

Yoga in the Upanishads.

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IT is needless now to consider the etymological meaning of the word 'Yoga'. It has acquired a meaning which is well-known and well-defined and needs no reference to the root or stem from which it was derived. An extensive literature, with ramifications in different directions, has grown up on the subject. And thinkers of India in all ages have bestowed considerable attention on the elucidation of its meaning and importance. There is a system of Philosophy which has been devoted exclusively to its study, and hosts of other writers have contributed in different ways to the proper understanding of the practices and the theories underlying the practices of 'Yoga'. Anyone reviewing in his mind this extensive and many-sided literature will be struck with the two main aspects of what is usually described as 'Yoga'.

On the one hand, there are the psycho-metaphysical theories of 'Yoga', and on the other there are the disciplines—mental as well as physical—intended as aids to the realization of the truths of this philosophy. On the one side, we have an enunciation of what is conceived as the highest truth—the truth about Soul and World and God;—in one word, a conception of reality; and on the other hand, we have means suggested to obtain a direct and more or less continuing vision of this truth. These means, again, include both a mental discipline as well as a physical training.

We may illustrate our meaning by reference to the *Yoga-Sūtras* of Patañjali. In this famous book we have, on the one hand, a theory about the nature of the soul and its function, the nature and place of God (Īśvara) and also of man's

place in the world, his birth and rebirth, and so on; there is a fine psychology and also a metaphysics not unworthy of study; on the other hand, we have a long discussion of the many physical and mental practices which are considered necessary to escape the evils of existence. We have a knowledge of truth, coupled with a knowledge of practices which will help the realization of this truth. The other discussions are only incidental and come by the way.

What is true of the *Yoga-Sūtras* is true of the Yoga-literature as a whole. Nay, we might go still further and say, it is true practically of the whole of Indian philosophy. Indian philosophy is not merely a "thinking consideration of things";—it is not simply a satisfaction of the desire to know: it is not knowledge for the sake of itself; but it is knowledge for the sake of something else;—it is knowledge which is a means to an end. Hence it is the peculiar character of Indian thought that it not only gives us knowledge of truth but also discusses means for its attainment. Outside the 'Yoga' system, we might take the instance of the Vedānta. In Vedānta, too, we have a similar framework: we have, on the one hand, an elaborate discussion of the nature of *Brahma*, who is the ultimate reality—the alpha and omega of the Universe; we have attempts to understand the origin of the world and its relation to *Brahma*; we also try to understand the place of the finite soul in the world-system and its ultimate destiny. All this is *theoria* or vision of the truth. But our endeavour is not expected to stop with this knowledge. The knowledge must be used and used

for the attainment of a purpose,—viz., the realization of the ultimate destiny of the soul. This attempt to realize the soul's ultimate purpose with the help of the knowledge that Vedānta gives, we may describe as the *practice* of Vedānta. Thus, taking the theory and the practice of Vedānta together, we meet with the typical framework of Hindu thought, viz., to discover the right sort of knowledge—the knowledge that is worth knowing; and then, with the help of that knowledge, to enable the soul to attain its ultimate goal.

If the analysis given above is correct, all philosophies of India will appear to be 'Yoga' of some kind or other. The sort of knowledge advocated as the highest is not the same in all cases. And the practices and discipline indicated as helpful for its attainment are also not the same. The knowledge that Sāṃkhya—Yoga regards as the highest is not considered such by the Vedānta; and the knowledge of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika is materially different from these systems. The *theories* are different; reality is differently understood and differently explained in the different cases. And the discipline—the practice through which this ultimate destiny (or निःश्रेयस, as it is generally called) is to be realized, is also different in the case of the different systems. These differences frequently lead to interminable wranglings. But still the general framework is curiously enough the same almost in *all* cases. All are 'Yoga'—of some kind or other. In all there is a theory and a practice: in all there is a knowledge to be employed for the realization of a purpose.

So far as the 'Yoga' philosophy of Patañjali—the 'Yoga' exclusively so called—is concerned, the theory or the metaphysics is mainly that of the Sāṃkhya of Kapila. But its distinctive character lies in the fact that it devotes very much more attention than any other system of thought to the elaboration of the means to be used for the attainment of the ultimate goal. These means are twofold: the control of the body and discipline of the mind. The mind is, of course; the more important thing; but it is affected by physical conditions and hence control of the mind is bound to fail unless the body also is controlled. Thus the control of the body also is necessary. Just as the mind has to be controlled in order that the highest spiritual purpose may be realized, so the body also has to be controlled in order that control of the mind may be a success. This is not all. The control of the body requires a control over the conditions of physical life—including the regulation of diet and sleep and so on. The 'Yoga' philosophy of Patañjali does not go into all these details of mere physical life. But in the wider 'Yoga' literature, we have profuse discussions on all these points. And it is an exceedingly interesting study even for those who do not believe in 'Yoga' as a whole.

Taking 'Yoga' in the wider sense, we have within it different forms and grades; and there is also an interesting nomenclature. There is *Rājayoga* and *Jñānayoga* and *Hāthayoga* and so on. And as part of the discipline of the body and the mind, we have extensive description of the various kinds of

postures (आसन) and of the many ways in which diet, etc. can be regulated and of diverse physical exercises, including sometimes obscene rites (cf. *Gheraṇḍa-Saṃhitā*, *Śiva-Saṃhitā*, etc.). And we have also description of the various kinds of meditation which are believed to be useful for the proper discipline of the mind.

The 'Yoga' of Patañjali and books of similar kind lay more stress on the mental discipline. They consider in detail and describe minutely the various steps of spiritual discipline—the different grades of consciousness—through which the soul can rise to its highest existence. The authors of these books do not lay much stress on the details of dietetic discipline or physical exercises or postures. They admit the general principle that such regulation of the physical life is necessary but leave the working out of details to the individual. Thus the *Gītā*, Ch. VI. gives a general indication as to how 'Yoga' is to be attained. The *Yogī* should prefer solitude; he should sit in a steady seat in a clean place; the seat should not be too high nor too low; he should sit steady and must not be looking about in all directions...; he should not eat too much, nor too little...; he should not sleep too much nor too little, etc., etc. (*Gītā*, ch. vi. 10—20)

Here in the *Gītā* we have a general indication of the external discipline, so to say, and nothing more. But take a book like *Gheraṇḍa-Saṃhitā* or *Śiva-Saṃhitā*, admittedly books on *Yoga*. In these books, we have hardly anything that could be called philosophical or spiritual,—little that could by any stretch of

imagination be described as even mental discipline. On the contrary, all that we have here is a description of the various means that a *Yogī* should employ to clean his body and strengthen it and improve it so that it may become a fit instrument for spiritual purposes. These means include brushing the teeth and tongue, washing the stomach and the intestines with air-current or with water, and artificially cleaning the alimentary canal through the mouth, etc., etc. We have descriptions of more than thirty kinds of *Āsanās* or postures, a dozen and a half of *Mudrās* or bodily movements or twists and turns of the body, etc., etc. Then we have also details of diet: which of the many vegetables used as food should be avoided and which should be eaten by a *Yogī*: whether date-fruit and palm-fruit should be taken: the temperature of the food to be taken, etc.

In these books great emphasis is placed on physical *Yoga*—rather than on mental and spiritual *Yoga*. But, however the emphasis may be shifted, the broad fact remains that *Yoga* as generally understood has these two sides—the physical as well as the mental. It was a bilateral discipline. And the principal metaphysical pre-supposition involved in this was that the mind and body are so intimately interconnected that improvement of the one implied that of the other.

In the Upaniṣads, in which the beginnings of all systems may eventually be traced, we find traces of the beginning of *Yoga* also. But, as might be expected, the Upaniṣads do not emphasize the physical aspect half as much as books like *Gheraṇḍa-Saṃhitā* or *Śiva-Saṃhitā* do. But both aspects of

Yoga are recognized. This establishes our conclusion that all *Yoga* was based on the metaphysical assumption that mind and body are intimately related—so much so that no improvement of the mind could be hoped for without a previous discipline of the body.

So far as the physical side is concerned, in the *Śwetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, ii, we have (i) direction about posture, (ii. 8) about breathing, (ii. 9) as to the place to be selected for meditation, and (ii. 10) also as to external objects which help meditation. About extraneous conditions of *Yoga* or meditation, this is about all that the Upaniṣads give. They do not consider it necessary to go beyond this. That that was the general attitude of the Upaniṣads will be further confirmed by the discussions under *Vedānta-Sūtras* IV. i. 7. The question is considered permissible there whether meditation might not be practised while walking or lying. And the answer given is that deep meditation is not really possible unless one sits down quietly. Hence while practising meditation one should be seated.

Besides, steadiness of the body is a *sine qua non* for profound thinking. That also is a reason why one should be seated during meditation. This conclusion, we are told, is corroborated by the *Smṛtis* also and a reference is made in this connection to the *Gītā* (*loc. cit.*). But the *Vedānta-Sūtras* do not consider it necessary to go into any further details as to the posture to be assumed while sitting or even as to the time and place. These are left to individual discretion—the only consideration being the possibility of undivided

attention. That secured, the details of posture, time and place may take care of themselves (*Vedānta-Sūtras* IV. i. 11).

Though the details of physical conditions are not of much moment to the Vedānta, the kind and mode of meditation is the very soul of it. In fact, the whole philosophy of Vedānta is devoted to an elucidation of that. This spirit, it is needless to say, has been breathed into it by the Upaniṣads. Thus in *Taittirīya* III, *Chhāndogya* ii, iii, etc., etc. we have directions given about the nature and method of the meditation to be practised. This is the *Yoga* that we find in the Upaniṣads.

The above brief survey of *Yoga* in the Upaniṣads enables us to notice one important thing. Both the Upaniṣads as well as the *Vedānta-Sūtras* regard the physical condition of *Yoga* as of lesser importance. No definite instructions about them are considered necessary. There is little, if any, reference to the regulation of diet. The duties of *Varna* and *Āśrama* are no doubt emphasized in the Vedānta; and, in that way, the regulations of the *Dharma-Śāstras* are also indicated to be obligatory. Besides, in the Upaniṣads, frequent references to *Smṛti* indicate that the regulations contained therein were considered binding. That certainly implied *some* regulation of food, as also regulation of other things; but it was very much less than the kind of regulation which books like *Śiva-Saṃhitā* intended. And as to *Āsana* and *Mudrā* and similar things, the Vedānta shows supreme indifference. These things are to be decided by the individual himself; the only condition imposed being that one must be assured

of complete attention and undisturbed meditation.

On the contrary, the Vedānta lays very great emphasis on the nature and method of meditation, which is *Yoga* proper. About this whatever latitude may have been allowed by the original Vedānta texts, viz., the Upaniṣads, the *Vedānta-Sūtras* make it somewhat stringent and restricted. Not any kind of subject is food for *Yogic* meditation and not any kind of meditation is good enough for the purpose for which it is practised.

Some may airily remark here that this is due to the simple fact that the *Vedānta* is a philosophy. True; but so is the *Yoga*. Yet there is the difference between the two systems in the matter of importance attached to physical conditions. How can we account for it?

The difference, it seems, is best explained if we remember the fact that even now in Hinduism there are two kinds of *Sādhakas* or Seekers after spiritual benefit. In the first place, there are those who in the name of *Yoga* take to all kinds of physical torture and consider it a high attainment if they can perform interesting physical feats. Thus there are those who lie down on beds of sharp spikes, or stand on one leg, with one arm uplifted, and so on, or swallow nitric acid or walk upon burning charcoal, etc., and pretend to be great *Yogīs*. On the contrary, as distinguished from them, there are the real *Yogīs*—who practise profound meditation and attempt to realize the highest truth in their soul, and consider the details of physical life and physical practices as

unessential. Not that they allow unbridled license in matters pertaining to physical life: some rules there always are. But they are mainly auxiliaries—and, what is more important, matters to be decided by the individual. The Vedānta is *Yoga* of this second kind; and the *Gheraṇḍa-Saṃhitā* is a typical example of the first kind of *Yoga*.

What are we to think of the value of these physical feats and practices? Higher Hindu thought has never attached any extraordinary value to them. The fact that the Vedānta is indifferent to them, proves their unimportance. But nevertheless it must be said to their credit that they are not altogether valueless. Physical feats are not philosophy and gymnastic is not salvation of the soul. Yet even Plato attached considerable value to the right sort of gymnastic. And the physical practices of *Yoga* are also of much aid in building up the right sort of body—a healthy body in which a healthy mind may reside. Properly guided and correctly pursued, some of these exercises, such as the breathing exercises involved in *Prāṇāyāma*, are known to have the power of improving the body and even to have cured many obstinate diseases. It is not right for us—right for men with modern education—to turn up our noses and sneer at them. In a general way, therefore, we are inclined to think that the *Yoga* practices described in some of the later books like *Śiva-Saṃhitā*, may be turned to a good account. But that does not mean that we can find justification for each one of these manifold exercises or that we are in a position to believe in the efficacy of

each one of them. To take an example at random, the *Śiva-Saṃhitā* IV. 69 speaks of a *Mudrā* which is nothing but standing on one's head. This is an interesting bit of gymnastic, no doubt, but it is difficult to believe that it confers any extra spiritual benefit on one who practises it. And some of the *Mudrās* described in the *Śiva-Saṃhitā* are frightfully disgusting and cannot even be discussed with anything like decency. They belong to the dark practices of a degenerate age and cannot by any stretch of imagination be linked with spiritual elevation. They must be brushed aside.

The real *Yoga* is *Yoga* of meditation. But the physical practices associated with it are not without value altogether. Our age needs thorough investigation into the utility or otherwise of each one of them. But who can undertake such an investigation?

One essential condition of such an investigation is that the practices should be pursued in the open. The mystery surrounding them and the secrecy that is studiously observed by those who pretend to practise them has been responsible for a good deal of mischief. There is no mystery about Sandow's system of exercise or any other form of gymnastic or even military drill. No one can deny that they are highly useful. Yet their efficacy is unimpaired by their publicity. And it is also recognized that they require proper guidance,—a sort of *Guru* to give the necessary training. But no such trainer would ever suggest that their efficiency would become less if the instructions were

given in public. In fact, such instructions are given in public. Why, then, should *Yoga* exercises, which, after all, are intended to improve the body, lose their efficacy, if instructions were given openly and without the veil of secrecy? *Yoga* admittedly requires a *Guru* or

guide. But that is no reason why the shroud of mystery covering it should not be lifted. In that case, we might know which of the practices are really good and for what. But will this scientific spirit be allowed to invade the realm of *Yoga*?

