



Ashtanga Yoga and its Benefits

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Abstract : Maharishi Patanjali, the father of Yoga Philosophy, compiled the Yoga Sutras around 400 CE. It is considered a foundational text outlining the principles and techniques of classical Yoga, known as Ashtanga Yoga. Patanjali's philosophy revolves around the concept of the eight limbs of yoga. These limbs include: (1) Yama which is five in numbers, such as Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truth), Asteya (non-stealing), Aparigraha (non-greed) and Brahmacharya (celibacy). (2) Niyama which comprises Shaucha (cleanliness), Santosa (contentment), Tapas (austerity), Svadhyaya (study of scriptures) Ishvara- pranidhana (surrender to God), (3) Asana (physical postures), (4) Pranayama (breath control), (5) Pratyahara (withdrawal of senses) (6) Dharana (concentration), (7) Dhyana (meditation), and (8) Samadhi (ultimate absorption). Patanjali's Yoga practice is essential for health and well-being. Moreover, beyond physical well-being, it is beneficial for mental clarity, mental balance, and spiritual development.

IndexTerms - Dharana, Dhyana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Samadhi.

INTRODUCTION

Yoga, in reality, is not just a series of physical postures or breathing exercises for good health and physical fitness. It is a spiritual process of transforming life through life. Yog or Yoga, in a general sense, is the experience of supreme or God. The word Yog is derived from the Sanskrit root, Yuj, which means to join or unite or bond or create union. Yoga therefore refers to the union of the individual soul with the Supreme. Chapter six of Bhagavad Gita entitled "Dhyana Yoga" explains that the process of linking oneself with the Supreme is called Yoga. Renunciation is like Yoga or uniting oneself with the Supreme. A person is said to be advanced in Yoga when having renounced all material desires and does not work for sense gratification or engage in furtive activities. Here the analogy of a ladder is used to explain how the living entity rises from the lowest material state to the pure spiritual life of perfect self-realization. The beginning stage is called the yogaruruksu and the highest stage is called yogarudha. It is said that one can never become a yogi unless he renounces the desire for self gratification. The relevant verse from the "Bhagavad Gita" quoted below:

Verse 4 – Chapter VI

"yada hi nendriarthesu na karmasv anusajjate
sarva-sankalpa-sannyasi yogarudhas tadocyate".¹

The process of Eight-fold Path or Ashtanga Yoga is a way of controlling the mind and the senses. Indeed, Eight-fold Yoga is an initial attempt to enter into meditation through the regulative principles of life where the practice of various sitting postures is considered as fruitful material activities. All such activities lead to the attainment of perfect mental balance for the control of the senses. When one is perfected in the practice of meditation, he stops all disturbing mental activities. Maharishi Ved Vyas, the author of the Gita describes yoga as Samadhi, which refers to the final stage of meditation in which the individual soul realizes the Divine or God.

According to Jainism yoga helps in achieving Moksha (salvation) that means liberation from birth and death.

The Indian yogi Sri Aurobindo Ghose, also known as Maharishi Arvind, says that yoga achieves oneness with the Supreme. It is the realization one's divine nature or divine consciousness. In answer to the question of how divine life is possible on earth, Aurobindo thinks:

"... such a state is bound to emerge sooner or later, but its descent can be expedited by spiritual activities. But how precisely are we to expedite it? Sri Aurobindo's answer is that this can be done by Yoga."²

Ashtanga Yoga or Patanjali Yoga is known as the traditional form of Yoga. It is considered as real yoga which is one, universal and transcends boundaries of religion, race, caste and country. There is no bar on the practice of it. Any truly aspirant can follow the yogic path of life and achieve his ultimate goal by following the Eight-fold Path.

The purpose of this research paper is to explain Maharishi Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga and discuss its benefits in our lives.

DISCUSSION

Yoga and its Limbs

According to Patanjali, Yoga does not mean union. Yoga is a spiritual endeavor to achieve perfection through control of the body, senses and mind, and through the correct distinction between Purusa, and Prakriti. Yoga Sutra 1.2 mentions 'Yogas Citta Vrittis Nirodha'. Yoga is thus defined as the cessation of the modifications of Chitta. This cessation is through meditation or concentration which is also called Yoga (yogah samadhih).³ Chitta which is also known as Antahkarana is unconscious. But being closest to the Purusa, it has the power to reflect the Purusa and therefore, it appears conscious. When related to an object, it takes on the form of that object and this form is Vritti or modification. Purusa is essentially pure consciousness and free from limitations of Prakriti. But with its reflection in the Chitta it misidentifies itself and manifests itself through change and modification. "Just as the moon appears as moving when seen reflected in the moving waves, and waves appear as luminous, similarly Purusa appears as undergoing modifications and Chitta appears as conscious due to Purusa's reflection in it."⁴ This end of modification of Chitta through meditation is called Yoga. This is nothing but the return of the Purusa to its original perfection.

Patanjala Yoga, also known Raja Yoga, is the control over the body, senses and the mind. A sound body is needed for a sound mind. Since sensual attachment and passions distract the body as well as mind, they must be conquered. To overcome it the Eight-fold Path of discipline is mentioned in the Yoga philosophy, such as (1). Yama (2). Niyama (3). Asana (4). Pranayama, (5). Pratyahara. (6) Dharana. (7) Dhyana and (8) Samadhi. The first five practices are referred to as external aids to Yoga (bahiranga sadhana), while the next three are categorized as internal aids (antaranga sadhana).

(1) Yama refers to self-restraint and encompasses the five ethical vows of Jainism, such as, Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Aparigraha and Brahmacharya. Ahimsa is non-violence or abstention from injury in thought, word, or action. Satya means truthfulness or abstention from falsehood, Asteya means non-stealing. Aparigraha means non-possessiveness or abstention from avarice. Brahmacharya means celibacy and control over desires so that one can get rid of passions and lust.

(2) Niyama signifies personal discipline or self culture and comprises both external and internal purification (shaucha), contentment (santosa), austerity (tapas), study of sacred texts (svadhyaya), and surrender to God (Ishvara-pranidhana).

(3) Asana refers to a stable and comfortable bodily position. A variety of postures serve as a physical aid to meditation, representing the discipline of the physical body.

(4) Pranayama means breath regulation and focuses on managing the inhalation, retention, and exhalation of breath. It is beneficial for health and greatly enhances mental concentration, but should be practiced under the guidance of an expert to avoid negative consequences.

(5) Pratyahara is the mastery of the senses and involves withdrawing the senses from their external objects. Since our senses naturally gravitate towards outside stimuli, they need to be restrained and redirected towards a more internal aim. This is the process of turning inward. By their inherent nature, the senses are oriented outward, and desires drive them to chase after external objects. During the practice of Yoga, it is essential to limit this outward tendency of the senses and train them to turn inward. The senses act as the channels through which the mind functions. The ever-active and restless mind extends in multiple directions via the senses. The practice that enables both the mind and the senses to detach from the external environment and focus inward is known as Pratyahara. It can be attained once all the preceding stages of Yoga have been practiced and perfected. When Pratyahara is achieved, the senses are in aligning with the mind and are introspective. At this point, concentrating on a chosen object or thought becomes effortless.

(6) Dharana is the concentration of the mind on a specific object of meditation. When the mind and senses withdraw from the external environment, their activities turn inward. At this point, it becomes possible to concentrate on a specific area within the body. This area could be the midpoint between the eyebrows, the center of the forehead, the heart, the navel, a spot in the throat, or the tip of the nose, among others. It may also be centered on a symbol or an image of a deity. The act of concentrating the mind on a single point, object, or thought is referred to as Dharana. At this stage, the mind remains unwavering like the steady flame of a lamp. Once the mind successfully establishes Dharana on a particular point or object, it becomes stable and tranquil, liberated from the distractions of the outer world. This state thus prepares the mind to transition to the next phase of Dhyana. Without Dharana, it is impossible to attain Dhyana and ultimately reach the final stage of Samadhi. Once the mind successfully establishes Dharana on a particular point or object, it becomes stable and tranquil, liberated from the distractions of the outer world. This state thus prepares the mind to transition to the next phase of Dhyana.

(7) Dhyana seeks to clear the mind and liberate it from questions and distractions. When the practice of Dharana becomes established and flows continuously as a stream of energy or awareness in a single direction, the state of Dhyana emerges. This state is characterized by an unbroken flow of thought directed towards a specific focus. It involves total attention, transcending mere thought control. In this stage, concentration is directed towards a single object, such as God. The individual's consciousness flows like a river merging into the ocean. The focus of attention and concentration remains solely on one object, which also serves as the focal point for realization. In this way, self-awareness is anchored in the awareness of the Divine, with nothing obstructing this connection.

Concentration is fundamental to Dhyana. It requires an object of focus for contemplation. It is not an outward activity; it represents an inward orientation. It reflects a personal stability and demands an individual's commitment to sustained concentration. Dhyana is not about adhering to strict routines, physical exercises, or simply repeating a verse or mantra. Merely sitting still or retreating to a corner while thoughts wander externally does not constitute Dhyana. In actuality, Dhyana involves sensing the omnipresent presence of God within a mind that remains quiet, still, and motionless. In this state, the mind aligns completely with God, allowing one to experience the divine presence continuously and fostering a bond of purity and unity. To establish Dhyana on God, an aspirant must possess unwavering faith in Him and should understand His Nature, Character, and Attributes. It is crucial to grasp the essence of God, and His presence should not

just be accepted, but truly felt. This awareness of God's presence can be enhanced and solidified through studying scriptures, reasoning, and persistent meditation. When we observe a creation, we should immediately think of its creator. To achieve success in Dhyana, one must practice and excel in all the preceding aspects of Yoga. Dhyana cannot be attained without the foundational ethical discipline of oneself.

(8) Samadhi ---The word Samadhi refers to concentration and is the final stage of yoga. In this stage, the mind is completely immersed in the focus of meditation. This is the highest way to experience the cessation of mental fluctuations, which is the ultimate goal. It is a higher state in which there is a disconnection from the external world, acting as a transition before achieving liberation. There are two types of Samādhi: Conscious or Samprajñāta and Supra-conscious or Asamprajñāta. The former is known as Ekagra where awareness of the meditation object continues. In the Samprajñāta state, the mind focuses intently on the object of meditation. Although mediator and the focus of meditation become connected to each other, yet awareness of the object of meditation remains intact. This state is divided into four types:

(a) Savitarka: This occurs when the mind is fixed on a gross object of meditation, such as the tip of the nose, the center of the eyebrows, or an image of a deity.

(b) Savichar: This occurs when the mind is focused on a more subtle object of meditation, such as the Tanmatras.

(c) Sananda: In this case, the mind is focused on a more subtle object of meditation that evokes pleasure, such as the senses.

(d) Sasmita: Here, the mind is focused on the ego itself, which is usually the way to identify the self. This state represents conscious bliss where the personality is still present.

Asamprajñāta Samadhi is a state of super-conscious concentration in which the meditator and the center of meditation become completely one, with no awareness of the object remaining. In this state, no new mental changes occur; although latent impressions may persist, they are suppressed (niruddha). Thus, this is referred to as Niruddha. This form of yoga is the highest manifestation of divine madness, a perfect mystical ecstasy that is difficult to express and even more difficult to achieve. Those who achieve this state often cannot hold it for long, because after a while their physical form breaks down, resulting in complete liberation.

Benefits of Ashtanga Yoga

In our lives, practicing the various aspects of Ashtanga Yoga offers numerous benefits. These are:

Different of five Yamas provide different types of benefits. Ahimsa fosters feelings of love, compassion, generosity, camaraderie, and peace. Truth cultivates qualities like courage, sacrifice, self-sufficiency, and fearlessness. Asteya encourages a hardworking, honest, and content mindset. Brahmacharya promotes self-discipline, tolerance and right knowledge. Aparigraha removes greed, unwanted desires and ignorance.

Among five Niyamas, Shaucha produces cleanliness of the body and purity of mind. Santosa eliminates greed and alleviates all disappointments. Tapas purify both the body and the mind. Svadhyaya fosters concentration and accurate knowledge while dispelling ignorance. Ishvara- pranidhan encourages self-surrender and strengthens one's relationship with God.

By Asana and Pranayama flexibility, strength and overall physical well-being can be improved. Regular practice can alleviate chronic pain, enhance posture, and boost immunity. Moreover, Pranayama enhances concentration and mastery over the mind and senses, as its practice purifies the mind.

Pratyahara gives correct route to the mind and senses and sets up restraint.

Dharana and Dhyana can enhance mental clarity, memory, retention and focus sharpen. It can be said that Dharana regulates our thoughts and lays the groundwork for Dhyana which achieves total control over the mind.

Samadhi represents the pinnacle of Yoga practice, serving as a gateway to divine experiences, the ultimate aspiration of Yoga. prices for sample firms and relative macroeconomic variables for the period of 5 years. The data collection period is ranging from January 2010 to Dec 2014. Monthly prices of KSE -100 Index is taken from yahoo finance.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the realization of God is the main objective of Yoga practice. This leads to complete happiness, or divine bliss (Ananda), as well as freedom from all pain and suffering. The yogi attains purity, true knowledge, and freedom from all cravings and worldly desires by conquering the restless mind. According to Patanjali, the ultimate aim of yoga is self-realization, also known as Samadhi, a profoundly spiritually awakened state in which a person transcends the boundaries of their ego and becomes one with the Divine. Practitioners can move closer to this higher state of consciousness by carefully adhering to the Eight Limbs. Dedication, perseverance, and a genuine commitment to self-discovery are necessary to fully reap the benefits of Patanjali's Yoga techniques. One can start a life-changing path towards holistic well-being, which includes mental clarity, emotional equilibrium, physical health, and spiritual development, by accepting his teachings with an open heart and mind.

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