

## THE CONCEPT OF PATANJALI'S ASTANGA YOGA

1. In the history of the vast literature on yoga and in the present times, there have been several different conceptions of yoga: Patanjali's Astanga<sup>1</sup> Yoga in the Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Jnana Yoga in the *Bhagavadgita*, the Hatha Yoga in the Tantrika tradition, Shri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, and in recent times the mushroom growth of conceptions about the nature and method of yoga one common characteristic of which is the intention of the exponent to make yoga a highly salable commodity in the West and in India in that order. Of late, there have also been noticed attempts to see elements of Yoga in J. Krishnamurti's philosophy which, in the eyes of the claimants, warrant comparing and contrasting J. Krishnamurti's concept of meditation with yogic meditation. These several conceptions of yoga are so very different that the use of the word "yoga" in relation to them seems to be the least clarifying and the most misleading as to the nature and methodology of yoga. The usage is unclarifying at least to me. Why after all should these different conceptions be characterized as one or the other form of yoga? Is there any justification for christening them by the same name 'yoga'? Or, is this only because we seek to make ourselves should respectable that we call them by this name? Or, is there really something common amongst these different conceptions that they carry the same family name 'yoga'? The usage is misleading also. The concept of yoga in the Astanga Yoga of Patanjali and that of the Karma Yoga in the *Bhagavadgita* seem to be so very different that any attempt to identify the one with the other must be regarded as a mistake, a product of misunderstanding the nature of yoga in the two different conceptual schemes.

2. The concept of yoga is different from the various conceptions of yoga. The different conception of yoga, may be looked upon as different analyses of the same concept of yoga, or as different theories about yoga, of which they are the theories or analyses is the concept of yoga. Thus, the concept of yoga is not to be identified or confused with some one particular conception or analysis of yoga. However, there is a usage of the word "concept" which tends to make it synonymous with the word

“conception”. It is following this usage that it make sense to speak of *my* concept of yoga being different from *yours* or *his*, for another example, ‘the concept of yoga in the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali’ being different from ‘the concept of yoga in the Karma Yoga of the *Bhagavadgita*’. It is instructive to keep in mind this distinction between the concept and a conception of yoga and thus avoid the possible conceptual confusion in any discussion on the subject.

3. Now my claim is that there are different conceptions of yoga, and that in the interest of clarity in understanding it is of the utmost importance to keep apart one from the other conception of it. For example, what one may truly say about Hatha Yoga may not ( and it in fact is not ) true of Patanjali’s Astanga Yoga. The latter emphasizes on the ease and spontaneity in one’s bodily postures or *asanas*<sup>2</sup> while meditating, whereas the former employs *hatha* or violence and force and requires of the Hatha Yogin for example to stand on one leg, or hold the arms, or inhale smoke with the head inverted when meditating. Similarly, a kind of yogic samadhi<sup>3</sup> or some sort of *siddhi* or perfection could be achieved by taking drugs or by reciting some mantra<sup>4</sup>, but a yogi who aims at kaivalya<sup>5</sup> may have nothing to do with this kind of samadhi and perfections, and for this reason will keep himself from them. Or, a person who follows what has been called Jnana Yoga may see no relevance of *isvara pranidhana*<sup>6</sup> or *cittavrttinirodha*<sup>7</sup> or even of samadhi<sup>8</sup> which constitute the necessary conditions or Astanga Yoga. The important thing to remember here is that there are many different conceptions of yoga and that for clarity’s sake one should not confuse one with the other conception and that one should not speak of yoga without specifying the sense in which one is using the word and the kind of yoga one is talking about.

4. Conceptions of yoga may differ from one another in terms of either ( 1 ) the analysis of the concept of yoga, that is, what one means or understands by the word “yoga”, or ( 2 ) in their view of the function or the role or the aim of yoga, that is, what you want yoga to do for you or what can be achieved by yoga, or ( 3 ) in the methodology of yoga, that is, how one should go about achieving what one does want to achieve by yoga. To illustrate these differences. The Karma Yogin and the Astanga Yogin differ in their analyses of the concept of yoga. while

for the latter, yoga is *samadhi*<sup>9</sup> or it is *cittavrttinirodhah*,<sup>10</sup> for the Karma yogin it is *karmasu kausalyam*<sup>11</sup> or skill in whatever you do. Some people look at yoga as identical with the practice of yogic asanas with the explicit aim not at spiritual upliftment, but at better bodily health and reduction of and maximum possible freedom from psychological tension. This emphasis in aim is quite at variance with the aim which a yogin has when he practises Astanga Yoga. He aims at attaining a stage in his spiritual development where there is what has been called *kaivalya*. He is wholly detached to all the worldly benefits that may accrue him in the course of yogic maturity. Differences between conceptions of yoga may also be identified in terms of the methodology which a yogin may adopt in the pursuit of his specific aims consistent with his particular analysis of the concept of yoga. This is illustrated by the Jnana Yogin's explicit emphasis on the non-necessary character of the yogic practices, while for the Astanga Yogin such practices are the necessary conditions of yoga in the sense that yoga without such practices which take him to the graduating stages in his spiritual development is conceivably impossible.

5. Yogic conceptions may also differ in relation to the question whether it is possible to have meditation in the sense of *samadhi* by will or reaching the stage of *samadhi* is a matter of divine grace, or that is a matter neither of willing nor of divine grace but that meditation has the characteristic of a kind of spontaneity the source of which is not known or at best it is traceable to some kind of evolutionary process as applied to the spiritual growth of man. This last alternative presupposes for its validity either the truth or the acceptability of the assumption of the evolutionary thesis which I personally find it difficult to subscribe to. However this may be, there is need to notice the fact that by some schools of opinion (J. Krishnamurti's is one of them) meditation has been held to be a matter which cannot be cultivated at will.<sup>12</sup> It is probable that the concept of meditation subscribed to by these people is radically different from the concept of meditation held by those who regard meditation as some thing which it is possible to cultivate it at will. If this is so, then my proposal that the conceptual differences with which the words "Yoga", "meditation", and the like are used ought not to be lost

sight of if a fruitful discussion on the concept of yoga is to be carried on with a certain level of clarity and direction.

6. Patanjali analyses the concept of yoga as *cittavrttinirodhah*<sup>13</sup> and his Bhasyakara the commentator Veda Vyasa identifies yoga with *samadhih*.<sup>14</sup> This conception of yoga differentiates it from all other conceptions like the Jnana Yoga, the Karm Yoga, and all the salable commodity theories of yoga being propagated in the West by the learned exponent of yoga like Acarya Rajanisha, Sri. Mahesh Yogi and others. I am not at all suggesting that their theories are false or that they are inadequate to the purposes for which they have designed by their architects. I am only asserting with a certain degree of emphasis that Patanjali's conception of yoga as given in the *Yoga Sutra* is definitely different, and that this difference ought not to be overlooked when we talk about the concept of yoga. The yoga as *cittavrttinirodhah* or *samadhih* is capable of being cultivated at will by following the combined procedure of *abhayasa*<sup>15</sup> and *vairagya*<sup>16</sup> on the one hand and *isvarapranidhana*<sup>17</sup> on other. This combined procedure necessarily requires one to be committed in thought, speech and action to the specified *yamas*, *niyamas*, *asanas*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*.<sup>18</sup> This commitment is distinctive of Patanjali's Astanga Yoga and of no other conception. When these commitments are adopted as one's way of life, there accrue to the Yogin certain perfections and divine powers the appearance of which is a matter of observation in his day to day life and in his dealings with other beings, human and nonhuman both. These *siddhis* and *vibhutis* constitute no part, for example, of a Karma Yogin's life. In the final stage of his yogic development, the Yogin attains what is called *sattva purusayoh suddhisattvam*<sup>19</sup> or *kaivalya*.

7. Given these features, I wish to show now that there is no sense in which Patanjali's Astanga Yoga could be said to be either a Philosophy or a religion. Rather, it is a technology structured on the basis indeed of a very long period of scientific research into the inward workings of the man's mind. This technology essentially is value-neutral. It can be (and in fact it has been) adopted by so many different religions and philosophies irrespective of their particular ideological persuasions. This last mentioned point that this technology essentially is value-neutral may be illustrated by drawing attention to the historical fact that

on the one hand Samkara's Advaita Vedanta<sup>20</sup> adopts yoga in this sense as a part of the training of the spiritually ambitious person; and on the other hand even in the Godless *Visasika Sutra*<sup>21</sup> yoga has been adopted as a necessary part of their ideological programme. Besides, the Buddhist and the Jaina monks also cultivated and practiced yoga with the utmost zeal in order to use this technology to understand, to control, and to be able to live at a level of consciousness not ordinarily available to the man engaged in the wordly pursuits.

8. Nor is yoga a religion. In the history of the Indian philosophy and religion, I do not think ( I may well be mistaken in this view ) that yoga has ever been regarded as a religion in spite of the outstanding fact that the idea of an Isvara or a God is a necessary part of the conceptual framework of yoga. This may sound paradoxical, but this is true. My own feeling is that the idea of an isvara in the *Yoga Sutra* is not the idea of a religious God : it is only a special kind of self.<sup>22</sup>

9. Finally, Yoga is not a philosophy, whether philosophy is regarded as a love for wisdom, an attitude for life, a world view or a logical or linguistic analysis of concepts. The elements like a gradual ascendancy to the higher levels in the development of the man's mind, where there is a sequence of events one event leading to the other which make yoga a technology do in no way encourage one to characterise yoga as a philosophy. I am inclined to hold this view in spite of the fact that in the text-books on Indian Philosophy the historians of Indian Philosophy have often, to my mind mistakenly, called yoga a philosophy.

10. To conclude: What I have done in this short paper are two or three things. *One* : I have shown that the concept of yoga admits of several different analyses and that the Astanga Yoga is radically different from the other conceptions of yoga like the Jnana or the Karma Yoga. *Two* : I have shown that yoga is neither a religion nor a philosophy but ( and this is the *third* thing, I have done ) yoga is a technology which is value neutral such that it can be adopted as a necessary part of the conceptual scheme or the training programme of any religion or philosophy.

## NOTES

1. The word "astanga" literally means "having eight *angas* or essentials".
2. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, BK. II, Sutrā, 46-48
3. "Samadhi" here means "concentration".
4. "Mantra" has been translated by James H. Woods as "spells". See *The Yoga System of Patanjali*. The Harvard Oriental Series, Volum 17 *Yoga Sutra* BK. IV, Sutra 1.
5. "Kaivalya" means the "energy of intellect grounded in itself". (Translated by James H. Woods) BK. IV, Sutra 34. *Kaivalyam Svarupapratistha va citesaktireti.* ( *kaivalyapada*, 34.)
6. The expression means "devotion to the Isvara". BK. I, Svtra. 23.
7. "Yoga is the restriction of the fluctuations of mind-stuff." *Yoga Sutra*, BK. I. Sutra 2.
8. Veda Vyasa's comment on the first sutra of the first Book of *Yoga Sutra*: "Yogah Samadhih."
9. Ibid.
10. *Yoga Sutra*, BK. I, Sutra 2.
11. *The Bhagvadgita*, Chapter II, SL. 50.
12. See R. K. Shringy's *The Philosophy of J. Krishnamurti*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, India, p. 345.
13. As in (7) above.
14. As in (8) above.
15. "Abhyasa" means "practice".
16. "Vairagya" means "passionlessness" or 'detachment'.
17. Devotion to the Isvara as in (6) above.
18. "Abstentions and observances and postures and equalations of the breath and withdrawal of the senses and fixed attention and contemplation and concentration are the eight aids." (Translated by James H. Woods.) BK. II, Sutra 29.
19. "When the purity of the *Sathya* and of the self are equal (there is) isolation." BK. III, Sutra 55.
20. Samkara's commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*.
21. *The Vaisesika Sutra* and the *Prasatapada-bhasya* on it.
22. *Yoga Sutra*, BK. I, Sutra 24. "Untouched by hinadrances or karmas or fruition or by latent-deposits the Isvara is a special kind of self." *Purusa-visesa isvarah*.