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Ancient Indian Philosophy in Relation to Modern Day Yoga

Early Indian Philosophy roughly began around the 8th Century BCE, however, Patanjali's sutras, the most important philosophical teachings that apply to Yoga, date back to the 2nd Century BCE and spanned several centuries (Britannica 1). Sutras are condensed pieces of texts that illustrate suggestions and guidelines that are unique to the philosopher, philosophy, or religion that are usually put together to form an overarching concept. For Indian philosophy, the sutras commonly reflect ways to improve or heighten general ways of living. The celebrated yoga sutras were written by Patanjali, an Indian sage who, through these sutras, compiled previously existing knowledge about yoga into one accessible, understandable source for the general public. Patanjali even holds the name of "the father of yoga" to numerous people in the yoga community due to the influence the Yoga sutras have had and still have on the practice of yoga (Allard 1). I argue that Ancient Indian Yogic Philosophy plays a role in modern yoga and can be used as a template to enhance current practices by the idea of the eightfold method, the emphasis on disciplined activity to reach salvation, and the freedom of attachment through yoga.

Before discussing the influence of Indian Philosophy into present day yoga, it is beneficial to illustrate what Patanjali defines and constitutes yoga as. The meaning of Yoga for Patanjali reads as "...a methodological effort to attain perfection, through the control of the different elements of human nature, physical and psychical" (Radhakrishna 453). Simply, this statement implies that yoga can be used to benefit one's life and improve everyday living by

altering aspects of human nature. In the first Sutra on page 454, there are points made about yoga that further define this concept. “Yoga is a restraint of mental modifications” (Radhakrishna 454), which means when the ‘three qualities’ of the mind: inertia, illumination, and activity, are successfully restrained, yoga has been achieved and the yogi stands in his own nature, or an entity separate from the three qualities. Another point is separating the meaning of yoga from its familiar connotation that uses the root word *yujir*, to join. Patanjali argues that “Yoga is contemplation” (Radhakrishna 454), deriving from the root *yuj*, to contemplate instead. Contemplation, an element of the eightfold method, will be mentioned in the following paragraph.

Now that yoga has been defined, the eightfold method serves as a basis to modern yoga practices today. The eightfold method, listed on page 453, includes abstention, observance, posture, breath-control, withdrawal of the senses, fixed attention, contemplation, and concentration. The Sanskrit names for these elements in the same order are *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Asana*, *Pranayama*, *Pratyahara*, *Dharna*, *Dhyana*, and *Samadhi*. Each element of the eightfold method either loosely weaves its way into current yoga or could easily be implemented to enhance yogis’ experiences. Abstention, or hindering oneself of indulgence in something, can relate to many of yogis’ personal motives such as avoiding indulgence in laziness and promoting abstinence of addictive behaviors or negative habits. Observance occurs in modern yoga through yogis perceiving their minds, body, and spirit through their practice. Abstention and Observance, *Yama* and *Niyama*, were implemented in my personal yoga teacher training as helpful tricks on ways to enhance your life and yoga training, which is a main goal of the yoga sutras. In *The Yamas & Niyamas Exploring Yoga’s Ethical Practice* by Deborah Adele, she states “The *Yamas* & *Niyamas* may be thought of as guidelines, tenets, ethical disciplines, precepts, or restraints and

observances” (Adele 15), which relates to the traditional Indian Philosophy through discipline to be discussed later, reiteration of observance, and guidelines as suggested in the sutras.

Continuing with the eightfold method, posture is the fundamental of yoga practices today. *Asanas* is a term that modern yogis use in exchange of the word ‘poses’ and without the *asanas*, yoga would be lacking the physicality that defines it in modern times. *Pranayama*, breath-control, also serves as a key element to modern yoga. There are numerous *Pranayama* exercises yogis explore, including a few of my favorites *Ujjayi*, *Bhramari*, and *Nadi Sohana*. Withdrawal of the senses relates to modern yoga because when practicing yoga, one enters a meditative state that allows them to disconnect from the outside world and their senses to focus internally. Fixed attention occurs by focusing solely on the practice at hand along with the feelings/thoughts that occur as well. Modern yoga incorporates the element of contemplation through meditation, a concept associated with yoga but also a familiar theme amongst Indian Philosophy. Lastly, concentration ties in with contemplation and fixed attention in yoga where yogis can concentrate on different things such as spiritual teachings, cleansing of the mind, and even philosophical teachings. By emphasizing the implementation of the eightfold method from Patanjali’s sutras, modern yoga can become a richer, further fulfilling experience.

A main interest in Patanjali’s sutras is the idea of disciplined activity and how through disciplined activity, one can reach salvation. Salvation typically refers to the state of being saved, which was a major desire for early Indian philosophers as they sought out tactics on how one could better their miserable, suffering life. Coinciding with salvation are two other terms used in Indian philosophy which are release and liberation. Liberation is what individuals try to achieve through following philosophical teachings, since it grants them release from their pain. Modern day yoga incorporates disciplined activity through maintaining daily *asana* practices and by

altering mindsets through yoga. Patanjali emphasizes in the yoga sutras that maintaining willpower to free oneself of attachments and adhering to all the contents of the eightfold method along with other mental/physical concepts, leads one in the path of safety in their life. Modern yogis should strengthen their relationship to the eightfold method and explore freeing attachment to connect on a deeper philosophical level and to reach a sense of salvation, release, and/or liberation.

Freedom of attachment, as mentioned previously, is a form of commonality across Indian philosophy teachings, meaning many teachings reflect, strive, and provide guidance on this topic. Why is attachment negative? Attachment creates disillusion and distracts people from reaching a fulfilling, liberated life. Objects of pleasure, or easy things to get attached to, blur one's path by diverting their attention. The problem with attachment is once the object breaks or becomes lost or when a loved person dies, pain is brought upon the one missing its object/person that it is attached to. Patanjali supports the abolition of attachment, saying "A mind free of attachment to perceptible enjoyments, such as women, foods, drinks, and power... has... a consciousness of its supremacy, due to an understanding of the defects of the objects, brought about by virtue of intellectual illumination" (Radhakrishna 456). Through releasing attachment, a person experiences the blessings of their supremacy, since they can recognize the hinderances and defects of the world. From there, the mind becomes pure. Implementing these concepts into modern yoga allows yogis to better recognize the defects of the world, instill release of attachment, become pure and liberated, and further connect to themselves mindfully.

Once an individual successfully follows each element of the eightfold path through using disciplined activity and rightfully discharge attachment, one can obtain *Samadhi*, respectively known as the final step of the eightfold method. *Samadhi*, or meditative state of concentration,

“...is not a thing to do, but the thing to get. Nor is it quite correctly called a "thing." It is Patanjali’s word for the goal of all yoga, that which is achieved or "reached" ...when we effect *nirodha*, a total detachment from all mind-things” (Kesarcodi-Watson 79). By positioning significance on reaching the state of *Samadhi*, modern yogis can experience “...the true-nature of anything” (Kesarcodi-Watson 79), create oneness with themselves, and once again, richen the overall act of yoga.

Few may argue that modern day yoga practitioners, specifically those in the Western culture, situate emotional connections, beliefs, and practices in a way that makes them devoted to yoga, therefore misapplying freedom of attachment to their practice. How can disciplined activity not be attachment? Disciplined activity in yoga, relating to Patanjali, are the acts one must do to reach *Samadhi*, not acts one is doing necessarily to pleasure themselves even though some may feel gratification in the process. In order to avoid this attachment style, modern yogis must resort back to the teachings of Patanjali, distinguish true-nature and defects, and withhold any attachment tendencies. Yogis avoid an attachment to yoga when they focus on the act of freeing themselves. To be disciplined is not to be attached. Rather, through discipline you become unattached.

Ancient Indian Philosophy, specifically the works of Patanjali, presently aligns with modern day yoga practices in numerous ways. In contemporary yoga, there is practice of the eightfold method, utilization of disciplined activity, and an ease into freedom of attachment. These concepts also exhibit room for development and further implementation into present yoga, which through application, modern yogis reap the benefits of *Samadhi* and liberation. Patanjali remains “the father of yoga” for invested, honoring yogis in the twentieth century.

Works Cited

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