

Principles and Methods of Yoga Practices: Exploring the Path to Self-Realization

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ABSTRACT:

Rooted in rich philosophical tradition, yoga offers a holistic approach to self realization, harmonizing mind, body, and spirit. As a science of right living, it is intended to be incorporated in our daily lives. It works on all levels, physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual. It is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Yuj' which in spiritual terms means union of the individual consciousness with universal consciousness. On a more practical level, yoga is a means of balancing and harmonizing body, mind and emotions and this need to be achieved before union with higher reality takes place. In yoga sutras patanjali describes yoga as a form of discipline. The word for discipline in Sanskrit is 'Anushasnum'. The anu means most tiny and subtle one. Nature of an atom is invisible yet potent. Anushasan means to 'rule over or to govern'. So, the concept of discipline in yoga is a process in which we learn to govern the subtlest aspect or the unknown aspect of our own selves. Patanjali describes the result of this anushasan or discipline as 'Yogha chitta vrtti nirodhaha'. Through this discipline we gain control over the different modification of chitta. Chitta means the aspect which observes, which sees, which is consciously active in the world. The aim of yogic discipline is to alter the vrtti's. Our mind is disturbed by the chitta vrtti's (five mental modifications) or five mental afflictions – pramana, viparyaya, vilkalpa, nidra, and smriti, which needs to be controlled.

Keywords: 1. Universal consciousness, 2. Pranayam, 3. Chitta, 4. Anushasan

Introduction:

Yoga, an ancient practice originating from the Indian subcontinent, has gained immense popularity worldwide for its profound impact on physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Rooted in a rich philosophical tradition, yoga offers a holistic approach to self-realization, harmonizing the body, mind, and spirit. In this exploration of the principles and methods of yoga practices, we delve into the transformative journey that yoga provides, unveiling its philosophical underpinnings and elucidating its practical techniques.

1. The Essence of Yoga: Union and Self-Realization

At the heart of yoga lies the concept of union. The word “yoga” itself derives from the Sanskrit term “Yuj”, meaning “to yoke” or “to unite.” It symbolizes the integration of various aspects of human existence, forging a connection between the physical, mental, and spiritual realms. Yoga is not merely a physical exercise routine but a profound system that seeks to align the individual self with the universal consciousness, leading to self-realization and liberation.

2. The Philosophical Foundation of Yoga

A. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras

Patanjali, an ancient sage, compiled the Yoga Sutras, a foundational text that provides a systematic framework for the practice of yoga. The Yoga Sutras consist of aphorisms that elucidate the nature of the mind, the causes of suffering, and the means to attain liberation. Patanjali outlines the eight limbs of yoga, known as Ashtanga Yoga, which form a comprehensive guide for spiritual development. These limbs encompass ethical principles, physical postures, breath control, sense withdrawal, concentration, meditation, and ultimately, absorption in the state of pure consciousness.

B. Advaita Vedanta and Jnana Yoga

Advaita Vedanta, a philosophical school within Hinduism, emphasizes the non-dual nature of reality and the ultimate oneness of the individual self (Atman) with the universal consciousness (Brahman).

Jnana Yoga, the path of knowledge, is closely associated with Advaita Vedanta and focuses on self-inquiry and the realization of one’s true nature through the discernment between the transient and the eternal.

It involves contemplation, study of sacred texts, and introspective practices to awaken higher knowledge and dissolve the illusion of separateness.

3. The Practice of Yoga: Methods and Techniques

A. Asanas: Physical Postures

Asanas are physical postures that promote strength, flexibility, and balance. These postures, ranging from simple to complex, are designed to cultivate a steady and comfortable seated position for meditation.

Asanas not only enhance physical well-being but also facilitate the flow of vital energy (prana) throughout the body, leading to a state of mental equilibrium.

B. Pranayama: Breath Control

Pranayama involves conscious regulation and expansion of the breath. By employing various breathing techniques, such as alternate nostril breathing (nadi shodhana) and victorious breath (ujjayi), pranayama harnesses the breath's power to balance the nervous system, calm the mind, and stimulate energy centers (chakras) within the body. The practice of pranayama cultivates awareness, increases vitality, and deepens the meditative state.

C. Dhyana: Meditation

Meditation lies at the heart of yoga, facilitating self-discovery, clarity, and inner peace. Through focused attention or mindfulness, practitioners learn to observe the fluctuations of the mind without attachment or judgment. Meditation practices can range from concentrative techniques, such as focusing on a single point (trataka), to expansive practices, such as transcendental meditation or mindfulness.

4. The Path of Bhakti Yoga: Devotion and Love

Bhakti Yoga, the path of devotion, centers on cultivating an intense love and devotion towards a chosen deity or the divine. It emphasizes surrender, selfless service, and the expression of deep emotional devotion. Through devotional practices such as chanting mantras, singing bhajans (devotional songs), and engaging in rituals, practitioners develop a profound connection with the divine, transcending the ego and experiencing union with the object of their devotion. Bhakti Yoga fosters a sense of interconnectedness and reverence, leading to inner transformation and spiritual growth.

5. The Path of Karma Yoga: Selfless Action

Karma Yoga, the path of selfless action, is based on the principle of performing one's duties without attachment to the outcomes. It advocates the practice of selfless service (seva) for the benefit of others and the greater good. By dedicating one's actions to a higher purpose and serving others with compassion and kindness, practitioners cultivate selflessness, purify the intentions, and dissolve the ego.

Karma Yoga teaches that every action has consequences and encourages individuals to act in a way that aligns with moral and ethical principles, promoting personal growth and spiritual evolution. The practice of Karma Yoga involves cultivating selflessness and compassion. By identifying and fulfilling our responsibilities in various roles and relationships, we learn to transcend our self-centered desires and contribute to the well-being of others and society as a whole. This path helps us recognize the inter connectedness of all beings and fosters a sense of unity and harmony.

6. The Path of Raja Yoga: Royal Path of Meditation

Raja Yoga, often referred to as the royal path of meditation, focuses on the control and mastery of the mind. It encompasses various practices, including meditation, concentration, and mental discipline, aimed at quieting the fluctuations of the mind and attaining a state of inner stillness. Raja Yoga incorporates the practice of specific meditation techniques, such as transcendental meditation, mantra repetition (japa), and visualization (dharana), to cultivate mindfulness, expand consciousness, and attain spiritual awakening. Through Raja Yoga, practitioners gain mastery over their mental faculties, leading to clarity, insights and self-realization.

7. The Importance of Ethics and Moral Conduct

Ethics and moral conduct play a crucial role in yoga practices. Yoga emphasizes the observance of ethical principles known as Yamas and Niyamas. Yamas encompass moral restraints, including non-violence (ahimsa), truthfulness (satya), non-stealing (asteya), moderation (brahmacharya), and non-greed (aparigraha). Niyamas focus on self-discipline and personal observances, such as purity (shaucha), contentment (santosh), self-study (svadhyaya), self-discipline (tapas), and surrender to a higher power (Ishvarapranidhana). Practicing ethical conduct cultivates a strong foundation for personal growth, harmonious relationships, and spiritual development.

8. The Role of Mindfulness and Awareness

Mindfulness and awareness are essential aspects of yoga practices. By cultivating present-moment awareness and conscious attention, individuals develop an intimate connection with their physical sensations, thoughts, and emotions. Mindfulness enables practitioners to observe the fluctuations without judgment, fostering self-awareness, and facilitating the integration of body, mind, and spirit. Regular mindfulness practices, such as mindful eating, walking meditation, or body scan meditation, deepen the understanding of one-self and promote a sense of inter connectedness with the world.

The Role of Mindfulness and Awareness in Yoga:

Mindfulness and awareness are essential components of yoga practice, as they enable individuals to deepen their understanding of themselves and their interconnectedness with the world. These qualities serve as the foundation for various yogic techniques, including asanas, pranayama, and meditation.

Mindfulness in Asanas: Practicing mindfulness during Asanas allows individuals to tune into their body, notice any areas of tension or discomfort, and make appropriate adjustments. It encourages individuals to move with intention, focusing on the breath and sensations in the body, rather than striving for perfection or comparing one-self to others.

In conclusion, mindfulness and awareness are integral aspects of yoga practices that facilitate self-realization. By cultivating these qualities, individuals develop a deep connection with the present moment, gain insights into their inner world.

9. The Significance of Pratyahara: Withdrawal of the Senses

Pratyahara, the withdrawal of the senses, is a crucial aspect of yoga practices. It involves consciously redirecting one's attention and withdrawing the senses from external stimuli. By practicing sensory withdrawal, individuals become less reactive to external influences and develop an inner sense of calmness and introspection. The Role of Pratyahara in Yoga:

Pratyahara acts as a vital link between the external practices of yoga, such as asanas (physical postures) and pranayama (breath control), and the internal practices of dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and ultimately, samadhi (blissful union with the divine). It provides a necessary foundation for deeper introspection and self-discovery.

When the senses are constantly engaged with external stimuli, the mind remains scattered and easily influenced by the outside world. Through pratyahara, one gains the ability to detach from sensory inputs and gain mastery over the mind. By turning the attention inward, individuals can explore the subtler aspects of their consciousness, leading to a deeper understanding of their true nature.

Conclusion:

In contemporary times yoga like mobile phones has received global recognition. Every section of society is benefited by practicing yoga in terms of improving concentration, physical fitness but these practices fail to do justice to the original intention and context in which yoga as a system was developed. Thus, there is a need to explore that dimension of yoga. Moksha is considered to be the ultimate goal of the yoga. Thus, the scope of yoga ranges from relaxation and physical health to spiritual realization.

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