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Review of ancient history of yoga

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Abstract

Yoga is a gift to the World given by India. Now with 21st June recognised as International Yoga Day, Contribution of ancient sages in this field needs to be reviewed. This paper reviews the ancient history of Yoga from Pre-Patanjali Period to Patanjali and Post-Patanjali Period to understand the sequential evolution of Yoga in India.

Keywords: Rigveda, Upanishads, Smrti, Epics, Patanjali, Hathyoga

Introduction

The ancient training and teachings of Yoga have been in existence for five thousand years or more. In ancient times, there existed a desire for explorations of personal freedom, health, long life, and self-understanding which eventually led to this system of physical and mental exercise, called Yoga, which has since spread throughout the world. The word yoga is derived from the root yuj, which means to unite or to join together. The practice of yoga may lead to the union of the human with the divine all within the self. The aim of yoga is the transformation of human beings from their natural form to a perfected form. The Yogic practices originated in the primordial depths of India's past. From this early period the inner attitudes and disciplines which were later identified and given orderly expression by Patanjali. Yoga is a unique scientific discipline that leads to inner transformation and a definite psychological state of conscious enlightenment. The secret lies in the awakening and development of Yogic vision or higher perception through a sound and clean methodology that brings a luminous, intuitive perception into the truth of things.

History of Yoga

Until recently western scholars and Indologists believed that Yoga developed only as late as 500 B.C. Now it is confirmed by archaeological surveys, and scientists working with satellite technology: Yoga is over 5000 years old. The very earliest indication of the existence of some form of Yoga practices in India comes from the Harappan culture. The ancient texts of Vedas are the oldest scriptures in the world. The Sanskrit word Veda means "knowledge" and rig means "praise". Thus the Rig Vedas are a collection of hymns that are in praise of a higher power. Other three Vedas are Yajur Veda, Sama Ved, and Atharva Veda. Vedic Yoga can also be called Archaic Yoga, as people believed in a ritualistic way of life. Rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies existed because they were considered a means of connection to the spirit world. People turned to rishis or Vedic yogis for illumination. Vedic masters were blessed with a vision of the supreme reality and their hymns speak of their marvelous intuitions.

A number of excavated seals show a figure seated in a Yoga position that has been used by the Indian Yogis for meditation till the present day. One of the depicted figures bears signs of divinity worshipped as the Lord of Yoga. At the time of excavations at Mohenjadaro, Stuart Piggot wrote

Vedas

The seeds of the yoga system may be discovered in the Vedic Samhita because the Vedas are the foundation of Indian culture philosophy and religion.

Among the available Vedas four are important, namely Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda. The Sanskrit word Veda means "knowledge" and rig means "praise".

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Thus the Rig Vedas are a collection of hymns that are in praise of a higher power. Other three Vedas are Yajur Veda (knowledge of sacrifice), Sama Veda (Knowledge of chants), and Atharvana Veda (knowledge of Atharvana).

There is no any direct explanation of word yoga in Vedas, whereas the word `dhira`, is mentioned in all Vedas. The meaning of dhira is self-realized. The sitting posture i.e., Asana, the Pranayama, the Mudras, Meditation techniques, the cleanliness Yama and Niyama, the Dharanas are explained in Vedas. The asanas explained in Vedas are mainly for the purpose of meditation. The sun salutation was the part of routine activity during that time. The Pranayama that is told in the Yajurveda, which is practiced during the regular practice, is same as Anuloma Viloma. The various types of meditation techniques are also explained in the Vedas. The practice of mudras is also explained in the Vedas. The Vedas also explain about the Tapas, Vratas and the ultimate aim of them are to attain Moksa (liberation). The ancient texts of Vedas are the oldest scriptures in the world.

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Upanishads

The philosophy of Yoga was ancient and was based on the Upanishads. The Svetasvatara Upanishad says: "Where fire is churned or produced by rubbing (for sacrifice), where air is controlled (by Yoga practices), then the mind attains perfection. In the Katha Upanishad, yoga is likened to a chariot in which the reasoning consciousness is the driver, and the body is the cart. Mastery of the body is thus achieved by control of the senses. This text is an early example of the basic yogic belief that the mind and body are not inherently separate but linked. The Upanishads accept the Yoga practice in the sense of a conscious inward search for the true knowledge of Reality. One of the most famous Upanishads, the Katha, speaks of the highest condition of Yoga as a state where the senses together with the mind and intellect are fettered into immobility. Upanishads are the essences of the Vedas. Among the available Upanishads, 10 are important. The important Upanishads that have explanations about yoga are as follows. The Panchakosha theory is explained in Taaittiriya Upanishad is the main theory used in the treatment of diseases through yoga. Kathopanishad explains procedure to attain Samadhi. This Upanishad explains the qualities of soul. The Kenopanishad, the Ishavasya Upanishad, Shwetavatara Upanishads are also gives details about yoga.

"This they consider Yoga: the steady holding of the senses."
Katha Upanishad

"Yoga is said to be the oneness of breath, mind, and senses, and the abandonment of all states of existence."

Maitrî Upanishad

Smriti

The Smritis are the texts, which deal about the disciplines that one has to follow in his life. The main smritis, which give details about yoga, are Manusmrti, Yajavalkya Smrti, and Harita Smriti. According to the smritis there are four

stages in life, they are Brahmacharya, Grhastha, Vanaprastha and Sanyasa.

The sages who were using their bodies, minds and sacred *Shruti-Smriti* literature as tools to comprehend the mysteries of the universe created the poses to represent the lessons learnt on their journey and to reflect on the energy manifested through each position. Myths and legends became the muse for asanas. Practise of the asanas and study of the texts became parallel tracks to the same destination of self-realization.

Jainism

In Jainism also yoga is explained. According to Jainism the movement of the mind and body towards the soul is called yoga. The great teacher Rishaba, who was the exponent of the tradition of Jainism, also emphasized on efforts dedicated to the liberation of the spirit.

Teachings of Buddha

It was during this time, that Yoga found its way into Buddhism too; Lord Buddha was the first Buddhist to study Yoga. The teaching of Buddhism which arose in India are similar to those of yoga: striving toward nirvana and renouncing the world. Indeed, some kind of meeting between yoga and early Buddhism certainly took place, and one of the Buddhist schools is actually called Yogachara (practice of Yoga). Indian Buddhism spread throughout Asia, some ideas from Yoga were carried into Tibet, Mongolia, China, and from there on into Japan. Buddhist scriptures lay stress on meditation and physical postures, which are Yogic processes. For getting the steadiness of mind the body should become steady at first. According to that there are two types of meditations, Suksma dhyana and Nirhara dhyana.

Panini

Panini, the grammarian, explains the meaning of yoga as union with the Supreme. He was a famous grammarian of Sanskrit. He wrote 8 chapters lessons of grammar, Astadhyayi. The usage of word yoga is there in his work.

The Epics

The Ramayana and Mahabharata are the two main epics that give the details about yoga. The great book of yoga known as Yoga Vasistha was written in this time. In Ramayana the moral disciplines, Yama and Niyama are explained in detail. We can see the definition for Dharma in this book.

Mahabharata is another important epic, which gives details about yoga. The Bhagavad-Gita is known as jewel of Mahabharata gives the definition for yoga.

"Yoga is the control of the whirls of the mind." Yoga Sutra Puranas: Among the available puranas eighteen are important. Out of these few puranas give details about yoga. The Bhagavata purana explains Bhakti yoga. Linga Purana gives the details about Yama, Niyama and Pranayama. Vayu Purana gives details about Pratyahara, Dharana, and Dhyana.

"Yoga is said to be control." Brahmânda Purâna

Patanaajali Period [500 BC – 800BC]

Patanaajali defines Yoga as the "cessation of movements of the mind." "

Yoga Citta Vritti Nirodha

The period between 500 BC and 800 BC is considered as

Patanjali's period. A great sage Maharshi Patanjali systematized yoga, its meaning and its related knowledge through his Patanjala yoga sutras. Patanjali, in his Yoga Sutra, defines yoga as 'cessation of all changes in consciousness.' Yoga is the science and praxis of obtaining liberation (moksha) from the material world. Patanjali's yoga sutra consists of 196 sutras, it is divided into four chapters, and they are,

1. Samadhi pada: This chapter deals with the nature of Samadhi.
2. Sadhana Pada: This chapter deals with the methods for refining the body mind and senses.
3. Vibhuti Pada: In this chapter the properties of Yoga and art of integration through concentration, meditation and absorption. The manifestation of super natural power is discussed.
4. Kaivalya Pada: In this final section, Patanjali draws the attention of the Yogi to the soul. The various types of Samadhi are explained in this chapter. These Yoga sutras explain every aspects of yoga in systematically.

Post Patanjali Period

The time after Patanjali up to today is known as post Patanjali Period. The yoga developed gradually after the period of Patanjali. Many classical texts about yoga were written during these periods. The great personalities of yoga and their texts on yoga are as follows.

Shankaracharya (8th Century)

Sri Shankaracharya proposed Advaita Philosophy. He has written Yoga Taravali, which tells about Hatha Yoga and Saundarya lahari that explains Kundalini Yoga. He has also written commentary on Patanjala Yoga Sutras.

Ramanujacarya (11th Century)

He has written the book Tantra Sara that explains Kundalini yoga. He proposed Vishistadvaita philosophy.

Bhakti Yoga Period

Bhakti Yoga was popular during 12th century to 16th century. Narada Bhakti sutra, the famous text on Bhakti became popular at that time.

Surdasa, Tulasidasa, Purandara dasa, Kanaka dasa, Vittala dasa, Merabai were some of the famous Bhakti Yogis. They popularized the Bhakti Yoga through devotional songs. They have also written devotional songs.

Hatha Yoga period

The Hatha Yoga period is from 9th century to 18th century. The development was at its peak during the 14th century. Adinatha was the founder of Hatha Yoga.

The history of modern yoga began with the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. Modern yoga arrived in the United States during the late 1800's. It was at this congress that Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of saint Ramakrishna, made a lasting impression on the American public. He addressed the gathering as, 'Brothers and Sisters of America ". Through these words he captured millions of hearts in the United States and attracted many students to yoga and Vedanta.

After Swami Vivekananda, the next popular teacher in the west was Paramahansa Yogananda, who arrived in Boston in 1920. He established the self-realization fellowship in

Los Angeles. He left his mortal frame in 1952; but continues to have a worldwide following. He wrote the famous "Autobiography of a Yogi". His teachings are called the yogoda teachings. Since the early 1930's and till his death in 1986, Jiddu Krishnamurthy attracted western minds with his philosophical thoughts. He expounded the wisdom of Jnana yoga and drew large gatherings. He has followed all over the world.

In the mid_1960's, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi introduced Transcendental Meditation to the west. He was associated with the Beatles.

In 1965, Shri Prabhupada came to the United States and founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON). He spread a movement based on Bhakthi Yoga (yoga of devotion).

One of the most prominent yoga gurus was the Himalayan master, Swami Sivananda. He served as a doctor in Malaysia and opened yoga centers in Europe and America. He wrote more than 200 books on yoga and philosophy. His famous disciple was Swami Vishnudevananda, who wrote the book, "Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga".

Other masters are Swami Satchitananda, Swami Sivananda Radha, Swami Satyananda and Swami Chidananda. Bhagawan Rajneesh, also known as Osho, was a widely popular guru in the 1970's and 1980's. The great Sri Krishnamacharya taught the Viniyoga Hatha Yoga. His son, Desikar and Desikar's brother-in-law, B.K.S. Iyengar continue the tradition. Sathya Sai Baba, whom millions of people all over the world throng to see, is the living yoga master of today; he is called the 'man of miracles'.

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