therefore appears as if it is conscious. When it is related to any object it assumes the form of that object. This form is called *vritti* or modification. Puruṣa is essentially pure consciousness and is free from all limitations of Prakṛti. But it wrongly identifies itself with its reflection in the *citta* and appears to be undergoing change and modification. *Citta* therefore, is the physical medium for the manifestation of the spirit. Just as the moon appears as moving when seen reflected in the moving waves, and waves appear as luminous, similarly Puruṣa appears undergoing modifications and *citta* appears as conscious due to Puruṣa's reflection in it. When the Puruṣa realizes that it is completely isolated and is only a passive spectator, beyond the play of Prakṛti, it ceases to identify itself with its reflection in the *citta* with result that the light is withdrawn and modifications of the *citta* fall to the ground. This cessation of the modifications of the *citta* through meditation is called Yoga. It is the return of the Puruṣa to its

original perfection [11]. It is clear from the above that the bondage of the self is because of its wrong identification with the modifications (*citta-vritti*) and liberation is the end of this wrong identification (*nirodha*). Thus, Patanjali defines Yoga as *cittavrittinirodha*.

Aṣṭāṅgayoga

The wrong identification (*citta-vritti*) happens due to the lack of control over the body, senses and the mind. Thus, Yoga advocates control over body, the senses and the mind. It is notable that the control is not denial but taming towards perfection. A sound mind needs a sound body. Sensual attachment and passions distract the body as well as the mind. They must be conquered.

Samādhi is of two kinds: conscious or *samprajñata* and supra-conscious or *asamprajñata*. In the former, consciousness of the object of meditation persists; in the later it is transcended. The former is *Ekāgra*, the later is *Niruddha*. To illustrate with an example of fire and fuel; if fire is restricted to a particular fuel, it burns that fuel alone; but when that fuel has been completely burnt, the fire also dies down. Similarly in conscious concentration, the mind is fixed on the object of meditation alone and modification arises only in respect of this object of meditation; but in supra-conscious concentration, even this modification ceases. It is the highest form of Yoga which is perfect mystic ecstasy difficult to describe and more difficult to attain [12].

Different schools understand this final stage of yogic experience in their own manner. "In the Epics, when bodily asceticism regains a place of honor, they become more closely associated with the notion of Yoga. The Bhagavad-Gita presents it as a communion with all beings, since, when united with God, the yogin sees himself in all things and all things in himself." [13] But the position of Patanjali regarding this issue calls our special attention. "According to Patanjali Yoga does not mean union but spiritual effort to attain perfection through the control of the body, senses and mind and through right discrimination between Puruṣa and Prakṛti [14]". In this context it is worthy to have a discussion over the concept of God in the Patanjali Yoga.

God in yoga

The concept of God in the Patañjali-Yoga is an enigma since the characteristic features that he presents regarding God is almost similar to the traditional understanding, but at the same time he does not present a conventional picture of God. "Patañjali defines God as a special kind of Puruṣa who is always free from pains, actions, effects and impressions. He is eternally free and was never bound nor has any possibility of being bound. But God of Yoga is not the creator, preserver, or destroyer of this world. He is only a special Puruṣa. He does not reward or punish the souls. He cannot grant liberation. He can only remove the obstacles in the upward progress of the devotees [15]."

⁸ T.K.V. Desikachar, Patanjali's Yogasūtras An Introduction.

⁹ Gasper M. Koelman, Patanjali yoga, From Related Ego to Absolute Self, p. 6.

¹⁰ T.K.V. Desikachar, Patanjali's Yogasūtras An Introduction, p. 2.

¹¹ Chandrarah Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, p. 170.

¹² Chandrarah Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, p. 173.

¹³ Gasper M. Koelman, Patanjali yoga, From Related Ego to Absolute Self, p. 5.

¹⁴ Chandrarah Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, p. 169.

¹⁵ Ibid., 174.

The interest of Patañjali on the idea of God seems to be very practical. It is in chapter one sutras 23 to 29 that he speaks about God where the discussions conclude with the sutra namely, “The individual will in time perceive His true nature. He will not be disturbed by any interruptions that may arise in his journey to the state of Yoga.” (Y.S. I: 29) ^[16]. It is clear from here that the intention of Patañjali is to keep the Yogin tamed and disciplined that his mind will never get distracted. The ideal of God is such a good entity that it will definitely meet the end. This position of Patañjali has raised criticism against him. “The attainment of a stable mind in a healthy body is the goal in Patanjali’s Yoga. He does not insist in a belief in God nor does he include the Vedanta view of God. His God is not the master of the world but the Teacher. It is this belief that has been criticised by such teachers as Vyasa, Sankara, Ramanuja, even as they commend his methods of stabilizing mind ^[17].” It is worth noticing here that the concept of God is an addition in the later systems of Yoga, which are theistic in nature and prevalent today. The classical Yoga has nothing to do with it. “In the theistic systems where Yoga leads the way to Deliverance in matters concerning the practice of concentration, it is the meditation of God and his qualities which take a large space. Nothing of this kind is found in the classical Yoga. Besides in the chief steps of the Yoga-way, God is not generally mentioned; only in a marginal way the devotion to God is mentioned as helpful and again it is one of the means besides other means and is no way absolutely necessary. Without it, the Yoga-way can be successfully traversed. The formality of this addition is, therefore, palpable ^[18].”

Conclusion

Yoga is one of the most ancient and noble gifts of India to the world. Its historical developments clearly state the cultural and philosophical adaptations that have taken place in the course of time. It is primarily because of its metaphysical position that it owes to another school of philosophy namely Sañkhya. Each system adapted it and made it their own. As a technique of asceticism it is acceptable to everyone even though the metaphysical nuances vary with every system. The practical path of purification and self control that it suggests in order to realize the true nature of man is appreciable and can be recommended to everyone. Still a mere reduction of it as a physical exercise all alone will definitely be falling into the risk of over simplification. It is something towards the highest perfection of human existence namely realizing oneself; as the very *Yogasūtras* conclude: “When the highest purpose of life is achieved the three basic qualities do not excite responses in the mind. That is freedom. In other words, the Perceiver is no longer coloured by the mind.” (Y. S. IV: 30).

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