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Unique Spiritual Identity and Indian Soteriology

Identidad espiritual única y soteriología india

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RESUMEN

La soteriología india es un proceso de autorrealización y realización de Dios, ya que presupone la naturaleza divina innata fundamental de los humanos. Que permanece sin realizar debido a algún error metafísico (avidyā) pero que, sin embargo, se desarrolla a través de extenuantes esfuerzos propios. De ningún modo se presupone la futilidad de la gracia divina, sino que se dice que se activa al alcanzar un nivel adecuado de perfección ética y espiritual. Este estado anticipado de perfección puede considerarse como una identidad espiritual única. El ensayo intenta resaltar sucintamente la tradición contemplativa védica y yóguica, que se dice que es un proceso ad intra para realizar la esencia interna, el atman que debe complementarse con otro proceso ad extra, que lleva al buscador a la realización del brahman. La ingeniería espiritual incrustada en la tradición del Yoga que consiste en ejercicios de respiración (prāna-yāma) y meditaciones en el centro de energía (chakra) se trata como un ejemplo de praxis inicial.

Palabras clave: espiritualidad; contemplación; upanishads; yoga; yogachakra.

ABSTRACT

Indian Soteriology is a process of self-realization and God realization, as it presupposes the fundamental innate divine nature of humans. Which remains unrealized due to some metaphysical error (avidyā) but nevertheless be brought to realization through strenuous self-efforts. In no way the futility of divine grace is presupposed but it said to be made active by attaining adequate level of ethical and spiritual perfection. This anticipated state of perfection can be considered as a unique spiritual identity. The essay attempts to succinctly highlight the Vedic and Yogic contemplative tradition which is said to be a process ad intra in order to realize the inner essence, the atman which needs to be complemented by another process of ad extra, leading the seeker to brahman realization. The spiritual engineering embedded in Yoga tradition consisting of breathing exercises (prāna-yāma) and energy centre (chakra) meditations are dealt with as an example of initial praxis.

Keywords: spirituality; contemplation; upanishads; yoga; yogachakra.

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INTRODUCTION

In Indian religious traditions, soteriology is invariably given a prime place with the exception of one materialistic tradition called Cārvāka System (Hiriyanna: 1979: p. 187). Even in the systems like Buddhism and Jainism which do not speak explicitly of Ultimate Divine Being, nevertheless, provide elaborate doctrines of soteriology, as authentic self-realization. We shall consider in this essay only orthodox systems of philosophy, where *moksha* (Hiriyanna: 1979, p. 71-81), translated as salvation, liberation, or emancipation, is a common term for the goal of life¹. The conception of *moksha* is connected with other two terms, *karma* and *samsāra*², the former refers to human action in general, then particularly to cultic action and virtuous deeds which promote salvation or moksha. The *samsāra* is the term for cycle of births and deaths, called transmigration or metempsychosis, according to the merits accumulated through karma. If so, liberation or moksha can mean emancipation from transmigration, after which the soul becomes immortal. There are slightly different explanation for the condition of the liberated soul depending on the three paths of salvation elaborated in the Bhagavadgita (Radhakrishnan, 1963), a very popular work of religious poetry, which constitutes a small section in the epic, Mahabharata (Frauwallner, 1984). The three paths (*mārgas*) proposed by it are the path of knowledge (*Jñāna mārga* or *jñāna yoga*), path of action (*Karma mārga* or *Karma Yoga*) and path of devotion (*Bhakti mārga*)³. The second and third conceive a theistic conception of the ultimate and hence more popular, liked and accepted by the hoi polloi, but the first conceives ultimate reality in monistic terms and has less followers who are mostly ascetics, mystics and yogis even though others are not left out. Thus karma, originally meant cultic act, can lead one to higher and higher stages of life, and finally to liberation from *samsāra* and union with the Divine. The Bhakti or devotion conceives Vishnu as the theistic ultimate to whom devotees through cultic songs, and mantras surrender themselves and attain salvation by dint of grace bestowed on the devotee by Vishnu.

We are concerned in this essay only with the first one, the *jñāna mārga*, propagated by Upanishads and also by Yoga tradition; according to the former the individual soul (*ātman* or *jīva*) is actually and essentially identical with *Brahman*⁴, the divine ultimate, but in human existence one fails to recognise this fact due to metaphysical error or ignorance (*avidyā*). Nevertheless, by dint of asceticism and constant contemplation one can intuitively realize the actual and real state of one's being, and get convinced that he is in essence, 'Brahman'. Therefore, the pithy and terse statement in the Upanishad: "being Brahman, he goes to Brahman" which explicates the gist of Indian Soteriology. The other two phrases of soteriological realization are: "I am Brahman" and "that thou art", the 'that' here means Brahman, hence 'Brahman thou art'. How to realise that "I am Brahman?" or "that thou art" is the prime question in the Upanishads. The answer is, through the discovery of *ātman*, the innermost essence of a human being, and the method proposed for this is a process of 'interiorisation'.

¹ There are other terms like *mukti*, *vimukti*, etc. which are also used quite often. Buddhism has the term *Nirvana* and Jaina as well as Samkhya have "*kaivalya*" to represent the state of liberation.

² See in Bṛihadaryaka Upanishad: IV, 4, 2-6; III,2 ,13; Chandogya Upanishad. V:10, 6-8; Karl H. Potter, Presuppositions of Indian's Philosophies, Delhi:1991, 11- 22.

³ See in Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*, ch. III and IV; see also the "Introductory Essay" *Ibid.*, 53 -75; McKenzie John, *Hindu Ethics*, London: 1971 (1922), 67 – 179.

⁴ See in Bṛihadaryaka Up. II:5, 9 and 14; The term *brahman* means 'great', derived from the root *brh-* to grow, to be great, to burst forth. The term evolved gradually to mean the Greatest, the Absolute. Cf. Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, New York: 1906; p. 54-172.

DEVELOPMENT

Interiorisation: pilgrimade ad intra

“Sitting in silence” characterises the entire oriental spirituality from the point of view of its praxis. In the Hindu Scriptures there is an entire section of literature that refers to “sitting”; the literature is called *Upa-nishads*⁵: *upa-* means ‘near’, *ni-* means ‘attentively’, *shad-* means ‘sit’, it is ‘sitting near the guru attentively’. This is the posture demanded from a disciple or a seeker after Brahman, so that he could be led to an encounter with the Divine. Then there is the well-known spiritual tradition in India called “Yoga”⁶, which also elaborates a very systematic and a very technical path towards one’s spiritual liberation. This tradition has given to the world the eight-fold path (*ashtānga mārga*), the third limb of which is called “*āsana*”, posture or seat – namely, a steady and comfortable posture for meditation (YS 2:46)⁷. This is the prerequisite for a seeker, so that he can sit undisturbed for hours in deep concentration.

It is evident that sitting in silence has a definite purpose. Namely, to create a disposition for contemplation. Why should we contemplate? What should we contemplate? What is the purpose of contemplation? The goal is certainly soteriological, expressed succinctly in the phrase: “Being Brahman he goes to Brahman”⁸. The phrase. “Being Brahman” is to be understood as basic comprehension of human identity as ‘divine’, and soteriology as a process of self-realization that impels a seeker to begin the tedious spiritual journey towards the centre of one’s being.

The whole of Upanishadic literature made up of around 108 books attempts to find out what is the inner essence of our being (Radhakrishnan: 1990, p.20-23). Actually, each one has to sit, meditate and discover and experience what is there at the centre. The task of the teacher (*guru*) is only to guide and facilitate the inner journey. The entire journey is a self-discovery, namely “dis-covering” or removing the cover in order to find out what is within. According to Upanishads, the innermost essence or *ātman* is covered with five levels of sheaths (*koshas*) (Taittiriya Up.: II, 1ff). If we can draw five concentric circles, with central point representing the *ātman*, then the five circles are five sheaths, coverings or layers. The outermost circle represents the human body (called gross body), the word used is *anna* (Taittiriya Up.: II, 2-5), which means food. This level represents human life in constant encounter with the external world through the five sense organs. The external world provides “food” for these five sense organs of the body, and they continuously supply information to the mind. At this level the seeker should begin his inner journey by regulating his sense organs. Once he can regulate sense perceptions, he can commence his second stage of journey, where he has to face the challenge of his own breath – the *prāna*⁹. We are citizens of two worlds: inner and outer. The entry to inner world is granted by the breath (*prāna*). The breath is not only the caretaker of the body but also the security guard of the inner world. When the seeker wins friendship with breath by submitting to abide by its rules and norms (called *prāṇayāma*), he is permitted to proceed to third level of the mind (*manas*), the function of which is to organise the sense data or perceptions and transfer the data to the intellect (*vijnāna*). The seeker should undergo training to regulate and control the mind and then proceed to the fourth stage of

⁵ The Vedas (ca.1000BCE) precede Upanishads (ca.600 BCE onwards), the former is religious poetry and the latter is mostly prose presenting religio-philosophic discussion. The Upanishads primarily enunciate the Absolute called, the Brahman or *Ātman*. We have quoted from two translations: (i) Radhakrishnan S. The Principal Upanishads, Delhi: 1953 (Reprint 1990); (ii) Robert Ernest Hume, The Thirteen Principal Upanishads, Delhi:1921 (Reprint 1983). For the meaning of the word refer Paul Deussen, The Philosophy of the Upanishads, New York: 1966, p. 10 –15.

⁶ Historically, Yoga can be traced to Indus Valley Civilization which is dated 2500 BCE. It was carried down through praxis. Only between 3rd and 5th cent CE the Yoga Sutras (henceforth YS) were scripted by Patanjali. They are aphorisms which systematically summarise the Yoga tradition. The YS presents ‘Eight-fold path’ (YS II:29). Cf. James Haughton Woods, Translator. The Yoga-System of Patanjali. Harvard: 1914 (Reprint: Delhi: 1988). Cf. also Deepika Kothari, Film “History of Yoga”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92J-JPCChael>;

⁷ Though there are thousands of *āsana*s, only 84 are officially recognised. Among these only four are recommended for meditation; the remaining 80 are called ‘Cultural *āsana*s’. The modern Gurus recognise fifth *Asana* called “friendship posture” (*maitreyaasana*), in which the meditator takes a seat on the chair, places feet firm on the floor and hands on the knees. Cf. Sri Swami Rama, Choosing a Path, Pennsylvania:1982, p. 130 ff.

⁸ “brahmaiva san brahmāpyeti” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad IV, 4, 6.)

⁹*Prāna* is breath. It is also the universal vital energy that constitutes the stuff of life or the basic life-force energy. Indian tradition enumerates different types of *pranas*. Taittiriya Upanishad 1:7; Brihadaranyaka Up. V: 13, 1-4; Yoga Sutras II : 49 -52; Cf. Sri Swami Rama, Op.cit, p. 5-9; 134f.

“consciousness” (*vijnāna*). At this stage he should get control of his thoughts, ideas, imaginations and all the functions of the intellect. Then he can really intuit the *ātman*¹⁰, who is in a state of “ānanda”¹¹, bliss. This is the authentic self, pure self, the soul, the core of one’s being. The process ad intra is a pilgrim journey from inauthenticity to authenticity. This inner journey is in congruence with the statement, ‘that if anyone runs away from himself never finds himself’.

This succinct “*kosha theory*” summarises the experience of sages for several centuries (Sri Swami: 1982, p. 1-30). The human mind is generally adverse to and hence opposes interiorization as it enjoys acquisition of external knowledge through objectification. But *ātman* cannot be objectified, it is formless. Hence the seeker has to dive deeper and deeper from perceptual level to intuitive level in order to meet the “Subject” of all experiences. The *ātman* is the Subject of human consciousness (Katha Up: I: 3, 10).

There is an interesting episode in the Upanishad: a young student undergoes training for 12 years on cultic dimension (*karma mārga*) of religious life. His teacher fails to teach him anything on mystical dimension of his life. Having observed what has happened, his father teaches him the science of mysticism with lessons of concrete examples (Chandogya Up.: VI: 1,9-16) and convinces his son that he is ultimately spiritual in a unique way. His real goal of life is to realise *ātman*:. “you are *ātman*” or “That (*Brahman/ātman*) thou art” was his teaching to his son. This episode also underscores that a seeker must realise *ātman*, his spiritual self in order to attain his goal of life.

The Upanishads just affirm what is the goal of interior spiritual journey, but they do not explain “how” to take up the journey, and how to attain the goal. “It is only by living that we learn to live. How to walk the talk is the question. This is done by Yoga tradition¹² which touches every aspect of life and leads one step by step towards the highest goal. It divides the journey into eight parts and provides elaborate instructions and guidance, so that every aspirant is led to the goal with regular and systematic training lasting for several years.

To describe the journey in nutshell, the five Koshas of the Upanishads are overcome with meticulous attention. The first Kosha of the physical existence is transcended according to Yoga tradition in four steps or four stages of disciplines. The first one is called *yama* (or control), which consists of five vows and prepares the candidate morally (Yoga Sutra:II: 30f). The second one is called *niyama*, rules and regulations related to purifications and devotions, meant to make the seeker strong psychologically and morally (YS II:32). The third one is *āsana*, means postures, which make him physically strong and healthy (YS II: 46 -48) so that he can sit in one posture for hours together. The fourth one is *pratyāhāra* (YS II: 54 f), which consist of a set of exercises to regulate and control sense organs. With this the first layer, the *annamaya-kosha* can be transcended.

Then the seeker can proceed to transcend the second kosha, the *prāṇayama* which is the fifth step of Yoga path (YS II: 49-52). Here he learns not only to breathe correctly but also to bring the conscious mind to rest. With the control of breath, he receives the entry into the inner world of his where he learns ‘one-pointedness’ (*dhāraṇa*), a method of concentration of the mind, which is the sixth limb (YS III:1). The next one is contemplation itself (*dhyāna*, YS: III,2), what the Upanishads call the *Vijnāna-maya-kosha*. After mastering the functions of the intellect through contemplation the seeker enters into the stage of total self-surrender (*samādhi*, YS III:3) the final and the eighth step¹³. Here he waits in total surrender to the revelation of *ātman*, thus completing his interior journey (YS: III:53-55). When *ātman* is revealed, he realizes *ananda*, or bliss (*ananda-maya kosha*)

¹⁰ *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* IV: 4, 22f. *Ātman* is the subjective Absolute, correspondingly there is the objective Absolute called *Brahman*, both of which are identified and there is the affirmation “One only without a second” (Chandogya Up. VI:2,1).

¹¹ See in *Brihadāranyaka Up.* IV: 3, 21 and 32; *Taittiriya Up.* II:8; III,10,5; *Maitri Up.* VI:13.

¹² Yoga as a tradition is prior to Upanishads, but the Yoga document called *Yogasutras* of Patanjali is much later (300 – 500 CE); Cf. Swami Hariharananda Aranya (1981), “Introduction” in *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, Calcutta, pp. xxi-xxvii.

¹³ *Samādhi* is the final stage of yoga training, the last one of eight fold path (YS:III.3 – 10). We can call it as a state of total surrender of the human being , just yearning for a union with the Absolute. Among the different interpretations we have chosen this for our purpose, to suit our perspective. Cf. Vincent Gabriel Furtado, *Classical Samkhya Ethics*, RW Studien 21, Echter,Wuerzburg: 1992, Pp. 173 -206.

Yoga prescribes meticulous exercises at each stage, which a student should repeat hundreds of times, in order to master them, which takes him deeper and deeper into all stages one by one. It is a journey that helps a candidate to perfect his body, to master his mind and to attain the full power of self-consciousness. Finally, the innermost essence, the *atman* is experienced.

The author of *Yogasutras* in his preoccupation to systematise innumerable schools of Yoga has conceived growth in spirituality in a very theoretical and scientific manner. In practice there need not be air-tight distinction between different stages. When a person climbs the ladder often, the attention on individual steps of the ladder dwindles, though they facilitate the climb. What is important is to reach the top. The seeker should take the help of the teacher and decide how he can integrate various stages in his personal growth with the mind set on the goal.

One point that makes abundantly clear is that the Indian spirituality lays great emphasis on interiorization, a journey *ad intra*. We said that the human being is considered to be a citizen of two worlds: a world within and a world without, which are two dimensions of human existence, the internal and the external. The life journey is an integration of both. But no authentic integration is possible without the discovery of a true self. Only an authentic person can relate with others sincerely. If the self does not exist as 'subject', no authentic interpersonal or intersubjective interactions are possible. True communication and communion can grow at the level of core-to-core relationship, the result of which will be vibrant societies. In the society the people express their identities in the way they live relationships. We are living in a broken world. But brokenness, and fragmentation can be overcome in wholeness. Actually, we all yearn for wholeness. Nevertheless, brokenness - physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual – constitutes an integral part of our daily living. The Discovery of true self "*ātman*", impels us to gather our scattered self in recollection, and silence (Amalorananda: 1990, p 9). The experience of wholeness is a basic prerequisite for our authentic social life.

Integration

Human beings are constitutionally religious, and both interiorization and integration open up the spiritual dimension of every seeker. In this section we would like to underscore the aspect of integration as an outcome of contemplation. Both are complementary aspects of spiritual as well as human growth and through integration a seeker opens himself towards the world in myriad ways and chooses what is suitable to build up his own world-view. Once a person has some experience of the Divine by discovering the *ātman* at the depth of his being, he has to integrate all other aspects of his life through personal choices. The Discovery of *ātman* can only make integration more convincing, comprehensive and authentic.

Integration through Brahman Experience

The *ātman* experience of a seeker gets amplified when he begins to interact with other seekers who had the same experience. The encounter with others develops a sense of common experience that can build up a conviction that *ātman* is universally present in every human being. It becomes intersubjective, namely an integration of the interpersonal interactions. As he interacts with other realities of life, the basic Indian perception of the presence of the all-pervading Divine is personalised by the seeker and this strengthens his belief in the Universal *Ātman* corresponding to individual *ātman*¹⁴. He learns that there is basic unity between the Divine, human and cosmic realities, all grounded in the one Ultimate Divine Reality, the Upanishadic Brahman. He is the really real from whom all reality emerges and in whom every reality is grounded.

As a spider might come out with his thread, as small sparks come forth from the fire, even so from this Brahman come forth all vital energies, all worlds, all divinities, all beings (Brihadaranyaka UP.:II:1,20).

¹⁴ See in Chandogya Up. III: 12, 7-9; Brihadaranyaka UP. II:5; III:9:10'17; The correlation between macrocosm and microcosm is well expressed in the passage Brih. III:2.13 which is used during funeral ceremonies.

The seeker too is grounded in the Brahman, so he can affirm that he is united with Brahman. The Brahman here is not the different reality from what he experienced in ātman. The Ātman is identical with Brahman (Brihadaranyaka UP.: II, 5,19; II:4,5; IV: 5,7). The former experienced through interiorization and the latter through integration, both complementary and two aspects of the same reality.

The ultimate integration is an intuition that can be characterised as cosmotheandric (Panikkar:1998; Furtado: 2018, 51ff.). It is the experience of triadic oneness of Kosmos, Theos and Anthropos. The holistic spiritual experience, the unique spiritual identity should enclose all three dimensions: the divine, the human and the cosmic (Taittiriya Up: I: 5.1). The science of Cosmology should stress the dynamic character of all creation. In its dynamism, every creature is called to attain its fullness.

Integration through Creative Activity

Ultimately for a human being the integration can only be participation in manifold ways in the creative process. In the Yoga tradition creation is a process of manifestation of the Unmanifest through evolution. Integration can also be interpreted as the creative manifestation of the potentialities of a person in multiple ways. The Unmanifest¹⁵ and the manifest can be correlated to interiorization and integration, silence and dynamism, contemplation, and action in the Yoga spirituality.

The ātman experience is a point of synthesis where the silence is at its peak level and the dynamism is at its total unmanifest level. The silence of the seeker at this level is pregnant with potentialities which are in an "unmanifest" state¹⁶. When the meditator completes his meditation, the unmanifest begins to manifest itself and the new creative activity of the seeker unfolds itself. All educational formation should lead one to this point of enlightenment – namely the ātman experience, the point of the unmanifest state of all potentialities through interiorization. The point of encounter with the ātman in which the seeker personally experiences his authenticity at the depth level is also a point of commencement of creative intelligence becoming manifest in action. If this experience is lacking, all integration will be superficial and transitory. A seeker is like a seed replete with the potentiality to become a tree if proper ambience is provided. It is the duty of our schools and training centres to provide such ambience. Actually an air tight distinction between the two is not possible. Both are mutually complementary, and both need to overlap in the case of any holistic formation or education that manifests the unique spiritual identity.

The education for integration can be further clarified through kosha theory of the Upanishads, by delineating the same process in the regressive order. The highest point of silence is the point of encounter with ātman and an experience of bliss (*ānanda*); this is also the point where all life energies are in unmanifest state. The seeker needs to emerge from his ātman experience into the open to face the challenges of integration into his new world-view: the people of all hues, the realities of the society and all vicissitudes of life. The contemplative solitude makes it possible to encounter the self, and stimulates a capacity for critical reflection, a necessary condition for dialogue and communication with people in the society. The meditator should activate the intellect (*vijnāna*), wherein he can critically determine a definite value system for his life and then begin the expansion of the mind; the discipline of breath makes him physically fit to continue his life pursuits. The encounter with the external world and appropriation of manifold perceptions can enrich his world-view. This regressive process is again a theoretical paradigm to guide and direct his daily choices. Actual integration is a complex process of living life in concrete situations with definite objectives.

¹⁵Yoga follows Sāmkhya System, in which the Prakṛti, the Unmanifest (*avyakta*), manifests itself and the creation proceeds through evolution. (*kārika* 15.); Vincent Gabriel Furtado, *Classical Samkhya Ethics*, p. 17ff.

¹⁶ The example given for this state is the concept of 'singularity' in Big Bang theory, which explodes into an expanding universe.

The principle of viveka

The supreme guiding principle to choose among the multiple choices and make concrete options at a particular point is the principle of viveka (Abhishaktananda: 1975, p.3), which alone can make a seeker truly a mature spiritual personality. The Sanskrit word *Viveka* means the ability to discriminate between what is transitory and what is permanent. From intellect (*vijnāna-maya*) to sense data (*anna-maya*), one is presented with choices at every instance. The seeker should always be aware of his goal in choosing the options available. The moral as well as spiritual growth primarily depends on this single important factor in the life of a seeker.

External signs of integration and wholeness

If the filtering process through discriminating principle 'viveka' is employed effectively, the integration bound to pave the way towards wholeness. At the personal level a seeker should manifest a picture of integrated personality resulting from the unity of self with itself. He should reach the ground of being, become one with One who is One. Externally such a person should radiate joy and a sense of freedom; the gulf between deeds and words, decisions and implementation should lessen. He will be consistent by speaking a total language and by desisting from ambiguous communication.

At the society level he should arrive at the maturity of accepting everyone as he is. A mindset that affirms all people are in me and I am in all, together we are in God and God in all of us. Openness to social activities and programmes should become spontaneous.

At the social level, a well integrated religious personality expresses solidarity with the suffering, willingness to work for the welfare of all and a behaviour that transcends all prejudices and biases based on geography, creed, gender, social status and cultural backgrounds. Integration means a desire to see things through the eyes of the Divine, to see what others do not dare to look at.

External Signs of Spiritual Maturity

A person who undergoes spiritual training through yoga and contemplation should manifest some basic signs of human and spiritual maturity. The first among these signs is a sense of self-awareness, mindfulness and recollection. Mindfulness is a direct product of effective training in interiorization as it is the consciousness of all enveloping presence of the Divine. It is the unifying force of all aspects of our existence. "This awareness must grow up into full awakening (*purnodaya*), extend to all persons (*vishvodaya*) and to all creation (*Sarvodaya*)" (Amalorananda: 1990, p 6).

The second sign of a mature spiritual yogi is peace (*shān̄thi*). It is the direct result of depth, fullness and wholeness. It is the calmness of the deep see even when there is turmoil at the surface. It is a certain degree of equanimity and calmness amidst emotional upheavals, ups and downs of life, opposition, criticism and even violence. At the same time, it should not be taken as passivity that denotes escapism from commitments to the world, and evasion of turbulent circumstances of existence. In India the perfect state of God experience is denoted by this word, which is repeated three times generally at the end of every cultic ceremony. (*Om shān̄thi*, *shān̄thi*, *shān̄thi*). (Taittiriya Up.: 1:1)

The very nature of ātman is described as ānanda, bliss or joy. This is the third sign of a mature committed spiritual person. A gloomy disciple is a disciple of gloom. As water continuously gushes out from a spring, so joy should ooze out of the heart of a yogi to all others around him. Joy can truly create a happy neighbourhood.

SPIRITUAL ENGINEERING¹⁷

SANCTIFICATION OF BREATH

The question of correct breathing

Have you ever noticed that your breath is generally uneven? Most of the times we breathe through only one nostril or the breath in one nostril will be either stronger or weaker than in the other. The question meanwhile we need to ask is, what way our investigation into breath will help us to become persons of better health and may be also more spiritual?

The Indian sages from ancient times have succeeded to notice the physical phenomenon of breath (prāna) very meticulously and then developed a method to regulate it. By regulating the breath, they attempted to bring the conscious mind to rest. Once the conscious mind is brought to rest, you can concentrate on higher spiritual realities. Hence the connection between breath and spirituality is through third reality of mind¹⁸.

Basic yoga technique of breathing

One significant point insisted in all yoga breathing exercises is the diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing¹⁹. In the case of deep breathing the in-breath should reach the bottom most part of the abdomen. Actually, we can speak of three stages of inhaling and exhaling. During the first stage of inhaling the breath should reach bottom of the abdomen; during the second stage the upper abdomen and the entire chest during the third stage. In the same manner, while exhaling the first stage should empty the chest, second stage the upper abdomen and the last stage should empty the lower abdomen completely.

Another very important point while practising breathing is to unite or combine mind and breath. Let the mind flow along with the air that you breathe. In other words, bind the mind to the breath so that both will remain always together and never separate from each other.

One thing all of us agree upon is that we need to control our thoughts in order to meditate. Mind is an entity that is most active, most unstable, and most difficult to control. In Buddhism they compare the mind to a monkey which is drunk and bitten by a scorpion, consequently restless. Nevertheless, the Indian sages have attempted to bring the mind to rest by multifarious exercises. They believe that it is easier to control breath than the mind. Hence, they bring the mind to rest by regulating breath. What do we mean by control of mind here? The 'control' means the process of bringing the conscious mind to rest. Meditation actually is an act of entering into the subconscious mind which is possible only when the conscious mind is brought to rest. Only then can we find an entry into the subconscious mind, what they say the 'inner world'.

We began this section affirming that our breath is uneven. Why the breath is uneven? Because the mind is unstable (Sri Swami: 1982, p.135). Make the breath even, then mind will be stable, peaceful and restful. The question therefore is how to regulate the breath and make it even. There are several exercises (kriyas) of breath control, but we delineate here only three: (i) Alternate Breathing (ii) Inner Eye Breathing and (iii) Spinal Breathing.

¹⁷ Engineering means practical application of scientific knowledge. In this second part we make an attempt to apply for our practical life the spiritual knowledge we presented in the first part.

¹⁸ Yoga in itself has no religion. It does not hold on to any specific religious tradition. It believes that specific human identity is not the body, not even the mind, but it is the spirit. It is a science of spiritual growth. It provides a systematic method to grow from human/material consciousness to divine/spiritual consciousness.

¹⁹ For a good demonstration of Yoga Breathing go to YouTube: "Swami Rama the Himalayan master – Breathing."

Alternate breathing

It consists in breathing through one nostril at a time, while the other nostril is kept closed. How do we practice that? Follow the steps below very carefully to get good results.

(a) Take a steady and comfortable posture. You can use a simple chair or a stool and place your legs firmly on the floor. Keep the spine, neck, and the head in erect position. Close your eyes. Fold the tongue and keep it pressed hard against the hard pallet²⁰.

(b) One full breath, *prāṇayama*, they say, has four actions: (i) Inhalation through left nostril holding the right nostril closed with the *right* hand thumb. (ii) Exhalation through right nostril keeping the *left* nostril closed with ring and little fingers. (iii) Inhalation through the same nostril (iv) exhalation through left nostril keeping right nostril closed with the right thumb. In Simple words it can be expressed as: “exhale and inhale through one nostril while keeping the other closed with your finger”.

The breathing will become even or equal depending on your regularity. Within a year, say the yoga teachers, a good student should experience good results. It means also the mind is brought to rest very easily and you feel concentrated. This exercise can prepare you well for meditation.

The Inner Eye Breathing

The second breathing exercise is called “Inner or Third Eye breathing”. What is the “Inner” or “Third Eye (*ājñā*)²¹” in the Indian spiritual tradition? We have two physical eyes which are open to the world of objects. They receive visual perceptions from external world and supply them to the mind. The Inner eye is located at the centre of the forehead between the eye brows by the yogis and its function is to look inwards, hence it is called an ‘Inner Eye’. Sigmund Freud (1856 –1939) has popularised the concept of ‘unconscious’, which constitutes 90% of our mind. Only the remaining 10% is the conscious mind. The Inner Eye concept is same as the idea of ‘unconscious (or subconscious)’ in Freud. Therefore, Inner Eye is neither a mythical concept nor a fiction, but the deep abyss of our own consciousness.

The Inner Eye breathing is done as follows: Let the mind flow with the breath as if they are inseparable partners. Then as you breathe in and out in three stages as we said earlier- first breathe into the lower abdomen, then upper abdomen, and thirdly into the full chest- push the breath to the forehead as well as into the brain area and hold it there for a while and then breathe out, also in three stages, first chest, second upper abdomen and third, lower abdomen.

This is a practice that can be done at any time of the day and at any place, whenever we become aware of our breathing. This can also become a very effective contemplation if you put some feelings of yearning for the divine into your exercise.

Spinal breathing (*sushumna*)

The term “Spinal” refers to what we actually do in this exercise (*kriyā*). The Sanskrit word used is “*sushumna*”²², which is a channel located within the spine through which the breath or the universal vital energy travels and reaches the crown of the head. This exercise supposed to bring joy into the life of practitioner. Hence it is sometimes translated as joyful or pleasant breathing.

²⁰ This is a special prescription given by Gurus for all types of meditations. The tongue is kept folded to avoid any energy escaping from the body.

²¹ In Sanskrit the word for Inner or Spiritual Eye is *ājñā*, which means ‘command’. The third eye is the commander of the conscious mind. It can also mean wisdom, then the third eye could be the wisdom centre. Third eye leads one to the intuition of the Divine Consciousness. Cf. Raja Choudhury, *The Third Eye*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFESFTgSeDU>

²² Some demonstrations on “*Sushumna Breathing*”, “*Sushumna Kriya Meditation*” are available in Youtube. Cf. Sri Swami Rama, *Op. Cit.* p. 164-168; Paramahansa Hariharananda, *Kriya Yoga*, Delhi: 2008, p. 63-80.

In this breathing the mind is made to accompany the flow of the breath along the spine. First, be quiet for a while. Bind your mind to the breath and inhale deeply into the bottom of your abdomen. When the breath reaches base of the spine mentally direct it upwards along the spine till you reach the top of the head or the "crown". It is important to feel the movement of the breath along the spine. From the crown start exhaling downwards along the spine till the base of the spine. By practice this becomes spontaneous. The breath should move continuously without pause through the abdomen then along the spine to reach the head and then exhaled along the same channel of the spine.

Sometimes the purpose of breathing exercises can only be 'better health'. The pure air that you breathe in purifies the body, invigorates the life-cells and enhances your immune power against all virus.

THE ENERGY BODY²³

The concept of energy

Albert Einstein has taught humanity how to convert mass into energy and the Quantum theory specialists have declared all physical reality is nothing else but energy. The biological sciences spoke so far of genes and chromosomes regarding biological phenomena, sooner or later the vocabulary is bound to change. The contemporary physics reveals something very amazing regarding our human body. Dr. Bruce Lipton affirms that a human body contains 50 trillion cells which are living entities that constitute human energy or life forces (*prāna*). Each cell has 1.4 volt of electricity and thus 50 trillion human cells contain 700 trillion volts of electricity²⁴!!

The sages in India from time immemorial considered the human being or human personality from the perspective of energy and postulated as constituting of five types of energy fields. The physical energy, the *prānic* (etheric) energy, the emotional energy, the mental energy and spiritual energy. All five are interrelated and correlated to one another. They also named the four energy fields - excluding the physical energy - as Energy Body. In the physical body the energy vibrates with low frequency and hence it is dense and looks solid. In the energy body the frequency of the vibrations of the energy is higher and hence the energy body is not visible to us but amenable to Kirlian photography. The energy body on the one hand creates a field of interconnected energy around the physical body, called "aura"²⁵ and on the other hand it connects itself to the physical body through energy centres called "Chakras"²⁶, literally mean 'wheels', as the energy particles said to move in circular motion around the centre. These are nearly 72,000²⁷ but most important among them are seven only which are located along the central energy channel or the spine. The energy centres are made up of "life-force particles" which vibrate with definite frequency.

Down the years the Yoga tradition has developed a very efficacious theory of 'energy body' and a sophisticated method of raising the level of our human consciousness, which can reach a state of total openness to Divine Consciousness.

²³ Some demonstrations on "Sushumna Breathing", "Sushumna Kriya Meditation" are available in Youtube. Cf. Sri Swami Rama, Op. Cit. p.164-168; Paramahansa Hariharananda, Kriya Yoga, Delhi: 2008, p. 63-80.

²⁴ Bruce Lipton, Every Cell in your Body is a Battery; Cf. also Human Body. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lkEzjZuXus&t=92s>.

²⁵ Aura is the electro magnetic field that surrounds human body. It is a halo of luminous light. Now we have instruments which measure the electro magnetic field that surrounds our body.

²⁶ The concept of Chakra (vortices of energy) became prominent in Hinduism during the classical period. It is an important religious concept in Tibetan Buddhism called Vajrayana. In this article, we have integrated both Hindu and Buddhist concepts. Cf. J.M. Dechanet, Yoga and God, London:1974, P. 95 ff.; Paramahansa Hariharananda, Op. cit., p.81-104.

²⁷ They are called nādis (breath or energy channels), which are the channels that constitute energetic irrigation system in the energy body. Cf. Sri Swami Rama, Op.cit., 178 -182; Brihdarnyaka Up. II, 1, 19.

The energy centres (*chakras*) are in a passive state in normal human person as long as the motivating potential of the energy centres remains inactive. A person can activate the energy potential of the centres physically through physical exercises, called "Yoga-chakra-kriyas"²⁸, and be an efficient and enterprising person in the world.

The historians affirm that Yoga existed in the Indus Valley civilization around 2500 BCA. Since then thousands of yogis throughout the history attained the state of superior spiritual consciousness by working on their energy bodies.

The spiritual dimension of energy centres (*chakras*)

The science of spirituality in the yoga tradition can be defined as 'the movement from impure human consciousness to pure Divine Consciousness'. As finite, contingent human beings we cannot deny of our fallenness and brokenness; but there are tremendous potentialities in our human body, which we can awaken and make ourselves powerful, energetic and divine centric. The Yogis affirmed these potentialities are not merely physical, psychological but also spiritual. They have developed concrete skills to awaken them after centuries of spiritual striving.

Quantum theory has shown that all energy manifests itself through movement and dynamism which means that it vibrates with definite frequency. What Yogis were saying that the negative thoughts deplete our energy and positive thoughts enhance it, the higher energy shall have higher frequency vibrations and lower energy cells has lower frequency of vibrations is confirmed by Quantum physics which affirms that the positive thought heals and negative thought kills. The thoughts and feelings of hatred, jealousy, anger etc. will deplete the energy by producing lower frequency vibrations and those of peace, joy, love, happiness etc. will enhance the energy by making it to vibrate with higher frequency.

The Yoga Chakra meditation does only this and it is based on one important belief, namely, our thoughts bound to become a reality in life. Yoga believes in the tremendous capacity of the positive affirmations in the achievement of life goals. In simple words, you become what you think. In the meditation the intellect presents definite intentions or positive affirmations to the Inner Eye (subconscious), sets the intellect motivated to make these intentions efficacious in concrete life situations. Here each *chakra* is connected to an area of human and spiritual growth in which it can function as a catalyst to motivate the mind to align with the intentions presented to it during the meditation. Intentions or positive affirmations are nothing else but signals from the intellect to the life-cells.

Doesn't this make clear the spiritual dimension of these seven energy centres? The chakras have the power to motivate the seeker to realise God consciousness.

²⁸ If you go to "Yoga Chakra Kriyas" in Youtube you get innumerable demonstrations of physical exercises for Chakras along with meditations. Cf. Paramahansa Hariharananda, op.cit. p.47-80.

The seven chakras

Here below is the list of seven chakras, their location and their function given in a schematic form.

The Seven Energy Centres (Yoga Chakras)			
<i>Name, Location, Colour of the Energy Centre and the Patron</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Impurities and Negativities (examples)</i>	<i>Positive Affirmations, Intentions. (examples)</i>
1.ROOT CHAKRA <i>Muladhara Chakra</i> Base of the Spine. Colour: Red	To represent Existence and Survival with the task to make it meaningful. "I exist, I live"	Tendencies towards frustration, addiction, and depression. Meaninglessness Purposelessness in Existence.	I am my body. I am divine I am what I am. I accept my life, my body.
2.SACRAL CHAKRA <i>Swadhishthana Chakra</i> Below the Navel, lower abdomen. Colour: Orange	To represent Emotions, Feelings and sexuality with the task to make their expressions mature. "I feel"	Emotional Imbalance, Negative passions. Emotional attachments. Hurt feelings, Anger, jealousy, sadness.	I'm a mature person I'm joyful I am peaceful I am contented
3.SOLAR PLEXUS CHAKRA <i>Manipura Chakra</i> Above the Navel, Upper Abdomen. Colour: Yellow	To represent commitments of life. – with the task to fulfil them with determination and Will power. "I can"	Laziness, Lack of Commitment, Half-heartedness, Superficiality. Doubt and ambiguity. Lack of will power.	I'm a person with a mission. I am firmly anchored. I am a committed person.
4.HEART CHAKRA <i>Anahata Chakra</i> Heart Colour: Green	To represent Relationships: Love, Compassion and Service to humanity "I love and serve"	Hatred, criticism, Prejudices and bias. Unforgiving attitude, Violence in all its forms.	I am a loving person. I am compassionate. I accept all as they are. I desire the welfare of everyone.
5.THROAT CHAKRA <i>Vishuddha Chakra</i> Throat Colour: Blue.	To represent Communication and speech, Truth and honesty with the task to create a just and righteous society. "I communicate".	Untruth, dishonesty Duplicity, lies, anxiety and worry. Inauthentic speech.	I am transparent. I'm true to myself. I stand for justice and peace.
6. INNER EYE CHAKRA <i>Ājñā Chakra</i> Forehead. Colour: Indigo.	To represent Wisdom, knowledge, Intuition, Imagination, Will power Right Judgements. "I know": I will".	Impure and evil thoughts, Negative thoughts, Deceitfulness. Pride and Cunningness. Wrong judgements.	I am what I think. I am a person with belief in myself. I am righteous .
7.CROWN CHAKRA <i>Sahasrara Chakra</i> Above the Crown of the head. Colour: Brilliant White.	To represent the Divine with the task to make all people to discern and obey Divine Will. "I experience".	Nil	I am fully conscious of myself. I am spiritual. I am in union with the divine consciousness.

Among the seven chakras only two, the first and the last, need some additional explication. The picture of the remaining five could be formed by reading the schematic presentation.

The first Energy centre: Root Chakra

The first Chakra is called 'root-chakra' (*muladhāra*), located at perineum (the area between genitals and anus, where the sphincter muscle is located) in the pelvic muscle. The medical science has discovered its importance in preserving the health of the prostate gland, hence we have many exercises prescribed under the title "Kegel Exercises" or "Ashwini Mudra" in the *Youtube*.

From ancient times the importance of this muscle has been recognised by the Yoga tradition as it believes the "life-energy" (*jīva shakti*)²⁹ is lying passively in this muscle and it has to be energised and activated, so that the energy hidden there can vibrate, move upwards in its passage along the spine and enter the crown and then finally merge and get absorbed with Divine Energy. Activating the muscle physically means first of all breathing into it and warming it up, then lifting it up by focussing attention on it, contracting it, holding it for some time and then loosening it. The root chakra stands for existence and survival, represents physical life in all its aspects, namely the health of the body, capacity to work hard and achieve temporal goals and the like. It spreads from the base of the spine to the feet up to the tip of the toe. It has been assigned red colour, just to help us to centre our attention on it³⁰. The spiritual meditation on this chakra is explained in the five steps below.

The seventh chakra: Brilliant Violet Light³¹

The seventh Chakra is located outside the body above the head, and it is the symbol of the Divine Consciousness and hence depicted as 'bright violet light' in the yoga literature. For those who are in the Vedāntic tradition, the 'bright violet light' can symbolise Brahman. Its location is determined by a simple exercise, namely, just roll your right eye and locate it above the head at a distance of around one foot. Then roll the left eye and make it to join the right eye. This position is to be considered as the seventh *chakra*. This point is to be imagined as a brilliant violet light.

The method of yoga-chakra meditation

The traditional method of Yoga-chakra meditation can be named as 'esoteric', as it needs intense preparation and also guidance of a guru to enter into all its technicalities, for which one should join some Ashram or Yoga centre where these meditations are actually taught. But there is also an 'exoteric' method, available to common man. For this it is enough to consider seven chakras as seven dimensions of life, namely (i) existence and its problematics, (ii) emotions, (iii) life commitments, (iv) human relationships, (v) human communications (vi) mental and psychological activities, like thinking, willing, desiring and judging and (vii) yearning to move from impure consciousness to pure consciousness, respectively. Under this approach the Yoga-Chakra meditation can be done profitably if you follow the steps given below. The purpose of the meditation is to create balance or harmony between all the seven chakras or seven dimensions of life. You can take one chakra a day, seven chakras for seven days. Then study the data in the third and fourth columns in the above schema against the chakra you wish to meditate upon. Fix the duration of the meditation before starting. Do the meditation regularly life long and you will see the change in your life.

Step one: Preparation for meditation. (i) Take a comfortable posture, stay immovable in that posture during the entire meditation. It is good to switch off all gadgets. (ii) close your eyes and do the inner eye breathing for five times (iii). Spend few moments in silence to attain relaxation of the whole body. First focus

²⁹ *Jiva Shakti* is nothing else but *Kundalini*. The Life Energy is in a state of passivity, but can be activated and made dynamic. In the *Youtube* under "Ashwini Mudra" some exercises are demonstrated.

³⁰ The chakras have been assigned colours by modern New Age Yoga Gurus in order to facilitate the students to focus attention on a particular Chakra at a time

³¹ Basing on the poetry of Dante Alighieri, the "Divine Comedy", Italian painter Gustave Dore has made an artistic presentation of the Beatific Vision, with a brilliant white light at the centre. The imagery is related to St. Francis of Assisi also. https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Beatific_vision. So, we can also characterise, "Bright violet light" as "Brilliant White Light".

your attention on the eyes and repeat, 'I am relaxing' a few times. These steps are common for any type of meditation.

Step two: Focussing on the Chakra: Let us do the meditation on the first chakra, the root chakra. Focus your attention on the area of the Chakra- lower abdomen and the feet. Breathe deep so that the breath is absorbed by the life cells of this area. Breathe in and out, say five times.

Step three: Purification: Become aware of any bad habits you have, or any problem of meaninglessness, addiction, natural weaknesses, lack of self-confidence, lack of belief in yourself and the like. Then focus on the seventh chakra – the Brilliant Violent Light. Imagine vividly the radiations of the light flowing into you body and coming down to the root chakra and eliminating all negativities and deficiencies in the chakra.

Step four: Positive Affirmations: This is an important step. Repeat the affirmations given above in the above column under Root Chakra. Add your own³².

Step five: Contemplation: Shift your attention again to the seventh chakra and remain in total silence, surrendering yourself to the Divine Consciousness. Remain in silence till you feel peace and calmness. If you consistently persevere, the zeal will be reached which is announced by the sages: "He who knows that Supreme Brahman becomes very Brahman" (Mundaka Up.: III:2,9).

The above meditation is just a glimpse into a long and very complex tradition that aims at liberation. The *Yoga-chakra* meditation techniques give an exalted position to the human body, and provides methods to elevate it to the realm of divine significance. Without body, there cannot be soul (atman), and the liberation of the latter needs the collaboration with the former. This is done by spiritualising the body and every life cell in it. Ultimately it is a realisation of the union of the human energy body with the divine energy. In this tradition energy (*shakti*) is itself conceived as divine and even the divine is defined in terms of it.

CONCLUSION

The question remains why the particular soteriological doctrine delineated above, especially in part one, is 'unique spiritual identity'? It can be characterised as 'unique' because it is most authentic and primordial in the Vedanta tradition. In the Vedas the concept of Brahman as Ultimate reality is absent as it holds on to polytheism. The concept of Brahman evolved in the Upanishads and proclaimed as the Ultimate Reality. The soteriological search for liberation from *samsāra* gave rise to the discovery of *ātman* as well as to its identity with Brahman. The lack of knowledge of this fundamental truth, is called 'ignorance' (*avidyā*) which is the basic reason for transmigration (*samsāra*). The realisation that individual *ātman* is really Brahman, is the unique spiritual identity for a person undergoing limitless number of births and deaths. Rightly therefore the Upanishad affirms 'being Brahman he goes to Brahman'.

To conclude, let me cite a *mantra* from the Upanishad dated sixth century before common era:

From the unreal lead me to the real,
From darkness lead me to light,
From death lead me to immortality.
(Brihadāranyaka Up. I: 3, 28)

³²The affirmations should be in the present tense without any negative terminology as the unconscious mind does not understand past and future as well as negative language.

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