

Yoga as the Living Philosophy for Meaningful Life

Arun Raghuwanshi*
Bhopal University
Bhopal, India

Abstract: *In this paper, yoga is perceived as the living philosophy – a way of living for authentic, meaningful life. This involves following ethical-moral code of conduct as proposed in yama-niyama, a healthy life style by practicing pranayama (proper breathing exercise) and asanas (postures) and meditation practices (personal experience and realization of ultimate truth or reality through mediation and other methods of expansion of consciousness). Alongside, yoga way of life also has the potential to solve some critical problems of present globalized world – environmental crisis, conflict of civilizations, war, violence, terrorism and global neurosis – through reconditioning and rewiring of the human brain schemes in positive way.*

Key words: *yoga, living philosophy, global peace, environmental conservation*

Introduction

“Man – a being in search of meaning” – Plato

The meaning of life is a concept that provides an answer to the philosophical question concerning the purpose, significance of life and existence in general. It can be expressed through answering a variety of related questions, such as: Why are we here? What is life all about? What is the meaning of it all? It has been the subject of much philosophical, scientific, and theological speculation throughout history. There have been a large number of theories to these questions from many different cultural and ideological backgrounds.

It is a well realized fact that Indian philosophical system, particularly yoga, deemed to provide answers to almost all the above questions in most convicting and life affirmative way. It is increasingly being realized by the spiritual minded practitioners of deeper aspects of yoga, and even those who are practicing for a longer period of time, that though mostly practiced in western world as a system of fitness exercise, yoga is more than a physical exercise. Ethical components (*yama-niyama*) of yoga, if followed truthfully, can change man’s attitude in such a way that it can lead not only to a meaningful life for individual, but also have answers to present day problems of sustainable environment, conflict of interest among various constituents of the society, particularly rich and poor, terrorism, drug abuse and many social ills, and consequently can contribute to harmony at global level.

The secret of the contemporary popularity of yoga lies in the fact that yoga is a holistic, meaningful way of life and living. Such is the world wide popularity of yoga that yoga seems to be a culture for the 21st century now. It is heartening that yoga has acquired global popularity within the last few decades and almost assumed a form of health culture. *Swami Satyananda Saraswati*, founder of Bihar School of Yoga, Bihar, India was a prophet when he said many years

* Corresponding author: arun_231248@hotmail.com

ago: “Yoga is not an ancient myth buried in oblivion. It is the most valuable inheritance of the present. It is the essential need of today and the culture of tomorrow.” And, there is little doubt that his prophesy has proved almost right if we look at some of the developments in recent times.

A life philosophy and way of conscious living

Yoga is, in real sense, an art of living a balanced, meaningful life and its fullness (yogic way of living emphasis a conscious and integrated living at all levels of existence). It is for this reason that *Swami Kuvalyananda* (1993) summarized yoga by saying: “Yoga has a complete message for humanity. It has a message for the human body, a message for the human mind and it also has a message for the human soul.”

Yoga is a living philosophy based on philosophical ideas developed and evolved through a long tradition of highly argumentative discourses and debates and deeply meditative and intuitive thinking by Vedic and *Upanishadic* seers of yore. It’s practical philosophy in every way, as alongside making you to live a meaningful life, yoga provides solutions to problems of human existence, as well as problems that are emerging anew. Because of this, people find that this thousands years old tradition is relevant today.

Yoga is a living philosophy and it is reflected in the fact that yoga has different meanings for different people. For example, for some people yoga is fitness, for the other it represents health; to some people, it is a nice way of relaxation and to many others it is the alchemy for transformation and good way to realize individual’s hidden potentialities. Many consider yoga to be psychology and apply it as therapy. To some who enjoy in it as a way of life, it is a community.

In its essence, yoga is a path of spiritual self-enquiry, awakened by the earnest desire for having the deeper understanding of life and the entire life as a phenomenon. For this reason, *Swami Satyananda Saraswati* (1967) asserts that “yoga is a system of living with sense and a science of the realization of ultimate values and altruistic missions of life.”

Yoga is a science of personal growth for spiritual experience. As such, it emphasizes the realization of spiritual truths by the practitioner himself. In *Six Lessons on Raja Yoga*, *Swami Vivekananda* states: “*Râja* yoga is as much a science as any other science. It is analysis of the mind, gathering of the facts of the super sensuous world and so building up the spiritual world”.

Radhakrishnan (1967) stated: “In yoga we have all reservoirs of life to draw upon. It formulates the methods of getting at our deeper functioning levels. Yoga discipline is nothing more than the purification of the body, mind, and soul and preparing them for the beatific vision. Since the life of man depends on the nature of mind (*citta*), it is always within our reach to transform our nature by controlling our mind. With faith and concentration we can rid ourselves of diseases. Normal limits of the human vision are not the limits of the universe. There are other worlds than that which our senses reveal to us, other senses than those that we share with the lower animals, other forces than those of material nature. If we have faith in the soul, then the supernatural is also a part of the natural. Most of us go through life with eyes half closed, with dull minds and heavy hearts. Even few of those who have these rare moments of vision and awakening, quickly fall back into somnolence. It is good to know that the ancient thinkers required us to realize the possibilities of the soul in solitude and silence and transform flashing and fading moments of vision into a steady light which could illumine the long years of life.”

Who we are? Our (human's) true nature

In the poem *An Essay on Man, Epistle II*, Alexander Pope begins with words: “Know then thyself, presume not God to scan. The proper study of mankind is Man.” and similar quote of Socrates - Know thyself, indicate the basic urge of man to know himself, i.e. his own true nature. Here yoga can be of great help as it helps to explore and experience true nature of individual, world and transcendental consciousness (*Brahman*) which is the way that all suffering come to an end. The question is raised in the Vedas: “What is that, knowing which, we shall know everything?” Naturally, the first thing to know is our own true nature. We used to try to know the outside world, and by knowing one's true self and applying philosophy of *Anda-Pinda-Vad* everything in the universe becomes knowable (there is a philosophy known as “*anda* (universe), *pinda* (body), *vada*” which says that the universe is inside our body: *yat anda tat pinda*).

The central philosophy of the yoga is based upon the *sankhya* cosmology, according to which the *purusha* (our true nature) is pure (consciousness) and perfect, and is the only “simple” (ultimate entity) that exists in this universe. The body and mind are compounds, and yet we are ever identifying ourselves with them. This is the great mistake that the distinction has been lost. When this power of discrimination has been attained, yogi sees that everything in this world, mental and physical, is a compound, and therefore cannot be the *purusha* (real “I – true self”). This pure consciousness is described in the maxim *sat-chitt-ananda* (“eternal bliss self-consciousness”). It is a description of the subjective experience of *Brahman* (the infinite, supreme soul) or the universal mind. This sublimely, blissful experience of the boundless, pure consciousness is a glimpse of ultimate reality. According to *Osho*, yoga is not only a system of belief but also a scientific methodology that heightens awareness and makes it possible to live in a constant state of happiness, harmony and fulfillment (*samadhi*) – *sat-citt-ananda*.

In yogic terminology, the above state without suffering is called as “liberation”, “self realization” “*Kaivalya*” (this is the reason that the last chapter of *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* is entitled *Kaivalya Pada* or Independence) or *mukti* (ultimate freedom). According to the last aphorism of Chapter III of Yoga Sutra (Sutra 56) – By the similarity of purity between *sattva* (intellect) and *purusha* comes *kaivalya*. Elaborating it, *Swami Vivekananda* writes: “*Kaivalya* is our goal. The state in which the soul realizes that it doesn't depend on anything in the universe, from gods to the lowest atom, that is called *kaivalya* (isolation) and perfection. It is attained when the mixture of purity and impurity called *sattva* (intellect) becomes as pure as *purusha* (pure self-consciousness) itself; then *sattva* reflects only the unqualified essence of purity, which is the *purusha*.”

In the last Sutra of Patanjali (4.33), that says: “The resolution in the inverse order of the qualities, bereft of any motive of action for the *purusha* is *kaivalya*, or it is the establishment of the power of knowledge in its own nature.”, one can find the answer to the question “What is life all about?” or “What is the meaning of it all?”. Elaborating it, *Swami Vivekananda* comments: “Nature's task is done, this unselfish task which our sweet nurse nature had imposed upon herself. She gently took the self-forgetting soul by the hand, as it were, and showed him all the experiences in the universe, all manifestations, bringing him higher and higher through various bodies, till his lost glory came back, and he remembered his own nature. Then the kind mother went back the same way she came, for others who also have lost their way in the trackless desert of life. And thus is she working, without beginning and without end. And thus through pleasure and pain, through good and evil, the infinite river of souls is flowing into the ocean of perfection, of self-realization.” In simple words! All this play of cosmic consciousness happens for the education/realization and finally liberation of the individualized soul.

Discipline of Yoga – Practice of Yoga

The first of *Patanjali Yoga Sutras – atha yoganusasanam* – emphasizes that yoga should be followed as discipline, for the full sincerity.

The eight steps of Patanjali yoga or *Raj yoga*, paving the golden path of yoga, are summarized in the sutra – *yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, prathyahara, dharana, dhyana* and *samadhi*, “eight limbs of yoga” (*Patanjali*, 2.29). This is considered to be the authentic yoga, as it is an all comprehensive philosophy and manual of yogic way of living, summarized in 197 aphorisms which can be practiced in daily life.

An austere and simple life is indispensable, according to yoga. The basic purpose of *yama* and *niyama* is change of behavior of individual, from selfish basic instinctive behavior to altruistic attitude. *Yama* and *niyama* (ten commandments) is the most poorly understood aspect of yoga in the west. Feuerstein (1996) called yoga in the west “watered-down version of classical yoga” or “its western derivatives”. He further states: “Moral aspect is the foundation of the other limbs of yoga.”

Through yoga integrated way of living, the process of identification of all the elements causing ill health and the use of appropriate techniques to neutralize their ill effects became one of the primary concerns of yoga. Thus yoga, which essentially is a science of personal growth for spiritual experiences, has simultaneously become a science of health and healing (What is yoga?, www.kdham.com). Baring this in mind, B.K.S. Iyengar (1989) made this pertinent remark: “The original idea of yoga is freedom and beatitude, and the by product, which come along the way including physical health, are secondary for the practitioner.”

Holistic/integral approach of yoga described by various classical and modern masters, includes following four essential components:

1. Ethical code of conduct (*yama-niyama*) for regulating our attitudes and behavior,
2. Physical practices (*asana, pranayama, mudra, bandha*, along with six cleansing techniques) for regulating body systems for maintaining perfect health,
3. Mental Practices (*pratyahara, dharna, dhyana, samadhi*) for control of mind and going beyond one’s own psychological and spiritual limits
4. Regulation of diet, as well as regulation of the daily activities, including the pattern of sleep, recreational activities and working habits. This helps in removing all irritant factors, which are responsible for the imbalance in the functioning of body-mind complex.

The leading concept can be – moderation in all aspects of life, followed by the maxim – “Every exaggeration is bad!”

In the final analysis yoga is an authentic, responsible, spiritual or integrated way of living which is the literal meaning of the word yoga in Sanskrit (*yuj* – integration). As such, yoga is a continuous process of spiritual self assessment, improvement and constant vigilance in all aspects of life, daily events and attitudes. Yoga is saying a big YES to life.

Yoga for environmental conservation and sustainable development

It increasingly becomes clear that, to sustain an environment suitable for people, we don’t need only technological knowledge but also developed environmental ethics, as suggested by *Arvill* (1978) in his book *Man and Environment*: “An ethics that proclaims a creed to preserve our natural heritage, with rights and duties to respect those rights... And to live up to this creed we

need qualities of: integrity – to infuse ecological percepts and true environmental – ethos into our life-style; humanity – to share the earth’s resources more equitably with all life on earth today and tomorrow; determination – to arrest pollution and squalor to promote quality in our surroundings and judgment – to choose wisely between competing aims and values in order, with humility, to promote the trusteeship of society for the environment.”

“Values of western society with undue emphasis on materialism and consumerism fail to face this spiritual and ethical challenge, while on the other side, oriental cultures (Indian Culture in particular) have long held an ethics in which people are regarded as part and not masters over their surroundings. Recognition of this deep, inherent relationship of human beings with their environment has been part of our culture deeply ingrained in its various traditions, philosophical systems, mythological literature and scriptures. As such Indian philosophy and culture and especially Yoga philosophy and its way of life and living has great deal to offer in implementation of grand design for the future of this planet.” (Raghuwanshi, 2010).

Ecology stands for the law and order of the natural ecosystems. In helping to maintain this law and order of nature, man can also help to preserve mankind. This is exactly the Indian concept of conduct of behavior *dharma* (codes of conduct in yoga and Indian philosophy), which must not be mistaken for mere religion or faith, as it’s practice entails/incorporates judicious use of natural resources. The codes of conduct or *dharma* that are preached by the traditions in reality are material prescriptions of organizing life styles to match the supporting capacity of the earth in just and sustainable manner. *Ananda* lies in this *dharma* or *dharma*. Its opposite is destruction, ignorance and misery for all concerned.

It is fairly obvious that yoga is an eco-friendly life style. *Patanjali’s Ashtanga Yoga*, with it’s a code of conduct *yama-niyama* can lead to a sustainable society. Each of Patanjali’s *yamas* and *niyamas* have relevance in modern day context of need for changes in attitude and lifestyle for better environment.

Discussion

According to *Rao (1978)*, though eastern and western perspective on consciousness seem to be quite opposite but can be treated a complimentary, when taken together in holistic approach of life – eastern and western viewpoints represent two dominant approaches to the consciousness. In the western scholarly tradition: (a) consciousness is generally equated with the mind; (b) intentionality is regarded as its defining characteristic; (c) the goal is one of seeking rational understanding of what consciousness/mind is. In the eastern tradition, as represented by the Indian approach to the study of consciousness: (a) consciousness and mind are considered to be different; (b) consciousness as such is believed to be non-intentional while the mind is regarded as intentional; (c) the goal is one of developing practical methods for transformation of the human condition via realization of consciousness as such.

It is suggested that consciousness encompasses two different domains, the transcendental and the phenomenal, and that humans enjoy dual citizenship in them. The eastern and western viewpoints each seems to be directed more toward one domain than the other, resulting in a biased emphasis. Seen as complementary rather than in opposition to each other, the eastern and the western perspectives may give us a more comprehensive understanding of consciousness and its role in our being.

The above perspective actually represents already existing approach of yogic and vedantic tradition of holistic way of life and living, as explicitly expressed in the following verse from *Upanishads* – “*Vidyam cha avidyam cha yastad vedobhayam saha Avidyaya mrutyum tirtva vidyaya amrutamashnute*” (*vidya – spiritual science* and *avidya – worldly science* should be learnt together. One overcomes death through *avidya* and attains immortality through *vidya* (verse 11, *Isopanishad*). Here *vidya* is understood as *brahmavidya* (yoga) that leads us to the ultimate truth of immortality of soul (real-being).

Bhagwat (2007) in the article entitled “Yoga and sustainability advocates, yoga as a sustainable lifestyle” argues that Patanjali’s *ashtanga yoga* provides a code of conduct that is believed not only to lead to the spiritual progress of the individual but also has social, environmental and economic dimensions; and if observed faithfully, it will lead to a sustainable society. Through a number of examples, he illustrates how this code of conduct can be applicable to individuals as well as institutions with respect to sustainable advantage, in the modern-day context.

Feuerstein (2007) summarizes environmental, social, political problems of the present day world, by the words: “I believe that the looming ecological crisis combined with increasing terrorism will change the face of the Earth in the decades to come. With its rapacious consumerism and all its wealth, the crisis will hugely affect North America. Yoga must be made more relevant to this issue, which involves the practice of yoga as a spiritually based and ecologically sensitive lifestyle.” Yogis are expected to lead a life full of environmental consciousness and also, play active role in global peace and harmony. And therefore, to lead a more meaningful life.

Conclusion

Yoga has passed the test of time, through thousands of years of its growth and expansion as a solid spiritual tradition and almost 100 years of the modern scientific inquiry of its various aspects, in east and west, in modern times. As a way of life and living, the living philosophy of yoga inherently has a proposal for a new global culture.

Worthington (1982), former Secretary General of the British Wheel of Yoga, could visualize this years ago, while she wrote in her book *A History of Yoga*: “Each age and culture has its own particular emphasis and our own is no exception. The perspective of yoga is wider than any of them. It remains as always a free thinking, experimental and experiential discipline requiring self-effort, compassion and knowledge. It has been said that eventually all spiritual teachings of the world will be united in yoga. Perhaps they will, for whatever benefits to mind and body may be sought and won on the way (as by-product) the true meaning and sublime object of yoga is union with the supreme spirit (ultimate reality – *Bhraman*).”

In the process of fast changes in the environment, in the personal, social and global life, yoga will show the pathway for the existing global community and it will help people to grow into the real “global citizens”, following philosophy *Basudheva-Kutumbkam* (Earth is One Planet, One Family).

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Received: June 28, 2012

Accepted: July 23, 2012