

## THE MEANS TO CONTROL THE MIND

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### Abstract

The *ashtāṅga* yoga system of yoga as presented by sage Patanjali classifies yoga into a series of eight steps, at the end of which the highest aim of human life, i.e. self-realisation can be attained. One can get some knowledge about what these steps are by reading sage Patanjali's *Yoga-sūtra*. However, how the aim of yoga can be attained and what are the means of attaining it cannot be easily known because the *Yoga-sūtra* comprises of aphorisms, which by their very nature, can be understood only if one has a thorough knowledge of the subject. This paper is an attempt to figure out the means of reaching the highest aim of yoga through the study of the *Yoga-sūtra*, one of the most authoritative text on the subject of yoga and another gigantic scripture in the field of yoga, the *Bhagwad Gita*, which is also known as the *Yoga śāstra*. Further, the nature of these texts is such that only an advanced yogi can understand its true meaning through his/her experiences. Therefore, the works of Swami Kripalvanandaji and Swami Rajarshi Muni have also been studied to throw more light on the subject.

### INTRODUCTION

Establishing control over the human mind is very instrumental in attaining the ultimate goal of the yoga system. However, regulating the activities of the mind is not an easy task. Despite the difficult nature of this task, various saints and yogis have managed to attain this goal and thus proved that however difficult it may seem, it is not impossible. If one has the right knowledge about the manner in which the performance of the eight steps of yoga, as stated in the *Yoga-sūtra* is to be undertaken and the instruments for their practice, then any person can achieve self-realisation.

### THE MEANS TO CONTROL THE MIND

The *Yoga-sūtra* by sage Patanjali is considered the most substantial work on the subject of yoga. The knowledge about yoga is found in various ancient Indian scriptures. But sage Patanjali, for the first time, put all this knowledge in one place and ascribed a proper structure to it. The *Yoga-sūtra*, therefore becomes the obvious source for anyone who would want to dive deeper in the subject of yoga.

Yoga is defined by sage Patanjali as 'the cessation of the fluctuations (*chitta vrittis*) of the mind.' (*Yoga-Sutra*, 1.2). This is considered to be the highest state of human existence. When the fluctuations of the mind cease to exist, the self abides in itself. (*Yoga-Sutra*, 1.3). 'This is the highest state of existence – the state of exclusiveness, where the self is separated from the non-self.' (Satya Prakash Singh, 2010) Needless to say, achieving this end is a humongous task. Anyone who would have tried to control the mind would have realised how restless the mind is! To make the mind stable even for a moment is very difficult. No doubt then, in the *Bhagwad Gita* when Lord Krishna tells Arjun that in order to reach the state of *samādhi*, one should try to attain control over the restless and wandering mind (*Shrimad Bhagwad Gita*, 6.26.); Arjun says to Lord Krishna that he finds the process of yoga described by him as impractical and impossible, as the mind is characteristically restless and unstable. (*Shrimad Bhagwad Gita*, 6.33). It can be understood that attaining such a state of mind where it is free from all the distortions and fluctuations is not as simple as it seems when one reads the above definition of yoga.

It may be noted that the *Yoga-sūtra* consists of various aphorisms which are very brief in nature. Evidently, the knowledge of various stages of yoga, which can be gained only after years of *yoga sādhanā* has been compressed and presented in the form of brief statements by sage Patanjali. These aphorisms are like the title of some subject, which can be understood by most people only when explained in detail. In ancient India, the oral tradition of imparting knowledge to students by the gurus was prevalent. Aphorisms like those contained in the *Yoga-sūtra* would have been elaborated and explained in detail by the gurus based on their experiences. However, in the present times such oral tradition is absent and finding a qualified guru who has the relevant experience to shed more light on the deep meaning of such aphorisms is very difficult. Therefore, through the present paper, an attempt is made to dig deeper in one of the most authoritative text on yoga – the *Yoga-sūtra*,

in order to look for references that suggest how the task of getting rid of the fluctuations of the mind; and thereby, the highest expression of the self can be realised.

The *Yoga-sūtra* is divided into four *pādas* (Chapters). In the second *sūtra* (verse) of the first chapter, the aim of yoga is introduced thus- 'Yoga is the restriction of the fluctuations of the mind.' Thus, in the very beginning of the work, the ultimate aim of yoga has been introduced. The importance of the mind in human existence and in realising the ultimate aim of human life is stressed here. As mentioned earlier, even in the *Bhagwad Gīta*, which is often referred to as '*Yoga Shāstra*', similar importance has been given to the role of mind and the difficulty of achieving control over it has been brought out through the conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjun. Swami Kripalwanandji, an advanced yogi from Gujarat, has considered the mind as the curtain or wall that separates the individual being from the ultimate being or the Almighty. (Swami Kripalvanand, 1977). That the mind acquires the central place in the system of yoga can thus be understood.

The other important aspect, as suggested in the said definition of yoga by sage Patanjali, is establishing control over the mind such that the various distractions of the mind can be put to rest. This is where the journey of a seeker of truth becomes arduous. The flickering mind is a part of the human being and yet most of the time we end up becoming its disciple rather than its master. The yoga practitioner is supposed to have his mind cleared of all its dispositions and thus to have restored it to its original shape of a crystal of the highest quality. (Satya Prakash Singh, 2010). Only when such a state of mind is achieved, the highest state of existence can be realised. In the *Yoga-sūtra*, followed by the meaning of yoga in the second verse, sage Patanjali mentions the different fluctuations of the mind and their meanings in the subsequent verses. Thereafter, an important hint about how the cessation of the mental fluctuations can be attained is found, when sage Patanjali mentions that 'these (the modifications of the mind) can be restrained through practice (*abhyāsa*) and non-attachment (*vairāgya*).' (Patanjali, *Yoga-Sutra*, 1.12) Similarly, in the *Bhagwad Gīta*, Arjun submits that the mind being very fickle, turbulent, stubborn and very powerful, controlling the mind seems to be more difficult than controlling the wind. (Shrimad *Bhagwad Gīta*, 6.34) Like Arjun, any yoga practitioner would have a similar doubt when faced with the task of establishing control over the restless and difficult mind. Lord Krishna responds to such submission of Arjun by acknowledging that what he says is correct and that it is indeed very difficult to restrain the mind. However, he adds that by practice and detachment, the mind can be controlled. Lord Krishna further says that yoga is difficult for one whose mind is unbridled. However, those who strive earnestly by the proper means can attain perfection in yoga (Shrimad *Bhagwad Gīta*, 6. 35-36).

It can be observed that the two most important and comprehensive works in the field of yoga, namely the *Yoga-sūtra* and the *Bhagwad Gīta* are unanimous in their suggestion as to the means to control the restless mind. Both indicate that the task of gaining control over the mind is definitely very difficult, but it is not impossible. *Abhyāsa* and *vairāgya* (practice and detachment) are the two tools which can make this seemingly unconquerable mind conquerable.

One would want to find out that 'what' is to be practiced and 'towards what' one is supposed to have detachment in order to attain the highest state of existence. About practice, it is said in the *Yoga-sūtra* that 'practice is the effort to secure steadiness.' (*Yoga-Sutra*, 1.13) Practice, in other words, is a constant effort (*prayatna*) aimed at attaining restraint over the modifications of the mind. Elaborating further on the meaning of practice, Vachaspati Mishra in his commentary on the *Yoga-sūtra*, states that practice means the repeated exertion done with the end of attaining and permanently maintaining such state of mind that is free from all fluctuations. It refers to that course of action which is requisite to attain this goal in mind. Further, he clarifies that the requisite action for attaining a permanent state of mind free from fluctuations is the performance of the eight *angas* – *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *prāṇāyama*, *patyāhāra*, *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna* and *samādhi*. The constant endeavour by a seeker at practicing all these eight is stressed. This implies that the effort of the seeker should be concentrated on performance of the action, i.e., on the means, rather than the result. (James Haughton Woods, 1972) Similarly, Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagwad Gīta* that 'for the one who is aspiring for perfection in yoga, action without attachment is said to be the means.' (Shrimad *Bhagwad Gīta*, 6.3) Here also, it has been stressed that the focus of the yoga aspirant should be on the means to the end and not the final result or the final aim itself. Constant effort at practicing all the eight steps of yoga until they all are mastered is what the aspirant needs to focus on. Sage Patanjali further says about practice that, practice becomes confirmed only when it has been cultivated for a long time, uninterruptedly and with earnest attention. (*Yoga-Sutra*, 1.14). It can be understood from the above description that the ultimate aim of yoga cannot be attained suddenly like the taking place of a miracle. Meticulous, steadfast action without any kind of lapse is a *sin qua non* for success on the path of yoga. In the commentary on the above aphorism of Patanjali, Vachaspati Mishra mentions that in case an aspirant fails to persevere, then in the course of time, it is possible that he might be overrun by various impressions of the mind or various disturbances of the mind. Thus, an aspirant of yoga should never fail to persevere. (Rama Prasad, 2014)

From the above explanation about practice, it can be seen that the practice to be undertaken by one aspiring to attain the highest aim of life, is not an ordinary practice. Such practice demands complete dedication of the highest kind and even a slight detour can result in great consequences making further progress very difficult. Thereafter, sage Patanjali mentions regarding *vairāgya* that 'non-attachment is the consciousness of supremacy in him who is free from thirst for perceptible and scriptural enjoyments' (*Yoga-Sutra*, 1.15). Detachment, thus,

is to be observed not only towards all the objects of the senses that can be perceived in the physical world, but also towards objects that are found within oneself. Not only towards all the allurements of the material world, but also towards the allurements of the spiritual world. Explaining this in further detail, sage Vyāsa writes that – ‘A mind free from attachment to perceptible enjoyments, such as foods, drinks, women, and power and having no thirst for scriptural enjoyables, such as heaven, has, when it comes into contact with such divine and worldly objects, a consciousness of its supremacy, due to an understanding of the defects of the objects, brought about by virtue of intellectual illumination. This mental state is desirelessness (*vairāgya*).’ (Rama Prasada, 2014)

One would be curious to know if lack of desire would also qualify for *vairāgya*. Clarifying this, Vachaspati Mishra mentions that – ‘Detachment is not the mere absence of desire. On the contrary, it is the consciousness of indifference to enjoyment, even though divine and worldly objects be in contact.’ He renders the same plainer- ‘devoid of all desirable and undesirable objects as such.’ (Rama Prasada, 2014)

It can be understood that even after being in contact with all the allurements of the physical and spiritual world, when an aspirant of yoga is not attracted towards them, it can be considered that he has developed detachment in the true sense. Therefore, while referring to the nature of the mind, Swami Kripalvananda, says that ‘the mind is full of thoughts and desires. Therefore, in order to render it desireless, one has to take recourse to *viveka* (discrimination) and *vairāgya* (non-attachment). He further says that, ‘it is the curtain or the wall of the mind which separates the being from the Almighty. A seeker has to remove this wall using *prāṇa* as a tool. With the eradication of this wall, the duality existing between the individual self and the universal self disappears.’ (Swami Kripalvanand, 1977)

Here an important element (*prāṇa*) in the path of yoga comes into picture. *Abhyāsa* and *vairāgya* have been suggested by the *Yoga-sūtra* and the *Bhagwad Gita* as the two means for attaining control over the mind, making it free from mental fluctuations.

The meaning of *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya* can be understood to some extent from these two texts as well as further clarifications found in sage Vyasa and Vachaspati Mishra’s commentary on the *Yoga-sūtra*. However, it is still very difficult to comprehend how proper practice of the eight steps of yoga can be undertaken and how detachment towards the worldly and scriptural enjoyments can be attained.

The answer to this can be found in Swami Kripalvanadji’s description of the process of gaining control over the mind. He mentions that the wall of duality between the individual self and the universal self can be removed by using the ‘*prāṇa*’ as a tool. (Swami Kripalvanand, 1977)

Swami Rajarshi Muni, an eminent spiritual personality and a distinguished scholar in yoga has explained the meaning of *prāṇa* thus - *prāṇa* is the ‘vital life force’ which is contained in the air we breathe. The various descriptions about *prāṇa* given by the Indian scriptures – life principle, all the autonomous reflexes that preserve life, force behind nerve conduction and motor impulses – all these collectively indicate that *prāṇa* is vital to all the processes of life. (Swami Rajarshi Muni, 2011)

Understanding the role of the *prāṇa* assumes great importance for the subject under consideration, i.e. finding out the means that lead to the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind.

It is said that the mind is the master of the senses and the *prāṇa* (vital air) is the master of the mind. However, the *prāṇa* remains subservient to the mind until it is freed by a seeker, having learned the right technique of meditation under the guidance of an experienced guru. The releasing of the *prāṇa* energy from the control the mind is called *prāṇothhāna*. When this happens, a number of spontaneous activities take place in the body of the seeker during meditation. They do not have any connection with the mind as the seeker has already separated the mind from the body through the release of the *prāṇa*. Such a seeker watches the activities of the *prāṇa* as a mere witness. As the *prāṇa* is given the freedom to control the sense organs, it gradually makes them introvert. Introversion of the senses or withdrawal of the mind from the senses is the fifth stage in the *ashtāṅg yoga* system. This stage is known as *pratyāhāra*. It is important to note that *pratyāhāra* is considered to be the gateway to meditation or yoga. A seeker thus begins his spiritual journey by making the sense organs introvert. Once the seeker enters into the stage of *pratyāhāra*, the rest of the components of yoga- *āsana*, *prāṇayāma*, *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna* and *samādhi* are unfolded automatically in due course. (Swami Kripalvanand, 1977)

## CONCLUSION

Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind. *Abhyāsa* and *vairāgya* are the two means through which a state of mind, where it is free from all fluctuations can be attained. *Abhyāsa* is the constant and consistent practice of the eight steps of yoga. *Vairāgya* is detachment of all the senses from the sense objects. The first four stages of yoga, namely, *yama*, *niyama*, *āsana* and *prāṇayāma* can be practiced by any person. However, the later four stages, i.e. *pratyāhāra*, *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna* and *samādhi* can be practiced only after a seeker has received proper training from an adept guru and learns how to release the *prāṇa* from the control of the mind, which is called *prāṇothhāna*. Once *prāṇothhāna* happens, various activities happen spontaneously in the seeker’s body which enable the introversion of the senses, making the mind in turn introvert. With the introversion of the mind, it is moved away from the objects of the senses and with further practice, the mind steadily develops detachment towards all the material and scriptural allurements and attains *vairāgya*. As the seeker continues

on his spiritual journey of yoga, which in the true sense begins with the experience of *prāṇottāna*, the perfection of the other stages of yoga is achieved automatically in due course of time. Ultimately, as the *prāṇa* becomes stable, the mind also becomes stable and free from all fluctuations. Thus, the highest aim of yoga is reached through the means of *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya*, by using the tool of *prāṇa*.

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