

Yoga: Concept and Dimensions (Theme Paper)

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Yoga is deeply conceptual and highly sadhana-intensive. Sadhana means an effort in the direction of achieving the spiritual goal. It is context-specific and as such needs to be understood with reference to its world-view. Since the Vedic times it has been adopted by different systems moulded to their ontic and epistemic framework. So, we find different yogic concepts, viz., hatha yoga, raja yoga, kundalini yoga, mantra yoga, even karma yoga, jnana yoga and bhakti yoga etc, which are content-specific and peculiar to the mind-sets that conceive “yoga” and reconstruct it according to their needs. In some systems like hatha yoga the physical aspect is given prominence, whereas in raja yoga the psychological aspect is the chief concern. The Tantric systems have their own esoteric yogic concepts, where as in some systems like Advaita Vedanta, yoga as such is not the foremost concern. In some systems yoga (literally meaning “union”) is really a viyoga (separation) and in some others it is a sort of union. Some basic concepts are quite dissimilar and antagonistic in different systems. For example, the Sankhya, the Yoga school of Patanjali and Advaita Vedanta take citta (mind) to be material, where as Kashmir Saivism takes it to be a consciousness-content. So, citta vrtti-nirodha which is so much fundamental to Patanjali’s yoga becomes quite irrelevant for them. With all such differences yoga has one unified undercurrent; it is an effort or a combination of efforts, physical, mental and even sometimes supramental, in the direction of an expansion hitherto unknown in our ordinary states of living. The entire process culminates in spiritual enlightenment even though a disease-free body, a stress-free mind and an obsession-free intellect are the necessary by-products of yoga.

The moment we become conscious as human beings we discover ourselves as a complex of body, mind and spirit although the existence of the last principle is not clearly accessible to us in our ordinary state of awareness. To a little reflection, it becomes conspicuous that the body and the mind which we take to be our most faithful instruments become our greatest obstacles because of their inherent limitations. Beyond a certain limit they even become a burden and create various physical and psychological embarrassments for us. So, yoga in the preliminary stage, gives emphasis on the cure of the maladies of the body and mind by harnessing their inherent capacities in the right direction. Some simple hatha yogic practices like a few physical postures and pranayama are capable of producing tangible results. Combined with a little bit of meditation they can cure all the maladies of life and ensure our evolution towards our cosmic goal. Patanjali’s raja yoga is one of the best

psycho-therapeutic methods of healing the psychological ills apart from being a very well defined and consistently devised method of self-realization. Though the scientific background of kundalini yoga is not properly studied or understood, a little bit of practice in this line makes its efficacy quite conspicuous.

The other types of yoga such as karma yoga, jnana yoga and bhakti yoga do not presuppose any scientific method or practice; they are broad-based attitudes and practices in various pragmatic, rational and emotional strata of life. Karma yoga is the method of right action with a right attitude which is aptly described as “skill in actions” in the Bhagavadgita. “Skill” does not signify aptitude in the consumerist sense. It means an attitude of non-involvement and equanimity. Jnana yoga is the path of knowledge which is so much emphasized in Vedanta; however, “knowledge” here does not mean bookish knowledge or only rational knowledge. It really means self-realization which starts with rational inquiry and ends in intuition. Bhakti yoga is the method of love and devotion when the main thrust is directed not towards the things of the world but towards God, the source of all love and happiness. It begins with the theistic attitude and culminates in the pantheistic realization.

The seminar focuses on different concepts of yoga and tries to highlight its relevance to the modern age. We have papers which deal with the efficacy of yoga to counteract the stress and strain of modern life. Some papers deal with the traditional concepts of karma, jnana and bhakti as yoga. The philosophical foundation of body- mind-spirit interface with its yogic praxis is ably dealt with in some paper. There is a paper on svarodaya, the esoteric yogic science of breath in the context of biorhythm and the subtle pranic rhythms. Some papers delineate Patanjali’s concept of yoga- vibhuti (powers of yoga), pranava and the obstacles. Papers dealing with right perception and the theistic concept of yoga school are there to be read out in the seminar. Bio-purification of the ancient Indian school of medicine is compared with some hatha yogic practices in some paper. In short, the seminar intends to widen the frontiers of understanding of yoga and arouse interest in it.

We are not sure whether we live within a close universe or an open universe. We do not know whether our knowledge is eternally limited to the epistemic framework and the categories we are born with. All the methods of yoga promise for man a sort of enlightenment and an attainment which are ordinarily inconceivable in his normal state of existence. It only requires right understanding and proper practice.

“Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy -- by one, or more, or all of these -- and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.”

Swami Vivekananda

(Rajayoga, Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda vol-1)

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