

Āyurveda & Yoga – A Series on Āyurveda by Paul Harvey Part Two



A Series of articles exploring the philosophical structure upon which Yoga and Āyurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, are based.

The previous article on Āyurveda and Yoga began with a brief introduction to Indian thought and its links with Yoga. It is sometimes difficult, living within our western culture, to recognise what is Yoga and what is not Yoga.

For instance a text like the Bhagavad Gita, although not part of the “official” Hindu canon, is one of the most precious of the Hindu scriptures. But because it draws many ideas from Yoga and blends them into the story of Arjuna and Krishna it is often taken in the West to be primarily a Yoga text.

With all respect to its great teachings and use of Yoga techniques and psychology, the Bhagavad Gītā is revered by all Hindus as a religious text equivalent to the New Testament for Christians (for further study one could consult “Hindu Scriptures” by R.C. Zaehner).

Therefore we need, in our inquiry into Yoga and its practice, to be able to appreciate where Yoga has influenced Hinduism or where ideas on Yoga are presented with a strong Hindu colouring.

What is certain is that the powerful insights of Yoga have influenced the many faceted religious patterns of India.

A further example of this is the way in which Buddhism draws many ideas from Yoga. Buddha is recorded as having studied the practice and doctrines of Yoga in North India under Udraka Ramaputra.

To quote Emile Senart, who wrote as long ago as 1900:

*“It was on the terrain of Yoga that the Buddha arose;
whatever innovations he was able to introduce into it,
the mould of Yoga was that in which his thought was formed.”*

That is why some ideas about Indian culture, religion, and philosophy can be helpful to appreciate the simplicity, directness and universality of Yoga. This understanding could help to guide us when looking more closely at subjects allied to Yoga. Such an understanding could help to guide us when looking more closely at subjects allied to Yoga, such as Āyurveda and Vedānta.

Yoga and Āyurveda

The previous article also looked at the close link between Yoga and Āyurveda. Traditionally the two systems went hand in hand. In fact Āyurveda relates all disease to energetic or psychological causes; therefore for the physician an understanding and use of Yoga was part of the holistic approach to well being.

Similarly the Yoga teacher was expected to know and be able to apply the principles of Āyurveda to help maintain the harmony of the student's constitution. The purpose of this article is to explore the background which links these two great sciences to Indian thought.

Historical Background to Āyurveda and Yoga.

If we study the history of Āyurveda and Yoga we have to go back to the Vedic period in Indian thought. In the Veda we find references to medicines, drugs, principles of treatment and descriptions of the different parts and organs of the human body.

So the seed of Indian medicine exists within the Veda, in particular the Atharva Veda which deals with anatomy and pathology and gives descriptions of specific drugs.

The primary texts of Āyurveda, the Caraka Saṃhitā and Suśruta Saṃhitā, see their teachings as an expression and refinement of this particular branch of Vedic thought.

Similarly the routes of Yoga are within the Veda and Yoga is one of the six principle systems of Indian thought which have the Vedas as their source. All these six systems are known as Darśana, which means "view" or "a particular way of viewing."

This particular Darśana, Yoga, was formalised by the great sage Patañjali and presented as a practical companion to the teacher and the student. Known as the Yoga Sūtra, it is one of many texts on Yoga.

However, the work of Patañjali is seen to be the most authoritative and complete and is the primary text when looking at Yoga within the framework of Indian thought.

The genius of Patañjali is recognised in that some sources proclaim him to be also the author of the Āyurveda text Caraka Saṃhitā and a work on Sanskrit grammar, the Mahābhāṣya.

Thus Patañjali is said to have presented a means to help people with their physical health, mental well-being, and problems of speech. For these gifts we salute Patañjali.

Philosophical Background to Āyurveda and Yoga

Here Āyurveda and Yoga draw on the same philosophical roots as Sāṃkhya. One core principle is that the human being is a reflection of the universe.

In the West we could express this phenomena as the macrocosm, the universe, being reflected in the microcosm, the individual.

Whatever properties contained in the universe are found in a human being and whatever properties are in a human being are found in the universe.

1. Two Primary Principles – Puruṣa and Prakṛti

Taking this concept one step further we find that both the universal and individual matrix are a combination of two things.

One is matter (Prakṛti) that exists, doesn't see but is constantly changing. The second (Puruṣa) is something other than matter that exists, perceives but does not change.

Yoga expresses matter as the “Seen” and that which is other than matter the “Seer.” The differences between the two principles will become clearer as the idea of what is “spirit” or what is “matter” is developed.

2. Awareness or Puruṣa –

How to describe something that is empty of form has challenged spiritual philosophy for millennia. For example the Bhagavad Gītā in Chapter 2 verse 23 uses poetic metaphor to illustrate that it is beyond the physical elements of Earth, Water, Fire and Air:

*“Weapons do not pierce this,
Fire does not burn this,
And the waters do not wet this,
Nor does the wind cause it to wither.”*

The same dilemma of describing or naming something that is empty of form and unchanging led to the famous maxim from the Upaniṣad Ne'iti Ne'iti or not this, not that.

Here the spiritual inquiry or Jñāna Yoga, eliminates what Awareness is not until we reach the inevitable realization that after eliminating all that can be known we are left basking in the presence of the unknowable.

This is also illustrated by allegorical stories such as from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad Chapter VI Section 12 when the teacher uses a seed from the fig tree to illustrate the difficulty of knowing, yet beauty of realizing the presence of Puruṣa.

The fig seed has all the potential to evolve into a fully grown fig tree yet when you open the seed what do you find? Nothing!

From this story arises the famous Mantra and constant maxim of the Upaniṣad – Tat Tvam Asi – That thou Art.

3. Matter or Prakṛti –

Furthermore both Yoga and Āyurveda respect that even the tools of perception (mind) and interaction (senses) are within the realm of “matter.”

The postulation here is that the mind is not the observer but the lens or camera through which awareness perceives and receives, or in the terminology of the Yoga Sūtra, the Citta is not the Cit merely the vehicle.

Hence the quality of perception depends on the dust on the lens and the work is to clean the lens so clarity can express itself more fluently.

Everything that is observable, the mind, the senses, the body, the objects of perception, the world, the universe, are created from a common source.

How is this?

4. Evolution – Pradhāna or matter in its primordial state

What was it that brought life and movement into Prakṛti or matter, which was inert, certainly with potential and yet without the infusion of awareness?

It is said that when Puruṣa came into contact with Prakṛti when abiding in its root form, known as Pradhāna, it was as if a seed sprouted. This seed Prakṛti multiplied; from this the material world evolved and became what is known as the Seen.

This coming together can be compared to a cosmic ‘big bang’ or even to the outcome of the human act of creation between the two aspects of masculine (Puruṣa) and feminine (Prakṛti).

Here the inert yet potential feminine egg bursts into life and awareness on contact with the masculine seed.

Each needs the other to both offer the movement of life and the expression within form. The ancient philosophy of Sāṃkhya illustrates both the cosmic and human relationship with a simile of the blind person (Prakṛti) and the lame person (Puruṣa).

In that one aspect can move but not have awareness and the other has awareness but is incapable of expressing itself without form.

Furthermore, because of this movement appearing only in matter it appears to possess awareness, but this apparent intelligence is only because of the proximity of the Seer or Puruṣa to the Seen or Prakṛti.

This is the basic premise of Yoga, to work towards allowing the motivation for all our actions to emanate from the source of awareness within us.

The Bhagavad Gītā expresses this relationship eloquently in Chapter 2 verse 50 defining a state of Yoga as ‘Skill in Actions’.

5. Twenty Five Principles (Tattva) –

The balance of Pradhāna or matter in its dormant state with the delicate equilibrium of its core qualities, the three Guṇa (the 3 qualities – sattva, rajas and tamas), has been disturbed and now Rajas is predominant.

6. The Buddhi or reflector of Puruṣa –

The first evolute of change appears in the form of an energetic mass called Mahat (The Great) or Buddhi (Reflector) or subtle Intellect.

Drawn on by the inevitable force of evolution once Prakṛti awakens from Pradhāna, or its root state of equilibrium, it transforms into a state of Mahat (the great one) or Buddhi (the reflector).

With its transpersonal sense of identity it is freer from the demands and blind drives inherent within the individuation of a more fully formed ego state. Thus can reflect more easily the true reality of an experience.

At the level of the individual the term Buddhi is more often used. This describes its quality inherent in that it possesses the potential to know what is the real truth behind the more driven and thus potentially more blind states inherent with the demands of individuation or Ahaṃkāra.

One might recognise the message of Buddhi in moments of clinging to the walls of the ego as the voice of discernment and apparent wisdom to let go or see beyond the demands and limitations of a more personalised sense of individuation.

This is because Buddhi is seen as the subtlest aspect of the individuation process and therefore has the potential to be least affected by the demands and patterns of ego as well as being the closest reflector of the wisdom of awareness.

How much we listen and actualise this depends entirely on our ability to step back to the voice of the Buddhi from the more basic fight-flight-protect 'survival' demands of the Ahaṁkāra or ego.

7. The Ahaṁkāra or personalized sense of Individuation –

Evolution now proceeds towards Ahaṁkāra (Self sense), as yet without "personal" experience, but with the obscure consciousness of being an ego.

Ahaṁkāra is that aspect of individuation or ego sense which drives our everyday existence towards identity and ownership of our subjective experience. Its drives are based on one agenda, that of survival of identity

8. The Tanmātra or subtle seeds from which the elements manifest –

From this apperceptive mass, the process of evolution proceeds in two seemingly opposite directions. Tamas (denseness) predominates in Ahaṁkāra and leads to the world of objective phenomena i.e. matter.

Here we have the subtle characteristics (tanmātra) of the five elements seen as sound, touch, form, flavour, and odour.

9. The Pañca Bhūta or five gross elements of matter –

From these subtle characteristics evolved the five core gross elements (pañca bhūta) we know as space, air, fire, water and earth.

10. The five senses of Knowing (Jñāna Indriya) –

In another direction Sattva (subtleness) predominates in Ahaṁkāra and leads to the world of subjective phenomena comprising the five senses of perception with the senses of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting, smelling.

11. The five senses of Action (Karma Indriya) –

Along with the five senses of perception or ways we know the world we have the five senses of acting or putting out into the world (Karma Indriya) with the senses of speech, grasping, locomotion, elimination and procreation.

12. Manas or the co-ordinating mental faculty of the Mind –

Along with the ten senses (Das Indriya) evolved the mind (Manas), often called the eleventh sense because of its ability to be drawn into whichever sense is predominant.

So reviewing backwards from form to source we have the eleven senses, the five elements with their five subtle qualities, the self-sense Ahaṁkāra, the first movement Mahat or Buddhi and the source of matter Pradhāna.

This gives us the twenty-four aspects of Prakṛti or matter. The twenty fifth aspect is the principle of Puruṣa, unchanging, other than matter and that which invigorates matter with awareness.

The table below outlines and reviews the twenty-five evolutes and their process or sequence of evolution.

Twenty Five Evolutes (Tattva) of Prakṛti evolving from Subtle to Gross Matter

The first (or 25th) principle of Puruṣa, or awareness, is seen for the purpose of analysis and metaphysical exploration as one of the tattva.

But as its essential nature is unchanging it cannot be a direct part of the cycle of change (pariṇāma) and the flow from subtle to gross form.

Though it is an agent or catalyst for change due to its proximity to matter.

Thus the cycle of transformation of matter from root to form begins with:

Root matter or Pradhāna consisting of the three Guṇa abiding in equilibrium. This equilibrium is disturbed by the proximity of Puruṣa and the cosmic dance of evolution commences with the emergence of



Subtle Will known as Mahat or Buddhi



This evolution now extends into Ahaṁkāra or the sense of individuation and expresses itself in two directions.



Sattva Ahaṁkāra is more subtle in terms of the mind and ten senses. Tamas Ahaṁkāra is more gross in terms of subtle elements and form.

Sattva Ahaṁkāra			Tamas Ahaṁkāra	
⇓			⇓	
Mind or 11 th Sense	5 Senses of Knowing	5 Senses of Action	5 Subtle Elements	5 Gross Elements
Manas	Jñāna Indriya	Karma Indriya	Tanmātra	Mahā Bhūta
	Hearing	Speech	Sound	Space
	Feeling	Movement	Touch	Air
	Seeing	Grasping	Form	Fire
	Tasting	Procreation	Flavour	Water
	Smelling	Elimination	Odour	Earth

This is a brief introduction to the theory of evolution drawn from the ancient philosophy of Sāṃkhya accepted by Āyurveda and Yoga as well as other Indian Philosophies and Religions.

The world we see is the combination of all these principles and because they evolve successively one to another, they are interrelated.

What happens in the outside world influences us and what happens in us influences our relation to the outside world.

So, the first axiom of Āyurveda and Yoga is that everything that exists in the external universe has its counterpart in the internal universe of the human being.

The relationship between the ten senses, the mind and the gross and subtle elements will be developed in the next article.

It will also go into the basic concepts of the three Principles or Tridoṣa of Vāta, Pitta and Kapha used in Āyurveda when understanding the energetic constitution of the individual.

However from this article we have a brief introduction to the historical and philosophical foundations of Āyurveda and Yoga influenced by ancient and profound insights of Sāṃkhya.

Plus showing the common ground they share with the third facet of the jewel offered with Indian thought, namely the Veda.

A firm base in understanding the primary principles in Indian philosophical and religious thought will be of great value when moving into a deeper study of Āyurveda and Yoga.

My own study in this vast subject is always incomplete so any misunderstandings or difficulties of clear expression are my limitations and not those of my teachers.

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