

The Spirituality Check: What is really meant by Yoga?

Vanamali Gunturu

*In a society in which large ecclesiastical institutions, endowed with the power to dictate a layperson's beliefs, do not control religious practice any more, diversity can become a problem. Who is not an expert, often needs qualified guides in order to distinguish sincere spirituality from misleading ways. An objective appraisal what can be a sincere form of spirituality and what not is difficult to find because most experts advance their own worldview. With this series of articles, called **The Spirituality Check**, we want to illustrate from the perspective of a transcendental science of religions what distinguishes sincere from dubious uses of spiritual terms. Therefore, a concept will be presented with its etymology, its theoretical provenience, its practical application, and its occurrence today, and will be discussed with regard to its serious applicability.*

It is a popularly held view in the western countries that yoga is a type of physical exercise. The word has on the contrary a lot of meanings and connotations in the Indian society and tradition. (a) In Indian astrology and in the Hindu calendar it is, for example, a hint on a particular planetary constellation und an indication for the results that might ensue from it. In such a context, the word yoga would be attached to the actual word as suffix, for e.g., *amritayoga*, *maranayoga*, *vishayoga*, *kartariyoga*, *pancananayoga*, *patanayoga* or *gajakesariyoga*. (b) Yoga also denotes the favourable or unfavourable conditions of a man in a particular phase of his life. The advantageous constellation of a man who makes progress on all the fronts of life und meets with only success everywhere is known as *rajayoga*, the royal yoga. This does not necessarily mean that he is going to be king! Patanayoga on the other hand means that a respected and successful man in question meets everywhere with unhappy experiences: his own people denounce him, they insult, punish and betray him. The word yoga also has a moral connotation. In this regard, *duryoga* means something negative and *sadyoga* means something positive. (c) Yoga also denotes a best performance in any field of activity, which a man can achieve. *Yogyata*, a word related with yoga, means qualification or suitability. d) In the context of religion and theology, the word means a way, a method, or technique. One may think of terms like Bhakti-, Karma- and Jñānayoga – the ways or methods of love, action or knowledge to reach God. It is interesting to note in this regard the concept of 'Ashthanga yoga', with

which Patañjali, the author of the 'Yogasutras', terms the entire part of his work dealing with the practice and technique of yoga.

The philosophy of Yoga

In a strict sense, the word yoga is the name of one of the nine schools of Indian philosophy. And it differs from its twin sister, *sankhya*, only in the question of God's existence. Whereas Sankhya manages to explain everything without assuming God, yoga ethics wants to take help of a sort of God for the final emancipation of man from his bondages. That is the reason why yoga is also sometimes called Patañjala Sankhya (Patañjali's version of Sankhya). Yoga – and from here onwards this word also means Sankhya – formulates two perennially important and valid questions of philosophy: What is the essential nature of matter and of consciousness? How are the two entities connected with each other? Yoga prepares some very important concepts of Hinduism, influences its pantheon and lays the foundations of the traditional Indian medicine, Ayurveda. On a meta level it describes all the possible experiences of a man who is treading the path of yoga, for instance, the ecstatic mental states of someone practising yoga; or the supernatural powers, which may be awakened in a person. As such, it is the earliest most important scientific work about spirituality and occultism, which is at the same time not bound to any religion.

The antiquity of this school of philosophy is difficult to tell with certainty. On one of the seals of the Indus-valley civilisation one can very clearly see the yogic posture (*asana*) called *kayotsarga*. As most features of the later day Hinduism and its practices are to be traced back to this civilisation, one can assume that also the roots of yoga and its ideas lay hidden here in this early history of the Indians. Like many concepts and technical termini of Indian philosophy, also those of the yoga originate in the Vedas and the Upanishads. In the Rigveda, the oldest and the holiest of the scriptures of the Hindus we come across a hymn called *purushasukta*, which is dedicated to the *purusha*, to the primordial Being. *Purusha* is one of the two basic categories of the yoga-philosophy, the other being *prakriti*.

Kapila, who has been mentioned in the works of the authors who lived in the pre-Christian centuries, is regarded as the founder of this philosophical system although none of his works seems to have survived the test of time. Ishvarakrishna's (3rd century A.D.¹) *Sankhya Karika* is the most important work for the Sankhya system. Patañjali, (2nd century B. C.²), the author of the *Yogasutras*, is considered to be the founder of yoga although he has most probably only put together aphoristically in an orderly way the results of the earlier discussions and the available knowledge of his day.

Yoga is most probably older than Buddhism, too. The young Siddhartha, later day's Buddha, has supposedly learnt techniques and meditations of yoga from several Gurus (Adepts). *Sankhyakarikas* and *Yogasutras* along with the from time to time written commentaries on them together form the entire literature on this topic.

¹ Radhakrishnan, S., S. 254

² Dasgupta, Surendranath, S. 238

Like almost all the other Indian schools of philosophy, yoga also addresses itself to the question: What is the nature of sorrow and what does it consist of? In its search for a plausible answer it comes up on the basic insights into the human equipment of knowledge, the nature of knowledge and error, and the way out of sorrow. As such, sorrow, not enthusiasm as in the western philosophy, triggers the philosophical inquiry. "The three-fold sorrow generates in human beings a curiosity to know and eliminate the sorrow", says at the very beginning the first verse in the Sankhya Karika.

The Sanskrit-word 'vritti', meaning modification or reforming, is a key concept in the yoga philosophy (for eg. I, 1, in the Yogasutras). During an experience or perception, the thinking-organ, *citta*, consisting of intellect (*buddhi*), ego (*ahankara*) and mind (*manas*), modifies itself into the respective object. An experience or a perception restricts itself only to this modification of *citta*, which again is a representation of the object or reality. At no point of time there is a direct contact between the object and the subject. The experiencing subject is called '*purusha*', one of the basic categories of yoga and the other being '*prakriti*', the primordial matter. These two explain the entire Yoga system.

Purusha is the principle of pure consciousness. It acts in no way, does not move but perceives and experiences everything. It is just a passive observer, a witness of the world and its happenings. Its nature is so that it can never change and never get into contact with matter. This is in accordance with a fundamental axiom of philosophy, i.e., that only things of the same essential nature can get into contact with each other. A thought, for example, can become connected with another thought, consciousness with another consciousness, a material thing with another material thing. Two things that are different in their essence cannot influence each other. Matter is absolutely alien for *purusha*. It being so, we can assert that Descartes' '*res cogitans*' is the age old *purusha* of the Indian philosophy and it also reminds one of Aristotel's '*unmoved mover*'. According to Yoga there is a plurality of *purushas* (Sankhyakarika, Vers 18). Sankhya believes that all the *purushas* are similar and it does not postulate God's existence. Patañjalis Yoga on the other hand supposes a '*superpurusha*', *purushottama*, a sort of a God whom it calls Ishvara. Ishvara is in every respect similar to the other *purushas* with only the one difference that it is the most important among the *purushas*.

The second category, *prakriti*, the primordial matter, often translated from the non-yogic traditions as nature, is the primeval matter, in which the entire manifold creation is present in its potential form. According to the Yoga system the entire universe develops or evolves out of the *prakriti*. But through this nothing new comes into being which has not already existed in a latent form in the *prakriti*. As such *prakriti* is, to speak in Aristotel's language, the material cause. Because it also has all the forms in itself, which it assumes, it is the formal and the final cause. It is restless and dynamic and develops uninterruptedly. This theory of evolution, which yoga adheres to, is called '*parinamavada*'. And the theory that the whole world, developing in its variety of forms, is already present in *prakriti* as a cause prior to any existence is known as *satkaryavada*, theory of existent effect in the cause (Sankhyakarikas, vers 9).

Prakriti is unfathomable and indefinite, *avyakta* – not manifested. Its three dynamic components, called *gunas*, are *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* (ibid., vers 11). *Sattva* is the quality

of lightness, ease, light, happiness, peace, the good, knowledge etc. Rajas on the other hand means motion, excitement, dynamism, activity, pain, sorrow etc. Tamas, the third component of prakriti means inertia, lethargy, heaviness, darkness, ignorance etc. (ibid., verse 13). When we cognise a thing, then all the three components are involved in the process, as they inhere the thing. Because of *sattva*, the thing can be cognised at all, because of it we perceive its qualities – *sattva* lets us perceive the thing. If the same thing makes us unhappy or generates pain in us, it is because of rajas. If we can perceive the thing only partially and several aspects of it remain undisclosed it is because of *tamas* which blocks or inhibits the process of cognition – hides the thing from us. Everything in this world consists of these three components, which cannot be separated from each other. Because of these three, we are confronted with many things in this world that we cannot recognise in the same degree. Most of them are disclosed only partially – some less and some even lesser depending up on the fact in which proportion the three components are mixed in them and which of them is dominant. Yoga concludes from this fact that even the primordial matter, *prakriti*, must be consisting of the three components.

In the non-manifest form of *prakriti* there is a balance between *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Due to this there won't be an apparent evolution in matter. It is as though *prakriti* produces itself, without the latent forms becoming actualised. Purusha causes the first disturbance in this balance that leads to the beginning of manifestation or evolution of the world.

Although consciousness is alien to the essence of matter, *prakriti*, it follows or shows a certain teleological goal. Prakriti seems to supply *purusha* with an instrument of cognition and with experiences. Therefore from *prakriti* intellect (*buddhi*) evolves. *Sattva* is the dominant component in *buddhi*. Out of *buddhi* evolves the ego, *ahamkara*, and out of this the mind, (*manas*). These three together form the inner organ, *antahkarana*, of consciousness. The entire instrument of experience or perception consists of the inner organ, five sense organs and five organs of action, which evolve out of the ego, *ahamkara*. All these manifestations are considered as the primary evolution.

The entire organ of experience is also called '*lingasarira*', a body of subtle matter, which survives death and incarnates repeatedly until *purusha* is emancipated, when all the products of *prakriti* fall back into its original undifferentiated form. The subtle body corresponds to the concept of soul in some religions.

This evolution of *prakriti* has two aspects. On the one hand, it is cosmic. In the one cosmic intellect, *buddhi*, for example, participate, to put it into Plato's terminology, all the individual intellects. Similarly, in the cosmic ego all the individual egos participate etc.

From the ego emerge also all the five subtle elements, out of which all the gross elements earth, water, fire, air and ether evolve. The visible world of our experiences, like mountains, rivers, forests, trees, animals and every thing imaginable, emerges as these five elements combine in different and various proportions.

In the actually lifeless intellect (*buddhi*), *sattva* is dominant. *Sattva* is the quality of knowledge and cognition. Hence, it is that component of *prakriti*, which is capable of reflecting *purusha* in itself like a mirror. By using this metaphor, yoga philosophy is trying to illustrate the impossible relationship between matter and spirit – between *prakriti* and *purusha*. The intellect reflects *purusha*, like water in a bowl reflects the moon. The moon

appears to get in to a relationship with water in the bowl, although in reality she is in the sky untouched by water. Such a pseudo relationship exists between *prakriti* and *purusha* – between the unmovable consciousness and inanimate, insentient matter. Just as a lame person sits on the shoulders of a blind person and both launch on a journey, so do the matter and the spirit appear to launch the creation, the world-drama. The lame can see but not move, the blind can move but not see the direction (Sankhyakarika vers 21). As such, *prakriti* has a double function in Yoga philosophy. On the one hand, it generates the organ of experience and cognition, and on the other, it supplies the *purusha* with experiences in the form of this world.

The inner organ, *citta*, modifies itself every time into the object of experience – of perception or of thought. These modifications are called *vruttis*, which are constantly accompanied and converted into subjective experiences by the ego. As a result, it comes to happen that the true nature of *purusha* is concealed from itself so that it cannot perceive it any longer. In addition to that, *purusha* begins to identify itself wrongly with *prakriti* – with the inner organ, even with the fine and gross body and its earthly experiences and gets involved in attachment to the world. That, according to yoga, is the cause of suffering with which the search had begun.

Yoga as path to liberation

After this analysis of the reality and of the cause of suffering, Yoga and Sankhya try to show a way to liberation from suffering. In this regard, Sankhya recommends a gnostic way – the way of knowledge. Humans should meditate on the true essence of *purusha* – on the fact that it is not a body, and it could never have had a real relationship with matter. In this manner, it should regain its original condition of purity. In purity of the spirit, *kaivalya*, lies the salvation of man. When *purusha* regains its absolute self-knowledge, *prakriti* stops to evolve further. It moves back into its original undifferentiated form, because it has fulfilled its function – to furnish *purusha* with experiences. It is as though the curtain on the stage falls, as though the actors remove their makeup and return to their normal life.

The Yoga school is on the other hand action oriented and recommends the Asthanga Yoga – the eight-fold way to emancipation. One who treads this path finally attains the ability to separate truth from untruth.

The eight ways are 1. *yama* (self control) consisting of non-violence, truth, not stealing, celibacy and non possession, 2. *niyama* (observance of the rules) consists of purity, satisfaction, rigorously aspiring the goal, studying the scriptures and surrender to God, 3. *asana* (body stances), 4. *pranayama* (breathing exercises), 5. *pratyahara* (steering the sense organs and thoughts into inwardness), 6. *dharana* (collection of the spirit), 7. *dhyana* (meditation) and 8. *samadhi* (the highest state of consciousness) (Yogasutras II, 29-45). The practice of this eight-fold path leads to the awakening of supernatural powers called *vidhuti*s before the full emancipation takes place. For example, the actions of one who dwells in truth are always crowned with success. One who practices non-possession

perfectly regains the knowledge of his earlier incarnations. One who desists absolutely from stealing gets all the riches of the world. (Stealing has to be understood in this connection as possession of private property. See the meaning of the Latin word *privare*). Gandhi, who used consult Patañjalis Yogasutras in his day-to-day life, said once, "I am one of the richest beggars of the world". He possessed nothing, but even then, people used to donate him huge amounts of money whenever he needed it for his projects. Through the special technique of *samyama*, concentration, one can read the thoughts of others and even become invisible. Many themes of the present day esoteric scene are the subject matter of the Yogasutras of Patañjali. Even if what is written there is true, it is not easy to realise these tasks like getting invisible etc., let alone them being buyable on the market. On the path of Yoga the desire for money, properties, and sex are a big hurdle to self-realisation.

Yoga and Sankhya have influenced Hinduism and the schools of Vedanta enormously. These two have fixed the basic terminology and concepts of the Indian religions and the schools of philosophy. Both have explained plausibly how this world has come into being, why man suffers, how he can get out of it and how this way looks like. On rational way they explained the phenomenon of rebirth, creation and its meaning. In all these attempts, Sankhya does not resort to the hypothesis of God's Existence. Even Yoga remains largely atheistic. Its *ishvara* is nothing but a super *purusha*, who helps other *purushas* in their liberation. He is not a creator of the world known to religions or other systems.

Hinduism usually identifies its Gods with *ishvara*. Vishnu has the epithet *purusha* and also the epithet *purushottama*, the noblest among the *purushas*. He is also called *sakshi*, the witness or the observer. The mother Goddess, Durga, is often called Prakriti or Mulaprakriti, the primordial matter; or *gunasraya*, the substratum of Gunas. All the gods are considered to be *sattvikas*, dominated by the good quality of *sattva*. Accordingly, demons are considered to be dominated by *tamas*.

This tendency finds its echoes in the Hindu-theology, which goes further and tries to remove the difference between the super *purusha* and the cosmic consciousness on the one side and the *prakriti*, matter on the other side. This is not in accordance with the yoga tenets. This is exactly what the genius philosopher Shankara (8th century A.D.) does to establish his Advaita Vedanta. According to him, the souls, God and the world are identical. Because of *maya* or *avidya*, illusion or ignorance, we conceive a difference between these entities. According to him, man finds his liberation if he overcomes his ignorance – ceases to see the difference between himself, the creator and the creation.

It is important to note that the Holy Scripture Shri Bhagavadgita deals with yoga at great length. This book begins with the sorrow of Arjuna (one of the Pandava heroes) on the eve of the war with his cousins. God Krishna, charioteer of Arjuna, initiates him on the battleground into the Yoga philosophy to show him the cause of sorrow. Only after this, he portrays in the following chapters other forms of yoga like Bhakti, Karma and Jñana. Krishnas way of presenting yoga shows clearly the influence of the Upanishads. As a result, it deviates from the fundamental axioms of Patañjalis Yoga that *purusha* and *prakriti* are separate and eternal entities. Consequently, in the Bhagavadgita one comes across passages which identify God with *purusha* and regard *prakriti* as an aspect of God.

Otherwise, the Bhagavadgita explains Yoga philosophy very lucidly and in all its details. Krishna advises Arjuna to stand on the solid ground of Yoga and only then to act in life. To maintain the inner balance in success and defeat Krishna defines as the gist of yoga (Bhagavadgita, 2, 48). Because of these estimations of Yoga in the Holy Scripture Yoga found a huge number of followers in Indian society. One can assert that God Krishna is as much important in making Yoga philosophy so popular in India as the emperor Ashoka in making Buddhism popular.

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About the author:

The author was born in 1956 in Nellore/A.P., India in a family of scholars and studied Sanskrit literature, English literature and history in Hyderabad. He received a doctor's degree in western philosophy in 1995 from Ludwig-Maximilians University, München. He now lives as author and lecturer near München. Among his publications are, besides novels: Krishnamurti: Leben und Werk, Diederichs 1997; Mahatma Gandhi: Leben und Werk, Diederichs 1999; Hinduismus: Die große Religion Indiens, Diederichs 2000; Hinduismus, Diederichs Kompakt 2002; Mensch sucht Sinn, Gabriel Verlag 2004; Der Kamasutra-Ratgeber: Sex, Lust und die Kunst der Verführung, Atmosphären Verlag 2004; Heiliger Sex: Die erotische Welt des Hinduismus, Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 2009.

Homepage: <http://www.gunturu.de/>. Email: vanamali.sg[at]arcor.de