

## Universality of Yoga Knowledge

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**Abstract:** *The starting point of this work is the hypothesis that yoga knowledge may be considered as a basic and universal knowledge with wide applications. Considering the yoga knowledge from the perspective of religion, philosophy, and science, we conclude that yoga is the science about development of humans and their potentials. In this paper we argue why we regard that yoga knowledge is spatially and temporally universal by nature and applicable in many areas of life. Also, bearing in mind that the development of human being influences the overall development and progress of mankind, we additionally argue that the implementation of yoga knowledge is necessary for mankind to continue moving in the direction of development with greater awareness and better ability to guide and manage human and natural resources.*

**Key words:** *yoga, knowledge, universality, time*

### Introduction

Different answers to the question what is yoga can be heard. For someone, yoga is a religion, for somebody else it is a cult, and for others it is just ordinary mystical practice or set of complicated postures, breathing exercises and meditations. These are just several of the incomplete set of views that often are attached to yoga. Although yoga is known and presented in our society for more than 5000 years, yoga knowledge still did not receive the value and importance it deserves. Many sections of yoga knowledge are still waiting to be clarified and integrated in different areas of society.

When yoga is discussed, a frequently asked question is whether yoga knowledge falls within the domain of religion, philosophy, or science. Attempts to find the answer to this question can lead to misconceptions, primarily because the yoga knowledge is often mentioned in the context of religion and philosophy, and recently yoga knowledge is increasingly present in science. The very uniqueness of yoga knowledge makes it difficult to classify yoga according to one of the known criteria.

In recent decades, major efforts have been made by yoga experts to make yoga knowledge closer to a wider public in the right way, returning to yoga knowledge the value that it deserves (see Raghuvanshi, 2011, and references therein). Using the methods of modern science, scientists from different fields conduct research that shows which positive effects yoga knowledge and techniques can have on physical, mental and emotional health of a human (e.g., Nikić, 2010, 2011; Janjušević, 2010, 2011; Novaković, 2011), and also, how the implementation of yoga knowledge may contribute to the development of humans and their potential, and thus development of the society as a whole (e.g., Adhi, 2010). More and more scientific authorities indicate the value of

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yoga knowledge and importance of its intensive and serious research. Thanks to a growing number of scientifically confirmed positive effects that yoga has on humans, yoga gains its rightful place, a place in science where it belongs.

Many yoga teachers and those who practice and study yoga, convey the message that yoga knowledge is universal knowledge that permeates all areas of existence (Nagendra, 2005). The universality of yoga knowledge lies in the fact that it is actually the knowledge about human and what he essentially is, and the human is a key factor in the overall development of mankind.

To better understand the essence of yoga knowledge, further in this work we will discuss different perspectives of yoga and we will try to argue why we regard that yoga is a basic and universal knowledge and why it is important to study and implement it. We will also argue why we regard that the implementation of yoga knowledge may lead to a healthier, more satisfied, happier, and more humane society that will lead mankind towards greater awareness.

### **Yoga is not a religion**

Since yoga is often associated with religion, we will first explain why we believe that yoga is not a religion and that it by its nature goes beyond any religion. We begin our explanation with the meaning of religion, which is a word of a Latin origin (Lat. *religio*) and it means to be obliged, bound by a covenant. Religion is further defined as a particular system of beliefs and worships, which requires people to follow scriptures, rituals, laws or dogmas.

A common opinion is that yoga originated from the Hindu religion. But this belief is a major misconception. Although elements of yoga knowledge may be found in the Hindu religion, and it can be said that yoga is an integral part of Hinduism, the roots of yoga knowledge may even be found few centuries before the advent of Hinduism. Yoga knowledge does not proclaim any belief or any religious rites or obligations to follow. Yoga knowledge does not proclaim any external object of worship or teaching (e.g. God or a divine figure). Yoga is not in conflict with any religion, it is intended for all humans and admirers of various religious traditions. The reason for the appearance of elements of yoga knowledge in different religions is its universality, which represents the knowledge of human self-improvement. All peoples regardless where and what time they lived had an incentive for self-improvement

Great yoga teachers or gurus did not equate yoga with religion. They considered yoga as a mean to explore the internal and external world in order to finally achieve wisdom and knowledge that can be found in the sacred writings of the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Sutras. They also talked about yoga as a spiritual activity that teaches us about the art of living and about the search for meaning.

Bearing in mind the above described meaning of yoga, we can say that yoga is completely irreligious knowledge, but still compatible with any religious system. No commandment of any religion can be found in the ancient texts, but instructions how to lead a righteous life in order to achieve a state of total awareness and unity of spirit, body, and mind. As such, yoga is universal and can be practiced by Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, atheists, or Sufis. By acquiring yoga knowledge, tolerance and love to both himself and others are awakened in individuals. Based on yoga education, we are all in essence such that it can be said that yoga knowledge awakes connection and unity with other people. All this just reinforces that it can be safely said that yoga is not a religion.

## **Yoga philosophical system**

Yoga is one of six elementary schools of Indian philosophy (*darshanas*). Founding of the yoga philosophical system is assigned to Patanjali, who in his book *Yoga Sutras* (Zec, 1977) developed the systematization of the yoga knowledge. Inside the philosophy of yoga Patanjali assimilated elements of Buddhism and Jainism. The metaphysical elements he took over most from the Samkya philosophy but with significant changes.

The eight steps of yoga philosophy are instructions how to live a meaningful and purposeful life. In some sense these steps represent a "recipe" of a universal moral and ethical code and self-discipline which suggests how we should behave with respect to ourselves and others. Adopting a moral code of ethics (*yama*) and developing self-discipline (*niyama*), additionally practicing postures (*asanas*), exercises of control energy by breathing techniques (*pranayama*), and mastering the senses (*pratyahara*) we create a calm and a clear mind. Further exercises of concentration (*dharana*) and meditation (*dhyana*) develops awareness. Awareness brings knowledge and wisdom to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong, truth from falsehood. This way, situations that are not appropriate for personal development can be easily identified. The skill of distinguishing allows for better concentration. With concentration skills, personal transformation is achieved through the experience of enlightenment, i.e. samadhi.

From the written above it can be said that yoga sutras form a practical guide how to reach the highest level of consciousness and complete self-realization through personal self-improvement. Yoga Sutras also describe what happens when the instructions are integrated into everyday life. Integrating yoga knowledge leads to spiritual growth and achieving physical, moral, emotional, and physical health of the individual and, consequently, of the society as a whole.

Based on the essence of yoga philosophy it can be said that yoga knowledge is universal and timeless knowledge that can be applied to any historical era and for all societies and people irrespective of their race, religion, gender or age.

## **Yoga knowledge and science**

Starting from the fact that yoga is a philosophical system, many people ask what this has to do with science. But as we have already mentioned, yoga knowledge may be considered as the science of human self-improvement and his potential. What we want to emphasize is the fact that many of the effects of yoga practice, which it has on the human, just can be investigated and verified using existing scientific methodologies. All those who have integrated yoga knowledge in everyday life, know which effects this has on their overall physical, mental and emotional life. From their point of view there is no need to prove that the knowledge of yoga is valid, because their experience is sufficiently valid. But to be recognized by the general public and by those who had no contact with the yoga knowledge before, yoga knowledge must pass appropriate scientific testing and verification. In this context, yoga knowledge has touching points with science. In recent decades, more and more needs for scientific study of effects of yoga practice appeared, so that yoga knowledge became an integral part of science.

From current scientific studies it can be concluded that many of the effects of yoga practice can be studied and verified, but that there are still many sections of yoga knowledge that are waiting to be processed and scientifically confirmed. The subject of frequent controversy and discussion is the question to which area of science the yoga knowledge can be classified and whether any effects of yoga theory and practice can be studied by existing scientific methodologies.

To understand why yoga knowledge can be considered as the universal knowledge that can be studied in different scientific fields, we'll first start from a definition what is science and what are the possibilities of studying yoga with existing scientific methods.

### ***Science and the scientific methods***

We can say that science is a way of thinking that is based on asking questions and finding answers. The word science (lat. *scientia*) means knowledge, and knowledge can be described as a product of understanding of things and events. It is the knowledge, which is performed using different scientific methods and which explains how the general laws of nature work. One of the primary goals of science is to collect facts, i.e. data. In science, the measurement, observation and experimentation are used to describe and explain the nature of a specific phenomenon.

Scientific methods assume naturalism and/or materialism. Naturalism is the belief that the world can be understood in scientific terms and materialism is the belief that matter (and energy) is all what exists. Since scientific methods are based on testing and repeatability, they are mainly intended for the study of the material world around us. This leads to the conclusion that everything what is not measurable and does not pass scientific testing and verification is not scientifically verified. But now the question is whether the existing scientific methods can explain all natural and environmental (living) phenomena. Also, it inevitably gives rise to the question how to quantify phenomena that are not material, such as morality, love, kindness, truthfulness, compassion. Science does not give answers to questions about the value i.e. there is no way to scientifically confirm and proclaim the value of something (e.g, what is more beautiful or what is more valuable). Science also does not provide answers regarding the issue of morality. In making decisions about what is good and what is bad, what is correct to do and what not, science can not help. Issues related to the so-called. "supernatural phenomena", phenomena that can not yet be explained by the known laws of nature, they are beyond the range of contemporary scientific research. Hence it can be concluded that science has its limitations that lie in the fact that all what can not be examined and measured, it is considered that "it does not exist". Everything what is not accessible and can not be subject to material study is considered to be irrational. In order to understand also the non-material phenomena, it is necessary to develop entirely new scientific methods and approaches that will be able to shed light on so far unexplained phenomena. Although science is one of the most productive ways of thinking, it is not the only necessary and sufficient way of thinking and reaching the cognition.

### ***Scientific study of yoga knowledge***

What distinguishes yoga knowledge from scientific knowledge is the subject of study and how to come up with answers, understanding and knowledge. The main object of yoga study is human self-improvement. Therefore it can be said about yoga that it is a spiritual science because it studies the human inner world. Although the opinion that science is material and yoga is spiritual can be often heard, they are actually completely complementary, and both tend to give an explanation of the nature and essence of the existence.

The basis of yoga knowledge is a personal experience, which is gained by adopting yoga philosophy. As we said, yoga knowledge is systematized knowledge that is the fruit of years of experience and practice. Systematization of knowledge is just characteristic of science, so the manner how Patanjali conducted systematization of yoga knowledge can be considered as fully scientific.

As in science, also in yoga various techniques and methods are used (the yoga techniques such as physical exercises, breathing exercises, separation of sensory impressions, concentration and meditation). They lead man through different experiences to the awareness of his inner and outer world. Primary things in yoga are internal practice, internal observation, and analysis. Yoga is the way of access to knowledge through ourselves. Adopting the yoga concept of the existence into everyday life leads to understanding of general life principles and rules among them. The ultimate goal of yoga is a level of consciousness where the one who cognizes and the subject of cognition become the one. As we see, yoga knowledge has all the elements of scientific knowledge in itself but with special approach to cognition, as what science itself also aims at.

Similarly to how science can be divided into several areas, different ways of self-improvement exist in yoga, according to the dominant quality that leads human to cognition. Thus, for example there is a difference between *Jnana*, *Raja*, *Karma*, *Bhakti* or *Tantra* yoga. Every system of yoga recommends certain internal practices and different techniques that lead to greater self-awareness and a greater degree of understanding and perception of reality.

When we talk about the scientific study of yoga knowledge we mean the study of the effects of adopted yoga knowledge which may have on humans and on all dimensions of its personality. Yoga knowledge can be considered as a science itself, but the effects of applied yoga techniques and adoption of yoga philosophy may be studied using existing scientific methodologies. If we like to include yoga in one of the existing scientific fields, we realize that it is not simple because of the very essence of yoga knowledge, i.e. the knowledge of self-improvement for which we consider as the basic knowledge of all other knowledge. All these effects and phenomena that are developed by adopting yoga knowledge can be studied in different scientific fields, leading to the conclusion that yoga can be classified as an interdisciplinary science, but also as a social, natural or applied science. Thus, the effects of yoga practice and phenomena can be studied in all fields of science, but because of the universality of yoga knowledge it is difficult to precisely determine to which scientific area it belongs.

Multidimensionality of yoga knowledge opens the door for its research in many areas of science. In this century, the great strides of progress are expected in defining the scientific methodology to confirm the value of yoga knowledge by different fields of science and its integration to the society.

### **Yoga knowledge for happier mankind**

Here we consider another dimension of universality of yoga knowledge and perceive how implementation and integration of yoga knowledge may serve to the purpose of creating more satisfied and happier humanity that will continue to proceed in the direction of overall development and progress. For this purpose, we first take a look at the current picture of our humanity, which can be considered to be at a high degree of scientific and technological development, but not at a high level of spiritual development.

#### ***The current picture of the development of our humanity***

We live in a period of technological and economic development, and we are witnessing major scientific achievements with which it is possible to explain and to master many natural and social phenomena. Standard and comfort of living have greatly increased and lifespan has prolonged. All this logically leads to the conclusion that mankind has made great progress, but what about the development of the human himself? Based on the report of the United Nations about Human Development from 2011, we can say that the situation is more alarming than encouraging. The

report points to serious problems of an inequality among people, to a high level of pollution of our planet, to a poor health status of people, and to big social differences among people at different levels. The material development of mankind has increased considerably in recent decades, which as a result should lead to a more satisfied and happier life. Despite this in this modern age, people tend to suffer more from physical and mental stress so that those who are at the top in any field are seldom satisfied and happy. People are more directed only to themselves and their interests, and less interested in the others. All this suggests that even though we follow the path through the development and progress, many parts of human nature remain unchanged.

All this necessarily leads to posing a question whether our humanity in these circumstances will still be able to go in the direction of development. Why this is so and whether this picture of reality can be changed and how, we discuss further in this paper.

### ***Yoga as a solution***

From the above mentioned, it is obvious that it is necessary to introduce some changes in the economic, social, political, educational and cultural level of our society. To allow the changes make more permanent trace on our society, we believe that these changes should begin with the changes of a human on his physical, emotional, and mental level. The knowledge, which can help to do this change is the yoga knowledge, which is applicable to all areas of human life because of its universality. Putting the emphasis on spiritual activities of the human (i.e, on the process of self-improvement) will necessarily lead to positive results at all other levels of society. One of the main goals of spiritual practice of a human is to become aware of himself, his needs and potentials, and to overcome the sense of separation from the rest of humanity, nature, and cosmos.

We live in a highly technologically developed society with a tendency to continue to develop. There is a question whether further technological development is necessary and whether further development of modern technology will really lead to betterment of the mankind. It is often claimed that technological development can be a brake of spiritual development. But this does not need to be so if the scientific technological progress develops in a way to help people to follow the path of spiritual growth.

In *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* it is explained how it is possible to more and more comprehend and dominate oneself and the surrounding world (i.e. all natural phenomena) adopting the yoga knowledge. The knowledge of natural phenomena largely depends on technological development. The goal of technology should be to enable people to live a more simply and more comfortably so that they would be able to focus on the greater and more important questions of life. The most recent scientific research has shown that when the basic needs of people are met, then it is possible to think about spiritual and sublimer issues. As intellectual beings, technological progress of mankind is necessarily happening. Our intellect is hungry for new knowledge and the process of satisfying intellectual hunger leads humanity towards ever greater technological progress. Technological advancement is a natural evolutionary process of humanity. It is similar to a spiritual progress. Only those societies that are technologically advanced will also become spiritually advanced. Therefore, a necessary condition for spiritual progress is great technological advance. Having a high level of technological development it can be said that all conditions for spiritual development are fulfilled, it only should be started.

Bearing in mind what we said about the yoga knowledge we can say that this is the knowledge that is missing in all the systems of society.

In the education system which exists today, many things can be learned, but what is lacking is the knowledge of the art of living and everything other what life brings. Knowledge how to lead a healthy and vital life, how to deal with life's challenges, how make pleasure to become a part of everyday life, how to express own potentials, how to transform own poor quality to high quality, how to live the wealth of sentient life, how to love and be loved, how to lead adequate communication with the environment, how to creatively express personal uniqueness, how to have a profound contact with oneself and one's true inner self, how to lead own life in the direction of success with the power of the mind, is precisely the knowledge that is missing. Instructions how to live the fullness of life may be found in the ancient knowledge that was left to us by the ancient teachers. This valuable knowledge for spiritual awakening is waiting to be implemented in all areas of society. Once yoga knowledge becomes an integral part of the educational system big changes in our society can be expected, which that will lead humanity to a new and higher level of development.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have considered yoga from the perspective of religion, philosophy and science. From the above it is concluded that yoga is a philosophical system which suggests a healthy, meaningful and purposeful life. Central place in the yoga knowledge is human and its development. Yoga can be seen also as a universal knowledge that is applicable in any time and age.

Yoga can be considered as a doctrine of self-perfection of a man. With existing scientific methodologies it is possible to study a number of effects that yoga practice has on humans but many other sections of yoga knowledge waiting to be processed and scientifically confirmed. As an interdisciplinary science, the effects of yoga can be explored from the perspective of different scientific fields.

Yoga knowledge can be applied to many areas of life and it additionally gives to yoga knowledge a universal character. Multidimensionality of yoga that does not touch only the area of science but also art, culture, creativity, and education, confirms the initial assumption that yoga knowledge is universal.

As the implementation of yoga knowledge in everyday life improves human, i.e. affects the psycho-physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual development, we conclude that the integration of this knowledge into the educational system would greatly contribute to the changes at all levels of society. These changes are urgently needed in this modern age to enable our humanity to continue to evolve towards new and more spiritual levels.

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