

Upanishads and the Science of Yoga

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Indian Philosophical Systems

Indian Philosophy is generally studied through its six systems, called Shat Darshana. These are: Nyaya of Gautama, Vaiseshika of Kanada, Sankhya of Kapila, Yoga of Patanjali, Purvamimamsa of Jaimini and Uttaramimamsa of Badarayana Vyasa. They deal respectively with Logic, Atomism, Evolution, Involution, Ritualism and Supreme Consciousness.

Our interest in this article is focused on the fourth and the last of these systems, viz., Yoga and Uttaramimamsa (or Vedanta). The standard texts of these two are, respectively, Yogasutras and Brahmasutras. The first text is attributed to Sage Patanjali, who is surmised to have flourished between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE. He is not the inventor of this science. Rather, he is the compiler of this experiential knowledge in the form of a textbook (known as *Patanjali Yogasutras* or the Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali).

The second text is attributed to Badarayana Vyasa and its date of compilation is still a matter of speculation. It was written down to summarize all extant knowledge about Superconsciousness or Brahman. The scriptures that deal with this subject are the Upanishads, forming the knowledge portion of the Vedas.

When one goes through the Upanishadic texts in detail, especially the major Upanishads, one is sometimes struck by dichotomous

statements made by them. This is because the revelations constituting the Upanishads occurred to different sages at different periods of history and have been expressed in words consonant with the era in which they lived. Hence, there was a need to reconcile these apparent contradictions to show the inner consistency of Upanishadic knowledge. This is the purpose served by the Brahmasutras.

A study of the Brahmasutras needs a prior acquaintance with the Upanishads, the Gita and some rudiments of Jaina and Buddha philosophies. On the other hand, the only prerequisite for a study of Yogasutras is an understanding of Sankhya. In this sense, it is a much easier subject to approach. Sankhya provides the theoretical foundation for the much more practice-oriented Yoga.

Theoretically, Yoga and Vedanta (the topic of the Upanishads and the Brahmasutras) are treated as two entirely different systems of philosophy. This is only a matter of convenience from the point of view of study. But in essence they have a common goal viz., *Svanubhuti*, realization of one's own true nature. The paths may appear to be different, but in practice they tend to feed upon each other.

It is said that there are about 220 Upanishads which have been identified. Most of them are now considered to be either of recent origin or spurious. The texts of 108 of



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them have been published by several publishing houses. Of these, at least 21 Upanishads deal with topics related to Patanjali's Yoga. Even though they claim to belong to the Vedic literature, a cursory glance through them shows that they just paraphrase some of the important sutras of Patanjali. Scholars dealing with the dating of the Upanishads have relegated them to a lower order of importance. Hence, we focus our attention here on only what are called major Upanishads.

Are Yoga and Upanishads Contemporaneous?

Before attempting a comparative study of the Upanishads with Patanjali's Yoga, an important question needs to be addressed. Are these two branches of knowledge contemporary in time? Till recently, there had been a feeling that the Vedic people had no knowledge of Yoga at all and that the latter is a later invention.

However, a closer examination of some of the seals and tablets found in excavations in the Saraswati Valley indicate that some of these tablets show postures like yogic asanas. The most famous of them shows a yogi, identified with Pashupati or Siva, sitting in the posture of Mulabandhasana, which is an advanced asana recommended in textbooks of Hathayoga as a means of closing Ida and Pingala and opening the Sushumna for the smooth movement of Kundalini. These seals have been dated to circa 3000 BCE, thus giving rise to a speculation that the Vedic sages did know about this art of entering the super-conscious stage and that most of their revelations recorded in the Vedas and Upanishads occurred to them in this state of Consciousness. This is, to a certain extent, substantiated by modern sages, commencing with Sri Ramakrishna himself.

Two more instances can be cited for the contemporaneity of the Vedic literature and Yoga. Every Mantra of the Rigveda is associated with a Rishi, a Devata, a Chandas and a Viniyoga. The first is the composer, the second is the deity addressed, the third is the metre and the last one is the objective to be achieved. One of the most famous and popular Vedic Mantras is the Gayatri or Savitru Mantra. The composer is Sage Vishwamitra, the deity is Savitru or Surya, the metre is Gayatri and the objective is Pranayama. The Rigveda is itself now dated to circa 3500 BCE. This is a clear indication that Pranayama was known and practised even at the time of Rigveda.

Swami Vivekananda was as active on the 4th of July 1902, the day of his Mahasamadhi, as on any other day. During the course of the day he instructed his disciple, Swami Shuddhananda, to fetch the Shukla Yajurveda. Swamiji then asked him to read the fortieth verse of the eighteenth chapter of the Madhyandina recension of the Vajasyani Samhita beginning with the words '*Sushumna suryarashmih*', along with the commentary of Mahidhara. Swamiji then remarked,

'This interpretation of the passage does not appeal to my mind. Whatever may be the commentator's interpretation of the word *Sushumna*, the seed or the basis of what the Tantras, in the later ages, speak of as the Sushumna nerve-channel in the body, is contained here, in this Vedic Mantra. You, my disciples, should try to discover the true import of these Mantras and make original reflections and commentaries of the Shastras.'¹

Mahidhara had interpreted the word as another name of Chandra, the Moon God, but Swamiji had felt that the word actually refers to the canal through which the Kundalini moves.

It is thus seen that there is ample evidence to show that Yogic practices are as old as the Vedic era. Hence, it is no wonder that we encounter the word Yoga explicitly in some of the major Upanishads.

Upanishadic Texts and Yoga

Even though the Vedic and Yogic knowledge systems are contemporaneous, it is not true of the texts, viz., the Upanishads and the Yogasutras. The Upanishads have come down to us through an oral tradition that strived to maintain its original and authentic form. The Yogasutras of Patanjali, on the other hand, were compiled only about 2000 years ago. The system itself might have undergone quite a few changes since the Vedic times, since it emphasizes practice over theory. Hence, it becomes difficult to make a guess as to what kind of Yoga might have been practised by the Vedic people. Thus, our comparison between these two systems has to depend heavily upon the brief references to Yoga in the Upanishadic literature.

The theoretical basis for Yoga is considered to be Kapila's Sankhya. The latter is supposed to be the oldest philosophical system, but is silent on the question of Brahman, either Nirguna or Saguna. But, Patanjali, in his yoga text, appears to make a concession by introducing the concept of Iswara as a *Purusavishesha* (a special type of purusha or person). The symbol or Pratika for this is Pranava or Omkara. Even though there is no elaboration of this point in the text, practising yogis consider Om as the most important symbol to meditate upon. For Yoga practitioners, Om represents that which Vedantins call Brahman.

Upanishads also give equal importance to Pranava. There are many major Upanishads where this word is mentioned explicitly such

as Katha Upanishad and Mundaka Upanishad. According to the Kathopanishad, Om is that which is praised by all the Vedas, it is that which is uttered by all spiritual aspirants and it is that desiring to reach which people practice Brahmacharya. Om stands for both the Saguna Brahman and the Nirguna Brahman, serving as a bridge spanning the two. It is the best support one can have in life to reach one's goal.

The Mundakopanishad describes Omkara through an allegory. In the second Mundaka, Section 2, the Upanishad says in Mantras 3 and 4,

'Taking hold of the bow, the great weapon familiar in the Upanishads, one should fix on it an arrow sharpened with meditation. Drawing the string, O Sowmya, hit that very target that is the Imperishable, with the mind absorbed in Its thought. Om is the bow, the soul is the arrow and Brahman is called its target. It is to be hit by an unerring man. One should become one with It just like an arrow.'

In his commentary, Adi Sankara says that Om is the bow that brings about the soul's entry into the Imperishable. Thus, Omkara is a means for self-realization.

The shortest Upanishad, the Mandukya, with only 12 Mantras, is all about Omkara. The letter 'A' represents the waking state, the letter 'U' stands for the dreaming state, the letter 'M' represents the dreamless sleeping state, and the combination of these three, Om, is the Fourth or Turiya, the state of Samadhi.

But, it is in a later Upanishad, the Shveta-shvatara, that one comes across an explicit description of Rajayoga. Perhaps nowhere else in the Upanishads can one find such a detailed description. This could be because it is a later Upanishad and by that time the oral tradition of yogic practices gradually came to be written down to become a part of literature.

The Upanishad says in its second chapter:

In order to attain ecstasy, one who is practising yoga will raise high the three parts of his body – the head, the neck and the chest. They should also be in a straight line. With the help of his mind, he should focus all his senses in his heart and then use Brahman (i.e. Pranava, the symbol Om) as a raft to cross the frightful currents of the river of life.²

(Now some hints are being given on how to practice Pranayama.) Anyone practising yoga has to be meticulous about what he should and should not do. (That is, he should follow the rules laid down by the yoga scriptures regarding food and other things,) He should also control his breath with great care. He may release his breath only when he feels exhausted. The mind is like restless horses harnessed to a chariot. Like a charioteer, the wise person has to control his mind and fix it (on some deity)³.

(But what sort of place is congenial for the practice of yoga? Here is the answer to this question.) The place should be even, holy, without pebbles, fire and sand, without noise, such as coming from a crowd, and not too close to lakes and other sources of water. It should be pleasing to the mind and not repulsive to the sight. It should be a place such as a cave where there are no strong winds. Practise yoga in such a place.⁴

(Some signs of progress in yoga.) Shortly before a yogi has his experience of Brahman, he will begin to see the following signs, all suggestive of that experience: snow, smoke, the sun, air, fire, fireflies, sparks, crystal and the moon.⁵

The gross elements—earth, water, fire, air and space—are no longer gross to the yogi. They are only their qualities (i.e. smell, taste, form, touch and sound). His body is transformed in that it loses its grossness, and he is no longer susceptible

to disease, old age or death. His death is at his will.⁶

Lightness of the body, absence of any ailment, no craving for enjoyment, a bright complexion, a sweet voice, a pleasant body odour, and urine and faeces in small quantities – these are the first signs of a successful yogi.⁷

The rest of the Mantras in this chapter deal with the final stage of Samadhi, which is the constant refrain of all Upanishads.

One can already see here the seeds of the thought process that later blossomed out into their fullest form in the 6th Chapter of the Gita and some chapters of texts on Hathayoga.

Apart from this Upanishad there are several other Upanishads also which deal with this subject. But they are more recent in origin and need not be taken too seriously because they essentially repeat whatever is found in Sivasamhita and Gherandasamhita.

Summary

The points that emerge from this study can be summarized as follows. The Upanishads and Rajayoga are contemporary developments. Both were originally propagated through an oral tradition, but the Upanishads came to be gradually written down. Yoga, on the other hand, still retained its oral tradition, because it is a highly practice-oriented science. Only later, when oral traditions became difficult to maintain, was this knowledge put into writing, whose earliest expression is in the Shvetashvatara Upanishad.

Even though it has become customary to consider Rajayoga as a separate philosophy, it is always advisable to remember its close connection to the Upanishadic literature. □

References

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