

YOGA AND MEDITATION PRACTICES IN ANCIENT INDIA; A STUDY OF INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

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Abstract: One of the oldest, most extensive, and enduring intellectual traditions in human history, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) spans a broad spectrum of disciplines such as philosophy, science, medicine, education, and spirituality. Among its most significant contributions are yoga and meditation, which emerged in ancient India as essential elements of a holistic path to human well-being and self-realisation. The purpose of this research is to comprehend traditional Indian yoga and meditation practices. Yoga represents the harmonious integration of body, mind, and spirit. The related practice of meditation focuses on cultivating inner awareness, attention, and mindfulness. In ancient India, these activities were not merely mental or physical exercises; they were central to the quest for liberation and elevated awareness (Moksha). The Intellectual roots of yoga and meditation are closely tied to philosophical traditions such as Samkhya and Vedanta, which have played a vital role in shaping the spiritual and cultural identity of Indian society. These philosophical perspectives emphasize the essence of reality, the self, and awareness.

Introduction

Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represent a vast collection of traditional wisdom, practices, and cultural understandings that have developed over centuries within particular Indian communities. These systems are grounded in the harmonious connection between individuals and their natural and spiritual surroundings (Pathan and Sharma, 2025). IKS includes a broad spectrum of knowledge such as traditional practices, beliefs, oral traditions, and ecological wisdom that is distinctive to particular cultural groups (Warren et al., 1995). Yoga and meditation, which originated in India, have become widely popular around the world for enhancing physical and mental well-being (Khan and Deshpande, 2024).

Indian traditional knowledge is grounded in ancient philosophical ideas that view mental health as inseparable from individual development and community growth, and it regards these rights as fundamental human rights (Jonsson et al., 2020). Yoga and Ayurveda practices have attracted considerable global attention, as they are regarded as vital to the wellness industry. Western observers consider Indian yoga an eternal tradition based on sacred Vedic scriptures and ancient divine messages that provide comprehensive mind-body spiritual guidance (Wig, 1990; White, 2011:1). Historically, yoga and meditation evolved through various stages, including the Vedic period, the ascetic traditions of Buddhism and Jainism, and the classical synthesis presented by the sage Patanjali. These traditions collectively contribute to a rich body of knowledge that integrates ethical conduct, physical discipline, breath control, and mental concentration. The emphasis on practices such as asana (postures), pranayama (breathing techniques), and dhyana (meditation) reflects a systematic methodology aimed at achieving physical health, mental clarity, and spiritual awakening. By situating yoga and meditation within the broader framework of the Indian Knowledge System, this study endeavours to provide a comprehensive understanding of their enduring legacies and contemporary significance.

Conceptual Framework of Yoga

Etymologically, as per India's oldest scripture, the Rig-Veda, the term yoga derives from Sanskrit yuj, meaning "to yoke, join, unite," commonly interpreted as the union of individual consciousness with a universal or highest self. Classical texts describe yoga as the control or cessation of the mind's wandering thought (citta-vritti-nirodha), which

results in self-realisation and freedom. Contemporary philosophical syntheses portray yoga as an all-encompassing framework for conscious transformation, blending physical, mental, and spiritual growth. Originally thought of as a harness on an animal's neck used to pull a cart, the term later broadened to encompass a military apparatus. According to White, the term "yoga" during wartime contrasts with "Skema" in peacetime. Yoga is understood as a deliberate endeavour intended to attain what has remained unachieved in spiritual life. The first known reference to the term "yoga" appears in the Rig Veda, the oldest Hindu sacred text. The wisdom found in the Rig Veda was further expanded and refined by seers in another sacred text, the Upanishads (Sarathe, 2021). Yoga is both an art and a science of living (Kusuma, 2016).

"Yoga" has a wider range of meanings than nearly any other word in the Sanskrit lexicon. The act of yoking an animal, as well as the yoke itself, is called yoga. In astronomy, a conjunction of planets or stars, as well as a constellation, is called yoga. When one mixes together various substances, it can also be called yoga. The word yoga has also been employed to denote a device, recipe, method, strategy, charm, incantation, fraud, trick, endeavour, combination, union, arrangement, zeal, care, diligence, industriousness, discipline, use, application, contact, sum total, and the work of alchemists. However, this is not an exhaustive list. (White, 2011: 2).

Conceptual Framework of Meditation

The term meditation is translated from the Sanskrit term, Dhyāna. Dhyāna has the root verb dhyai (dhyāyati), meaning to think of, imagine, contemplate, meditate on, or call to mind. Meditation is translated from Jhāyana or Jhāna in the Pali literature. has the same meaning as above. According to Buddhist scriptures, meditation is necessary for mental growth and purity of mind. What is the meaning (Artha) of the word dhyāna? Because of meditation (dhyāna), practitioners are "concentrated" (samāhita) and capable of contemplating the object (upanidhyāna). Upanidhyai signifies "to contemplate exactly." The root dhyai is used in the sense of upanidhyāna. The term "meditation" comes from the Latin word "meditari," meaning "to actively engage in contemplation or reflection." In another source, the term "meditation" comes from the common Greek and Latin root of the term "medicine." Meditation is a well-defined and unique experience marked by a state of "thoughtless awareness" or mental silence (Sharma and Sharma, 2024). Meditation is defined as a mind-body practice involving intentional mental activities, such as focusing, releasing, imagining, moving, directed toward an object or field of experience, often becoming more effortless over time. Meditation is the practice of engaging in mental exercises to achieve a higher level of spiritual awareness (Clarke et al., 2018).

Yoga in Ancient India

In ancient India, yoga was not merely a physical exercise but a complete lifestyle. These included moral values, self-discipline, breathing techniques, concentration, and spiritual practices. The most systematic explanation of yoga was provided by Sage Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. He described the Ashtanga Yoga or Eightfold Path of Yoga, which includes the following:

- **Yama:** moral principles.
- **Niyama:** personal discipline.
- **Asana:** Physical postures.
- **Pranayama:** Breathing control.
- **Pratyahara:** Withdrawal of the senses.
- **Dharana:** Concentration.
- **Dhyana:** Meditation.
- **Samadhi:** A state of spiritual absorption or enlightenment.

These practices are designed to promote physical fitness, mental balance, and spiritual freedom

Yoga equips students with tools to enhance their social and emotional well-being, promoting holistic growth that helps navigate the challenges of student life (Sahu, 2024). Yoga began in India over 5000 years ago. It is an ancient practice designed to bring balance to the body, mind, and spirit. Yoga likely began during the Vedic era in India,

roughly around 1500BCE. At that time, yoga was chiefly employed as a religious practice and was closely associated with Hinduism and Buddhism. Dating to around 1500BCE, The Rig Veda contains the earliest known form of yoga, making it undoubtedly one of Hinduism's oldest sacred texts. The IKS encompasses yoga and meditation, practices known for their broad impact on emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Yoga originated from the Vedas and Upanishads, two ancient Indian scriptures. As a foundation of IKS, it has remained largely unchanged over the centuries (Feuerstein, 2003).

Nirodhayoga (yoga of cessation), an early form of yoga, is described in the Mokshadharma section of the 12th chapter (Shanti Parva) of the third century BCE Mahabharata (James and Mark, 2017). The origins of yoga can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization, one of the oldest civilizations in the world, which flourished around 3300–1300 BCE, where archaeological findings suggest the presence of seals depicting figures in yogic postures (Kenoyer, 1991; Harvey, 2012). Archaeological excavations at sites such as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa have unearthed seals and artifacts depicting figures in yogic postures, suggesting the presence of early yogic practices in ancient Indian society (Chauhan & Bansal, 2019). The Upanishads, philosophical treatises dating back to around 800–200 BCE, delve deeper into the essence of existence, the individual self (Ātman), and the universal aim of human existence—freedom (moksha) (Egenes 2023). Additionally, references to yoga can be found in ancient Indian texts such as the Rigveda, the oldest of the Vedas, dating back to approximately 1500 BCE, where the term “yoga” is mentioned in the context of spiritual discipline and meditation. (Feuerstein, 2012). Yoga, deeply rooted in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), is a profound discipline that integrates physical, mental, and spiritual well-being (Sharma and Tiwari, 2024). Born in India, yoga an ancient practice has recently earned global recognition for its wide-ranging health benefits and holistic approach to well-being. However, to grasp the true essence of yoga, one must explore its origins in ancient Indian tradition.

Meditation in Ancient India

Meditation holds an important place in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Ancient sages meditated in remote locations to achieve greater awareness and insight. Various meditation practices were undertaken, including;

- **Mantra Meditation:** The repetitive chanting of sacred sounds like “Om.”
- **Breath Meditation:** Concentrating on your breathing rhythm.
- **Mindfulness Meditation:** Being aware of one's thoughts and actions.
- **Transcendental Meditation:** Reaching profound relaxation and inner stillness.

Buddha achieved enlightenment by meditating deeply beneath the Bodhi tree, an experience that formed the basis of Buddhist philosophy. Jain monks also engage in rigorous meditation and self-discipline as part of their spiritual purification. The Upanishads, thought to have been composed between the 8th and 4th centuries BCE, also discuss meditation and breathing exercises. Meditation plays a vital role in numerous Indian philosophical and spiritual systems, such as Jainism and Buddhism, and traces its origins to Vedic scriptures. Examples of meditation include mindfulness meditation (Vipassana), mantra meditation (Repeating sacred sounds), and transcendental meditation. Meditation offers an effective method to soothe the mind, focus on the present moment, and cultivate mindfulness (Nash, 2019). Mindfulness meditation traces its roots to the earliest recorder forms of yogic meditation in the Vedas (Sharma, 2015). Meditation is among the oldest spiritual practices in ancient India and China. Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years in India and China, with various techniques documented in ancient texts. In ancient India Vedic texts, meditation was described as beginning with dhāraṇā (concentration) and progressing to dhyana (meditation). The primary purpose of meditation in Vedic scriptures is to purify the mind and understand the knowledge of the ultimate reality, which is the means of obtaining the highest freedom (Zanyi et al. 2022). In ancient India, meditation began as a special practice mentioned in Vedic texts, coexisting with the comprehensive health system of Ayurveda. Meditation, with its ancient roots and evolving forms, is a timeless, bringing calmness in the midst of turmoil. It transcends individual boundaries, connecting people globally and fostering a shared sense of well-being. It serves as a special thread that unites humanity and invites everyone to partake in its transformative journey toward inner peace.

Yoga and meditation have mental health and psychological benefits

Yoga and meditation are ancient techniques that encourage balance in the body, mind, and spirit. These traditions, which originated in ancient India, have become widely acknowledged around the world due to their favourable impact on mental health and well-being. In today's fast-paced and hectic world, people frequently experience anxiety, despair, emotional imbalance, lack of attention, and mental tiredness. Yoga and meditation are natural and effective techniques to treat these issues and promote overall well-being. Mental health is an important part of human well-being. It influences how people think, feel, behave, and deal with everyday issues. Good mental health enables people to maintain positive relationships, make sound decisions, and deal with stress successfully. Yoga and meditation improve mental health by promoting inner serenity, emotional stability, and mental clarity.

Yoga is a comprehensive practice that involves physical postures (asanas), breathing exercises (pranayama), and relaxation techniques (asanas). These techniques promote blood circulation, calm the neurological system, and relieve physical tension, in the body. Regular yoga practice decreases the production of stress hormones like cortisol, which alleviates anxiety and stress. It also improves sleep quality, boosts energy levels, and promotes a state of calm and happiness.

Meditation is the practice of focusing on the mind and developing awareness. It trains individuals to stay present and control unnecessary thoughts and feelings. Through meditation, people learn to observe their feelings without becoming overwhelmed. This helps reduce negative thinking, emotional instability, and mental stress. Meditation also improves concentration, memory, creativity, and decision-making.

One of the primary psychological benefits of yoga and meditation is stress reduction. Stress is a frequent problem in today's culture, particularly among students, professionals, and the elderly. Continuous stress can cause mental and physical health concerns. Yoga and meditation help people calm their minds and bodies, helping them to deal with obstacles more successfully. These activities also boost emotional resilience, allowing people to stay calm under challenging times.

Another significant advantage is a reduction in anxiety and despair. Many scientific studies have found that practicing yoga and meditation on a daily basis can improve mood and mental health. Deep breathing techniques and mindfulness activities promote calmness and confidence. As a result, people become more emotionally stable and cheerful.

Yoga and meditation encourage self-awareness and discipline. They encourage people to better comprehend their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. This greater awareness promotes positive attitudes, healthier practices, and improved interpersonal interactions. Students who practice yoga and meditation frequently demonstrate enhanced concentration, academic performance, and emotional control.

Furthermore, yoga and meditation improve social and psychological well-being by encourage compassion, patience, and optimistic thinking. These activities assist people develop inner strength and mental calm, which are necessary for living a healthy and fulfilling life.

Conclusion

Yoga and meditation are ancient Indian practices that provide significant physical, mental, and spiritual benefits. Individuals can improve their health, find inner peace, and get a better understanding of themselves and the world by following these practices. These ancient philosophy-based practices remain relevant and transformative in current life, providing methods for reaching balance and harmony. Yoga and meditation are now widely recognised for their therapeutic, psychological, and lifestyle advantages. However, their origins and

deeper philosophical importance within the Indian Knowledge System are frequently left unexamined. This study examines the historical evolution, philosophical foundations, and practical dimensions of yoga and meditation in ancient India.

It seeks to demonstrate how these practices were conceived as holistic tools for personal change and societal harmony, as well as how their significance continues to reverberate in addressing contemporary stress, health, and well-being concerns. Yoga and meditation are powerful tools for maintaining mental health and psychological wellbeing. They reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, while improving concentration, emotional stability, self-confidence, and overall happiness. In the modern world, where mental health challenges are increasing rapidly, yoga and meditation serve as effective and natural methods for achieving a healthy and peaceful lifestyle.

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