

Yoga And Islam: Unveiling A Common Ground

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Abstract

Yoga is believed to be associated with Islam, in fact the two complement each other. Islam and yoga together may make a mutually beneficial synergy. Both agree that the body is considered as a means to realize the sense of spirituality and salvation, the primary identity of the human being is not with the body only but with the eternal soul. This is true in case of any religion, be it Hindu, be it Islam, or be it Christian. Yoga is not a religion. Rather it is a philosophy of life which is a set of techniques and skills that can be adopted by any religion with a view to enhance their acceptability and utility. No doubt, yoga arose from the Hindu origin and can be traced back to pre- Vedic age, it has a universal applicability. It helps one to follow one's own religion better whatever that may be. It consists of certain interesting concepts which can be considered common between the two which needs to be unveiled. There is a compatibility between Islam and yoga on the highest level. When a yoga aspirant is established in truth, whatever he says or does bears fruits. Thus, it can be ascertained that there is a ground in which both yoga and Islamic thoughts can be brought together. Yoga always emphasizes on discipline and self-control through the practice of *aṣṭāṅga- yoga*, likewise, Islam places great importance on self-control and discipline.

Keywords: yoga, Islam, Holy Qur'an, meditation, *aṣṭāṅga- yoga*, *puruṣa*, *prakṛti*, etc.

Introduction

Yoga is one of the six important schools of Indian philosophy. The most authentic and reliable source of the Yoga philosophy is *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali. Patañjali defines *yoga* as the cessation of the modifications of *citta*¹. *Citta* refers to the three internal organs viz., *buddhi* or intellect, *ahamkāra* or ego and *manas* or mind. *Citta* is the first evolute of *prakṛti* and has the predominance of *sattva*. It is itself unconscious but finest and nearest to *puruṣa*. It has the power to reflect the *puruṣa* and hence, appears as conscious. When it gets closer to an object, it takes the form of that object. This form is called *vr̥tti* or modification. The light of consciousness which comes from the *puruṣa* that illuminates this form is called *jñāna*. *Puruṣa* is pure consciousness and is free from the limitations of *prakṛti*. But it mistakenly identifies itself with its reflection in the *citta* and thus appears to be undergoing variation. *Citta*, therefore, is the physical medium for the manifestation of the spirit.

Islam is a world religion centered on the Holy Quran and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. The followers of Islam are known as Muslims. They have faith in peace and tranquility among people. Various ethical values, stages of consciousness, rules and regulations of life are found available in the pages of the Holy Quran. Muslims emphasize that Allah is one and incomparable and they consider the Holy Quran as the verbatim words of Allah. Islam is based on the belief of the oneness and uniqueness of God (*tawhid*) and belief in an afterlife (*akhirah*) with the final judgement, wherein the righteous will

be rewarded in paradise (*jannah*) and the unrighteous will be punished in hell (*jahannam*). The five pillars of Islam are *shahada* (declaration of faith), *salah* (prayer), *zakat* (almsgiving), *sawm* (fasting) and *hajj* (pilgrimage).² Here in this paper an attempt has been made to throw light on some common ground of Yoga and Islamic teachings.

Aims and objectives

This is a literary study conducted with a view to achieve the following aims and objectives-

- To search the concepts of yoga in Islam with special reference to the Holy Quran.
- To arrange the findings of the study in a systematic way.
- To co- relate the findings and to find a common ground.
- To arrange the matters in the form of a scientific article.
- To send the article to a peer- reviewed popular journal with National and International repute for publication.

Methodology

To conduct the study, both online and offline modes were applied. Books on yoga and the related topics and the translation and interpretation on the Holy Quran were consulted. The study was conducted by following the below mentioned methods-

- A search was done to get the yogic concepts in the books like Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*, and other books. Some portions of the Holy Quran was studied and consulted for finding the similarities and so on.
- An extensive use of online and offline libraries was done.
- The findings were documented and arranged in a systematic way.
- The findings were discussed to show the common ground between yoga and Islam.
- At the end, a summary and a conclusion were drawn followed by references and sent to a peer-reviewed popular journal for publication expecting appraisal of the scientific society.

Discussion

In the beginning of the 11th century Persian scholar Al- Beruni had visited India and lived in close proximity with the Hindus for nearly sixteen years and had an opportunity to have translated many original Sanskrit works into the Arabic and Persian languages. One such work is the commentary on Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* which was discovered in the year 1922 in an archive in the city of Istanbul.³ According to the text, the development of Sufism was influenced by yogic practices. Although Al-Beruni had simply translated the original work, he had reiterated some of the *sūtras*. This version of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* reached the hands of the people of Persia by around 1050 AD. The impact of yogic concepts on the life of people of Persia and other countries has been witnessed.

In the 16th century AD, the *Amṛtakunḍa*, a *haṭhayoga* text was translated into the Arabic and Persian languages and it was called *Mirat- ul- Maani*. It has been considered as one of the earliest Islamic works.⁴ However, yoga has not been completely accepted in Islam. But the Muslims of South Asian countries have gradually started to accept the concepts of *yogāsanas*, *prāṇāyāmas* and meditation.⁵ In Iran, there were about two hundred yoga centers in 2014, one quarter of these are in Tehran where people could be seen practicing yoga in parks and open places.⁶ The only sect of the Islamic community

who had incorporated yoga into practice is the *yogī* or *faqeer* whose followers are believed to be Muslim converts.⁷

Islam and yoga together may make a mutually beneficial synergy. Both agree that while the body is as important as a vehicle of spiritual realization and salvation, the main identity of the human being is not with the body only but the realization of the eternal soul.⁸ Yoga is not confined to Hindu religion only; rather it has a universal applicability. Yoga is a way of life, a path to follow one's own religion in a better way whatever that may be. But it is difficult to establish the similarity between Islam and the yoga. However, it has been tried to some extent to find out a way by means of which the differences may be minimized. For example, the term *Nafs al- Ammarah* from *Surah Yusuf* (12:53) of the *Quran Sharif* has highlighted that every individual is dominated by desires and inclinations towards evil often leading to disbelief for righteousness. In this context, *Yogasūtra* also mentions that false knowledge (*avidyā*) is the cause of delusion which implies that the object does not appear in its real nature and people can be regarded as evil self.⁹

The two phrases *Ain- al- Yakeen* (in 102:7) and *Haqq- al- Yakeen* (in 56:95) of *Quran Sharif* can be mentioned here in which the conviction of truth is derived from seeing or perception or from complete spiritual experience by the self.¹⁰ In this context, Patañjali says that when a yoga aspirant is established in truth, whatever he says or does bears fruits.

It is interesting to compare the symbolism of Prophet Mohammad's night time ascent to heaven (*Al-Mi'raj*) with the corresponding symbolism in *yoga*. In Islam, the *Mi'raj* is the night journey of Prophet Mohammad from Mecca to Jerusalem and then to heaven. At that time, the Prophet is said to have ascended on *Al- Buraq*, a riding beast with the head of a woman, through the seven heavens to the throne of God. Similarly in *yoga*, the *kuṇḍalinī* is a feminine energy that dwells at the bottom of the spine and ascends through seven levels (seven *cakras*) and which can be awakened by means of meditation and others.¹¹ While performing *prāṇāyāmas* or meditation, an individual concentrates on one object and attains *samādhi*. It consists of fixing the gaze on a single point while in Islam also, during prayer (*namaz*), same thing is practiced by fixing the gaze on a spot on the ground where the forehead rests.¹²

Physical similarities between *salah* (five times *namaz*) and yoga are the body movements that are repeated every time. It is also believed that yoga is nothing but a set of techniques and methods that gradually enhance the practice of religion, be it Hindus, Islam, Christian and others. It is also found that the components like *sijdah* may be compared to *śīrṣāsana* while *qayam* is *vajrāsana* and by doing *ruku* is like *āsana*. It is also observed that both Islam and yoga insist on physical cleanliness and moral cleanliness (*śauca*) and purify before performing their practices which is a pre- requisite of every religion.

In *Yogasūtra*, the concept of *brahmacarya* or celibacy has been emphasized. *Brahmacarya* is one of the *yamas* that is considered very essential for a yoga aspirant. In Islam, during the holy month of *Ramadan*, a person is supposed to maintain continence and not to indulge in any kind of physical contact. According to *Yogasūtra*, a person must aspire for extreme happiness by means of contentment.¹³ In this context, the phrase *Nafs- al- Mutma'innah* of *Surah Al Fajr* (89:27- 28) of Holy Quran, can be mentioned.¹⁴ This state represents the highest degree of spiritual development characterized by peace, contentment and complete adherence to Allah.

In *Yogasūtra*, Patañjali has laid down the path of giving up everything and concentrates on *Īśvara* only.¹⁵ In Islam also, it is stated that to surrender completely on the feet of Allah and submission is that

surrendering to the will of Allah and not to accept the passive fatalism.¹⁶ In *Yogasūtra*, *prāṇāyāma* is defined as the control of breath, the process of inhalation and exhalation. In Sura *Waquf- e- Adadi* of the Holy Quran, it is stated that an individual must utter the names of Allah for a definite number of times in one breath, i.e., repeating the names of God minimum twenty-one times or more in one breath.¹⁷

Conclusion

Thus, it can be ascertained that there is a ground in which both yoga and Islamic thoughts can be brought together. Yoga always emphasizes on discipline and self- control through the practice of *aṣṭāṅga- yoga*, likewise, Islam places great importance on self-control and discipline. Both recognize the significance of maintaining balance in life to promote self- control and holistic development. In yoga, ethical principles of *yama*, *niyama* etc., are strictly adhered to which is similar in Islam also in which the teachings of Prophet Mohammad and the Holy Qur'an want the followers to show kindness and mercy to all, the path of truth, the cleanliness and other ethical values are also spoken of. The feelings of self- satisfaction and gratitude recognizing the true nature of happiness that comes from within. It has been emphasized in Islam as well.

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