

Meditation and Yoga in the West

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Abstract

This paper looks at distortions by the western world, on things such as yoga and meditation, assumptions about religion, traditions and culture, and further investigates whether the West could ever understand eastern ancient wisdom as it is, without distortions. In essence, depth psychology is spirituality. Therefore, whenever spiritual material is used in a loose sense or superficially, it loses its depth and we do not find the source of light and thus remain in the dark.

Key words: Contemplation, Meditation, Vedanta, Yoga

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Introduction:

Although a certain level of criticism is necessary for the correction and exploitation of potentials, this is not the purpose of this paper. It may appear critical sometimes, but that is only for the purpose of teasing out the differences. Another important point to notice here is that this paper is not about spirituality. It only seeks to investigate into the spiritual dimensions of the word 'Yoga' and 'Meditation' from old texts. For this reason it explores, on a very elementary level, the origin and differences of these words; discussing how meanings are misunderstood and misinterpreted; looking at distortion caused by such unbalance and the perceived outcome of this; also its impact and consequences. We might already have an idea of what Yoga is but, to understand it better, we have to know what it has become, as well as its roots and beginnings.

Human psychological growth includes – along with comfort and gratification in one's relationship with self, family, work and society – recognition of the yearning for meaning, purpose and transcendence of self-consciousness as part of our nature.

The scientific-minded and extrovert West appears to be struggling to understand the introvert nature and depth of the eastern heart. Opposites procreate new meanings, thus the possibility of a new language, culture and identity is emerging.

Meditation:

As stated in ancient scripture, existence consists of contradictions – it is vast enough to contain all contradictions – it consists of polar opposites. They appear to be opposites to the logical mind, but they are complementary deep down in reality. They exist together simultaneously. In this paper, the distortions caused by the West to the eastern spiritual

practices are explored. In addition, the outcomes of this and my concerns are discussed.

In English, 'meditation' has the flavor of 'reflection'. In English (Prabhavanand, 1957), there is no word that can be said to be the equivalent of *dhyana* or Zen, so the word 'meditation', which comes closest, is used. With the word 'meditation', the question arises 'On what?' because 'meditation' in the English language means meditating upon something. The words *dhyana* or Zen, however, simply mean emptying yourself of all thinking; it is not a question of meditating upon something. Meditation is without any effort. It is pure understanding, like watching, which is a natural capacity – you do not have to do it: effort will disturb the stillness and bring in the mind. No effort, no mind; it is a spontaneous awareness. Meditation (Ghanananda, 1972) is a state of absolute silence, of profound peace, of not thinking at all, but just being aware. Only in that awareness is it possible to see the truth.

In English, meditation is confused with concentration. In fact, concentration is only the beginning of meditation. Generally when we say concentration, it is what we practice, which in Sanskrit is known as *upasana*. The word *upasaka* means the one who gathers his mental energy and focuses on a particular object. The object of focus (deity) is *Upasyam*. The effort to concentrate upon the *upasyam*, by narrowing down your area of concern and concentrating on a particular object, is known as *upasana*. A stage comes where the *upasaka* disappears and the *upasyam* alone remains, meaning that the meditator completely merges into the object of meditation. In concentration, one is concentrating upon an object other than oneself and greater than oneself. The object of concentration should be greater than oneself; concentration on an object lower than oneself is not *upasana*, but becomes indulgence. Concentration is an aspect of meditation. In Tibetan it is known as gom, which means 'to

familiarize one's mind with the object'; that is, to familiarize oneself with the object of meditation time and again.

To understand concentration's subtle nature, it is possible to make comparison with how a certain part of our brain works. According to Swami Bodhananda (1995), there are two sides of our brain, known as the left and right hemispheres, which need to be balanced. The left side of the brain is the seat of reason and the right side of the brain is the seat of passion to do with emotions, unstructured thoughts and the unconscious. Reason may give us direction, but without passion there is no movement, no energy. When these two aspects (conscious and unconscious) are harmonized, it brings fulfillment in life. In short, concentration is the capacity to put your heart and soul into the moment's activity. It is putting your mind behind your limbs. It is an activity of exclusion. You exclude everything and focus upon a chosen thing.

The next step is contemplation. It can also be called introspection and reflection. When the mind and the sense organs are totally absorbed in an object, it is concentration. But behind the object are the sense organs. Behind the sense organs is the mind. Behind the mind there is something else continuously reflecting and illuminating all these activities. That is the *sakshi*, which means the witness of all these activities. According to Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, meditation is evolution in reverse. Meditation is a process of devolution. Beginning at the surface of life, the meditating mind goes inward, seeking always the cause behind the appearance, and then the cause behind the cause, until the innermost reality is reached.

Contemplation (Bodhananda, 1995) means to remain cut off from the object and the mind that is interacting with the object. In the word 'contemplation', *tem* means to cut off. *Temple* means a place where one can be cut off from the world. In Indian temples, people's shoes are removed before entering a temple, which means that by doing so, you remove your world

also; you leave it outside and remain cut off from the world, because you are in communion with the Lord. Contemplation means to remain detached from the object and the mind that is interacting with the object. Remaining in an attitude of witness-hood – *sakshibhava* – is contemplation, which means you do not completely forget yourself, or completely disappear into the act of concentration, but you know you have a higher depth: to remain identified with the light of consciousness, which illuminates the presence and the absence of the object, as well as the mind and its activities. It is the quality of standing apart from activity, yet remaining interested and engaged, then you have the depth of an ocean. Standing apart in terms of understanding and continuing to do everything known as detached activity is contemplation or detached concentration. It is the depth beyond the object and the mind. The quality of reflection and introspection is necessary. Real introspection is just allowing things to take place and happen without any interference or judgment. Non-judgmental witnessing of all happenings is contemplation, reflection or introspection.

From concentration one evolves into contemplation – creating, and leaving behind, a detached activity. It is in this state of detached concentration that true meditation is experienced. It is an experience of total collapse into the self.

According to *Vedānta* (Vivekananda, 1955), *Jñāna Yoga* (the path of knowledge) is practiced through two different means: contemplation and meditation. In the classical texts of *Vedānta*, the proper method for practicing contemplation and meditation is not described clearly, rather it is directly taught by the teacher to the student. Contemplation and meditation are complementary practices. Without contemplation, meditation becomes a mental exercise; without meditation, contemplation becomes mere imagination. With the help of contemplation a person comprehends reality intellectually, and with the help of meditation he experiences the reality

within. Through contemplation one comes to know and through meditation one comes to realize. Contemplation is a prerequisite for meditation, for unless one knows intellectually that there are higher levels of reality beyond mundane phenomena, one will not begin one's quest to experience those levels of reality.

The Vedāntic method (Tigunait, 1983) of contemplation is completely different from the western method of contemplation. In Vedāntic contemplation one reflects on the transitoriness, and hence ultimate invalidity, of the experiences of external objects and looks beyond the ever-changing phenomena of the world to search for that which is real. In contemplation, awareness of the highest goal of life – self-realisation – is always maintained. Questioning and analysis are the chief modes of Vedāntic contemplation. One has to use rigorous logic and close reasoning to realize the truth of the subject of contemplation. Faith and dedication are then employed to accept the truth, and strong determination is brought to bear to bring that truth into practice in daily life. Reliance on religious and theological concepts of God, and on the practice of rituals, is discouraged in *Vedānta*. Religious contemplation is viewed by *Vedānta* as a set pattern of thinking based on mere belief.

The above description of meditation shows that the word meditation, as used in the West, is not what *Dhyana* stands for in the East. It is made to look very shallow and thus has distorted the real meaning of *Dhyana* on many different levels.

If we go back to look at the difference in the meaning of words like faith, ego, intellect and austerity, it can be seen that such misunderstandings contribute enormously towards distortions of powerful esoteric words like meditation and Yoga.

Yoga:

Yoga is another word that has become very popular in the West, but it is totally

misunderstood and abused without hesitation. It is used commonly and loosely, and practiced like any physical exercise without any purposeful knowledge, depth or understanding. It is very sad to observe this happening; it is like eating the peel and throwing the fruit away. A lack of meaningful understanding of language and culture could be one of the main reasons behind this.

According to Ghanananda (1972), Yoga is a science. It is applied psychology. Yoga is the most practical school of Indian philosophy. The word Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, which means 'to unite'. It is the Sanskrit ancestor of the English word 'yoke'. Hence, it comes to mean a method of spiritual union. To achieve such union is to reach the state of perfect Yoga. Christianity has a corresponding term, 'the mystic union', which expresses a similar idea. The Yoga system provides a methodology for expanding one's individual consciousness to universal consciousness. There are various schools of Yoga; for example, *Bhakti* Yoga, *Jnāna* Yoga, Karma Yoga and *Kundalini* Yoga. It is quite a deep and vast subject, and it would not be possible or practical to discuss all these various approaches to Yoga here. This paper, therefore, focuses on the most comprehensive approach, known as the Patanjali Yoga Sutra. Patanjali was the first sage to systematise the philosophy and practice of Yoga. There are various commentaries on this text, *Vyāsa's* being the most ancient and profound. *Bhoja*, one of the classical commentators defines Patanjali's use of the word Yoga as 'an effort to separate the Atman (the Reality) from the non-Atman (the apparent)'. One who practices Yoga is called a Yogi.

The Yoga system is highly practical; it discusses the nature of mind, its modifications, impediments to growth, afflictions and the method for attaining the highest goal of life – *kaivalya* (absoluteness). Since this method is described in eight steps, it is also known as *Astānga* Yoga, the eightfold path.

According to Patanjali, Yoga (Prabhavanand, 1957) is the control of the modifications of the mind. He realized that it is the mind that leads a person to bondage or to liberation; that most human problems are mental and the only remedy to solve them is mental discipline. The mind is also the link between consciousness and the physical body. This is the reason that Patanjali places great emphasis on the study of the mind, and provides all the possible means to control its modifications and unfold its great power for higher attainment.

Theoretically, the system is based on the same tenets as *Samkhya* philosophy (Hiriyanna, 1949) and the teaching of *Vedānta*. In *Samkhya* philosophy, the mind is categorised into three functions or parts (lower mind, ego and intellect). But in *Vedānta* philosophy, the mind is divided into four parts (lower mind, ego, intellect and 'mind-stuff', or *chitta*, the storehouse of memories). In Yoga, however, the mind is studied holistically and the term *citta* is used to denote all the fluctuating and changing phenomena of the mind. According to Yoga, the mind is like a vast lake, on the surface of which arises many different kinds of waves. Deep within, the mind is always calm and tranquil, but one's thought patterns stir it into activity and prevent it from realizing its own true nature.

As stated in the *Patanjali Yoga Sutra* (Prabhavananda, 1957), these thought patterns are the waves appearing and disappearing on the surface of the lake of the mind. The more one is able to calm one's thought patterns, the more the inner state of the mind is unveiled. It is not very difficult to calm down the waves of thought patterns on the surface of the lake of the mind. But it is very difficult to calm down those unrhythmic and destructive waves of thought patterns that arise from the bottom. Memories are like time bombs buried in the lakebed of the mind that explode at certain times and disturb the entire lake.

There are two main sources for the thought waves arising (Prabhavananda, 1957): sense

perception and memories. Like lake water when it is still and clear, one can see deep down to the bottom of the lake. Similarly, when one's thought patterns are quietened, one's innermost hidden potentials within are also uncovered. Since the mind is composed of the elements of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, the relative proportions of these qualities determine the different states of *citta*, the mind. It is the interaction of these '*gunas*' that give rise to thought patterns.

In Yoga (Tigunait, 1983), the mind is described in five stages, depending on the degree of its transparency: disturbed (*ksipta*), stupefied (*mūḍha*), restless (*viksīpta*), one-pointed (*ekāgra*) and well-controlled (*niruddha*). The first three stages of mind are negative, and act as impediments in the path of growth and exploration. At this level, one experiences pain and misery, and all kinds of unpleasant emotions. But the next two stages are more calm and peaceful. All the modifications are found in the earlier three stages. In the one-pointed and well-controlled states, there are no modifications at all. In the one-pointed state of mind (*ekāgra*), there is a predominance of *sattva*, the light aspect of *Prakṛiti*. This is a tranquil state near to complete stillness, in which the real nature of things is revealed. This fourth state is conducive to concentration, and the aim of the Yoga system is to develop or to maintain this state of mind for as long and as consistently as possible. In the well-controlled state of mind (*niruddha*), there is no disturbance at all but only a pure manifestation of *sattvic* energy. In this state, consciousness reflects its purity and entirely in the mirror of mind, and one becomes capable of exploring one's true nature. Only the last two states of mind are positive and helpful for meditation, and many Yogic practices are designed to help attain these states. When all the modifications have ceased and the state of stillness is acquired, then *Purusa* (consciousness) sees its real nature reflecting from the screen of the mind.

The Yoga system (Ghanananda, 1972) categorized the modifications of mind into five classes: valid cognition, invalid cognition, verbal cognition, sleep and memory. All thoughts, emotions and mental behaviours fall into one of these five categories, which are further divided into two major types: those that cause afflictions (*klesha*) and those that do not cause afflictions (*aklesha*) are in themselves afflictions and they are harmful. Valid cognitions and memories are not considered to be causes of affliction, and are not harmful for meditation.

The sources of valid cognition (Tigunait, 1983) are perception, inference and authoritative testimony. False cognition is ignorance (*avidya*). Ignorance is an aspect of consciousness, a certain way of knowing, bearing in mind the contrast that opposes the penetrating view of primordial intelligence to the ignorant mind. Ignorance is mistaking the non-eternal for the eternal, the impure for the pure, misery for happiness and the non-self for the self. It is the modification of mind that is the mother of the *klesha* or affliction. Ignorance has a further four offshoots, known as I-am-ness, attachment, hatred/aversion and fear of death, which is the urge of self-preservation.

Verbal cognition is the attempt to grasp something that actually does not exist, but is one's own projection. Fantasies like Alice in Wonderland are mere verbal cognitions that do not correspond to the fact and only cause the mind to fluctuate, whereas sleep is a modification of mind in which one's relationship with the external world is cut off. But the dreaming and waking states are not accepted as modifications, since the dreaming state is occupied with verbal cognitions, and the waking state is occupied mainly with valid cognitions and invalid cognitions. Memory, the fifth and final mental modification, is the recall of impressions stored in the mind.

The modifications of the mind (Tigunait, 1983) are caused by impediments, namely sickness, incompetence, doubt, delusion and confusion.

These impediments disturb the mind and produce sorrow, restlessness and an unrhythmic breathing pattern. Yoga provides a method for overcoming these problems and controlling the modifications of the mind. Patanjali states that the mind and its modifications can be controlled through practice (*abhyāsa*) and detachment (*vairāgya*). *Abhyāsa* or practice means a particular type of effort or technique through which the mind maintains stillness. Perfection in practice is attained through sincerity and persistence. On the other hand, *Vairāgya* or detachment here does not mean withdrawing oneself from one's environment. Rather, it means to have no expectations from external world objects. Detachment means to eliminate identification with nature and to understand oneself as pure self, as a self-illuminating conscious being.

Patanjali (Prabhavanand, 1957) also describes another method, called *kriyā Yoga*, which means the Yoga of purification. It is a threefold discipline composed of the practice of austerity, study of scriptures and surrender to God. Patanjali Yoga is a highly scientific path and combines many different practices in a systematic way, through which one can develop voluntary control over one's body, desires, emotions, thoughts and the subtle impressions that lie dormant in the unconscious mind. The Yoga system provides many different methods to accommodate people of varying capacities and they are known as: Karma Yoga, *Bhakti* Yoga, *Jñāna* Yoga, *Kundalini* Yoga, Mantra Yoga and *Hatha* Yoga. According to *Patanjali* Yoga, the eightfold path (also known as *Astānga* Yoga) have the necessary qualities and conditions for reaching the subtler levels of consciousness, which eventually lead to realization of the highest state of consciousness.

Perhaps these esoteric traditions of the East need to be taken seriously and require deep, meaningful understanding in order to get the desired results. Adopting a narrow and shallow view will result in distortions. It can be argued that distortion is also a two-way process. It not

only devalues the ancient esoteric systems, but also misguides and confuses the practitioner by misinformation and, hence, one cannot be sure of getting the desired results. In some yoga and meditation classes in the West, people are not even given clear, proper instructions about sitting postures and what it means to be watchful of your breath (*prana*), and what the pros and cons are of these systems. Meditation and yoga systems demand intense training and discipline, and eventually this leads to integrate into being. This is the main purpose behind them: the total unfolding of human potential. Unfortunately, in the West these systems are mostly used as a method of doing something, like going to the gym or doing aerobics. In the West, meditation is mostly confused with concentration, and yoga is confused with stress management and fitness exercises. The East and West, in this regard, are different in many respects; they are the two opposite poles supporting the universe, but there is a unity in this diversity that is creative and positive. By honoring this difference, one can rejoice in the beauty it represents, instead of deforming it to suit our own comfort zone of a materialistic lifestyle.

Assumptions about Religions, Tradition and Culture:

All the eight major religions of the world are, without exception, of Asiatic origin. Evidence from several sources has revealed that a close relationship between Hinduism and Christianity does exist. There are many common features in the two religions. To start with, Christ and Krishna are worshipped as divine incarnations, whereas the founders of other religions are regarded as prophets or messengers of God. The climax in both religions is faith in the incarnation of God and both declare that God incarnates Himself in human form.

Despite such similarities, it can be argued that Hinduism is not properly understood in the West. There are many wrong assumptions and misconceptions about it. Hinduism (Vedic

tradition) is often confused with Buddhism, and eastern wisdom is always talked about in reference to Buddhism, whereas eastern wisdom is not contained in Buddhism but Buddhism is contained in eastern wisdom. Actually, Buddhism does not accept the authority of the Vedas, although the importance of direct experience (self-realization) is maintained even in Buddhism, together with many views held in the Vedas. Buddha, however, did not cite the Vedas as the authority for his views.

In Vedic traditions, religion is understood as the science of self-purification; it is a means to an end. The Sanskrit word for religion is *dharma*, which also means duty, one's duty towards oneself to realize one's full potential. The word (Tigunait, 1983) 'religion', therefore, represents the meaning that any technique by which man regains his original glory. In fact, the merger of the little self (ego) with the real Self (*Atma*) is the goal of religion. Hinduism as a religion means a way of life. Contrary to the view of westerners, it is free from rituals and superstitions, and is meant to bridge the gulf between humankind and God.

Similarly, eastern cultural traditions are very rich; sexuality has been an important part of eastern culture and religion. In India, men and women wear totally different costumes. They are different in every sense – in color, cutting and stitching; even in material used for them – unlike in the West, where we find both men and women wearing trousers. In the East, femininity is honored and admired, and is allowed to express itself in every sense. It is expressed in dress, in jewellery, in hairstyles and even in the toiletry and make-up used by women. But everything has a deep spiritual meaning behind it. For example, Indian women wearing a mark on their forehead in the middle of the eyebrows (known as *Bindi*) denotes the feminine wisdom that is the quality of the sixth chakra (energy centre) of *Kundalini* Yoga. Similarly, Henna is used for colorful decoration of young women, especially when they are courting or getting married. This has a very

deep spiritual meaning, which is associated with the universal principle of feminine and masculine creativity. A young woman's body adorned with the color of henna (*mehandi*) denotes *Prakriti* (feminine/anima) manifesting herself out of compassion for *Purusa* (masculine/animus). The purpose of the manifestation of *Prakriti* (feminine) is to show herself to *Purusa* (masculine), so that he can realize that he is distinct from her. It is a living example of Vedic man living a cosmic life, a universal principal expressing itself in its simplest form in our everyday life as woman and man.

These are only a few examples of the richness of culture and tradition in the East. One could cite many more examples, but the point being made here is that these traditions have lost their value and richness in the West. People use these things as fashion or part of their make-up. It can be argued that these traditions had a special effect on people when they were followed with a deep understanding of their meaning. Now they are there like a worthless piece of plastic. It seems that in the West these traditions are assumed to be part of a third-world country and not considered worth exploring in their real deeper sense, which again could then reveal their true meaning in the way it was experienced by ancient practitioners.

Conclusions:

In conclusion, I believe distortions can also be counter-productive. For instance, third-generation Asians in the United Kingdom have given birth to a new race. They call themselves British Asians. They gave themselves a new identity and have given rise to a new philosophy, culture and language. I also

realized, however, that it is not possible to translate anything without distortion, and it is even harder when translation is from a different culture and different language, as people do think culturally. Maybe it is nature's way of maintaining human evolution and creativity in constant flux.

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