

Improvement upon Rājayoga: Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Srimat Anirvan

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Abstract

The introductory segment of this paper locates the pre-Vedic roots of yoga. The various kinds of yoga prevalent in India such as *haṭhayoga*, *rājayoga*, *bhaktiyoga*, *karmayoga*, *jñānayoga*, *tāntricyoga* and so on. The second part of the paper focuses on the concept of *rājayoga*. For this, three contemporary Indian philosophers have been chosen – Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Srimat Anirvan. The objective of the paper is to interrelate these masters in their handling of *rājayoga* as the idea passes from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth.

Keywords: *rājayoga*, *upanisads*, *Bhagavadgītā*, interrelate, handling idea

The origin of yoga is pre-Vedic. Whereas Ṛgveda bears a number of references to this, the notion of yoga is also presumed to have germinated around the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. (in ancient India's ascetic and śramaṇa movement). *Upaniṣads* and other ancient sources depict prevalent yoga practices of the time. However, yoga has its philosophic roots in the system of the Sāṃkhya and it is from them that Patañjali drew on to write the *Yogasūtra* which dated back from the fourth to second century B.C.E. *Yogagurus* have lately introduced the concept to the West following Swami Vivekananda in the nineteenth century. Although outside India, it has been adopted into a posture-based physical fitness, stress-relief and relaxation technique, yoga in Indian traditions, is more than physical exercise; it is meditative and deeply spiritual. Thus, the notion of yoga has travelled a long path over the centuries into various religions, isms, and cultures. The first half of this paper briefly outlines the ancient Indic tradition beginning from the *Yogasūtra* to the *Gītā* and the minor *Upaniṣads*. The second half focuses on how yoga has been taken out of its old form – an occult set of disciplines that a few chosen mystics could practice – to a wider number of people all over the world suitable even for a diurnal life. This part of my contention bases itself on

the yogic theories propounded by Vivekananda (1863-1902), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and Srimat Anirvan (1896-1978). This article will explore how rājayoga is perceived and improved upon by these three masters of Bengal.

The word “yoga” briefly refers to an alignment between the *jīvātman* and *paramātman* or a union between the devotee and the devotee. The Sanskrit noun *yoga* derived from the root *yuj* means “to attach, join, harness, yoke”. The word “yoga” in English is cognate with “yoke”.

Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* (2nd B.C.E.) is the earliest extant text exclusively devoted to yoga and is considered to be the master source as well as an inspiration for later writers on this subject. “Patañjali was probably the most notable person”, as Surendranth Dasgupta asserts, “for he not only collected the different forms of yoga practices and gleaned the diverse ideas which were or could be associated with the yoga, but grafted them all on the Sāṃkhya metaphysics and gave them the form in which have handed down to us”.¹ The *Yogasūtra* consists of 195 (or according to some, 194) *sūtra*-s divided into four parts (*pād*-s), meaning quarters, named in sequence as *samādhi* (contemplation), *sādhana* (aids), *vibhūti* (occult powers) and *kaivalya* (liberation). The first and the last of these deal with the nature of the essential or immediate means (deep meditation) and the ultimate object (liberation) of yogic practice. The second part moves on to the secondary level of means, i.e., means leading or contributing to *samādhi*; and the third part enumerates occult powers resulting from the yogic practice at an advanced stage. Dasgupta further asserts that these *sūtra*-s “do not show any original attempt but a masterly and systematic compilation which was also supplemented by fitting contributions”.² Patañjali’s system is predicated upon the system of the Sāṃkhya although there are points of differences between them. “The two most important differences are, first that Patañjali admits a Personal God in the form of a first teacher, while the only God the Sāṃkhyas admit is a nearly perfected being, temporarily in charge of a cycle. Second, the Yogīs hold the mind to be equally all pervading with the soul, or Puruṣa, and the Sāṃkhyas do not.”³

An examination of the *Upaniṣads* is *Śāṅḍilya*, *Yogatattva*, *Dhayānabindu*, *Haṃsa*, *Amṛtānanda*, *Varāha*, *Nāḍabindu*, which are known as the *Yoga Upaniṣads* reveals that the yoga practices had undergone diverse changes in diverse schools but none of these shows any predilection for the Sāṃkhya. Thus the yoga practices grew in accordance with the doctrines of the Śaiva-s and Śākta-s and developed a distinct form as the *mantrayoga*. In another direction those practices came to be known as the *haṭhayoga*. The *haṭhayoga* was supposed to produce mystic and magical feats through regular practice of nervous exercises. It was also concerned with healing and other supernatural powers. In this connection, we may refer to the *Yogatattva Upaniṣad* which identifies four kinds of yoga – the *mantrayoga*, *layayoga*, *haṭhayoga* and *rājayoga*. thus refers to “chief, best of yoga”.

In the *Bhagavadgītā*, *yoga* is a means – not to a mundane goal but to the highest goal of human existence (the *Bhagavadgītā* restricts the word precisely in this sense) – liberation from the worldly existence, the *mokṣa*. The *Gītā* concept of *yoga* covers also the *yoga* of meditation which is the most popular sense of the term and to which the *Bhagavadgītā* devotes a whole chapter (Ch. 6) besides occasional references elsewhere. A comprehensive view of *yoga* makes the *Bhagavadgītā* a *yogaśāstra*, ‘the science of *yoga*’, an epithet employed in the colophon of each of its chapters. Thus, *jñāna* (knowledge of the reality), *bhakti* (devotion), *karma* (action, duty) *sannyāsa* (renunciation) and *dhyāna* (meditation) – are all *yoga*-s, provided they are not harnessed to any worldly end. To illustrate, to worship God for obtaining son, property, wealth, land, victory over enemies etc. is plain *bhakti*; to worship God for his grace, to endow one with spiritual knowledge is *bhaktiyoga*. *Karman* becomes *karmayoga* when performed for the purification of mind and without any expectation of worldly gains. There is a long chain of means and ends in which every preceding link is a means to the following one which is its end. Every chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā* is, therefore, designated as a *yoga* prefixed by the topic of the chapter.

Swami Vivekananda introduced the philosophic doctrines of the *Vedānta* and *yoga* to the West. His book *Rājyoga* published in the year 1896 offers his interpretation of Patañjali’s *yogasūtra*. Meant primarily for the Western audience it also includes his commentaries, which contained a series of talks. Vivekananda’s principles are predicated not only upon traditional Hinduism, but also upon the ideas of Western science, Idealism and “the Neo-Vedantic esotericism of the Brahma Samaj and Western occultism,” including mesmerism and “American Harmonial religion” and Western movements such as transcendentalism.

It is evident that *rājyoga* lays significant emphasis on mind – “The science of *rājayoga*, in the first place, proposes to give us such a means of observing the internal states. The instrument is the mind itself.”⁴ But it is to be noted that “a part of this practice is physical, but in the main it is mental. As we proceed, we shall find how intimately the mind is connected with the body.”⁵

Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy is the philosophy of divine life. He is “the first to declare that it is possible for man in his terrestrial life, in his physical body, to attain complete divinity.”⁶ But this divinity is not something which man can only win by getting out of mind, life and body. Even remaining in the body and having intercourse with his fellow-men, it is possible for man to become a divine man. This is the essence of Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy of divine life.

Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy of divine life has a theistical necessity – its realization. But how is it to be realized? He speaks of his *yoga* as a path to be followed by us in this connection. It is called integral *yoga* which is a synthesis of all the traditional *yogas* - *hathayoga*, *rājayoga*, *bhaktiyoga*, *karmayoga*,

jñānayoga, *tāntricyoga* and so on. He believes that a day must come when divine life will be realized as a natural course of evolution. But it will take much time. He intends to accelerate it which is possible by means of the path of yoga as shown by him. According to Sri Aurobindo, the synthesis of yoga is integral yoga. In his words, “The synthesis we propose cannot, then, be arrived either by combination in mass or by successive practice. It must, therefore, be effected by neglecting the forms and outsides of the yogic discipline and seizing rather on some central principle common to all which will include and utilize in the right place and proportion their particular principles and on some central dynamic force which is the common secret of their divergent methods and capable therefore of organizing a natural selection and combination of their varied energies and different utilities.”⁷

Sri Aurobindo’s *synthesis of yoga* thus is an improvement upon the philosophy of *rājayoga*. *Rājayoga*, as he understands, operates with the mind. Its sole aim is to arrive at a supernormal perfection and enlargement of the capacities of the mental life. And it goes beyond it into the domain of spiritual existence. But the weakness of *rājayoga*, according to him, lies in its excessive reliance on the state of *samādhi*. He asseverates in this context “Our object is to make the spiritual life and its experiences fully active and fully utilizable in the waking state and even in the normal use of the functions. But in *rājayoga* it tends to withdraw into a subliminal plane at the back of our normal experiences instead of descending and possessing our whole existence.”⁸ Sri Aurobindo further asserts that the triple path of devotion, knowledge and action attempts a superb province. But it is unfortunate that *rājayoga* leaves this province unoccupied. He, therefore, feels the necessity of making a synthesis of the traditional yogas along with *rājayoga* simply because his aim is “a transformation of our integral being into the terms of god-existence. It is then that a synthesis becomes necessary.”⁹ He make this synthesis by taking up the essences and processes of the old yogas.

Srimat Anirvan, a vedic scholar and philosopher of the 20th century is known for his translation of Sri Aurobindo’s *The Life Divine* and a three-volume treatise *Veda Mīmāṃsā*. He is another expertise in yoga. He wrote a good number of articles on yoga which came out in several issues of *Ānandavārtā*, a spokesman of Benaras Anandamayee Ashram during the period from 1956 to 1958. Goutam Dharmapal published those articles from Haimavati Prakashani under the title *Antaryoga*. These articles reveal how Anirvan improves upon the of *rājayoga* as shown by Patañjali in his *Yogasūtra* in a number of ways in his *Antaryoga*. He lends a new rendering to each of the limbs of *rājayoga*. Here is a passage concerning his interpretation on *dhāranā* that testifies to this. “You will remain fixed in your self-centre always. This is what is called success in the persuasion of *dhāranā* Always I lay emphasis upon practical yoga Yoga can never be complete unless we bring it to the level of diurnal life.”¹⁰ This passage has an important message – Anirvan debunks the false notion that a cave or temple is the

only place for practicing yoga. He also holds that yoga can be done at any time of our life.

Besides, Anirvan divides *aṣṭāṅga* yoga of Patañjali into two – *bahiraṅga* and *antaraṅga*. *Yama*, *niyama*, *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma* and *pratyāhāra* belong to the former and the latter consists of *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna* and *samādhi*. By referring to *Kathaopaniṣad*, he says that ordinary men turn the eye outward.¹¹ In such a position yoga is not possible. We need to turn the eye inward. And what is called *aṣṭāṅga* yoga is not possible. He believes it is the persuasion of *bahiraṅga* yoga that turns us to the inward. And what is called *antaraṅga* yoga leads to self realization.

Anirvan talks about an inherent calmness which comes after *prāṇāyāma*. It frees the minds from all *vṛittis*. This state is described as ‘a state of sahaja’. In an article, now included in *Letters from a Baul* edited by Lizelle reymond,¹² he defines this state of sahaja thus: “That which is born in you, that which is born with you, a state of pure essence. The body, the spirit, the impulse of light and intelligence are all there. Nothing must be rejected or mutilated, or within “one and the same thing” can be consciously established.”¹³ Thus, even the entire process of *rājayoga* of Patañjali is summed up as the sahaja yoga.

The concept of yoga – since the time of its inception till its recent rendering – has travelled a long path. Especially in the hands of modern thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Srimat Anirvan the horizon of yoga has been incredibly expanded. Each of these philosophers has lent a new dimension to the ancient ideology related to yoga. But unfortunately, after their works of yoga undertaken have, to a great extent, degenerated from its sacred objective – liberation of the soul which is meant for everybody. Further endeavor on yoga should keep this into consideration.

References

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8. Ibidem, p. 37
9. Ibidem, p. 45
10. Anirvan, *Antaryoga*, trans. Sunil Roy, *Anirvan – A Biographical Sketch* (Kolkata, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 2019), p. 84
11. Kathopaniṣad, 2.1.1
12. A French philosopher and orientalist Madame Lizelle Reymond (1899-1994) came to Anirvan at Almora in 1949 with a view to quenching her thirst for spiritual knowledge. Her books – *My life in A Brahmin Family* and *To Live Within* constitute two authentic sources of knowing Anirvan's life as passed at Almora. *Letters from a Baul* is an erudite edition by her. She went back to her native land in 1954.
13. Anirvan, *Letters from a Baul*, ed. Madame Lizelle Reymond (Kolkata Sri Aurobindo Pathamandir, 1983), p. 3