What is Yoga Psychology and Where Does It Stand in Contemporary Psychology?

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Abstract
While Yoga has spread across the world, its image as a system of calisthenics has played up the physical aspect of Patañjali’s eightfold strategy, while pushing its core as a system of psychology out of sight. The purpose of this article is to briefly explain what makes Patañjali’s Yoga a system of theory and application of psychological principles, and to suggest where this system stands in relation to the major trends of contemporary psychology. After presenting a brief overview of the concepts and techniques of Yoga psychology, comments are made to indicate where Yoga psychology stands in relation to Skinner’s radical behaviourism, the mainstream of contemporary psychology, cognitive psychology, Freudian psychoanalysis and transpersonal psychology.

Keywords
Patañjali, yoga psychology, self-transcendence

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There are numerous popular books on Yoga on the shelves of bookstores today, which display pretty bodies in complex postures. The image of Yoga such books present is that doing yoga will help the reader in developing a healthy, shapely and beautiful body. The proliferation of Yoga ‘studios’ across many cities of the world work mostly like a gym where you can go for exercise to ensure fitness—and maybe some well-being. At the same time, there is practically an international research ‘industry’, which is devoted to testing the health benefits of a variety of postures and breathing exercises. Such research is so widespread that one of the review articles refers to some 500 research articles, many of them using randomised controlled trials—the gold standard to medical research (Cramer et al., 2014). While the cumulation of such research does, indeed, help in spreading the already increasing popularity of Yoga worldwide, the fact that the core of Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtras deals with the mind is lost sight of. Against this background, in this article, I will, first, present a brief introduction to Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtras, with a focus on the psychological concepts and techniques designed for controlling the processes of mind, which form the core of Yoga psychology. This is followed by a brief discussion on where Yoga psychology stands in relation to major trends in contemporary psychology.

A Brief Overview of Yoga Psychology

Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtras is a short treatise, which presents the concepts and techniques of Yoga in a mere 195 aphorisms—brief statements—some of which are as short as only two words. The precise date of its composition is unknown; it is said to be composed sometime before the end of the 2nd century BCE. Patañjali did not invent Yoga; it was already established for a long time before Patañjali. Gautam Buddha, we are told, had practised Yoga for many years, which means that the tradition of Yoga goes well before the 6th century before the beginning of the Common Era. Patañjali is said to have presented a ‘to do’ manual based on the practices, which were already well established. The antiquity of Yoga is not a major issue to speak of; what is important is that Yoga is a living tradition, which continues till this date. Since the aphorisms are too short, they need to be explained to help make clear sense. The first most authentic and dependable task of explaining the aphorisms was done by Vyāsa around the 1st century CE. Vyāsa’s commentary is indispensable for understanding Patañjali, and his work is the basis for
several major commentaries that have followed: by Vācaspati Miśra (9th century), Raja Bhoja (11th century), Bhikṣu (ca. 1550) and Bhatta (ca. 1775) to name just a few important ones. The tradition has continued in the 20th century, with important contributions by Āraṇya (1869–1947), Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), both of whom were practising yogis. The books by the philosopher Dasgupta (1973; 2001) provide a valuable source explaining the Yoga system in English. Another illustrious name in this tradition is Krishnamacharya, a yoga guru who taught such illustrious yoga teachers as BKS Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois and TKV Desikachar. The technique of Transcendental Meditation devised by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008) is an example of continuing innovation following the lead of Patañjali, while Sudarshan Kriya devised by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is a most recent example of the continuation of the Yogic tradition till this date.

For all the innovations and interpretations, Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtras continue to provide a perpetual source of inspiration and the basic framework for Yoga. As is widely known, Patañjali presents an eightfold (aṣṭāṅga) path of Yoga. The eight ‘limbs’ involve the following:

1. **Yama**: a set of behavioural *restraints* such as non-violence, avoidance of telling lies, etc.,
2. **Niyama**: a set of *observances*, such as cleanliness, cultivation of a sense of contentment, ascetic practices, Self-study and surrendering fruits of action to God,
3. **Āsana**: a steady and comfortable *posture*,
4. **Prāṇāyāma**: breath control,
5. **Pratyāhāra**: withdrawing of attention from objects of the senses,
6. **Dhārṇā**: restricting the range of attention or concentration,
7. **Dhyāna**: sustaining attention for a length of time, or contemplation and
8. **Samādhi**: a graded series of increasingly *higher states of consciousness*.

The reason to translate the term *aṅga* (in aṣṭāṅga) as ‘limb’ is that the list of aforementioned eight items form an integral whole composed of interdependent aspects rather than simply parts or steps to follow in sequence. Thus, the first two ‘limbs’ basically involve ethical guidelines for behaviour, which must be followed throughout life; they are not initial steps to be completed before starting the rest. Quite often, people start the practice of Yoga with postures (āsanas), which involve the third in the list of eight limbs. But to do so without regard to the ethical
practices prescribed in the first two ‘limbs’ does not make a lot of sense. Patañjali suggests only that the posture one adopts should be stable (*sthira*) and comfortable (*sukha*) without even naming the various types of postures. The development of many complex postures as well as various breathing techniques (*prāṇāyāma*) have been devised mainly in the tradition of what is called the Haṭha Yoga, which is essentially a derivative in the long and still-evolving tradition of Yoga at large. Thus, while the first two ‘limbs’ involve guidelines for ethical conduct, the next two involve the physical aspects of Yoga. The first four ‘limbs’ taken together are basically preparatory for the remainder four ‘limbs’, which are entirely in the domain of the mind. Indeed, the first four are called the ‘external’ features (*bahiranga*) of Yoga, while the inner core (*antarāṅga*) belongs to the mental sphere.

Patañjali starts his treatise saying ‘now begins the instruction (*anuśāsanam*) on yoga’, indicating his emphasis on practice. In the very next aphorism, he declares that the purpose of Yoga is the cessation of the mental process (*citta vṛtti nirodhah*). The concept of *citta vṛtti* essentially involves two elements—first, *citta* meaning mind and, second, *vṛtti* meaning processes. Mental processes involved in this context include a wide range of cognitive processes like those of thinking as well as imagining, doubting, inquiring, deciding, dreaming etc. In effect, this concept is very closely equivalent to William James’ view of ‘Thinking’ or Descartes’s idea of cogito. Vyāsa, the first and foremost commentator of the Yoga aphorisms, speaks of *citta nadiḥ*, which literally means ‘mind-river’, thus recognising the flowing character of mental processes. This would remind us of what William James called the ‘stream of thought’. To put it simply, the central task of Yoga is to slow down the flow of thoughts to the point that it comes to a near stop. To accomplish this, the first thing one needs to do is to withdraw attention, which is normally directed to the world of objects in the environment and turn it ‘inside’, gazing at the inner world of thoughts. This is what Patañjali means by *pratyāhāra*, which is the fifth ‘limb’ of his eight ‘limbs’, and the first step in the *inner core* of Yoga comprising of the last four ‘limbs’.

Students of psychology would quickly recognise that this manoeuvre called *pratyāhāra* is pretty much the same as ‘introspection’—the technique with which Wundt started with while founding the modern phase of Western psychology. As can be easily seen, generations of psychology students have been told almost from the start of the first course in psychology that, as Watson (1913) declared back in 1913, the
method of introspection does not work; it is null and void. Watson based this conclusion on the fact that followers of Wundt in Germany and others like Titchener in the USA could not agree on the nature and number of the elements of consciousness. Against this background, it is likely that for many contemporary students of psychology, who have been trained in the reasons behind the behaviourist revolution started by Watson, Yoga would be a false enterprise as it asks us to use the failed methodology of introspection. At this point, it is necessary to look back into the history of introspection, which has been well charted by Boring (1953) and by Bakan (1954). Without going into the details of the history of introspection, a few observations can be made about introspection as conducted in the laboratories of Wundt’s followers in Germany and the USA.

The origin of the idea of the elements of consciousness can be traced back to the ideas of Locke (1959), who followed the distinction his friend Robert Boyle had made between chemical elements, which combine to form compounds. Locke drew an analogy between the physical and mental domains to suggest that there are ‘simple ideas’, which are elements of consciousness derived from sensation that form ‘complex ideas’. Following this lead, James and John Stuart Mill conceived of mental chemistry in which laws of combining simple ideas into complex ideas could be discovered. Against this background, Wundtian view of search for the elements of consciousness involved observing and analysing the contents of conscious experience. While commenting on the Wundtian method of introspection, James (1983, p. 188) quotes Auguste Comte who had pointed out that ‘the thinker cannot divide himself into two, of whom one reasons while the other observes him reason’ (p. 188).

As noted by Boring (1953), a subject of an experiment could not hold onto the content of a thought flashed through his mind in a fraction of a second to describe and analyse it as the mind quickly moves onto the next thought and then on the next thought, etc. And if the subject chose to look back at the contents of the thought that had receded rapidly into the past, such ‘retrospection’ creates a problem with the fading of its memory. As Boring (1953) aptly put it: ‘It could take twenty minutes to describe the conscious content of a second and a half and at the end of that period the observer was cudgelling his brain to recall what had actually happened more than a thousand seconds ago, relying, of course, on inference’ (p. 174). A careful look at the Yoga Sūtras shows that like Comte who came a couple millennia after him, Patañjali had noted the
difficulty in dividing a thought between two parts where one observes and the other keeps thinking (Patañjali, 4.20). He had also recognised that retrospection results into an infinite regress (atiprasaṁgaḥ), where each new thought chases its previous thoughts in an unending chase. Patañjali also noted that this situation leads to a problem with memories (Patañjali, 4.21) even as Boring notes in his history of introspection.

Having thus recognised such problems with introspection and retrospection, Patañjali followed his forebears in adopting a very different approach in dealing with the mind. Instead of trying to observe and analyse the contents of consciousness, the yogis devised a method of controlling the flow of the processes of thinking and imagining so as to first slow down and then bring the flow to a stop. Patañjali (1.12) suggests means for bringing thought processes to a stop: first, relentless effort (abhyāsa) and second, the cultivation of dispassion (vairāgya). Relentless effort as intended in this strategy is a long-term undertaking. One tries and tries till one succeeds, no matter how long—may be years or decades—this might take. This is unlike the Wundtian introspectionists, most commonly graduate students, who could hardly be expected to devote that kind of effort for conducting a laboratory experiment for earning a degree. The cultivation of dispassion is, similarly, a long-term enterprise; it mainly involves curbing the demands of desires, which tend to arise relentlessly and endlessly. Aside from such long-term strategies, Patañjali proposes a practical course of action called Kriya Yoga, which deserves an explanation.

There are three parts of Kriya Yoga: (a) undertaking some austerities (tapas); (b) self-study (svādhyāya) and (c) surrendering fruits of one’s actions to God. Of these, the austerities involve voluntarily chosen restrictions about what, when and how much to eat, or choosing something pleasurable to avoid like drinking or accepting something rather unpleasant like sustaining cold temperatures for determined period of time. Such austerities are common part of religious rituals, like the rule to refrain from eating through days during the month of Ramadan among observant Muslims. To put it briefly, the main purpose of austerities is to cultivate self-control. What is meant by self-study, the second component of Kriya Yoga, is serious critical self-examination. Patañjali and his commentators make it clear that self-study may involve the study of texts that discuss the nature of selfhood, especially the nature of transcendental Self, which are a forte of the spiritual path of knowledge (Jñāna Yoga) adopted by the Advaita system. The third part implies two things: first, the idea of God, which is at the core of the path of devotion
(Bhakti Yoga), and the path of action (Karma Yoga) as described in the Bhagavad Gita, which asks an aspirant to pursue duties appropriate to one’s station in society (svadharma) without expectation of reward. In effect, what the Kiya Yoga means is a combination of three paths (mārga) to spiritual uplift, namely Jñāna-, Bhakti-, and Karma Yogas. To put it differently, although the specific path to Self-realisation, which Patañjali describes in his Yoga Sūtras, has concentrative meditation (Dhyāna) at its core, he does not demand exclusive adherence to his doctrines or techniques. Rather, he recommends a pluralist, or better still a syncretic, approach.

The practice of meditation begins after an aspirant has followed Āsana and Prāṇāyāma, and Pratyāhāra, the third, fourth and fifth ‘limbs’ of Patañjali’s eightfold (aṣṭāṅga) path of what has been variously called Dhyāna Yoga or Rāja Yoga. In other words, the aspirant is ready to move on after she/he has followed ethical guidelines, mastered the practice of sitting in a stable and comfortable posture (āsana) and has learnt basic techniques of breath regulation (prāṇāyāma), which are said to help in controlling mental processes, and has then withdrawn attention inward. At this point, the aspirant goes on to the sixth ‘limb’ called Dhāranā, which requires her/him to focus attention onto a restricted ‘region’, meaning either a specific spot like the tip of the nose or an object like picture of one’s favoured deity, or it could be a particular theme or idea like a cow. In other words, the first step in concentrative meditation involves restricting the range of the mind jumping from one topic to another topic or from one thought to another—a process which Freud called ‘free association’. The next, seventh ‘limb’ called Dhyāna requires an aspirant to focus on a single object of thought for a sustained period of time. Once this is accomplished, the yogic aspirant is ready for the last and eighth ‘limb’ called Samādhi, which involves a series of increasingly higher levels of consciousness.

The traditional literature, particularly the commentaries of Vyāsa, Vācaspati Miśra and Vijñāna Bhikṣu, describe and discuss, in detail, the nature of the transformation of ordinary wakeful consciousness to the highest level of Samādhi. There are also writings of modern and some contemporary authors (e.g., Bryant, 2016; Koelman, 1970), but many of them remain within such fields as indological or religious studies, and they commonly remain within the conceptual framework of Yoga, interpreted in Sanskrit terminology, which is not comprehensible to many readers. Interpreting traditional accounts of the stages of Samādhi in the language and idiom of contemporary psychology is a stiff challenge.
that cannot be properly handled in a short article like the present one. Yet a general impression from reading the available literature can be presented. It is fairly clear that the traditional sources deal with the cognitive content of the most singularly focused thought at very high level of concentration, which is the starting point of the yogi’s journey through the increasingly higher levels of Samādhi. One way to describe the progression from this point on is to view it as a successive deletion of the cognitive content. Let us take the example of cow as an object to meditate upon. First, the associative meanings like ‘this cow is of the variety X, and I expect it will give me N liters of milk daily’ are dropped off. Then, the connotative meanings like ‘a cow is a sacred animal’, or meanings derived from the existing ‘scientific’ knowledge (āgama2) are dropped off, leaving the denotative meaning ‘this is a cow’ represented by the word cow, which is imposed on the perceptual image of the object cow. Here onward, the perceptual image of the whole object cow is gradually stripped from its spatial context so that only the sensory experience on which the perceptual image remains. Then, even the sensory content is dropped off, and the yogi’s experience becomes totally devoid of content, cognitive as well as sensory. It is in this contentless consciousness that the real Self (Puruṣa) is said to be directly apprehended. This is a moment of Self-realisation.

Here, we may ask ‘So, what?’ A short answer to such a question is that, as Patañjali clearly recognises, one’s image of the self is commonly identified with the ongoing thought. As William James put it, the common experience is that the “‘Thought’—a cognitive phenomenal event in time is . . . itself the only Thinker which the facts require’ (James, 1983, p. 349). But according to Patañjali, when the mind is emptied of all cognitive phenomenal content, the Self revealed through the experience of the unchanging backdrop of pure awareness—although, otherwise, the self is identified with the ongoing thought (vrttisārūpyam itaratra). The implication and consequence of this insight is that, while in ordinary cognitive consciousness one is emotionally tossed up and down, depending on the emotive content of the ongoing thought, the identity of the Self-realised person gets grounded in an unchanging backdrop of the ‘I’. As a result, the Self-realised person remains in a serene and deeply peaceful state of mind undisturbed by emotional ups and downs. In other words, suffering ends.

Here, one may ask: ‘But what is the evidence for such a claim?’ In his commentary on Yoga Sūtras (3.6), Vyāsa affirms that the knowledge of Yoga (or evidence about it) can be obtained by actually practising Yoga
(yoga yogena jñātavyo). The thrust of this is not much different from that of a scientist who would say ‘do the experiment exactly as I describe, and you will get the same results as I got after doing the experiment’.

Placing Yoga Psychology in Relation to Major Trends in Contemporary Psychology

Skinner’s Radical Behaviourism

Since Watson (1913) launched the behaviourist revolution in 1913, varied forms of behaviourist psychology have resulted, and its basic tenets have been absorbed across the spectrum of mini-theories and investigative practices in what is called the ‘mainstream’ of psychology. We shall return to the mainstream later in this article. Skinner’s radical behaviourism, on the other hand, has retained a distinctive character with its principles fairly clearly defined in the many writings of Skinner (1974), including About behaviourism (1974) in particular. As I have argued in some detail elsewhere (Paranjpe, 2019), the principles of radical behaviourism stand in sharp contrast with those of Patañjali’s Yoga. Since Skinner’s views are fully documented in the paper just mentioned, I would refrain from using the limited space available for this article to provide exact references to Skinner’s many publications and showing which of his principles stand in sharp contrast with those of Yoga.

The first instance of sharp contrast between them involves the fact that, while Patañjali strongly affirms the experience of a transcendental Self and suggests methodology for its discovery, Skinner equally firmly denies that there is anything called the Self. Skinner insists that his is a psychology of the ‘other one’; as scientists, we can observe and control others by manipulating the environment; there is no such thing as psychology of the Self. While Patañjali emphasises contentless ‘pure’ consciousness as a fundamental principle of reality, for Skinner, what exists is only matter in motion; he pooh-poohs the concept of mind by repeatedly mentioning ‘mentalism’ as an epithet with scorn. For Skinner, all behaviour is strictly determined by influences from the environment; the agentic function of human beings is a chimera (Skinner, 1971). Accordingly to change oneself one must change one’s environment. Patañjali’s position on the issue of control is quite the opposite—the core of Yoga is self-control. One can voluntarily undertake to be guided by
moral principles of conduct, start controlling one’s behaviour with the practice of self-chosen austerities and ultimately bring all the mental processes to a full stop through the practice of mind control.

Notwithstanding the highly contrasting basic principles of Yoga and radical behaviourism, quite ironically, there is an unsuspected convergence. Thus, in his autobiography, Skinner (1983, p. 408) maintains that the denial of self would mean that a person can become selfless like Thomas a Kempis, a medieval Christian monk, whose behaviour completely lacked selfishness. This view of the consequences of the denial of self is ironically similar to Patañjali’s psychology of the Self, since the yogi who attains Self-realisation through the successful practice of Yoga dissolves her/his ego and thereby manifests completely selfless behaviour like that of a saint.

The Mainstream of Psychology

Notwithstanding the highly diverse nature of contemporary psychology lacking a unified field like that of a Kuhnian paradigm, certain common features of the so-called ‘mainstream’ have been noted (Tart, 1983; Toomela, 2014). In the light of these and other related articles, I will presently identify certain characteristics with focus on those that tend to militate against Yoga psychology.

There is a common anti-philosophical stance in contemporary psychology, which has its origin in the emergence of modern psychology as a rebel child of the mother discipline of philosophy. For whatever reasons, in the colonial educational system, Yoga was included as a system of philosophy to the total neglect of its psychological significance. So, when modern psychology was introduced in Indian universities, the then-established perception of Yoga as a system of philosophy militated against modern psychology’s anti-philosophical stance. There are certain salient features of the mainstream of psychology that follow from the emergence of modern psychology following the mode of natural sciences. As in the natural sciences, the emphasis in the mainstream of psychology has been on discovering universal laws that hold across history and geography. In the early days of behaviourism, for instance, the laws of learning were thought to apply not only to all humans everywhere and at all times but also to animals. The emphasis on hypothesis testing often implies that hypotheses are potential statements of universal laws. The practice of hypothesis testing silently begets a
universalist stance. The implication of this is that like physics, the ‘science’ psychology admits no regional variations; therefore, a distinctly Indian approach to psychology is ruled out by fiat.

There is another implicit assumption that prevails in the mainstream of contemporary psychology: the presumed validity of Auguste Comte’s Law of the Three Stages of the development of knowledge. This Law states that every field of knowledge goes through three successive stages, namely theological, metaphysical and ‘positive’ or scientific, such that each successive stage is said to be superior to the previous stages. Thus, the ‘science’ of psychology is unquestionably superior to philosophy, it suggests. This trajectory of the development of knowledge is drawn further with the assumption that science continues to develop in a linear fashion such that the later developments turn earlier developments obsolete. This assumption was often translated in the course of training in psychology over generations of students; they were told not to list more than say five references to old sources; most cited articles must be from recent journal articles. Given this tendency, the ancient roots of Yoga imply a strike against Yoga psychology. Another implication of the view of the universalist view is that the currently dominating American brand of psychology is itself a regional variation, while ignoring the fact that several European and Canadian psychologists have pointed out how some of its generalisations do not apply to their societies. Danziger (1990), for instance, has shown how educational testing has been developed in Germany, primarily as a tool for teachers to identify individual students who need special attention, while, in the USA, tests were used mainly by educational administrators to make financial decisions about teachers’ salaries and school funding.

The overemphasis on methodology is another feature of the mainstream of psychology. Danziger (1990) has labelled this tendency ‘methodolatry’—term fashioned after ‘idolatry’. Accordingly, students of psychology tend to first find a test with which to start collecting data rather than think first of an issue worth studying and then look for methods appropriate to investigate into the chosen subject matter. By and large, the tests focus on trait-like features of individuals. There is a great emphasis on individual differences to the neglect of focus on individuals as such. Consequently, there is very little in contemporary psychology about what can be done to help interested individuals in their moral or spiritual development. The overall popularity of psychology as a ‘value-free’ science dominates despite the inroads of values and ethics through the contributions by Piaget and Kohlberg in devising methods to study
moral development. In contrast, Yoga psychology is unabashedly value-loaded; as applied psychology, it is clearly aimed at spiritual and moral development.

Like the dislike for philosophy, there is a widespread disdain for religion and spirituality in mainstream psychology. The perceived connection of Yoga with Hinduism exacerbates the prejudice against Yoga. It is as if psychology’s interest in religion started and ended with William James’ publication of his *Varieties of religious experience* back in 1902. After a century of neglect, psychology of religion and spirituality has only recently emerged as an area of interest in the USA, with a separate division of the American Psychological Association (APA) along with an official journal of its own. Indeed, the profusion of empirical methods developed in contemporary psychology can be meaningfully used to study religious behaviour. Against this background of neglect, a recent social psychological study of the mammoth religious gathering in the Magh Mela at Allahabad is a fresh breath of air (Hopkins et al., 2015). Hopefully, empirical studies in the field of Yoga psychology will follow, shedding all the prejudices against the same.

Cognitive Psychology

The ‘cognitive revolution’, which emerged in American psychology from the 1950s through the 1970s, was often viewed as countering the dominance of behaviourism in psychology. Over the decades since the beginning of the cognitive revolution, two distinct trends have emerged within the field of cognitive psychology. One is the trend, where the constructivist view of cognition dominates, following the contributions of Piaget, Vygotsky, George Kelly, Ulrich Neisser and others. A more specific aspect in this trend is cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) guided by the contributions of Aaron T. Beck and others (see Beck & Dozois, 2014). In a general way, the therapeutic techniques developed in CBT tend to devise ways for reconstructing the patient’s view of self and environmental reality from a less to more adaptive format. In contrast to the constructivist view of cognition, there is a flourishing field of Cognitive Science. Within this field, there are two discernible trends: In one trend, human beings are thought of as advanced computers, and computer modelling is used to understand the nature of cognition. In another trend, brain and its tissues are viewed as the instrument of cognition, and focus is on neurological studies of cognitive processes.
Against this background, Yoga psychology may be viewed as generally allied with the constructivist approach to cognition. In Yoga psychology of Patañjali, cognition (prjñā) is viewed as an integral part of the ordinary wakeful state of consciousness. A constructivist view of cognition is implicit in Patañjali’s conceptual framework. Such an implication is clearly seen in Patañjali’s view of the progression through the various stages of Samādhi, where cognitive content is gradually reduced step by step such that associative and connotative meanings are dropped from consciousness along with their sensory foundations, ultimately leading to an awareness empty of content. To put it in Piagetian terms, it is as if layers of cognitive development going from sensory–motor intelligence through concrete and formal operations are peeled off layer by layer, going in a direction opposite to that of the normal course of cognitive development. Thus, techniques of Yoga psychology may be viewed as presenting a way of cognitive deconstruction in contrast with cognitive reconstruction involved in CBT. Further, self-study (svādhyāya) part of Kriya Yoga Patañjali, in effect, recommends the strategy of the Advaita system, in which, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Paranjpe, 1998), critical self-examination essentially leads to a cognitive deconstruction of the ego.

**Psychoanalysis**

Within the limited scope of the present article, it is possible to focus only on Freud as it is impossible to deal with a wide proliferation of variations of psychoanalysis through the work of Adler, Jung, Melanie Klein, Kohut, Winnicott, Lacan and many others. When it comes to placing Yoga psychology in relation to Freud, this is relatively easy since Freud has explicitly referred to Yoga in his writings.

In *Civilization and its discontents* Freud (1930) says:

> Another friend of mine, whose insatiable craving for knowledge has led him to make the most unusual experiments and has ended by giving him encyclopedic knowledge, has assured me that through the practices of Yoga, by withdrawing from the world, by fixing the attention on bodily functions and by peculiar methods of breathing, one can in fact evoke new sensations and coenaesthesias in oneself, which he regards as regressions to primordial states of mind which have long ago been overlaid. He sees in them a physiological basis, as it were, of much of the wisdom of mysticism. (p. 72)
As is well known, the friend Freud was talking about was Romain Rolland, a Nobel Prize–winning French author who was familiar with the writings of Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Rolland had written to Freud about ‘Oceanic feeling’—an experience of something limitless that mystics in higher states of consciousness are said to attain. About this, Freud wrote: ‘I cannot discover the ‘oceanic’ feeling myself. It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings’ (p. 65). Strongly committed to the world view of science, Freud often denigrated religion and mysticism. But there was something more to Freud’s views of Yoga than his antireligious attitudes. After referring to his inability to experience ‘oceanic feeling’ of the mystics, Freud (1930) had something more to say about Yoga. ‘The extreme form of this [of influencing the instinctual impulses] is brought about by killing off the instincts, as is prescribed by the worldly wisdom of the East and practiced by Yoga’ (Freud, 1930, p. 79). Freud disagreed with the Yogic view of attaining highest levels of satisfaction by overcoming instinctual desires through practice of dispassion (vairāgya) and attaining a state devoid of desires. Moreover, he went on to declare that ‘The feeling of happiness derived from satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed’ (Freud, 1930, p. 79).

Freud’s view of the ego is reflected in his statement just quoted. In his view, ego is often involved in ‘taming’ or repressing pleasure-seeking impulses of the unconscious Id. However, he viewed the role of the ego only as a servant of the Id. The impulses of the Id may be repressed only to protect the individual from an imminent danger—while noticing a strong and vicious male guarding a desired female, for instance.

In general, the aim of psychoanalysis is to make the ego strong enough to ward off the dangers posed by the ‘reality’ from the outside and from the moralistic demands of the Super ego lodged inside the psyche. Thus, it is mainly individuals with a relatively weak ego who need a typically Freudian intervention. Yoga, by contrast, helps an individual whose ego is strong enough to voluntarily undertake austerities—self-imposed rules of conduct that deny ordinary pleasures of eating whatever one wishes and whenever, for example. There are many such rules in the practice of religion, usually called vrat in Hindi. Such practices gradually strengthen the ego, and a yogic aspirant must continue this process till the ego becomes strong enough to overcome all desires. The aspirant must finally abandon the ego, for only a person with a strong ego can afford to dispense with it altogether.
Transpersonal Psychology

As is well known, humanistic psychology emerged in the work of Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Abraham Maslow and others as a ‘third force’ in psychology as opposed to the two dominant forces—behaviourism and psychoanalysis. One of the central features in this trend was a focus on the development of personality towards higher levels of functioning as distinguished from the focus on pathological conditions in psychoanalysis. Such focus was illustrated, among other things, by Maslow’s earlier emphasis on the hierarchy of needs and the concept of self-actualisation (Maslow, 1954). The idea was that the basic or lower-order needs starting with the physiological needs for air and food which have to be satisfied first. Then follows in sequence the satisfaction of the needs for safety, then the needs of belongingness and esteem, finally leading up to satisfying the need for self-actualisation at the top of the need hierarchy. The overall thrust was on persistent unfolding and actualisation of human potentials, an idea encapsulated in the notion of ‘becoming’, which was reflected in the title of Rogers’s (1961) book ‘On becoming a person’ (emphasis added). In the early 1960s Maslow (1962) was already moving in the direction of higher states of consciousness as reflected in his work on the ‘peak experiences’. In the later phase of his work, Maslow (1969) made a major break; with founding of a new journal called Transpersonal Psychology, he signalled the emergence of a new ‘fourth force’ in psychology. As encapsuled in the expression transpersonal, the emphasis was on transcendence. In an article charting and interpreting this transition from the ‘third’ to ‘fourth’ force in psychology, Koltko-Rivera (2006) notes as follows:

The earlier model positions the highest form of motivational development at the level of the well-adjusted, differentiated, and fulfilled individual self or ego. The later model places the highest form of human development at a transpersonal level, where the self/ego and its needs are transcended. This represents a monumental shift in the conceptualization of human personality and its development. (p. 306)

Koltko-Rivera then goes on to note that

At the level of self-actualization [there is] a certain self-aggrandizing aspect to this motivational stage…. At the level of self-transcendence, the individual’s own needs are put aside … in favor of service to others and to some higher force or cause conceived as being outside the personal self. (2006, pp. 306–307)
It should be clear that in the image of human nature Maslow presented in his turn to transpersonal psychology, he got closer to the Yogic perspective, which aims at turning an ordinarily selfish person into a selfless one. While the idea of self-actualisation implies ‘becoming’, or an unending process of continual change in selfhood, the dominant Indian perspectives like the Yoga and Advaita aim at some sort of ‘stasis’—a stage in which an eternal and unchanging foundation is discovered in the experience of the transcendental Self in ‘pure’ or contentless state consciousness. A focus on ‘Becoming’ versus one of ‘Being’ generally dominates in the civilisations of the West in contract to that of India (see Paranjpe, 1998). Yoga psychology, however, recognises the process of ‘Becoming’ as an integral feature of human existence within the sphere of constantly changing sphere of the Prakrti, while, at the same time, recognising ‘Being’ of the eternally changeless Purusa experienced in contentless state of consciousness. With regard to the emergence of transpersonal psychology and its focus on transcendence, the various inputs from Asian spiritual traditions have been well recognised (Stark & Washburn, 1977; Walsh, 1988). Scotton and Hiatt (1996), in particular, have pointed out the contributions of Hinduism and Yoga to transpersonal psychiatry. Yoga psychology has already found a place in contemporary psychology and psychiatry!

Overview

There are a few clearly distinctive features of Yoga psychology. First, its focus is on self-transformation, which means that it presents a plan for a personal undertaking to be voluntarily adopted by interested persons. Such an undertaking does not fit in educational systems and forms of pedagogy widely adopted in India under the influence of the colonial rule. A thorough decolonisation of the mindset in the educational system in general, and in psychology, in particular, is called for. Nevertheless, the theory and methods of Yoga can still be accommodated in the impersonal didactic style currently practised in colleges and universities today. In some way, such teaching of Yoga has already been part of teaching philosophy; just that psychologists need to understand and appreciate the essentially psychological nature of Yoga and introduce it in curricula of the departments of psychology. Second, it is necessary to be clear that the focus of Yoga psychology is not on some other-worldly gain; it presents concepts and techniques for the benefit of an individual
here and now. The benefits of postures and breath control are available to anyone anywhere, as is relevant from the spread of Yoga worldwide. There is already considerable evidence of health benefits demonstrated by research methodology that meets the highest standards.

Like any system of psychology, Yoga does not present a panacea. It is relevant and useful for a relatively small section of the population of individuals who wish to go beyond the lure of worldly gains and attain a radical personal transformation through Self-realisation. Not that there is an aversion in Yoga for prosperity and Maslowian self-actualisation. The classical Indian concept of ċhárma (which means righteousness, not ‘religion’) sanctions worldly gains conveyed by the concept of abhyaḍaya along with its twin goal of spiritual uplift (nīḥśreyasa). As Yoga spreads across the world, there is reaction among some circles that Yoga is a ‘Hindu’ enterprise, and that it aims at converting non-Hindus to Hinduism. But it should be clear that, as a system of applied psychology, it has nothing to do with ‘religion’ or conversion for that matter. While religions, especially Christianity, demand acceptance of a prescribed set of beliefs, Yoga aims at the realisation of a state of consciousness beyond all beliefs, and in that sense, Yoga is beyond ‘religion’. Yoga psychology would appeal to a relatively small section of population in which persons are interested in self-transcendence, no matter what their beliefs may be. It is to that clientele that Yoga psychology is relevant. The population at large is vast; it includes children as well as deviants who would benefit from the skilful use of rewards presented by Skinner; those suffering from obsessive–compulsive syndrome could well benefit from psychoanalysis and yet others from CBT.

Traditionally, Yoga has not been designed to deal with varied forms of pathology, which the diagnostic statistical manual (DSM) describes. Yet, there have been attempts to device Yoga-based counselling in some institutes like the T. Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in Chennai. Also, doing empirical research is not part of the Yogic tradition as such. Yet Yoga system has no allergy for empirical research; indeed, Yoga affirms observation (pratyakśa) as a criterion for the validation of truth claims. Sophisticated methods of empirical research could be beneficially used in Yoga research even as they have proliferated in investigating health benefits of postures and breathing techniques. The relevance of ‘austerities’ in the form of widely practised ‘vrat’ and their putative role in developing self-control is, for instance, a ripe topic for empirical research, and many more such topics relevant to Yoga psychology can be suggested. On the whole, it makes sense to adopt a pluralist approach; let
different approaches flourish to help deal with differing needs of the different segments of the population. Yoga psychology can certainly have its place of honour among the many viable alternatives in the world of psychology.

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Notes
1. For English translation of the Yoga Sūtras and its three major commentaries, see Larson (2018) and Rukmani (1980–1989).
2. Āgama implies all the knowledge handed down and accepted as authoritative and similar to what is now taken as valid knowledge based on scientific scrutiny and authority. Thus, in today’s world, it would mean that a yogic aspirant who is well versed in the latest developments in biology of veterinary science temporarily sets aside all well-established notions if she/he has chosen to focus on an object such as a cow.

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