

RESEARCH ON IMPORTANCE OF YOGA AT AN EARLY AGE

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ABSTRACT

When we think of what yoga can contribute to scientific research, and especially to research in the field of psychology, we can think of two entirely different types of research: psychological research about yoga and yoga research about psychology, or to say it even more succinctly, research *about* yoga and research *in* yoga. The first type of research, research *about* yoga, works within the limits of existing science, and distills from the Indian tradition only those theories and techniques that science can assess by its own well established research methods. Following this approach, one can look, for example, at the various schools and sub-cultures that together make up the Indian tradition as a source of practical techniques to produce positive psychological or physical change. One can then 'administer' such techniques to groups or individuals and test the result with the well-established research procedures of mainstream psychology (Mohan, 2001; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). The Indian traditions claim that the inner realms they explored contain not only the dark subconscious corners associated with the Freudians, but also a wide range of more uplifting subtle worlds. Experience confirms that, following their methods, one can find in them not only the origin of much of our ordinary behavior, and with that effective means for therapy, but also more subtle and intense forms of happiness, love, beauty, harmony, truth and meaning, different varieties of intuition, a deep sense of oneness with others and the world, a sense of one's "eternal" identity, and ultimately even the possibility of what feels like a direct contact with the Divine. It seems then very much worth the effort to explore the second option, that is to use) yoga-based methods of enquiry, yoga-based "rigorous subjectivity" to develop a powerful and effective science of the entire domain of inner "psychological" states and processes.

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In this article I will try to show how yoga-based techniques and inner gestures can be used to provide rigour and reliability to research on 'inner' states and processes. The idea of doing so is not new. While there is a considerable amount of research-in which yoga and meditation, for example, are used to provide some form of physical or psychological comfort or well-being, there is hardly any research in which they are used directly to only for the sake of peace and happiness, but also, and often primarily, for the sake of knowledge. One may wonder what it actually is, that stands in the way of taking yoga seriously *as knowledge system*, and why it is so hard to look at yoga and science as equal partners in the research process. Before we get to that, I would like to clarify what it is that I'm proposing in this article, by comparing the basic research strategies of psychology to those of medicine. [In medicine one can distinguish three major research strategies. The first is the age-old method of clinical case-studies. The second consists of in-depth analysis of the anatomical, physiological and bio-chemical processes that take place inside the body. The third consists of large population surveys. All three are important: the first indicates areas that deserve further study; the second is where most of medicine's new insights come from; and the third is used to determine whether medical interventions actually have any statistically significant positive effects in the population as a whole. It may be clear that the second type of research, which deals directly with what happens inside the body, is the only one that produces scientific knowledge of the same type that is responsible for the stunning progress in the "hard" sciences. Medicine would have reached nowhere if it had treated the body as a "black box" or if it had limited itself to the directly observable outer behavior and self-reports of its patients. Yet, strange enough, this is the cul-de-sac which classical Behaviorism has forced onto psychology. Though classical Behaviorism belongs to the past, mainstream psychology still has an inordinate focus on the third of medicine's three methods. The first method is somewhat grudgingly allowed in the form of the qualitative analysis of individual narratives, but the crucial second one is strikingly missing. There are of course psychological experiments, but they are limited to the analysis of outer behavior and the self-reports of others; they are not based on direct observation of what goes on inside the psyche. [In other words, mainstream psychology has till now not managed to find the equivalent of surgical, microscopic and biochemical enquiries. But just as

medicine cannot make progress if it avoids going inside the body, psychology cannot make progress if it does not go inside the "psyche" ..

Similarities between subjective and objective research

To start with the most obvious, yoga and science are both considered difficult, and rightly so. They are not for everyone, and they require the utmost sincerity, intellectual rectitude and effort of the individual. Besides this, they also involve a number of social support structures that consist of the same basic elements. It does happen, for example, that individuals take up yoga or science entirely on their own, but much more typically they do it in small groups, whether these are schools and laboratories, or *gurukuls* and *ashramas*. The idea is clearly that to have some chance of success, the often considerable efforts of the individual need to be supported by a surrounding that shares the same ideals and objectives. Both endeavours are furthermore supported by an extensive body of literature; there is a largely implicit common understanding on what within the specific school is accepted as 'true', what can legitimately be doubted, and what can be fruitfully explored; there are well-established techniques, procedures and 'best practices'; and finally, both in yoga and in science young (re)searchers are guided by a more or less complex network of peers and elders.

Another important area of similarity is that of the assessment of the quality of the work. Though yoga tends to be done in a very different atmosphere, where assessment does not play the same role as in the scientific setting, in principle, the same elements that help to assess the quality of research in the objective sciences can also help to assess with yoga when treated as a subjective research methodology. For example, the quality of the work itself can be assessed in terms of:

- o the clarity, depth, detail, subtlety, and comprehensiveness of observations, descriptions and interpretations;
- o the transparency of the processes followed;
- o the freedom from known sources of error, inconsistencies and obfuscations;
- o the robustness and 'authenticity' of the results;

This article has no other intention than to clarify some immediately practical aspects of the introduction of yoga as an aid to subjective research. Still, this story would not be complete without at least a few words about the philosophical premises on which subjective research in consciousness has to operate.

In this article I've argued that the standard, objective study of yoga misses out on one of the most interesting aspects of yoga: the possibility of using it as a tool for rigorous research in the subjective domain. Contemporary Psychology is confronted with several serious problems that are inherent in its present exclusive reliance on objective research. I've tried to show that the basic set of checks and counterchecks that make up the essential core of science's unrelenting self-critical search for truth can be used equally well for subjective as for objective research, and that several of the most commonly heard objections against subjective research can be shown to rest on little more than unsustainable prejudices. This is of course not to deny that there are difficulties with subjective research: the basic stuff that subjective research has to deal with is not matter, but consciousness, and this has major consequences which should be taken seriously. For the study and mastery of matter, we have learnt to rely on the development of ever more sophisticated mathematical models and physical instruments. For the study and mastery of consciousness these are of little use and science has still to find the appropriate methods, as it is very clear that the ordinary introspection cannot be relied upon. I've argued that the Indian tradition has found many radical ways of dealing with the difficulties inherent in the subjective realm, and I've indicated some salient aspects of two of these methods which together might help to create the 'rigorous subjectivity' that is needed for reliable research in the subjective domain: 1) the liberation of one's consciousness from the workings of the mind, and 2) a drastic purification and transformation of one's nature.

In whatever direction research in yoga may evolve, our first task will be to create the necessary references in terms of yoga study.

- The originality, newness and/or usefulness of the findings. (5)

In both case, the quality of research is to quite an extent dependent on the quality of the instruments used, and in the case of subjective research, the main instruments are the (inner) cognitive faculties of the researcher him or herself.

The Indian solution: Yoga as research methodology

- **Introspection and the witness consciousness**

In the ordinary waking consciousness, introspection is the main route by which we can look somewhat objectively at what goes on inside our own minds, but, as we have seen, it is a method that has several serious drawbacks. Seen from the perspective of the Indian tradition, these shortcomings all derive from the fact that in ordinary introspection, one looks with one part of the surface mind at what happens in another part of the same surface mind. This severely limits our capacity to look inside for three closely related reasons. The first is that the conscious surface mind seems capable of doing only one thing at a time: where we seem to be aware of two or more actions simultaneously, it is argued that we actually jump up and down between them. To use an old Though in modern psychology introspection is not considered a very reliable source of knowledge, it is still used extensively, both in quantitative and qualitative studies. It is clearly seen as the main, if not only way to observe directly what happens inside ourselves, and one finds its language used even in modern texts about Buddhist meditation.

- **The relation between the liberation of the Self, and the transformation of the nature.**

As a very general rule, some preliminary purification of the nature is required for the consciousness to be able to extricate itself from its surface activity: Strong desires, fears, aggression, ego-sense, mental rigidity and ambition all make it more difficult for the Self to stand back and watch. Absolute purity is not essential however, and even a complete liberation of the *purusha* from the *prakriti* is possible while the outer nature is still in a more or less chaotic state. If all we want is an inner sense of freedom, then this does not matter, and keeping the outer nature sufficiently quiet to reach the state of a pure witness consciousness is enough. However, if we want to use yoga to increase our knowledge of psychology, then it is necessary to go further and turn one's outer nature into a reliable instrument with which one's innermost self can express itself.

cases, still be due to a simple lack of inner skill. This is the case for example when one carries no memory of certain higher states due to an undeveloped, unconscious stretch on the way

into and out of that alternative state. As one's experience increases one can then learn to bring more back from these inner states and in the end one can 'bring down' their essence so completely that one can actually be simultaneously in the higher state and in the ordinary consciousness. (12)

One could argue that with this, we have definitely left the terrain of science in favour of some vague, mystical heavens far beyond the shared reality. But as mentioned before. it would be a terrible error to limit psychology to what is understandable by everyone. After all, astronomy would have got nowhere if it had limited itself to what the average layperson can see with his unaided eyes, and neither would have physics if it had limited itself to so much of mathematics as the average postgraduate remembers from primary school. If we consider it good for physics if physicists are allowed to study the extreme limits of where the human intellect can reach, we have little reason to deny psychology the option of exploring the extreme limits of what human consciousness is capable of.

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