

# Development of Yogic Tradition in Buddhism

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## Abstract

There is a strong yogic tradition in Buddhism which, for centuries, has been kept uninterruptedly and practiced according to the Buddha's teachings. Buddha himself was a great Yogi, disseminating yogic teachings for forty-five years. History shows that the main foundation upon which Buddha became enlightened was a combination of Hatha Yoga (physical practice) and Rāja Yoga (yoga philosophy). Yoga and Buddhism have same the spiritual root which focuses on inner practices to attain the highest wisdom through *Samādhi*. The Buddhist practitioner finds Yogic influences in Buddhist practices; likewise the Yogic practitioner will find elements of the Buddha Dharma in their practices. The present study is going to discuss yoga and its tradition, the importance of yoga to the Buddha, and how the yogic tradition was developed in Buddhism. Buddha's contribution to humanity is worthy of being called "The Yogic Teaching of the Buddha." If we take Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* and compare it with the Buddha Dharma we can see how the yogic tradition developed in Buddhism. The development of the Yogic tradition in Buddhism will continue to flourish as these two timeless traditions continue to provide both physical and philosophical techniques for practitioners to gain the ultimate goal of liberation.

**Key words:** Samādhi, Yoga, Buddhism, Tradition, Liberation

Article Received: 10-06-2016, Published: 30-08-2016

Conflict of interest: None declared

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**International Journal of Science and Consciousness (IJSC): a Bio-Psycho-Spiritual approach**  
Published by the Research Foundation for Science & Consciousness, Uttarakhand, India

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### Introduction:

There is a strong yogic tradition in Buddhism which, for centuries, has been kept uninterruptedly and practiced according to the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha himself was a great Yogi, disseminating yogic teachings for forty-five years. History shows that the main foundation upon which Buddha became enlightened was a combination of Hatha Yoga (physical practice) and Rāja Yoga (yoga philosophy), having been taught by six famous teachers before he became fully enlightened. It is fair to say that without Yoga, Buddha would never have attained the Highest Truth in his lifetime.

Buddha used yogic postures to meditate, and incorporated the yogic teachings in his lessons; furthermore, he attained Mahāparinirvāna using yogic postures as well. Buddhism owes a great debt of gratitude to the lineage of great sages and yogis who maintained and passed down the yogic tradition for thousands of years until it reached the Buddha. One of the great qualities of the yogic tradition is the freedom it provides the practitioners to question explore and have their own experience. Moreover, the tradition itself transforms as new insights, such as what the Buddha experienced, are incorporated into the practice. As a result, Buddha's teaching was embraced around the world and highly welcomed. The Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism and the Eight Limbs of the Path as idealized by Patañjali in his Yoga Sūtra have many similarities. Buddhism and Yoga together are a strong combination to enhance a practitioner's experience and quickly lead to the ultimate goal of Nirvāna.

Yoga and Buddhism have same spiritual root which focuses on inner practices to attain the highest wisdom through Samādhi. The Buddhist practitioner finds Yogic influences in Buddhist practices; likewise the Yogic practitioner will find elements of the Buddha Dharma in their practices. There are many noble yogis in

Buddhism such as Śāntaraksita, Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Milarepa, Atiśa, Nāgārjuna, Kumārajīva, and Padmasambhava, among others. There are yogic traditions continuously being practiced in the three major branches of Buddhism (Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna). The mysteries of yogic practice in Buddhism should be given credit as "Buddhist Yoga". The great Yogi the Buddha refined all the spiritual techniques and then presented them in a simplistic manner so every beginner could grasp the ultimate truth easily.

The present study is going to discuss yoga and its tradition, the importance of yoga to the Buddha, and how the yogic tradition was developed in Buddhism. Buddha's contribution to humanity is worthy of being called "The Yogic Teaching of the Buddha." The core of his teaching embraces Sila (Morality), Samādhi (Result of absorptions – attainments) and Prajñā (Wisdom), which are the three main principles of yoga included in the main sects of Buddhism. The essential purpose of Yoga is to overcome ignorance, which is perfectly matched with Buddha's teaching. "The whole aim of yoga is to dissipate this ignorance and to guide the yogi to what the Buddhist call right knowledge" (Evans, 22). As more Buddhist practitioners incorporate Hatha Yoga as a physical practice, in combination with Buddha's philosophy, the Yogic Tradition in Buddhism will continue to develop and grow.

### Review of Literature

In *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Mircea Eliade provides the broadest, deepest and most solid account of Yoga from its origins through the history of its development. Having done extensive research in India, and also being a yoga practitioner, Eliade is able to provide a deeply authentic central doctrine of Yoga theory from the major traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Tantrism, and even aboriginal yogic cultures. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* is a necessary piece of literature for any scholar who wishes to

arrive at a realistic understanding of Yoga techniques in Buddhism.

Georg Feuerstein, a world-renown scholar and a yoga master, has written an extensive work on the history, literature, philosophy and practice of Yoga, called *The Yoga Tradition*. This book is a historical preservation of the Yogic tradition and an outstanding reference work for any yoga scholar, researcher or practitioner. His chapter on Yoga in Buddhism provides great detail and depth on the history and rise of Buddhism, as well as a deep understanding of Buddha's teachings and philosophies.

S.N. Tandon, an accomplished master of both Pāli and Sanskrit languages, provides a thorough and concise comparison of Buddha's and Patañjali's doctrines in his book, *A Re-Appraisal of Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra*. In order to provide such detailed information on the similarities and differences between the two doctrines, Tandon was not only a master of the two languages, but also a highly learned Buddhist scholar. This book skillfully and clearly explains where and how Buddha's and Patañjali's works overlap.

### **Discussion**

The current research project focuses on areas not yet discussed in depth by other writers in this field. Several fine and accomplished scholars have written expansive histories of yoga and Buddhism, their traditions and their doctrines. However, it is difficult to find a complete and concise comparison of the two traditions: their similarities, their differences, where they overlap and how interdependent they are on each other. This is the intention of the current research.

### **The Yogic Tradition**

A tradition is a belief system that is handed down through generations to maintain a way of life following a certain set of laws, customs, rules, moral codes and ethics. The Yogic tradition claims to exist from the beginning of time; its origins can be traced all the way back to Hiranyagarba, scientifically referred to as the

big bang. It is also said that Yoga tradition originates with Lord Shiva, the Indian figure representing the creative aspect of the universal Supreme Being.

The yogic tradition is rich with teachings that were orally transmitted for many centuries. Many yogis and sages succeeded at liberation following the path of yoga. Sanatkumara, Sanakar, Sanadanar, Sananthanar, Sivayōgamuni, Vyagrapada, Tirumūlar, Agastya, and Vyāsa are a few of the greatest yogis in India who passed down the oral teachings until the Buddha's time.

Yoga, one of the schools of Indian philosophy, is a combination of mental and physical disciplines designed to develop the mind and body so that enlightenment, or liberation from suffering, may be achieved. It is a rising and an expansion of human consciousness through which one can purify perceptions and cognitions, and can also attain supernatural power. The great yogis and sages, working to understand the science of the body over thousands of years, discovered that the mind is directly affected by the body, and vice versa. So if both are in good condition one may attain enlightenment without any barrier. A body at peace creates a mind at peace. If the body is not at rest then the mind cannot be; therefore, they created the āsanās to provide certain effects in the body in order to produce an effect in the mind.

The word Yoga has its root in Sanskrit. Yuj is defined as union, yoke, method, effort and meditation. What is being united? There is Divine Energy (Paramātma) and Individual Energy (Ātma). When both of these merge together and there is no longer any sense of separation, union is achieved. All the sages and great masters in all the world's religions are practicing to achieve the goal of union with the divine power. According to the great scholar Evans-Wentz, "the essential purpose of Yoga is to overcome ignorance by becoming yoked to or attaining union with knowledge" (Evans, 39).

The Yoga Sūtra, the sacred text composed by Patañjali, summarizes the Yogic tradition's moral

code, ethics, rules and customs. Known as the Eight Limbs of the Path these guidelines lead a devoted practitioner to finding liberation from bondage and suffering. In brief, the eight limbs are as follows:

1. Universal Morality (Yāmas)
2. Personal Observances (Niyāmas)
3. Body Postures (Āsanas)
4. Breathing Exercises (Pranayāma)
5. Control of the Senses (Pratyahara)
6. Concentration and Cultivating Inner Awareness (Dhāraṇa)
7. Devotion, Meditation on the Divine (Dhyāna)
8. Union with the Divine (Samādhi)

Just as with any religious tradition, there are characteristics that identify a person of that tradition. Someone who is practicing yoga will be serene, calm, full of peace and compassion; in addition, the advanced practitioner will have a high degree of wisdom, that which is beyond knowledge. When a practitioner steps on the path of yoga, a determination arises within to continue to grow inner peace for the benefit of all living beings.

### **Buddha Following the Path of Yoga**

The well-known teacher Ālara Kālāma (hermit saint), a teacher of yogic meditation, taught the ascetic Gōtama meditation, especially a dhyānic state called the “sphere of nothingness”. Eventually ascetic Gōtama equaled to his teacher Ālara Kālāma, who could not teach him more, saying “You are the same as I am now, there is no difference between us. You could stay here and take my place to teach my students with me.” Ascetic Gōtama has no interest in staying with his teacher and left to look for another teacher recommended by Ālara Kālāma. The great teacher Uddaka Rāmaputta taught yoga to a young man, ascetic Gōtama. Through the yogic practices, ascetic Gōtama quickly gained the same level of achievement as his teacher, but was not satisfied that he had achieved the ultimate truth. Therefore, he left his yoga teacher in order to seek by himself. He was on the verge of giving

up because he was so weak from practicing for six years a high level of self-mortification, which at the time, was a key part of the yoga practice. He still had not found what he was seeking. Then, one day, he learned that to reach a goal, everything should be in moderation. He discovered that enlightenment could be attained not only through the extreme practices, but also through the way of moderation. After practicing moderation, within seven days he was fully enlightened.

“The Buddha had ‘awoken’ to a liberating insight into the nature of the human condition. By achieving this insight it is understood that very nature of Siddhārtha Gōtama had been radically changed...that he was no longer subject to continued death and rebirth in this world” (Skilton, 25). In Pāli, “Budh” means to wake up, perceive, to become aware. Buddha means “The Awakened One.” The main realization of a Buddha is to be released from the bondage of rebirth (samsara) and suffering (dukkha).

After the Buddha was enlightened, he continuously practiced for forty-nine days in deep meditation, to see the past, the future, and the present, as well as to understand the cosmos and the divine energy. These forty-nine days were his inner scientific research of the universe. Scientific research requires a step-by-step approach where 1) a problem is identified, 2) data is accumulated, 3) a hypothesis is formed, and 4) experiments are designed and conducted to test the hypothesis. The testing must establish a set of controls so that when results are achieved, the experiment can be repeated with all the same factors and yield the same result. Through his inner science (silence, meditation and contemplation), Buddha discovered The Four Noble Truths, which themselves are an embodiment of scientific research:

- 1) Define the problem: There is suffering
- 2) Accumulate the Data: Suffering is caused by ignorance
- 3) Form a hypothesis: Suffering can be overcome

4) Design experiments that test the hypothesis: Noble Eightfold Path is the solution to suffering.

The Noble Eightfold Path is an entire experiment which, when repeated with all the same factors in place, will yield the same result. The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path were Buddha's first contributions to the development of the Yogic Tradition in Buddhism. In order to further understand how Yoga and Buddhism are interrelated, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the Buddha's doctrine.

### The Four Noble Truths

1. There is Suffering ~ everyone suffers from birth, sickness, old age and death. Suffering comes in many ways, including being with people we dislike, being apart from those we love, not getting what we want, and encountering unavoidable problems and disappointments.
2. There is a Cause of Suffering ~ ignorance, craving/attachment, and greed are the fundamental human conditions which cause suffering.
3. Suffering can be Overcome ~ when ignorance, craving/attachment and greed are eliminated, the state of nirvāna is achieved and suffering ends.
4. There is a Way to End Suffering ~ the Noble Eightfold Path explains very simply and clearly how to overcome suffering.

### The Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path has eight specific techniques to practice, which are grouped into three virtues: Morality, Concentration and Wisdom.

#### Morality

1. Right Speech ~ speak kindly and respectfully, avoid harsh words, abstain from slanderous and false speech, refrain from idle chatter.

2. Right Action ~ non-violence, do not steal, avoid sexual misconduct, do good deeds, be generous, be kind towards others.

3. Right Livelihood ~ wealth should be acquired by legal means, peacefully, without trickery, in ways that will not cause harm or suffering for others.

#### Concentration

4. Right Effort ~ apply the right amount of energy to become wholesome and to eliminate unwholesome actions.

5. Right Mindfulness ~ apply the right concentration and awareness of moment to moment thoughts, feelings, body sensations and environment. Presence of mind, attentiveness and awareness.

6. Right Concentration (Samādhi) ~ meditation and development of focus and a wholesome state of mind.

#### Wisdom

7. Right View ~ understanding suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation. Accurate perception of life's situations.

8. Right Intention ~ intention of renunciation, good will, harmlessness.

Buddhism, in combination with the yogic tradition, can lead everyone to liberate oneself in one lifetime. In fact, after Buddha began to teach, thousands of people did liberate themselves from suffering.

### Yoga in Buddhism

Around 200 BCE to 200 CE, (approximately 300-400 years after the Buddha) Patañjali compiled the philosophy of yoga and wrote the Yoga Sūtra. This was the first time in all of the yogic tradition's history that the system was defined and organized in a concise way for practice. When Patañjali composed the Sūtra, he used many similar concepts and ideas from the Buddha's teachings, as well as some of the same terminology. Scholars today accept that Patañjali

did use Buddhism as an organizing principle for the Yoga Sūtra. David Frawley stated that Yoga and Buddhism are almost identical:

“We may want to combine their teachings or practices accordingly, as if there were no real differences between them. The differences that have existed between the two systems historically, which have kept them apart as separate traditions, are less obvious to us in the West than are their commonalities. Or those who study one of these traditions may be inclined to see the other as a borrowing from it. Those who study Buddhism may find so much similarity in Yoga that they suspect a strong Buddhist influence on Yoga. Those who study Yoga may find so much similarity in Buddhism that they see a strong yogic influence on Buddhism.”(Frawley).

If we take Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtra and compare it with the Buddha Dharma we can see how the yogic tradition developed in Buddhism. As we know, Patañjali was a compiler; he borrowed many teachings from Buddha and other great sages from before Buddha’s time, and even before Patañjali himself. S.N. Tandon did some research on the Yoga Sūtra and the Buddha Dharma. In the Yoga Sūtra many teachings and terms are similar to Buddhism. Tandon explains very clearly in his book “*A Re-Appraisal of the Yoga Sūtra*.”

- **Three Aspects of Suffering:**

Patañjali speaks of three aspects of suffering, viz. Parināma- dukkha (suffering due to mutation), tāpa-dukkha (suffering due to agony) and samskāra-dukkha (suffering due to subliminal impressions) (Yoga Sutra II.15).

The Buddha also spoke of three states of suffering, viz. viparināma-dukkhatā (suffering due to change), dukkha-dukkhatā (suffering due to pain), and samkhāra-dukkhatā (suffering due to latent impressions of past actions) (Samyutta Nikāya 45.165. 167). The Buddha’s dukkha-

dukkhatā and Patañjali’s tāpa-dukkha have the same connotation since the terms dukkha and tāpa are synonymous in the Sanskrit Literature. Both the Buddha and Patañjali have the same expression to signify the aspect of pleasant feelings turning into ‘suffering’ as a result of change taking place – the Buddha calls it ‘Viparināma-dukkhatā’ and Patañjali calls it ‘Parināma-dukkha.’

- **The Four Sublime States:**

According to the *Yoga Sūtra*, which uses Sanskrit language, the serenity of mind has been stated to arise from the cultivation of loving-kindness (maitrī), compassion (karunā), altruistic joy (muditā) and equanimity (upekshā) (Yoga Sūtra I. 33).

These same four qualities are in the same order and described by Buddha as Brahmavihāras (Sublime Abode). The names in Pāli language are mettā, karunā, muditā, and upekshā.

- **The Four Divisions of Yoga:**

There are four divisions of Yoga (yogavyūha), viz., the suffering, its cause, its cessation and the means of cessation. These have been termed heya, heyahetu, hāna and hānopāya, respectively (Yoga Sūtra II 16, 17, 25, 26).

This division follows the pattern of the Four Noble Truths (ariya-sacca) enunciated by the Buddha. These are the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering. The terms used for these are: dukkha, dukkha-samudaya, dukkha-nirodha and dukkhanirodha-gāminī patipadā.

Parallel to the expression hāna (cessation of suffering) used by Patañjali, the word frequently used in Buddhism is pahāna, e.g., pahānam kamasannanam while the word hāna is used as a part of compound words, e.g., hānabhagiya sanna.

- **Abstention: The First Limb of Yoga:**

The first of the eight limbs of Yoga is called yamā (Abstentions). These comprise abstention from injury (ahimsā), falsehood (satya), theft (asteya), incontinence (abrahmacarya) and possessing things (aparigraha) (Yoga Sūtra II. 30).

Three divisions of the Noble Eightfold Path known as sammā-kammanto, sammā-vācā and sammā-sankappo (i.e., Right Bodily Action, Right Speech and Right Thought) recommend all the above and a few more (Vibanga, 4.1.9).

It is very clear that when Patañjali undertook to compose the Yoga Sūtra the public mind at the time was under considerable influence from the Buddha's teaching. Therefore, as Patañjali was composing the Sūtra, he incorporated the essential practices which were prominent at this time. There are many more similarities between Buddha's teaching and the Yoga Sūtra, and they are worthy of much more in depth exploration.

After the Buddha attained Mahāparinibbāna, there were other junior yogis (Vasubhandu and Asanga) who continued teaching Buddha's philosophy and developed the Yogācāra Philosophy (Mahāyāna Buddhism) in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. This involves meditation to develop the mind with various practices, along with spiritual yogic exercises. Furthermore, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhaghōsa wrote Visuddhimagga, a unique consolidation and distillation of the Buddha's teachings. Buddhaghōsa took all the essential teachings from the Tripitaka and compiled what could rightfully be described as the Buddhist Yoga Sūtra, a concise and beautiful document, which makes Buddha's teaching available to everyone.

### **Conclusion:**

Yoga and Buddhism are two of the world's great spiritual traditions. Both arose in India, and are from the same Yogic spiritual root. Moreover, both hold as the goal to attain the highest wisdom through Samādhi. The greatest Buddhist Yogi is, of course, the Buddha himself, who was

able to take the teachings from the Yogic tradition and, with new insights, attain the ultimate goal. The central piece of this insight, that of moderation, distinguishes the special nature of Buddhist Yoga; it is based on one of the most important reforms initiated by Gōtama Buddha in the spiritual practice of ancient yoga (Cleary, 8).

As a tradition, Yoga dates back to the beginning of time, and today is becoming one of the most popular spiritual practices. Its fundamental teachings underlie all the world's religions, as they are the basics of being a good human being. It was all of the thousands of years of yoga's tradition and history that brought Buddha far enough to see the next and final step that could truly bring Buddhahood to all living beings. Buddhism developed as a result of the Yogic tradition.

After Buddha, the yogic teachings were shaped and refined. Great credit must be given to Patañjali for the Yoga Sūtra, a systematic treatise, using only 677 words in 194 aphorisms. Buddhaghōsa also deserves great appreciation for the Visuddhimagga, which is a systematic encyclopedia of Buddhist doctrine.

While there is not a strong foundation of physical practice in the majority of Buddhism, more and more practitioners are including physical exercises to develop a healthy body and mind. The development of the Yogic tradition in Buddhism will continue to flourish as these two timeless traditions continue to provide both physical and philosophical techniques for practitioners to gain the ultimate goal of liberation.

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**Cite this paper as: Muniandy, N. (2016). Development of Yogic Tradition in Buddhism. *International Journal of Science and Consciousness*; 2(3): 13- 20.**