

Origins of Yoga

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YOGA, WHICH ORIGINATED in an Indian religious milieu, has taken various forms all over the world, and the popularity of Eastern religions is more due to yoga than their particular philosophies. Today, removed from its original settings, yoga is mainly adapted to enhance physical and mental health. However, at the core of its variations and modifications one can still find yoga's original spiritual principles. Discerning people are increasingly becoming aware that physical and mental problems are generally caused by deep spiritual unrest and that yoga is one of the best solutions in neutralizing this unrest. Such people are gradually moving towards the spiritual side of yoga.

A set of well-defined and established practices that lead a sincere aspirant to spiritual freedom constitutes yoga. Swami Vivekananda says: 'All the orthodox systems of Indian Philosophy have one goal in view, the liberation of the soul through perfection. The method is by Yoga. The word Yoga covers an immense ground, but both the Sankhya and the Vedanta Schools point to Yoga in some form or other.'¹ Yoga is not attributed to a single founder but 'at a certain period of Indian history, this one subject of man and his mind absorbed all their interest' (2.20). The different stages and practices of yoga were arrived at through centuries of experimentation with every possible mental phenomenon and honed by many generations of yogis. Patanjali, by the second century BCE, collated all the various methods within a system to create the *Yoga Sutra* in its distinctive and classical format.

From the theological standpoint, yoga is as ancient as the world. Sri Krishna declares in the Bhagavadgita:

I imparted this imperishable yoga to Vivasvan (the sun god). Vivasvan taught this to Manu (the first born) and Manu transmitted this to Ikshvaku (first king of the solar dynasty); the king-sages knew this (yoga) which was received thus in regular succession. That yoga, O destroyer of foes (Arjuna), is now lost owing to a long lapse of time; that ancient yoga itself, which is this, has been taught to you by me today, considering that you are my devotee and friend, for this yoga is a profound secret.²

Yoga in the Vedas

Yoga, as a body knowledge and technique aimed at refining and expanding consciousness, attained prominence during the Vedic period, even before the term acquired its customary meaning. Although these practices were initially devoid of specific philosophical and technical frameworks, they formed the basis of later philosophical structures within Hinduism.

Vedic literature indicates that many rishis were conversant with certain methods that, when followed diligently, were known to transform consciousness to higher levels. Some of the methods were known as: *dhik*, insight; *diksha*, initiation; *tapas*, austerity; and *yajna*, sacrifice. *Yajna* engaged Vedic society and played a crucial role in developing metaphysical concepts. People, metaphorically speaking, questioned, searched, and scanned their sacrificial altars for answers to the great questions of life and the

universe. As answers came, the ordinary sacrificial act was transformed into a mystical act of cosmic significance. The Gita echoes this idea: 'Know that action has the Veda as its origin; the Veda has the Immutable (Brahman) as its source. Hence, the all-pervading and eternal Veda is based on sacrifice' (3.15). The Creator created the universe through a yajna and offered himself in it; thus, the daily yajna became a replication of this supreme act.

Yajna, besides its sacred significance, demanded physical and mental diligence in order to build altars, light fires, recite right mantras, and pour oblations. These disciplines became sacrificial rules aimed at integrating, or yoking, the self of the sacrificer with the cosmic Self. The disciplines became the basis of later yogic disciplines. Moreover, the various yajnas were performed in accordance with *ritam*, the universal cosmic order; tapas; and upasanas, meditations. In fact, every yajna had this counterpart of mental activity, otherwise it would not be considered yajna at all.

The secret of the Vedic rishis' towering personalities was their power of tapas. The ordinary meaning of 'tapas' is 'heat', but tapas is a course in self-discipline through the observance of brahmacharya and obligatory *indriya nigraha*, subjugation of the senses. The word is technically understood as: '*Manasascha indriyanam chaikagram paramam tapah*; one-pointedness of the mind and the senses is supreme tapas.' Every Vedic activity was generally pursued after diksha, making one competent to enter into the subtleties of spiritual life. It is through rigorous tapas, aided by upasana with Saguna Brahman as the object of meditation, the chanting of sacred and mystic mantras, and the performance of specific rituals, that the sacrificer transcends the body-mind complex and attains a state of oneness with the cosmic Deity.

This introspection into the true nature of Reality, manifested through the microcosm as well as the macrocosm, is denoted by the word *dhīh*. The outer expression of this profound insight later issues forth in the form of rediscovering more mantras and hymns. This proto-yoga of the rishis contained many of the elements that characterize later yoga systems: ethics, control of the senses, concentration, sexual continence, austerity, recitation of mantras, devotional invocation, and self-sacrifice.

Yoga in the Upanishads

As Vedic society progressed and rituals became cumbersome and expensive for many, one finds in the Upanishads that some rishis have internalized Vedic rituals through meditation and contemplation. This was the real beginning of nascent yoga traditions and was possible because the ground was already prepared through long physical and mental discipline. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* begins with the process of internalizing the famous *ashvamedha yajna*, horse sacrifice. Acharya Shankara, in his commentary says: 'The utility of this meditation concerning the horse sacrifice is this: those who are not entitled to this sacrifice will get the same result through this meditation itself.'³ This internalization of yajnas into spiritual practices is also illustrated in the *Kaushitaki Upanishad*, when it refers to *antaram agnihotram*, the inner fire sacrifice.⁴ The deeper the rishis internalized universal concepts, the more they came in touch with Reality, which is beyond all concepts and all *desha-kala-nimitta*, time-space-causation. The external world then appeared as a faint shadow of Reality. As a consequence, the development of an intense sense of renunciation of desires with the purpose of cutting through all bondages and attaining bliss, arose in the rishis. The process of the sacrifice of the lower self for

attaining unity with the higher Self is the central theme of the Upanishads.

Upasana became the chief means of attaining transcendental knowledge. The esoteric teachings of the Upanishads, however, was not for everybody but imparted only to competent disciples who already had years of training in internalizing concepts regarding God, creation, cosmic law, and yajnas. The *Cbhandogya Upanishad* is one of the finest example in which one finds various *vidyas*, meditations, and upasanas describing the process of internalizing old sacrificial rituals into metaphysical concepts. The rishi Ghora Angirasa explains to Krishna, son of Devaki, that 'austerity, charity, sincerity, non-injuring, and speaking of truth are his dakshinas, sacrificial gifts.'⁵ Teachings like this show that later yoga ethics in the form of *yama* and *niyama*, restraints, as basic steps of spiritual life were current in the Upanishads. The *Cbhandogya Upanishad* devotes much of its sections to the discussion of various forms of *vidyas*.⁶ In his introduction to this Upanishad, Acharya Shankara explains upasana as: 'Establishing a

continuous flow of similar modifications of the mind in relation to some object as presented by the scriptures, (and) uninterrupted by any foreign idea. ... These meditations that are such become helpful to the nondualistic realisation, by way of presenting a glimpse of the reality of Brahman through the purification of the mind, and they are easy to practice because they are based on some palpable object.'⁷

One of the earliest references of the term yoga is found as *yoga-atma* in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*. Acharya Shankara comments on the term thus: '*Yogah* is conjunction, concentration. It is the *ātmā*, self (the middle part), as it were.'⁸ The *Katha Upanishad* deals explicitly with yoga in many of its teachings. It propounds the doctrine called *adhyatma yoga*, 'concentration of the mind on the Self after withdrawing it from the outer objects' (1.146). In order to illustrate the process the Upanishad draws a parallel by referring to the body as a chariot and describing the subduing of the senses, horses, through the mind, which are the reins in the hands of the enlightened charioteer, the purified intellect, while



the Self is the passenger (1.163–7). It speaks of the various *nadis*, nerves (1.231), and also about the object of meditation (1.232). Moreover, in very definite words it speaks of yoga: ‘They consider that keeping of the senses steady as yoga. One becomes vigilant at that time, for yoga is subject to growth and decay’ (1.224).

In the *Katha Upanishad* one finds both the Upanishadic reality known as Brahman and the Sankhya philosophy’s concept of Purusha (1.203)—later yoga philosophy, it must be remembered, is built on Sankhya philosophy. The Upanishad also describes sadhana as a return to one’s true nature in an ascending gradation of seven levels, which comprise the hierarchy of existence: ‘The sense-objects are higher than the senses, and mind is higher than the sense-objects; but the intellect is higher than the mind, and the Great Soul is higher than the intellect’ (1.168). ‘The Unmanifest is higher than Mahat; the Puruṣa is higher than the Unmanifest. There is nothing higher than the Puruṣa. He is the culmination, he is the highest goal’ (1.169).

In the *Mundaka Upanishad* teachings representing future yoga tradition are also found; for instance: ‘Taking hold of the bow, the great weapon familiar in the Upaniṣads, one should fix on it an arrow sharpened with meditation. Drawing the string, O good-looking one, hit that very target that is the Imperishable, with the mind absorbed in its thought’ (2.125).

As one studies the later Upanishads, one finds sublime metaphysics invariably mixed with concrete references to yoga. By this time the word dhyana, meditation, has become current in the literature. In the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* innumerable passages referring to yoga are discernibly crystalizing. ‘By practising the yoga of meditation they [sages] realised the power of the Deity Himself, hidden

by its own effects.’⁹ The second chapter of this Upanishad gives elaborate instructions for the practice of meditation such as ideal external conditions; asana, posture; *pranayama*, control of the *prana*; *dharana*, concentration; and of course dhyana, along with the signs of perfection in these practices. But the scripture also cautions that these signs should not be confused with liberation. The supreme goal is not mystical visions but realization of the ultimate Reality: ‘I know this great Person who is resplendent like the sun and is beyond darkness. By knowing Him alone one transcends death; there is no other path to go by’ (130).

The *Maitrayani Upanishad* presents a far more developed and systematic portrayal of yoga by introducing many ideas and concepts upon which the Yoga philosophy of Patanjali develops. According to this Upanishad, the Atman can be realized through knowledge, austerity, and deep concentration and realization is explained in terms of the union of the lower self with the transcendent Self. It also expounds the *shadanga-yoga*, six-fold yoga: *pranayama*; *pratyahara*, withdrawing the senses, dhyana; *dharana*; *tarka*, logic; and samadhi.¹⁰ Excluding *tarka* one obtains five out of the eight-limbs of Patanjali’s yoga.¹¹ Some of the physiological theories of later yoga also begin to appear in the sixth chapter, along with meditation on the mystical syllable ‘Aum’. Apart from the *Maitrayani Upanishad* there are about ten Upanishads, popularly called Yoga Upanishads, that deal with aspects of yoga.¹² However, the tradition of yoga, in its classical sense, would not emerge until several centuries later.

Yoga in the Bhagavadgita

Yoga reaches its zenith and is most comprehensively taught in the Gita. For thousands of years this scripture has inspired the world. Each of

the eighteen chapters is a type of yoga, and the colophons at the end of the chapters declare it to be a *yoga shastra*, yoga scripture. Many consider that every shloka is a teaching on yoga, and some will go even further and say that each word is pregnant with the meaning of yoga. Sri Krishna exhorts Arjuna to work 'established in yoga'¹³ and to 'become a yogi' (6.46). Swami Ranganathananda says: 'If you ask what Śrī Kṛṣṇa is going to advise you, I will say this: He is whispering in your ear, and in everybody's ear, "Be a *yogī*, Be a *yogī*; that is your birthright. You are realizing what is already there, merely hidden within you. Spirituality is your birthright. Try to realize your birthright." That is the message Śrī Kṛṣṇa conveys to every person.'¹⁴

By teaching different categories of yoga Sri Krishna brings tremendous dynamism and appeal to the earlier esoteric philosophies, making them practical. The Gita is called *amba*, mother, and just as Sri Ramakrishna says that a mother prepares different dishes to suit the appetites and digestive capacities of different children, so does the Gita cater to everyone accordingly. Swamiji says: 'Our various Yogas do not conflict each other; each of them leads us to the same goal and makes us perfect.'¹⁵ Sri Krishna was a great harmonizer and modernizer of various ancient ideals and teachings prevalent in India. One finds the different conceptions of God, philosophies, and rituals perfectly harmonized to make the Gita a comprehensive manual for attaining perfection. The word 'yoga' has been used not only in conformity with the root *yuj* in the divadi class of Panini's grammar as *samadhbau*, concentration, but also in conformity with the root *yujir* in the rudadi class as *samyoga*, to yoke. Just as the earlier yajnas were internalized to give rise to the principles of yoga, in the Gita the concepts of yoga are internalized to form a new type of yogi. The Gita

also combines the best elements of earlier severe yogic disciplines and the diligence of ritualism to mark out a middle path. This scripture revolutionized yoga.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutra

Patanjali gave yoga traditions its present classical format, and yoga finally became established as one of the six orthodox philosophies of Hinduism. Over the centuries his *Yoga Sutra* was extensively commented upon by some of the greatest spiritual minds. Moreover, the terse sutras were later expanded by other sages to form separate schools, for instance, hatha yoga, kundalini yoga, *pranayama* yoga, and mantra yoga. Just as the branches of a tree are attached to a stem, similarly diverse strands of thoughts are within yoga, all connected to the original philosophy. In fact, there is a considerable theoretical overlap between schools, and in many places only a slight shift of emphasis demarcates one school from another. Even within one school there may be a variety of opinions, as teachers develop their own interpretations through personal experiences.


The appeal of yoga philosophy is its practicality and methodical approach, which can give one the highest realization. Those wishing to pursue yoga must devote their entire life to it under the guidance of a guru. The *Yoga Sutra* is the only scripture that genuinely explores the regions of the superconscious and delineates its laws of operations, which are only theoretically presented in other books. Another novelty of Patanjali's yoga is its exploration and attempt at controlling the subconscious mind, thought of as containing frightening things behind its closed doors. Patanjali shows how the latent powers of the mind can be unfurled to control the very mind that hides layers and layers of consciousness, each more subtle than the other. The world that is seen by conscious minds as

ordinary is overturned to reveal its many dimensions through yogic states of consciousness. In the final stages the yogi acquires the power of controlling Prakriti.

Patanjali describes yoga as *chitta-vritti-nirodhab*, restraining the *chitta*, mind-stuff, from taking various *vrittis*, forms. The goal of the yogi is *kaivalya*, liberation, not powers or suzerainty over certain spheres of existence. ‘Samadhi-pada’, the first chapter of the *Yoga Sutra* is for advanced aspirants; the second, called ‘Sadhana-pada’, recommends *kriya* yoga for middling aspirants; in the third chapter, titled ‘Vibhuti-pada’, *ashtanga* yoga is presented for ordinary aspirants; and in the last chapter, ‘Kaivalya-pada’, is taught the philosophy of yoga. Various samadhis, *siddhis*, and yogic powers are enumerated in the treatise. Some of the higher experiences recorded there are hard to achieve, but Patanjali, like a scientist, lays down rules that can be replicated by one who is diligent.

Yoga is popular not just because it is simple and adaptable, but because its spiritual dimension has been authenticated by innumerable aspirants. Somewhere down the centuries the words ‘yoga’ and ‘yogi’ became associated with secrecy and esotericism. Swamiji, himself a great yogi, says:

From the time it was discovered, more than four thousand years ago, Yoga was perfectly delineated, formulated, and preached in India. It is a striking fact that the more modern the commentator the greater the mistakes he makes, while the more ancient the writer the more rational he is. Most of the modern writers talk of all sorts of mystery. Thus Yoga fell into the hands of a few persons who made it a secret instead of letting the full blaze of daylight and reason fall upon it. They did so that they might have the powers to themselves’ (1.134).

As Sri Krishna again imparted the ancient yoga to Arjuna that was ‘lost owing to a long lapse of time’, so in this age Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples have come to revive yoga in its pristine form for the benefit of humanity. 

Notes and References

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1990; 9, 1997), 1.122.
2. Bhagavadgita, 4.1–3.
3. *The Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, Swami Madhavananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2004), 4.
4. See *Kaushitaka Upaniṣad*, 2.5.
5. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad, with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1997), 229.
6. Some of the *vidyas* are: Shandilya, Bhuma, Satyakama, Upakoshala, Madhu, and Dahara.
7. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad, with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, 6.
8. *Eight Upaniṣads, with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 1.335.
9. *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2003), 49–50.
10. See *Maitrayani Upaniṣad*, 6.17.
11. Patanjali’s system has *savi-tarka* and *nirvi-tarka samapattihs*. Swamiji translates the two words as ‘with question’ and ‘without question’.
12. Some of the Yoga Upaniṣads are: the *Shandilya Upaniṣad* of the Atharva Veda; the *Yogatattva Upaniṣad*, the *Amritanada Upaniṣad*, the *Varaha Upaniṣad*, and the *Yogakundali Upaniṣad* of the Krishna Yajur Veda; the *Dhyana-bindu Upaniṣad* of the Sama Veda; the *Hamsa Upaniṣad* and the *Mandalabrahmana Upaniṣad* of the Shukla Yajur Veda; and the *Nada-bindu Upaniṣad* of the Rig Veda.
13. Bhagavadgita, 2.48.
14. Swami Ranganathananda, *Universal Message of the Bhagavad Gita*, 3 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2007), 2.183.
15. *Complete Works*, 1.92.