

# Introduction to Yoga Theory

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## 1. Background and context of Yoga

Man minus his insatiable urge of knowledge would be little different from other animals. This urge is manifested as much in knowing the outer or objective world as the inner or the subjective one. If the first line of search is in reply to the question 'what is all this that surrounds me?', the other line is in reply to the question 'who am I?' The justification for the second search lies in the fact that the first search presumes the existence of the knower, the subject. Means for the first search are basically the natural senses of perception, backed by the mind, which man is endowed with; they are ineffective for the second search as the subject lacks characteristics the sense organs can work upon. Man has to rely exclusively on mind for the second search. He soon realised that mind as it is is unable to make a headway in the second line of search, for, by its very nature, it is drawn to outer objects, and this habit prevents it from grasping the inner reality. How to withdraw it from the outer world? By centuries of observations and experiments, man found an answer to this question in what we now know as Yoga, the discipline for the control of mind – which, to use modern terminology, is applied psychology or mind engineering.

## 2. Sources of Yoga

If we set aside the inconclusive views of scholars of prehistory who interpret some clay seals found at Mohenjo-daro and other sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation as illustrating Yogic postures, and also attempts of others to find the likeness of Yoga in the theories of Greek philosophers like Pythagorus, clear references to Yoga and use of its terminology are found from the times of the Upanishads. Of the older Upanishads, Katha (I.2.12, II.3.11) and Shvetaashvatara (II.8-9, 12) are prominent sources of Yogic material. We come next to the Bhagavad-giitaa (BG) which, besides stray references elsewhere (Ch 8), devotes a whole chapter, the sixth one, to the practice of Yoga and related problems. From this literature, it appears that the word Yoga may be an abridgement of a longer one – 'adhyaatma-yoga' (spiritual device) as Katha employs at one place (I.2.12) and 'abhyaasa-yoga' (practical device) as BG employs in 8.8.

## 3. Etymology and usage of Yoga

Etymologically, the term Yoga comes from the root yuj to yoke (even this English word is historically related in sound and sense to the Sanskrit root yuj), unite, join

etc. and is in use in a general sense of 'a means' as well as a special sense of 'the control of (the modes/states of) mind'. It is in the first sense that the BG applies the term to a number of means of spiritual development such as action without worldly interest, devotion, renunciation and so on; while the Yoga-suutra (YS, see below) defines it in the second sense. The author of the BG has a brainwave when he looks at the meaning of the root yuj to unite, and makes a pun on the word Yoga: 'Although called union, Yoga is in fact a separation, – separation from the union with suffering!' (6.23)

#### **4. Yoga-suutra and its author**

Patanjali's Yoga-suutra(4<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> c. B. C.) is the earliest available systematic work exclusively devoted to this subject and has remained the major source as well as an inspiration for later writers on this subject. Tradition credits Patanjali with substantial contributions to three distinct areas of study: grammar (Mahaa-bhaashya on Paanini's work), medicine (Charaka-samhitaa) and Yoga. The common thread that binds these apparently unrelated subjects is that they are designed to achieve purity – of speech, of body, and of mind respectively. There are some amusing anecdotes about Patanjali current in grammatical tradition, and also a Sanskrit playlet on him entitled Patanjali-charita. Though aimed at purity of mind, Yoga deals also with such physical and physiological aspects as contribute to the control of mind. This makes room for Yogic postures and breath control, – aspects which, along with some more methods of physiological control, eventually branched off into a separate school called Hatha-yoga (Yoga of force) with its own methodology, as against the earlier approach termed Raaja-yoga (Royal Yoga or Yoga of persuasion). Our present knowledge of postures and breath control comes from the tradition of Hatha-yoga; Patanjali treats of these topics in a cursory way. Extant works on Hatha-yoga do not date as back as Patanjali's work. Hatha-yoga will be dealt with separately as we proceed.

#### **5. Outline of the Yoga-suutra**

The Yoga-suutra consists of 195 (or according to some, 194) Suutras divided into 4 parts (Paadas), meaning quarters, named in sequence as Samaadhi- (contemplation), Saadhana-(aids), Vibhuuti- (occult powers) and Kaivalya- (liberation). The first and the last of these treat of the nature of the essential or immediate means (deep meditation) and ultimate object (liberation) of Yogic practice. The second part deals with the secondary level means, i. e. means leading or contributing to Samaadhi; and the third part enumerates occult powers resulting from the Yogic practice at an advanced stage.

#### **6. Yoga among six philosophical systems**

Yoga has been given an honourable place among the six orthodox philosophical systems in Indian tradition and is mostly aligned to the Saankhya system as far

as the metaphysical framework is concerned. The remaining systems also make similar pairs: Vedaanta and Mīmaamsaa; Vaisheshika and Nyaaya. We find in this scheme that Saankhya, Vedaanta and Vaisheshika are really metaphysical systems while the remaining ones, though aligned, may be superficially, to specific metaphysical systems, do not contribute to metaphysical thought; instead, they develop disciplines useful for scientific search. Thus, Mīmaamsaa is hermeneutics, Nyaaya is logic, and Yoga is the technique of realisation through mind control.

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