

YOGA – Contribution of Vedic Hinduism to the World

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Introduction

Yoga is an everlasting contribution of Vedic Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma) to the world. Yoga is a Sanskrit word and is derived from the root 'Yuj', which means 'to yoke'. At the individual level, yoga enables one to realize the indwelling soul through discipline at physical, mental and spiritual levels. In the universal level, yoga enables one to realize the union of individual self with universal self. So Yoga refers to a process and its origin is found in the Upanishads of the Vedas and the universally known Bhagavad-Gita, which are the foundational literature of Sanatana Dharma or popularly known as Hinduism. The process of Yoga involves all the three domains of a human being namely physical, mental and spiritual. So there are several answers given for the question "what is Yoga?" Some of the answers are (1) Yoga is the union of the individual self with Universal Self, (2) Yoga is the restraint of mental process, (3) Yoga is balance or harmony in life, (4) Yoga is the disconnection of connection with suffering. Thus Yoga has global relevance and is useful to all human beings as the goal of human life is to seek peace and happiness and become free from miseries and suffering.

Yoga originated by the sages of ancient Vedic tradition, has become a global phenomenon because any human being can follow the yoga process for spiritual fulfillment. It is noted that in an address made September 27, 2014 at the United Nations by Mr. Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India describes below the universal relevance of Yoga.

"Yoga is an invaluable gift of India's ancient tradition. It embodies unity of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature; a holistic approach to health and well-being. It is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and nature. By changing our life style and creating consciousness, it can help us deal with climate change. Let us work towards adopting an International Yoga Day."

It is pleasing to know that the United Nations influenced by the universal impact and relevance declared June 21 of every year as the International Yoga Day. A statement below by UN secretary general Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, highlights the universal relevance of Yoga.

"By proclaiming 21 June as the International Day of Yoga, the General Assembly has recognized the holistic benefits of this timeless practice and its inherent compatibility with the principles and values of the United Nations. Yoga offers a simple, accessible and inclusive means to promote physical and spiritual health and well-being. It promotes respect for one's fellow human beings and for the planet we share. And yoga does not discriminate; to varying degrees, all people can practice, regardless of their relative strength, age or ability."

It is very important to remember that Yoga can take a sincere seeker to realize the ultimate purpose of human life namely spiritual enlightenment. In the vision and

words of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru, founder of Ashtanga Yoga Vijnana Mandiram, Mysore, India,

“The chief aim of Yoga is to experience the inner spiritual world having realized the truths through the knowledge of process of manifestation of self, senses and body and based on one’s own full spiritual development by tuning the outward looking self (mind) inwards through the path of Sushumna (the central naadi channel in the spine)”

Yoga in Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita

Yoga has existed from Vedic times and its importance is described in several scriptures. In Upanishads such as Shvetashvataropaniṣat and Kathopaniṣat, yoga is referred as an essential means to achieve happiness. In Kathopaniṣat, for example, in the statement below it is clearly advised that the union (yoga) of the senses, mind and intellect of the person directed towards spiritual goal is essential in realizing the purpose of life namely achievement of both peace and spiritual bliss.

“Treat the self as the person seated in the body as the chariot. Then, treat the intellect as the driver (charioteer), the mind as the reins and the senses as the horses. The one who has control of mind directed by intellect thereby controlling the senses leads the person to the spiritual goal. Otherwise a person’s life will be as of a chariot driven by uncontrolled horses.”

In the Bhagavad-Gita, which is known as Yoga Shastra i.e. a scripture on Yoga, is a handbook of Yoga for leading a life with balance and harmony. Successful people in all walks of life have read and applied the principles of Yoga from Bhagavad-Gita. Each of the 18 chapters of Bhagavad-Gita not only has Yoga in its title but also ends by calling it as a Yoga Shastra. Lord Krishna emphasizes that the goal of everyone should be to achieve yoga, or state of equanimity. He beautifully describes the blissful state of a yogi (i.e. one that has achieved yoga). Then through Arjuna, He advises everyone to become a yogi. Lord Krishna says “Tasmat yogi bhava Arjuna” (therefore, become a yogi).

Several forms of Yoga have been identified, described and prescribed in Bhagavad-Gita. The three common ones are (1) Karma Yoga, (2) Jnana Yoga and (3) Bhakti Yoga. In addition there is Ashtanga Yoga (the Yoga with eight-limbs) formulated by Sage Patanjali. Ashtanga Yoga and Hatha Yoga can be seen within Karma Yoga. The Raja Yoga and Laya Yoga can be seen within Jnana Yoga and Mantra Yoga and Japa Yoga can be seen within Bhakti Yoga. However all these are inter-related given one as a predominant Yoga path for a given person based on the person’s inclination and abilities.

Ashtanga Yoga

Ashtanga Yoga as formulated by sage Patanjali consists of Ashta (eight) and Anga (parts) is essential for complete development of human beings. This complete development refers to physical, mental and spiritual levels, which are found within every human being. The Ashtanga Yoga culminates not only provides healthy body and sound mind but also results in happiness and spiritual fulfillment in life. The process of yoga encompasses all aspects of human life namely physical, psychological and spiritual. The

yoga process of Patanjali is referred as “yoga-darshana” and is essentially developed on practical basis. In the vision and words of His Holiness Sriranga Priya Swamiji of Ashtanga Yoga Vijnana Mandiram, Mysore, India,

“Yoga-Darshana is a practical discipline comprising of the conclusions and proclamations of enlightened seers (yogis) whose main concern was helping seekers (sadhakas) to attain the normal state called Yoga in which the perceiver is established in the real state and this is an inner experience of the inner world.”

The eight-steps are given by the Sage Patanjali in his yoga sutras. They are briefly indicated below. These form the practical aspect of the process of yoga.

(1). YAMA: This step contains five sub-steps, which need to be practiced in the three domains namely thought, speech and action.

(a) Non-Violence (Ahimsa) (b) Truthfulness (Satya) (c) Non-Covetedness (Asteya) (d) Contenance (Bramhacharya) (e) Non-receiving (Aparigraha)

(2). NIYAMA: This step also contains five sub-steps, which need to be practiced in the domains of thought, speech and action. (a) Cleanliness (Shoucha) (b) Contentment (Santosha) (c) Austerity (Tapas) (d) Scriptural Study (Svaadhyaya) (e) Surrender to God (ishvara Pranidhaana)

These two steps when practiced fully, provide the seeker the self-control and disciplines which becomes the preparation to the next two steps

(3). ASANA (Postures) There are hundreds of asanas in the scriptures and its variants. It is needless to say that all asanas are to be practiced with patience and perseverance. Many of the asanas are derived from nature and positions that are found in the animal world. These postures are natural and are inherently coordinated with animals’ breathing. There are also routines in which several postures are together. For example, *Suryanamaskara or Sun Salutation*, The practice of sun salutation is comprised of a series of postures helps in maintaining good health and vigor. It invigorates the body and the mind. It helps to reduce abdominal fat and increases the flexibility of the spine and limbs. Since the various steps of sun-salutation require coordination with breathing, it strengthens the breathing capacity. The reduction of fat will help to reduce the effects of hypertension, diabetes etc. It has the potential to penetrate and rejuvenate most of the vital organs of the human system, while keeping the mind calm and focused. The reader should consult an expert on Yoga-Asanas for learning properly the various postures and their benefits.

(4). PRAANAYAMA (Regulation of Vital Force): In Asanas, the body is held steady in postures drawn from observing animals and nature such as a tree, mountain etc. In Pranaayama, control of vital forces is focused through proper regulation of breathing under strict supervision of an expert..

(5) PRATYAAHARA: in this step, the yogi practices withdrawing the mind from senses and multiplicity of thoughts. The withdrawn mind is then directed towards inner-self.

(6) DHAARANA: deals with the development of the ability of the indrawn mind to focus and concentrate on a Sacred Object (such as vision of the Guru, chosen Deity, and other Sacred forms).

(7) DHYAANA: referred as meditation, is continuous contemplation or concentration on the Sacred Object. Meditation is to be achieved like a lamp (steady mind) in the absence of flickering wind (wavering worldly thoughts).

(8) SAMADHI: This step refers to an experience of transcendental state of balance and deep spiritual absorption. This is an internalized experience of the individual. There are various states of experiences.

Thus yoga deals with providing answers (based on practice) for the basic questions of life. Various aspects of Hinduism (Sanaatana Dharma) namely rituals, mantra japa, music, dance, etc can also be seen as related to the process of yoga. The important tools of a human being namely mind, breath, speech, and body are used in the process of yoga to achieve the highest goal of human life namely God Realization, resulting in Pure Bliss.

Thus we see that yoga is not merely restricted to poses and acrobatic postures with impressive demonstrations. The sole purpose of yoga is the realization of original and normal state. Yoga should transform one's life. In the vision and words of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru:

"The customs and habits, the dress and ornaments, the manners and etiquette, the conceptions of right and wrong and of good and evil, the learning, literature and the various arts like music, the political thoughts, views regarding all actions and the consecratory ceremonies, etc., of the Indians (Bharatiyas), are all permeated like the warp and woof by Ashtanga Yoga."

Concluding Remarks

Thus it is seen that Yoga is an essential approach for any human being to sincerely practice to achieve harmony with other individuals, nature and Universal Self (Bramhan). The method of Yoga when practiced by a seeker as a disciple properly under a Guru who has realized Bramhan will lead the disciple to realize Bramhan. As Sage Yajnavalkya says "Ayam tu Paramo Dharmaha Yad Yogena Atma Darshnam", which means that the human life has its ultimate purpose (dharma) is to see or realize Atman (Bramhan). May the great sages of the Vedic tradition with compassion who gave the world the invaluable path of Yoga and the great Yogis who have realized the Atman bless every sincere seeker in the world to realize Atman or Bramhan.

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