

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF YOGA  
THERAPY

The word *yoga* refers to an enormous body of spiritual principles and techniques which developed in India over several millennia and which may be regarded as the very substratum of the cultural life of Indian man. Yoga is thus by no means a uniform tradition. However, it is assumed that the goal of all the forms and schools of Yoga involves the control of every process of the body-mind complex as well as the transformation of consciousness, which thereby allows consciousness to break through onto a different level of cognition.

Certain therapeutic Yoga techniques have also become popular, and are spreading throughout the Western world. In India as well as in Europe and the United States, many different schools and institutes have come into being with the aim of popularising Yoga. Not uncommonly, however, these have a sectarian and commercial character. The various methods of Yoga, known since ancient times, have often been “adjusted” to suit the contemporary needs of impatient Western Man, and have usually been simplified and reduced to a set of gymnastic or relaxing exercises devoid of their original philosophical background.

However, Yoga should not be identified solely with keep-fit exercises or even with the “pure” practice of certain consciousness-transformation techniques. The theory and practice of Yoga are not, in fact, separable categories; they mutually inform each other,<sup>1</sup> and because of this Yoga should be regarded as a theory-practice continuum. Thus, to apply the therapeutic techniques of Yoga properly, it is important to be aware of their philosophical foundations.

Current analysis of the philosophical presuppositions behind Yoga does not take into account all polymorphous phenomena included in the Yoga tradition. It focuses only on two types of Yoga which are the most important and representative of the Yoga tradition as a whole.

Although the first formulations of the Yoga method are to be found in the *Upaniṣads* – ancient Indian scripts originating in the fifth century B.C. – the first fully elaborated and detailed classical exposition of Yoga is contained in a treatise composed around the third century A.D. entitled *Yoga-Sūtras*. This work, attributed to Patañjali, represents the basic treatise of the classical

Yoga system, known as Rājayoga – one of the six schools of the Brahmanic philosophy.

A highly developed system of psychosomatic techniques is also provided by another form of Yoga known as Haṭhayoga, which is a continuation of the experimental approach of Tantrism. This type of Yoga probably originated in the eighth or ninth century A.D. Tradition celebrates the legendary Gorakṣa as the founder of Haṭhayoga. Among the later manuals of Haṭhayoga based on the works of Gorakṣa are *Siva-Saṁhitā*, *Gheraṇḍa-Saṁhitā* and *Haṭhayoga-Pradīpikā*.

#### THE MAIN PRESUPPOSITIONS BEHIND YOGA

When discussing the philosophical foundations of Yoga, we must first of all keep in mind the three fundamental presuppositions common to every yogic or gnostic school in India. These are:

1. the axiom of the universality of suffering
2. the twin doctrine of rebirth and the law of moral causation
3. the doctrine of the possibility and desirability of emancipation through transcendental knowledge.

1. **Suffering** (*duḥkha*) is taken as the exact antithesis of the blissful Self (*puruṣa*), which is by definition infinite, never changing and beyond all fear and grief. But suffering does not merely imply physical pain or mental agitation. It stands for the inescapable truth of the transience of phenomenal existence.<sup>2</sup> Sorrow is everywhere, even in joy, for behind joy there always lies the anxiety of losing it and the fear of what may happen when such pleasure has faded. Suffering has a universal character and is a necessity of all life or being-in-the-world. The only way to escape the impact of suffering is to see things as they really are by realising one's true nature of the Self. Classical Yoga emphasises the virtue of meditative discipline as the best way to remove suffering and acquire transcendental knowledge. According to the author of *Yoga-Sūtras*, the preliminary condition for the realisation of the Self is the restriction of mental fluctuations (*citta vṛtti-nirodha*)<sup>3</sup> which are conceived of as a source of never-ending suffering and bondage. Normally, the Self identifies itself with the finite and limiting mind which creates all its diverse psycho-mental states. This Self's false identification or self-delusion, called "nescience" (*avidyā*), is the nourishing ground for all the various painful whirls of the mind (*kleśa*), such as egoism, attachment, aversion and thirst for life. The restraint (*nirodha*) of the psychic flux leads to the final emancipation, that is to liberation (*moksa*) of the Self.

In contrast, Haṭhayoga promotes “realisation through the body” and its primary intention is to remove all physical pain, restore health and prepare the body for higher spiritual practices. In one of the Haṭhayoga manuals<sup>4</sup> we read that the goal behind all the various methods of Haṭhayoga is the attainment of perfection through Rājayoga, i.e., classical Yoga.

Such an understanding of overwhelming suffering does not lead to pessimism because it has a positive aspect insofar as it acts as a stimulus for man to transcend it. In contrast to Christian belief, the Indians do not consider sorrow to be the result of primeval sin for which man was punished by God. Rather, the roots of sorrow lie in man’s lack of Self-knowledge.

2. In classical Yoga, the underlying conception of **the doctrine of rebirth** (*saṃsāra*) and **the law of moral causation** (*karman*) consists in the conviction that each volition leaves a corresponding “impression” (*saṃsāra*) in the depth-memory which contains a network of such impressions forming distinct configurations or “traces” (*vāśana*). These are the seeds which determine the external aspects of being, such as its body or the environment in which it is born, as well as the major course of its life. The law of moral causation, *karman*, works in such a way that good deeds have as their fruit a positive after-death state, while the recompense for bad deeds is correspondingly negative. And this is why the preliminary stage of any Yoga practice involves observing both the cardinal ethical precepts and moral discipline (*yama* and *niyama*).

The depth-memory survives death and occasions new birth, thus keeping in motion the cycle of continual birth and death, called *saṃsāra*. By applying highly advanced Yoga meditation techniques, the practitioner can integrate all levels of his mind, both the presently operating empirical consciousness and the depth-memory which represents an inaccessible and unconscious layer in the normal mind-state.

3. **Emancipation** (*mokṣa*) is conceived of differently in both types of Yoga and depends on their ontological assumptions. Classical Yoga declares dualism of Nature (*prakṛti*) and the Self (*puruṣa*). When the phenomenal consciousness is “transformed” into the “witness-consciousness” representing the supreme essence of man, the emancipation or “aloneness” (*kaivalya*) of the Self is realized. Self-realisation in Rājayoga follows the subject-oriented concentration, or ecstasy (*asamprajñāta-samādhi*) and is understood in the sense of isolation from the totality of sorrowful existence.

Haṭhayoga teaches a well-balanced polarity or non-dualism (the *śiva-śakti* doctrine) and provides a means of transforming the human body into a “divine body” (*divya-śarīra*) or “diamond body” (*vajra-deha*) which alone bequeaths immortality. Thus, Haṭhayoga revives the ancient and popular ideal of “immortality” in the body which survives after emancipation in a perfected physical vehicle (*siddha-deha*).

#### THE BODY-MIND COMPLEX

As I have already mentioned, man is regarded in Yoga philosophy as an integrated whole. According to Patañjali, the physical, psychic and mental sides of human nature, just as in most aspects of Hindu tradition, are merely phases or modes of one and the same reality which is structured hierarchically. In *Yoga-Sūtras* all these psycho-mental organisms represent the manifestation of a single ontological objective reality (*prakṛti*), distinguished from the subjective reality of transcendental awareness that is the Self (*puruṣa*). Since the microcosm of the human being corresponds with the macrocosm, acquiring knowledge of one’s own body and mind entails knowing the structure of the world as a whole.

According to Haṭhayoga, the human body is considered to be composed of gross and finer matter. Like the physical body, its subtle counterpart has a definite structure which has been the object of much practical investigation. The subtle body is precisely that part of human individuality which transmigrates and assures personal continuity after death; this means that it remains when the physical, gross body is destroyed, and lives through the lengthy cycle of births and deaths until its dissolution at the time when the living being reaches its ultimate goal of final liberation.

Although it is true that the subtle vehicle cannot claim the same “objectivity” as the physical frame, we should not simply ignore all this “subtle” physiology. Several papers have been published<sup>5</sup>, which examine and confirm the extraordinary abilities of experienced Yoga practitioners to gain full control over the so-called autonomous nervous system, and influence both heart and breathing rhythms.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THE SUBTLE BODY

The “material” from which the subtle body is built is the life-force, or cosmic or bio-energy, called *prāṇa*. Communication between the subtle body and the gross one goes on through the medium of this vital force. Despite its

homogenous nature, it assumes a fivefold appearance.<sup>6</sup> In order to locate these appearances, they are usually associated with certain physical functions and reflexes such as breathing, excreting, circulation, coughing and digesting, etc. The flow of *prāṇa* is controlled and guided by the mind with the help of special breathing exercises, called *prāṇāyāma*. It is one of the most important Yoga techniques because the first two appearances of the life-force, i.e. *prāṇa* and *apāṇa*, are strictly linked with mental activity. When the life-force is active, the mind is also in motion. When the former is stopped, the mind also becomes tranquil.

*Prāṇa* is often visualized as a pulsating energy; it circulates in a vast network of channels, called *nāḍīs* which are spread out through the entire body, or rather its subtle counterpart. It is said that there are 72,000 such "channels" (but other figures are also given in the texts). Among these, *idā*, *piṅgalā* and the axial *suṣumṇā*, are of special significance.

Moreover, the "subtle" mystic physiology of Haṭhayoga mentions several points, called the *cakras*, which are arranged vertically along the individual's "world axis" (*suṣumṇā*), i.e. in the gross body along the spine. They are thought of as members composing the body of the serpent power (*kuṇḍalinī*) and they are frequently conceived of as "lotuses" (*padmas*) which open up as the serpent power ascends. The arousing of the latent force within the body and its controlled guidance upwards through the six centres is claimed to lead to a more complete state of enlightenment than is the case with ordinary Yoga. In the *cakras* the subtle nerves and arteries of the subtle body are connected to the physical nerves through which they receive the perception of the sense organs and communicate to the body the reactions of the subtle body and the orders of the Conscious.<sup>7</sup>

#### BETWEEN DISEASE AND HEALTH

We may consider the Yoga techniques designed to remove human suffering as a psycho-physiological form of therapy. Nevertheless, the eradication of physical and psychic sorrow or dysfunction is not the only goal of Yoga. The ultimate aim of Yoga is of a soteriological nature. It is the emancipation of the Self (*mokṣa*) and the surpassing of the boundaries of ordinary awareness through Transcendental Awareness, or Subjective Being (*puruṣa*).

The concept of illness represents a very wide category in Yoga. In fact, therapy should be applied unceasingly. This is due to three basic reasons. Firstly, even if we do not feel any pain or symptoms of illness, this does not mean that we are completely healthy (according to Yoga, even laziness or

mental lethargy presage illness). Therefore, our normal state is a state of sickness, either manifest or latent. Secondly, Yoga therapy is not only thought of as a method for removing morbid symptoms but, above all, as a technique for regaining a state of health, understood in a specific sense. And thirdly, illness is so common because its causes are universal, the consequences of nescience or ignorance (*avidyā*).<sup>8</sup>

Nescience is the sole cause of illness. *Avidyā* is the reason for all causes of all diseases. Nescience affects both the empirical, ordinary level and its metaphysical counterpart. On the empirical level, nescience prevents us from understanding how our gross and subtle body and consciousness work. In the metaphysical dimension, *avidyā* covers up the real nature of our Self.

Thus, in order to recover health, the only solution is to get rid of the real and first cause of illness, which is the root of all others. This "recuperating" process should progress gradually. Starting with the observance of ethical precepts through purification of the body and mind, this process ought to be continued up to the moment of complete recovery equivalent to the ultimate liberation.

The absence of sorrow, or, in other words, the harmonious, undisturbed synergy of body and psyche, as believed in Yoga, does not mean that the goal of therapy has been reached. Every man, even the healthiest, has one more ailment remaining to be confronted. This is death. Thus, the purpose of Yoga therapy is not only to recover physical and psychic health, but to liberate man from the necessity of the next rebirth.

*Kraków*

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NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Feuerstein, G. (1979), *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali: An Exercise in the Methodology of Textual Analysis*. New Delhi, pp. 15–16.
- <sup>2</sup> *Yoga-Sūtras* II.15: “Everything is nothing but suffering to the one who discriminates” (*Vivekin*).
- <sup>3</sup> *Yoga-Sūtras* I.2.
- <sup>4</sup> *Haṭhayoga-Pradīpikā* IV.102.
- <sup>5</sup> With regard to research on “subtle” physiology and altered states of mind being a result of yogic practices, see, for instance: B. K. Anand and G. S. China (1961), “Investigation on Yogis Claiming to Stop Their Heart Beats”. *Indian Journal of Medical Research* 49; C. S. Laubry and T. Brosse (1936), “Documents recueillis aux Indes sur les Yogins par l’enregistrement simultané du pouls, de la respiration et de l’électrocardiogramme”. *Presse Médicale* 83 (Paris); G. V. M. D. Satyanarayanamurti, P. Brahmayya and M. B. B. S. Sastri (1958), “A Preliminary Scientific Investigation into Some of the Unusual Manifestations Acquired as a Result of Yogic Practices in India”. *Winer Zeitschrift für Nervenheilkunde und deren Grenzgebiete*, Vienna.
- <sup>6</sup> In classical Yoga, the vital force, as *prāṇa*, extends from the nose and mouth to the heart. As *samāna*, it begins its course from the central point of the body, the navel, extending towards the borders of the body. As *apāna*, it leads down to the sole of the foot. As *udāna*, the vital force travels upwards through the vertical subtle channel as far as the head, and is especially responsible for the separation of the subtle body from the physical “vehicle” at death. *Vyāna* circulates throughout the whole body. In Haṭhayoga, a further five auxiliary forces are also mentioned.
- <sup>7</sup> Danielou, A. (1973), *Yoga. The Method of Re-Integration*. London, p. 135.
- <sup>8</sup> Patañjali distinguished five basic types of nescience (*Yoga-Sūtras* II.3.): (1) *avidyā* as misapprehension about the real nature of things, (2) egoism or “I-am-ness” (*asmitā*), (3) passion or attachment (*rāga*), (4) aversion (*dveṣa*), and (5) the will to live or self-preservation (*abhiviveśa*).