

YOGA IN THE MODERN WORLD

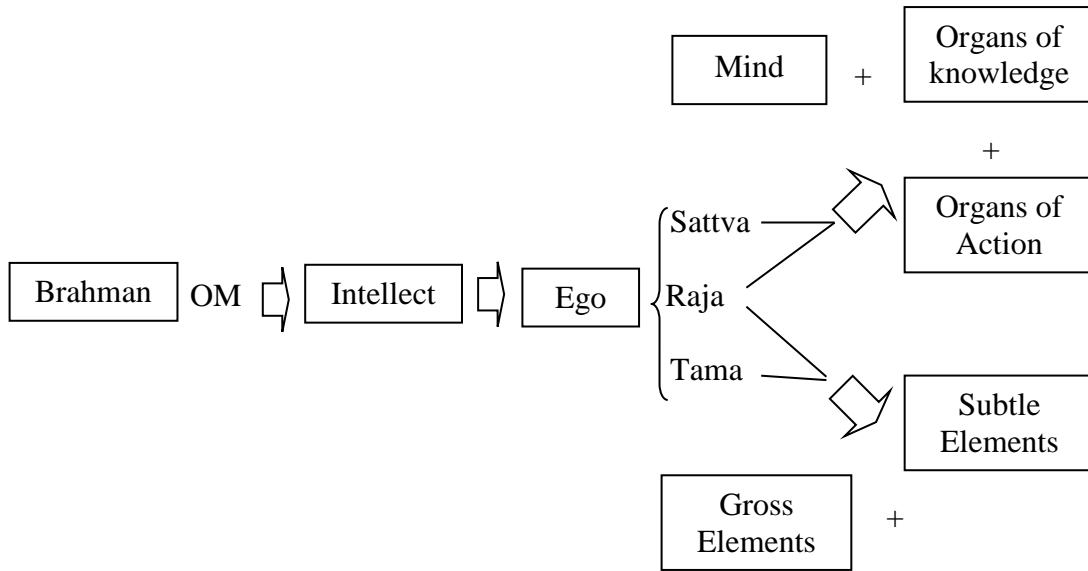
The wisdom of yoga can be traced to the sacred Sanskrit scriptures that are the Veda. The term Veda comes from the root “vid,” which means “To know” in Sanskrit. In relation to the book of scriptures, the Veda means knowledge of Brahman, the omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent Absolute. Brahman is a one, impersonal and all-pervading spirit beyond attributes. Powered by its own energy, Brahman is intrinsically dynamic and as such it is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the visible universe. In Hinduism, the macrocosm of the universe is deemed to be reproduced in the microcosm of the human body. In respect to humans, the Veda implies that the knowledge of Brahman is the supreme goal of human life and it points the paths to acquire this understanding. It is along these paths that the relevancy of yoga is to be found.

Cosmology

In the beginning, the impersonal, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent Brahman was silent. Being intrinsically dynamic, Brahman could not remain quiet and so it expressed itself by creating the cosmos and will sustain it until the universe runs its course. In the end, Brahman will dissolve the cosmos only to start another cycle of creation elsewhere. There is no purpose and no end to these cycles of cosmic creations and dissolutions other than being a reflection of Brahman’s dynamic nature.

Brahman is characterized by the fact that its quintessence is made up of three intertwined elements namely Sat (Being), Chit (Pure Consciousness) and Ananda (Bliss). Sat is associated with matter. Matter within Brahman is composed of three forces known as gunas which are Sattva, Raja and Tama. Before creation, when the universe was not yet manifested (pralaya), the three gunas were in perfect harmony and so matter was inert. Simply because Brahman exists and its nature is intrinsically dynamic, Brahman could not remain quietly still. And so, Brahman generated the vocal sound OM which produced a movement within the three gunas. This movement created a cascade of events during which the intellect (buddhi) was initially produced out of which came the ego (ahamkara). The three gunas rested within ahamkara where sattva combined with raja to form the five organs of knowledge (hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, smelling), the five organs of action (speaking, grasping, walking, excreting, procreating) and the mind. Raja also combined with tama to form the five subtle elements (sound, touch, form, taste, smell) and the five gross elements (ether, air, fire, water, earth) (graph A).

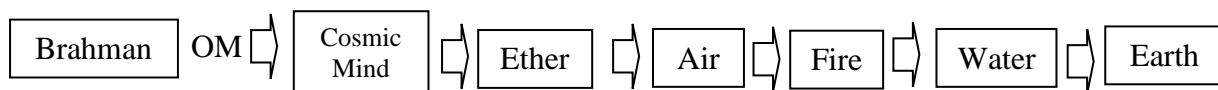
Graph A: Creation of the physical universe



In this model, the mind can be broken up into three parts namely the subconscious, the conscious, and the super-conscious. The subconscious (chitta) is the rudimentary mind. It is the seat of instinct, autonomous functions and a storehouse for past experiences. The conscious (manas) is the result of the development of the subconscious through the work of the intellect. It is the seat of self-awareness. The super-conscious is the intangible seat of intuition. It can be regarded as a refinement of the conscious that enables grasping concepts beyond the scope of the intellect. Sometimes, the intellect, the ego, chitta and manas are grouped together under the label of Cosmic Mind. The super-conscious is not explicitly included in the definition of the Cosmic Mind because it is regarded as an acquired feature of the conscious. The more refined is the conscious, the more intuitive is the mind.

When the gross elements were produced, ether was produced first, out of which came air, out of which came fire, out of which came water, out of which came earth (graph B).

Graph B: Evolution of gross elements



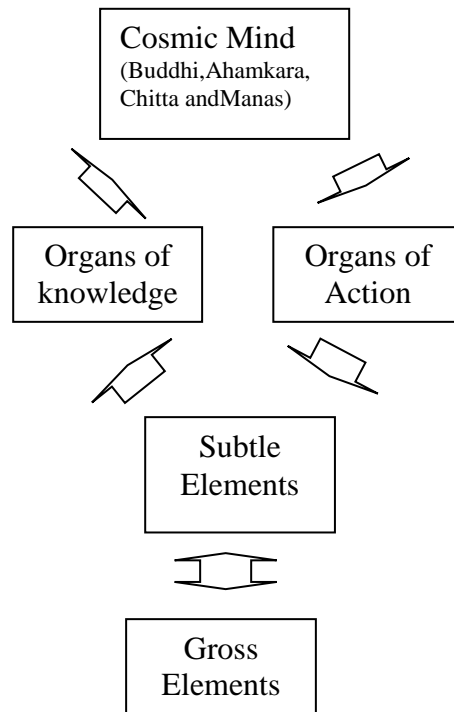
In many respects, this perspective is strikingly similar to the one accepted in modern astrophysics. While the composition of the support of the universe is unknown, it is acknowledged in astrophysics that the cosmos is not emanating out of nothing. This unknown substratum can be associated with Brahman in the Vedic worldview. It is an accepted view among modern cosmologists that there may be more than one universe in existence. The Big Bang, which is associated with the vocal sound OM, marked the beginning of our universe. This initial explosion released a tremendous amount of energy. It was so powerful that it created a space in the substratum of the universe akin to the creation of a bubble when water is heated. Along with

space came time and these two are associated with ether. As the cosmic space expanded, the universe cooled down. The cooling led to the transformation of the raw energy released by the initial explosion into hydrogen and to a lesser extent helium. This phase is associated with air. Through the force of gravitation, the atoms of hydrogen and helium clumped together. As matter was clumping, heat and pressure progressively increased leading to nuclear fusion. The ignited matter created the stars and this phase is associated with fire. Through nuclear fusion in the heart of the stars, heavier atoms and some molecules were created. The burning stars are associated with water. Finally, when the original stars exhausted most of their fuel, their center collapsed and they exploded. In the process, they threw the matter they had produced in the intersidereal space. This phase is associated with earth. After the explosion of a star, the matter released in the intersidereal space clumps again due to the force of gravity resulting in the creation of other stars. It is through these ongoing cycles of creation and destruction of stars that solar systems appear and life emerges.

Only the mind present in the Vedic worldview is left out from the modern astrophysical model. That being said, the idea of a universal consciousness is found in other contemporary worldviews. Indeed, it has been shown that water responds to the changes in its immediate environment by modifying the shape of its ice crystals. Plants cooperate through their root system with vegetation that shares their genome but compete to access resources with any other plant life. Ants living in the same nest coordinate their activities in such a way that the entire colony behave as a distinct living being. All these observations infer to a form of consciousness that normally is seen in living beings with a brain. In order to permeate the universe, this universal consciousness would need to appear at the same moment space and time emerged. If the existence of a universal mind were ever to be proven, it would make modern astrophysical cosmology basically identical to Vedic cosmology.

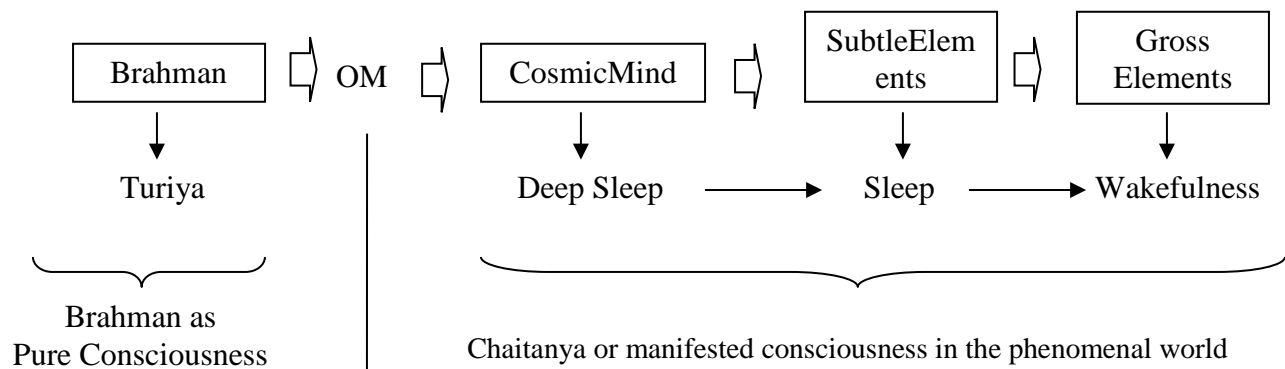
In their relative physical organization, the organs of knowledge and the organs of action are directly connected to the Cosmic Mind. The subtle elements connect the organs of knowledge and the organs of action with the gross elements which form the physical universe. Hence, the organs of knowledge, the organs of action, the subtle elements and the gross elements can be regarded as excrescences of the Cosmic Mind. In order to animate matter, the subtle elements infiltrate the gross elements. Within the gross elements, the subtle elements are called Pranas. There are five major Pranas, each specializing in a specific function (graph C).

Graph C: Physical organization within the mind



Chit, the second element making up Brahman, is associated with consciousness. The absolute consciousness is called turiya. It is the hallmark of Brahman. Following the vocal sound OM, Brahman's pure consciousness entered into the phenomenal world as chaitanya. Within the cosmos, the coarseness of chaitanya follows a spectrum similar to matter and as such it ranges through the successive states of turiya; deep sleep; sleep and wakefulness (graph D).

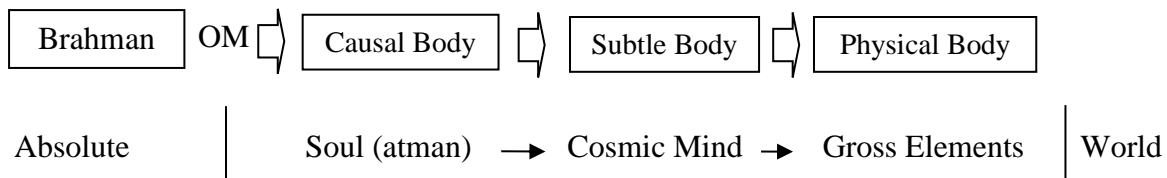
Graph D: Levels of consciousness in relation to matter



Finally, ananda or the third element composing the quintessence of Brahman is associated with the emotion of love. Love encompasses all other emotions and it pervades manifestation.

The three elements composing the essence of Brahman never express themselves independently from one another. Rather, their expression is always intertwined. The soul can be regarded as the most basic manifestation of these intertwined elements in the cosmos. The soul, which is referred to as the individual self in humans, is called atman. The atman is a mixture of matter (Sat), consciousness or chaitanya (Chit) and emotions (Ananda). It can be regarded as the portion of Brahman that enters the universe and sustains every entity found in the cosmos. Atmans could be compared to stem cells making up the cosmic fiber. In the universe, atmans initially manifest within a causal body. Within the confine of the cosmos, when an entity is produced or life is conceived, an atman becomes active in a similar fashion as a stem cell develops into an organ. As the material aspect of the soul evolves into a mind and gross elements, the atman successively develops into a subtle body and a physical body (graph E).

Graph E: Development of the atman into various bodies



In Hindu cosmology, the relation between the oneness of Brahman and the plurality of the cosmos could be compared to an ocean. In this view, it is explained that when the ocean is quiet and without waves, it is like Brahman in its un-manifested state. When the ocean becomes agitated and presents waves, it is like Brahman manifesting the cosmos. Each wave has a soul (atman) made up of a physical body (Sat), consciousness or chaitanya (Chit) and emotions (Ananda). In chaos theory, this phenomenon is likened to a fractal.

The principles governing the three elements making up the essence of Brahman (Sat, Chit, Ananda) not only apply to the cosmos itself and to humans but also to every entity found within the universe ranging from the immeasurable to the infinitesimal, the simplest to the most complex. As everything shares the same essence, these principles govern the workings of atoms, plants and living beings. The only difference among the various entities found in the cosmos is the relative degree of development of the elements composing each entity. For example, the intellect is more developed in humans than it is in animals and plants. In atoms, gross elements are proportionally more prevalent than mind. A popular way to illustrate this view is by comparing the cosmos to a Russian doll whereby the outer doll contains smaller dolls one inside the other. Each doll is identical to the others, differing only in size. Similarly, every entity in the manifested universe mirrors Brahman notwithstanding its size or degree of complexity. This view led to the saying that the macrocosm is reproduced into the microcosm.

Yet, everything in creation is integrated. Atoms organize themselves into molecules. Molecules form cells that organize themselves into specialized organs within living organisms. Humans organize themselves into institutions within societies. Each society has a distinct culture which is akin to different personalities in humans. Societies also have a collective memory and their ideologies and values are passed from one generation to the next through what is known as the

social sub-consciousness. Countries organize themselves into international bodies within a global village. The global community is an intricate part of a greater whole called earth. Akin to a living organism, the earth can be seen as having specialized systems whereby the international community can be regarded as its consciousness; the waterways its blood stream; the trees its lungs, and so forth. The earth is part of a greater whole called the solar system. The solar system can also be regarded as a living organism whereby the sun provides the energy sustaining the planets making up the system. In this planetary system, the earth can be seen as the consciousness of the solar system thanks to the works of the international community. The solar system in turn can be regarded as an organ of a yet bigger organism called the galaxy. Galaxies are like giant cells forming the living universe. In this perspective, arts and science can be regarded as a means to expose and reveal the essence of creation, the ever dynamic Absolute. It is with a similar view that the rishis promoted the idea of integration as a way to approach Brahman.

In the Vedic view, the ability of a system to accumulate, process and expend Prana is the main difference between an inanimate object and a living being. Inanimate objects have a limited capacity to accumulate, process and expend Prana when compared to living beings. The flux of Prana generated by living beings produces a visible aura of energy around the physical body. This aura can be seen using a special photographic technique and its intensity is a direct reflection of the health of the subject being photographed. Death is characterized by an excessive loss and/or a diminished ability to process and/or a reduced capacity to expend Prana. After death, the aura progressively tapers to reach the characteristic intensity of an inanimate object. The energy generated by an inanimate object can be seen using special equipment in a laboratory of physics.

Sacrifice

While these details explain the nature of the cosmos, they do not explain the dynamics of the universe. The cosmos was set in motion through the vocal sound OM and this initial vibration ensures that the universe is in constant movement until its dissolution. For as long as the cosmos exists, it will keep transforming itself. The principle behind these transformations is the concept of sacrifice, the quality of which is determined by the gunas.

Sacrifice is the process whereby a given system sheds indiscriminately the excess it produces while maintaining its integrity and developing its potential. If the system fails to maintain its integrity, the system itself is shed. The refuse, or in other words what has been sacrificed, is prime material for another system to maintain itself and/or develop its potential. Sacrifice is synonymous to giving. The colloquial saying, “one man’s refuse is another man’s treasure”, sums up the concept of sacrifice. Clouds drop rain when they are saturated with water. Rain allows plants to grow. Plants produce fruits that feed animals. When living beings die, their bodies re-enter the food chain. The concept of sacrifice is what keeps the cycle of life turning. The notion of sacrifice is the fundamental principle behind the guidelines elaborated by the rishis for the conduct of human behaviors. Its scientific counterpart is chaos theory.

The three gunas are constantly present in everything that composes the cosmos. Raja is associated with passion and action while tama with darkness and inertia. Sattva is associated

with purity and it is a balance between raja and tama. In the framework of sacrifice, one guna always predominates at any given time and influences the quality of the sacrificial process. The context determines which guna will dominate and for how long. Hence, when an apple matures, it is influenced successively by the three gunas: raja dominates when the apple is green, sattva when the apple is ripe and tama when the apple rots.

In the grand scheme of the universe, creation constantly oscillates between organization and destruction. This state of affairs will continue until such time the universe will revert back into Brahman. Meanwhile, it makes no difference if a given system is maintained, evolves or is destroyed because the nature of Brahman is never compromised in the ongoing process of transformation. The dance that consists in the creation and dissolution of the universe along with all the transformations within the manifested cosmos is called Brahman's Lila or play. It has no purpose other than being a reflection of the dynamic nature of Brahman. Chaos theory propounds that the stability and survival of a given system is enhanced when all the elements constituting the system cooperate together. When some elements within a given system are competing, their feud comes at the expense of the entire system. While it makes no difference in the grand scheme of the universe whether the elements constituting a given system are cooperative or competitive with one another, each element within a given system benefits more when all the elements constituting the system cooperate rather than compete. Translated in human terms, individuals benefit more in the long run if they cooperate and share their resources than if they compete and cumulate wealth for themselves.

In the context of spirituality, the word "religion" can be equated to "relating" and so the rishis promoted the integration of the realms of divine and human, society and individuals in order to achieve felicity. Humans mainly relate through their actions, the expression of emotions and the sharing of knowledge. Hinduism is about achieving higher understanding expressed in the form of intuitive knowledge (Chit) and happiness (Ananda) through the establishment of a meaningful collaborative relation (Sat) with the community, the universe and the whole creation. In light of the concept of sacrifice as it applies to one's life, science and the rishis agree in principle on the importance of sharing the product of one's actions for the ultimate benefit of all.

Tapas

The word "tapas" means heat in Sanskrit. At the cosmic level, the term refers to the force behind the universe that ensures cosmic cohesion. At the human level, it is the energy that sustains life. When that force is generated, it is felt as an increased body heat hence its name. The practice of yoga is regarded as the most effective way to generate tapas.

The word yoga comes from the root "yuj", which means "To yoke" or "Unite" in Sanskrit. Keeping in mind the essence of Brahman, the Veda implies there three main forms of yoga in line with the way humans relate: Karma Yoga that operates on matter through the practice of dharma (Sat), Bhakti Yoga working on the emotions through devotion (Ananda) and Jnana Yoga aims at acquiring knowledge through the study of scriptures (Chit). There is a multitude of complementary yogic practice of which Hatha Yoga is most known in the western hemisphere.

Although typically define in the occident as the union of body, mind and spirit, Hatha Yoga truly centres on Prana to expand the mind so as to acquire higher understanding. This knowledge leads to the intimate realization of the interconnectedness of creation (Chit) which in turns generate a feeling of compassion (Ananda) urging one to act for the benefit of the community (Sat).

Macrocosm to microcosm

The principles related to the cosmic Lila apply at every level within the universe. In human terms, the three most significant levels are the social, the temple and the individual echelons.

In Hinduism, social organization is derived from the Veda and it is representative of the cosmic layout. In this perspective, one's contribution to society is sacrifice. When the divine is superimposed over society, the expression of love one has is directed toward society as a whole creates an emotional bonding with society. The acquisition of a meaning to life comes directly from one's life experience.

Similarly, the layout of the Hindu temple is designed to reproduce the phenomenal universe. Typically, the outside of the temple represents the phenomenal world and as such it is colorful and well decorated. The inside represents the divine and its appearance is more modest. The temple rites are injunctions derived from the Veda and their performance could be regarded as a miniature enactment of the universe. They strive to create a balance between the macrocosm of the cosmos and the microcosm of society. The temple ceremonies are an integrating act between the divine and human realms. Through offerings (sacrifice), divine assistance is requested to ensure the continuity of the wellbeing of the community one depends on for its welfare. Temple rituals are performed to create community cohesion, to mark rites of passage, to celebrate the transition of the seasons and to heal the sick and injured. Humans have emotional and intellectual dimensions along with an innate urge to engage the world. Accordingly, the temple ritual provides means to reach the Absolute through these three aspects. During temple rituals, the human and divine realms are actively brought closer through the performance of rites according to specific rules during which offerings to the gods are made. Partaking in these temple rituals is reaching the divine through actions. The expression of love toward the deities during the performance of rituals creates an emotional bonding with the divine. Lastly, through inference, the correspondences suggested by the temple layout and the rituals progressively lead to an intuitive understanding of creation.

Finally, the individual body is regarded as a miniature reproduction of the universe. The mind is associated with the Universal Consciousness and the body with the manifested universe. When the divine is superimposed over the body, the caring of the body becomes an act of devotion. The stomach is regarded as a sacred fire and the consumption of food is seen as oblations to the divine thus making the act of eating a sacred ritual. In exchange for the offerings, one receives from the divine the subtle energy necessary to keep the body alive. Social rules are injunctions derived from the Veda and as such they are indented to mirror the dynamics of the cosmos within society. Through their obedience, one incorporates the Hindu ritual in one's life and lives in harmony with the universe. Through the practice of meditation, one can realize the essence of its nature which is Brahman.

Putting it together

Yoga rests on the principle of tapas generated by sacrifice which in turn is a byproduct of actions (karma). At the social level, the force of tapas creates cohesion among members of society. It is generated by conforming to dharma which means “That which holds” in Sanskrit. Dharma is therefore the power that upholds society and it is the realm of Karma Yoga. When the Vedic worldview is transposed on the modern western secular society, dharma takes the form of laws, code of ethics and social values. For a given individual, the applicable ethics is a function of the specific social role performed in a given situation at a given time. One’s contribution to society is determined by one’s disposition, tendency, capacity and education. The efficacy of one’s contribution is a function of one’s conformity with social rules, one’s attitude (bhava) in the performance of one’s role and the steadiness or consistency in one’s work. In this context, Karma Yoga consists in taking every opportunity to give one’s time and apply one’s skills to the best of one’s ability for no other reason than the wellbeing of others notwithstanding the benefit one may gain or the loss one may incur.

At the temple level, the cosmic force of tapas unites the realm of the divine with the realm of humans. This union is best achieved through the practice of Bhakti Yoga which could be summed up as the performing of the ceremonial rituals of one’s espoused spirituality.

At the individual level, the force of tapas is both sustains life and produces a sense of unity with creation. On one hand, the force of tapas can be generated by a adhering to a vegetarian diet and by practicing Hatha Yoga. In the Vedic worldview, the stomach is regarded as a sacred fire within the body and food as oblations for the divine. Food is offered in the sacred fire of the body in exchange of tapas so that life can be sustained. Through Hatha Yoga, tapas are also produced by the performance of asanas and the practice of pranayama. When the force of tapas is generated by the practice of asanas and pranayama, it is felt as intense body heat hence the meaning in Sanskrit. Its esoteric benefit is the expansion of the mind which is deemed to lead to higher understanding.

On the other hand, the force of tapas emanates from a sense of unity achieved through the search for meaning. This could be achieved through the practice of Jnana Yoga which can be summarized as the performance of vichara or enquiry through the study of scriptures and philosophy to reconcile the plurality of creation and reveal the oneness of Brahman. Jnana Yoga is regarded as bridging Hinduism and science because in this form of yoga the Absolute is seen as being empirical and logical. Incidentally, many modern scientists, physicists and cosmologists in particular, are turning toward Vedanta as a source of inspiration to explore and understand the workings of the universe.

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