

Yoga – An Overview

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With the onslaught of western culture and western economic systems on many global issues some of the basic concepts of eastern ways of living styles have got distorted. Among such concepts “Yoga” is one. In recent times Yoga has come to be interpreted as some sort of physical exercise, sometimes accompanied by some sort of meditation that originated and practiced in India. Different books and different forms of pictorial literature have appeared in the west to indicate relative impact of such exercises on the development of the body. In this process the essential and focal point of Yoga seems to have been lost. In the east Yoga is still associated with meditative processes and prayerful thought processes under special postures of body for optimum results. In the following paragraph an attempt is made to clarify the significance of Yoga and remove some of the misconceptions.

”Yoga” really means union in Sanskrit language corresponding to the word yoke in English language. The union of mind and body in human beings has thus become a disciplined practice called Yoga. In fact it is a sort of belief amongst some in Hinduism that every part in this Universe has a material content and a spiritual content already in union. This union may be weak or strong and varies depending on circumstances and power of each content. Some interpret the already containing union as the destined goal of the individual entity. It is always possible to perfect the union by Yoga practices and Yoga discipline.

If such an union is perfected through Yoga, one is said to achieve some material or spiritual gains. A perfect union is said to be a state of ‘BLISS’ in human beings with required powers. As there are many instances in Hindu literature by such perfection many sages and wise men saw through their ”Yoga drishti” or “cosmic sight” the truth of Creation and its purpose long before the western science and technology discovered the same. They also obtained powers to grant desired boons or to destroy external evils. Thus the perfect union is ultimately a realization and identifying oneself with “Godliness” or “Supreme power”. Many sages and wise men in India through Yogic practices exhibited many supernatural powers. But there are also many instances in the lives of even ordinary men who have obtained the cherished worldly goals and controlling ones own health.

Almost every country seems to have its own system of Yoga. In China, Tatchi seems to be a system of Yoga. In Muslim countries the Namaz itself has been considered by some as Yoga of Islam. The sermon on the Mount, kneeling before the prayers, walking long distances to witness visions of Mary or Jesus, can all be considered as Yoga in Christianity. A concept of “Mystic union” is said to exist in Christianity which can be interpreted as Yoga. Similar practices exist in places where Buddhism and Jainism or other religions are in vogue.

In Hindu scriptures four types of Yoga practices are recognized as most important, considering that Yoga is only a means to achieve the end which is a perfect union and realize something.

- 1) Bhakti Yoga: This method is to obtain the perfect union through entirely devotion to “God” or “Divine entity”. This is perhaps the easiest practiced by most believers of all major religions. This practice develops some intense personal relationship between the worshiper and the worshipped.
- 2) Karma Yoga: This method is to obtain the perfect union through action. The concept of selfless work and continuously practicing the same is one aspect of this Yoga. The practitioner dedicates the fruit of his action through the spiritual power, the God which helped him to complete his work satisfactorily. In this method one can find calm amongst turmoil, the significance of failures and successes, and wisdom through non-attachment. The ordinary concept of Yoga for physical exercise and control of body and mind can also fall under this category.
- 3) Jnan Yoga: This method is to obtain the perfect union through intellectual discrimination. This is not easy and calls for extra ordinary powers of will and clarity of mind as has been practiced by many wise men in India.
- 4) Raja Yoga: This is perhaps a combination of all the above generally practiced by people in monasteries who lead a daily routine of spiritual life in all aspects like dress, shelter, food and daily rituals.

Although the philosophy and practice of Yoga were referred in several places in Vedas and Upanishads, it was Patanjali who is said to have reformulated and codified the ideas and enumerated several “Sutras” (Aphorisms) in Sanskrit, sometime between 4th century B.C and 4th Century A.D and later different forms of physical exercises were evolved on the foundation of the above mentioned sutras.

For practicing any Yoga, Patanjali had identified eight essential factors to be associated with the same. He called them “Limbs” of Yoga. They are

- i. Yama : Abstention from evil doing and evil thoughts
- ii. Niyama: Observance of righteous living.
- iii. Asana: Posture; A firm position of body but completely relaxed.
- iv. Pranayama: Control of inhalation and exhalation
- v. Pratyahara: Withdrawal of mind from sense objects
- vi. Dharana: Concentration
- vii. Dhyana: Meditation
- viii. Samadi: Absorption in Atman. Identification of self with the Supreme Power.

When the last three are brought together to bear upon one subject it is called “Samyama” . It is interesting to understand what Patanjali said in Sutras about the effects

of Samyama on different subjects. A few examples of daily concerns are mentioned below.

By working Samyama on

- 1) A strong object like elephant, - one obtains the strength
- 2) Sun, - one gains knowledge of cosmic spaces – Suryanamaskaras
- 3) Moon, - one gains knowledge on celestial patterns of stars, etc.
- 4) Polestar, - one gains knowledge of motion of stars.
- 5) Body navel, - one understands the entire constitution of the body
- 6) The blood circulatory systems, - one can obtain absolute motionlessness
- 7) Back of the Head, - one may see celestial beings
- 8) Heart, - one comes to know the content of the mind
- 9) Nerve systems, - one can obtain power to walk on water, power to fly in air, and power to enter to other bodies, etc.

Thus it is believed that by developing a proper perception of Yoga and practicing Yogic discipline and exercises, strictly in accordance with basic Patanjali Sutras and over a long periods of time one would certainly make the needed advance towards mind control. It is said by obtaining the perfect union, the Yogi, that is the man who practices Yoga can become as tiny as an atom or as huge as a mountain or as heavy as lead or as light as air. He can walk through water unwetted and can stand firm against hurricanes, cyclones or tornadoes. There are many many examples of Yogis with these characteristics in Hindu literature, and even in these days some have performed these acts to the wonder of modern medical practitioners. Perhaps in a busy material world this may not be a common experience but the practices and possibilities cannot be ruled out.