

# **ASHTANGA YOGA OF PATANJALI VIS-À-VIS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

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**Abstract:** The present paper explores and elucidates the possibility of Patanjali's *Ashtanga Yoga* in providing solutions to the challenges posed by modern-day rifts and tensions of myriad kinds, including terrorism and geopolitical ones involving many belligerent countries. The paper investigates the aspects of interlinking actions of individuals with the global concerns like increasing violence and environmental threats and how individuals can help in achieving important goals like Universal Peace and making the planet earth environmentally healthy by 2030, which is part of the United Nations' ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), by adopting the yogic principles in their day-to-day life. The above postulation, in which the role of an individual finds a certain accentuation as an agent bringing positive changes in the world, enjoys a definite and firm plinth of the idea that an individual soul has an inherent role in the makeup of cosmic order the philosophers have pondered over since ages.

**Keywords:** Environmental Crisis, Inner Self, Universal Peace, Violence.

## **1. Introduction**

Humans, since times immemorial, have sought safety against fears and threats of all sorts, including the most fundamental

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ones relating to the existence and also the lesser important ones dealing with other needs and paucities. Therefore, the quest to find answers to their agonies, pains, anxieties, depression, distress, and death has made humans ponder the reasons that create the very vortex of negativities in life. They gradually started analysing the world around them and also began to look inwardly within themselves to find suitable answers that could help them counter their miseries (UNESCO ix). Almost every major philosophical system of the world had the same concern for their love (and search) for wisdom, as the literal meaning of the word 'philosophy' goes (*Philo* - Love, *Sophos* - Wisdom).

An effort was made in the Indian subcontinent for such an exploration of wisdom to take the people away from their pains and miseries and lead them to happiness and peace. It was called the Yoga. The philosophical system of Yoga began to gain ground around 2000 years ago. *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali is the most celebrated work of the philosophy of Yoga (Dasgupta 212). Noticeably, Yoga, as an idea of physical wellbeing, has seen a significant spread in recent years. Significantly, the western part of the world has shown a propensity to assimilate it into their lifestyle. A survey conducted in 2016 revealed that 36 million Americans practice yoga, up from 21 million in 2012 (Jarry 1269). "Yoga in America has been bundled and labeled as a way to enhance a practitioner's health by increasing relaxation and cardio-respiratory health, boosting muscular strength, transforming the body's composition, and decreasing levels of stress and anxiety" (Syaman 125).

However, in the light of challenges the contemporary world is facing, it is perhaps needed with its complete repertoire of solutions that also include healing the inner self rather than remaining merely as a distressing physical regimen. The pressing issues of our times have found an unequivocal expression in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including the need for universal peace, prosperity, happiness, and a healthy environment.

Living in the precarious and volatile times of the Russia-Ukrainian Conflict can seemingly be scary indeed as no one knows when the war may spiral out beyond anyone's control whatsoever and assume the form of nuclear war. Moreover, global warming is even surer a threat that looms large over the planet earth. Terrorism, refugee crisis, civil wars, etc., have been the matters of constant crisis calling for lasting solutions. In the preceding century itself, largescale violence in the form of wars on a global scale is testimony to the fact that history has many lessons for humans to learn. However, have they really learnt from the blunders of the past is a big question to ask. The need of the hour is to address the challenges before it is too late to come back from the brink of a catastrophe that will become more certain with every passing moment.

*Ashtanga* (Eight Limbs) Yoga has features that can provide remedies to the ailments of the world that have been underlined by the UN. *Ashtanga Yoga* is a combination of a variety of physical postures (*Asanas*) and breathing exercises (*Pranayama*), leading a person to not only a physically fit life but also to a mental regime where a person, after being dexterous in Yoga, will be able to reign her/his mind (*Chitta*) thereafter, enabling herself/himself exert absolute control over her/his senses leading one to satisfy the desires, the ultimate cause of our entanglement. The senses that lead humans to greed and covetousness, if disciplined with the help of Yoga can help the people of the world achieve the lofty SDGs of the United Nations. Therefore, it is pertinent for us to examine the philosophy of Yoga to harness its wisdom for the welfare of the people and the planet.

## **2. Origin of Yoga**

Knowledge and wisdom stored across geographies over many millennia are supposed to give humans lessons to stay away from pitfalls of all sorts. The Indian Vedic and non-Vedic systems pursued the most vexed questions of life and tried to find the solutions to the problems. Perhaps the oldest and one

of the most profound and impact generating schools of Indian philosophy is Yoga (Radhakrishnan 308).

Although the historians trace the roots of the philosophy of Yoga in the Indus Valley civilisation by associating it with the cult of Pashupati and also the cult of Mother Goddess as the excavations from various Indus Valley sites have furnished the archaeologists and historians with figurines and coins which depict both Pashupati and the Mother Goddess in postures that are typically associated with Yoga. However, the philosophical ideas associated with Yoga gained currency around 2000 years ago when it got its high priest in sage Patanjali, who not only propagated the yogic ideas but also explained his philosophy in the form of aphorisms known famously to the world as 'Yoga Sutra' (Dasgupta 258). Another pertinent point to be made here is that Sankhya is often taken as the theoretical foundation of philosophy while Yoga takes the same into the realm of practicality (Sharma 169).

### **3. The Vortex**

The steps humans take for their welfare often yield results encompassing both positivity and also negativity. The many consequences of the initiatives are not known until they unfold before the world. Such unintended results can be seen in the light of what we call the law of unintended consequences, which is primarily meant to deal within the sphere of economics, but it represents a great potentiality of its application in human life in general. The pursuit of happiness has unintentionally created space for seeds of misery, unhappiness, lust, greed, and destruction. The world has been caught in the quagmire of plastic, global warming, widespread poverty, inequality, terrorism, and an uncountable number of problems (Huesemann 464). To get rid of this paradox that philosophically forms the warp and weft of the phenomenal life, sages and saints from all the world's major religious systems also had ventured to find a solution to the ubiquitous misery and discontentment.

The scramble for more resources to create more and more wealth has been the hallmark of almost every civilisation on Earth; in other words, greed has been the defining element of development. Moreover, scientific and technological advancement has certainly added hubris to human nature blatantly enough to mock the nature worshipers who lost all ground to the creeds that deified reason and logic instead of water, hills, the moon, and the sun. Helios, for example, lost the anthropomorphic importance once it was scientifically established that planets are not humans. In fact, in the wake of the European Renaissance and especially after the Industrial Revolution, humans began to assert themselves more and more and started taming nature to maximise profits. This led to unimaginable exploitation of natural resources of every conceivable sort. Not so strangely, the windfall of this race for more material prosperity has been not only the environmental abyss but also an orgy for bloodshed and violence which might, perhaps, pale all the bloodthirsty kings and emperors of yore. As a result, humans are more unsatisfied, tensed and stressed than ever. Even more distressing is the fact that environmental threats such as global warming, if not checked in time, are going to spell doomsday. If human greed is underlying as a constant the most overt and common reason for human and environmental distress, the lifestyle of Homo sapiens of the contemporary world can certainly be blamed. The restlessness and chaos of the inner self that perturbed the seers, the philosophers and knowledgeable persons for ages know no bounds even today, and a constant quest for peace continues unabated (Sharma and Behura 270). Ironically, it is happening unabated and unchecked despite the fact that we know what lies ahead but do not know how to handle it.

Economic, political, cultural, and above all, technological inequality is marking the modern-day societies of the world more glaringly than ever. While we boast of an egalitarian world order based on fair play, the entire world has more fault lines than in human history. Although the consciousness about the disaster the world is heading towards and an emerging

consensus to contain what imperils the world ecologically and otherwise, there are no clearly defined ways and means to achieve the end that is coming out of the vicious circle the world is trapped in.

To understand the world's current situation regarding the two aspects, we will quickly mention two events, one of which happened a few months ago and the second one was happening while this paper was being written. The first one is the Glasgow summit<sup>1</sup> of the world leaders, and the second is the ongoing military confrontation between Russia and Ukraine. The congregation comprising more than a hundred leaders representing their respective countries and many delegates from all parts of the world did churn for over two weeks to find solutions for the problem that assumed catastrophic proportions. However, the entire exercise at Glasgow could not yield anything concrete because there was no convergence of opinions between the developed and the developing nations. "The approved texts are a compromise," said UN Secretary-General António Guterres. "They reflect the interests, the conditions, the contradictions and the state of political will in the world today. They take important steps, but unfortunately, the collective political will was not enough to overcome some deep contradictions" (United Nations). The biggest and the most apparent contradiction in arriving at any unanimity pertains to the energy consumption of the developed and the undeveloped nations. While already industrialised countries emphasise a reduction in the rate of carbon emissions by switching over to green technologies, the countries which are lagging behind in the race of development have not such a sufficient coffer to bear the cost of the green technology that is costly and beyond their reach because of patent regimes. Moreover, the amount of energy consumption by the rich (both the nations and the people) and the poor is also something that causes grave concerns about the so-called equitable global

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<sup>1</sup>The UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP26) happened in November 2021.

society. "The richest 10 per cent accounted for over half (52 per cent) of the emissions added to the atmosphere between 1990 and 2015. The richest one per cent were responsible for 15 per cent of emissions during this time – more than all the citizens of the EU and more than twice that of the poorest half of humanity (7 per cent)" (Oxfam). According to this report, the high energy consumption rate of rich people around the world is directly related to their lifestyle. However, happiness has eluded humans. While the poor are craving for the basic necessities for themselves, the super-rich are more inclined to invest their wealth in biotechnology to ward off the evils of ageing and even death. In other words, humans are searching for solace for their miseries, pains, unhappiness, and discontent in the world their senses interact with.

Secondly, the world amidst a spree of incessant violence is another big worry of the United Nations, which accords Universal Peace a prime place in its scheme of SDGs. As we have mentioned the violent faceoff between Russia and Ukraine, the importance of the UN's SDGs seems even more pertinent and pressing. When the world sits on the stockpile of nuclear arms, the armed confrontation between the two neighbouring nations has the potential to turn into a full-fledged war between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), led by the United States of America and European nations, which are playing, not so covert, supportive role to Ukraine. A mere thought of a full-scale war between the two is enough to give jitters to every sane individual who can calculate the losses of people and material after World War I and World War II. Interestingly, behind both the environmental degradation and all kinds of violence, there is a common lack of contentment among people and countries alike.

Nonetheless, these vexed questions tormenting human life were present in all ages and spaces. As we have seen, finding permanent solutions to such problems was perhaps the primary concern of the philosophers and sages since time immemorial. The biggest and the most popular exponent of the philosophy of Yoga, Patanjali tried to do the same by providing

deep enumerations of the principles of Yoga and how one can adopt these aphorisms in day-to-day practice to reach the culmination of her journey of life. In his 'Yoga Sutra,' Patanjali postulates *Ashtanga Yoga*, which has the following sets and subsets to be learned and practised to fulfil one's ultimate objectives. In the context of the world's crisis, *Ashtanga Yoga* must be evaluated and examined in light of its metaphysical and beyond phenomenal aspects and its value for practical purposes, which has the potential to serve humanity in its earthly form. Therefore, we will peruse the teachings of Yoga in the light of the health and wellbeing of the people and planet. The study of the *Ashtanga Yoga*, as a cure for the human miseries, becomes important because happiness has more to do with the inner self of the humans rather than what they garner from the gross and physical world around them.

#### **4. The Solution - *Ashtanga Yoga***

The matters pertaining to the inner self of humans form remarkably the focal point of the philosophy of Yoga. "According to Patanjali's definition in the second sutra, Yoga is the cessation of the activities or permutations (*vrttis*) of the *citta*. The *vrttis* refer to any sequence of thought, ideas, mental imaging, or cognitive act performed by the mind, intellect, or ego ... – in short, any state of mind whatsoever" (Bryant xiii).

According to Patanjali, the *Ashtanga Yoga* or the Eightfold pathway to progress (physical, mental and spiritual) of humans is as follows;

- i. *Yama* is the first of the eight limbs, and it corresponds to abstention. *Yama*, exhorts people to stay away from hurting anyone by thought, speech or action. The ten forms of *Yama* are truth, non-stealing, non-violence, kindness, forgiveness, celibacy, inner and outer purity, patience, non-hypocrisy, and moderate diet (Charandas, *Bhakti*, 65). Perfecting the *Yamas* is essential for any Yoga practitioner.
- ii. *Niyama* is a kind of self-culture that comprises contentment, austerity, charity, etc., which is indispensable for the people who want to attain liberation from the entanglement of the



agonies of the world. A Yogi, in order to attain flawlessness for salvation, has to perfect herself/himself in the task of keeping her/his senses acutely disciplined. Her/his losses and gains in the phenomenal world must not have an impact on her/his unperturbed state of calm of his mind that she/he has attained with the help of yogic practices. The practitioner of Yoga needs to surrender herself/himself completely, including one's body, mind, and intellect. The *Niyama* include internal and external *Saucha* (cleanliness), *Santosha* (contentment), *Tapas* (spiritual austerities), *Svadhya* (study of the sacred scriptures and of one's self), and *Isvara Pranidhana* (surrender to God) (Charandas, *Ashtang*, 57).

iii. The *asanas* are physical postures to help a practitioner sit in a steady and comfortable position for periods that often get extended as the level of penance increases.

iv. *Pranayama* is another very important aspect of the *Ashtanga Yoga*. Through *pranayama* the yogi practices certain breathing exercises that deal with the regulation of inhalation, retention and exhalation of breath. By practising *pranayama*, humans attain higher levels of concentration of the mind that help them reign their senses. It is acknowledged as the highest form of *tapas* (penance). It helps the yogi master her/his pranic (breath) energy that, in its turn, helps her/him control the mind and removes all disorders, including the darkness, from the mind of the practitioner and enables her/him to attain true perception.

v. *Pratyahara*: According to the philosophy of Yoga, the control of one's senses and then gradually withdrawal from the objects they yearn for is called *Pratyahara*. In fact, it is the progression of yogic practices towards introversion without which the vision of a yogi will never be attained. If one can control the senses, her/his mind will automatically be in a state of control. However, it is not possible for a yogi to harness it without mastering the *Pranayam* (Charandas, *Bhakti*, 93).

vi. *Dharana*: Through mastering *Dharana*, the yogi fixes her/his mind on the very object of the meditation. The aim of *Dharana* is to make the mind unwavering, unlike the flickering flame of a lamp placed amidst winds. The continued practice of *Dharana*

leads one to the stage of fearlessness that itself is sine-quo-non for the salvation of the yogi from the bondage of all sorts of attraction for the physical world around her/him. It is of five kinds, namely, Thambhani, Dravani, Dahani, Bhradini, and Shankhini (Charandas, *Bhakti*, 94) and these are focused on the five elements earth, water, fire, air, and space, respectively. It is pertinent to underline the fact that according to the philosophy of the Yoga, the fifth element that is space, is the highest of all the five mentioned above, and a yogi attains eternal rest here.

vii. *Dhyana* (meditation) entails an undisturbed flow of yogi's thought on the object of meditation. One devotes all attention to the feet of the Divinity in *Padastha Dhyana* (Charandas, *Bhakti*, 96), and while doing so, the yogi keeps on chanting the eternal syllable OM. This is done in order to make one's mind tranquil and remove all suffering. While in *Pindastha Dhyana*, the yogi focuses on the space between the eyebrows during meditation. Another important meditative emphasis is on *Rupastha Dhyana*, which is the personification of *Dhyana*. In *Rupastha Dhyana* one experiences the entire universe in its most splendid form, and the yogi feels as if s/he is floating on the vast ocean and experiences the unfathomable bliss. *Rupatit Dhyana* is a meditative state beyond all names and forms. In other words, *Rupatit* meditation brings the yogi towards meditating on absolute *Shunya*, which is the highest kind of meditation. Attaining this state symbolises the state of the yogi becoming one with the final reality (Charandas, *Bhakti*, 98).

viii. *Samadhi* is the representation of the culminating step in Yoga. In the state of *Samadhi* mind of the yogi is fully riveted to the object of meditation. It is the highest means to realise the termination of mental alterations, which is the pinnacle of the end a yogi endeavours for through Yoga (*Adluri* 394).

As we can see that all the eight limbs collectively forming the *Ashtanga Yoga* are intertwined with each other that one becomes essential to perfect the other also, there is a movement from one stage to another, typically in the fashion of a ladder in which every single rung is important to collectively perform its role of helping one to ascend. This correlation among the eight

limbs is suitable for the spiritual uplifting of the yogi (Guruprasad 108). However, the modern practices that are prevalent both in India and abroad have by and large taken up one or the other limb, for example, pranayama, to address a variety of asanas to help themselves in fighting stress and many other lifestyle-related problems.

Rapidly emerging in the Western world as a discipline for integrating the mind and body into union and harmony, when adopted as a way of life, Yoga improves physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual health. Yoga offers an effective method of managing and reducing stress, anxiety and depression and numerous studies demonstrate the efficacy of yoga on mood related disorders (Woodyard 53).

## **5. Yoga for Sustainable Health and Wellbeing**

To reach the goal of sustainable health and wellbeing for the people and the planet, we will discuss the importance of *Ahimsa*, *Asteya* (non-stealing), and *Aparigraha* (non-covetousness) from *Yama*, and from the *Niyama* we will discuss *Santosha*. The reason for handpicking these aspects of the *Yama* and the *Niyama* is to underscore the utility of these sets of ethical practices that directly impact the behavioural part of human life.

In the contemporary world, violence has spread its wings to cover almost every single human habitation. It is present, day and night, in a variety of forms ranging from battles and wars between nations, terrorism, and sectarian clashes down to the level of domestic violence. Women and children are the most vulnerable and conspicuous victims of all kinds of violence. Patanjali's Yoga puts a remarkable emphasis on the right conduct. *Ahimsa* is an essential prerequisite for any human who aspires to attain the highest aims of life, i.e. freedom from the bondage of the birth cycles. It is not just Patanjali's Yoga, but almost all the philosophical traditions of the Indian subcontinent preach non-violence as a supreme behavioural virtue. It is also pertinent to note here that many teachings of different schools of Indian philosophy are common, and only

certain subtleties mark their distinctive features. Therefore, when Mahatma Gandhi exhorts people of the world to adopt non-violence, he represents the ideals of the Bhagavad Gita and other philosophies of the land, preaching the same kind of tenets for the welfare of the people. The idea of non-violence also becomes more appealing when violence as a means to achieve stability, prosperity, and quality of human life has failed throughout history. The result of violence to achieve human goals has always been more than miserable. The policies of brinkmanship and sabre rattling have yielded little for humanity. It is the right time to give peace a chance and contribute to the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals.

The Yoga Sutras teach us how to control our senses by controlling our minds. *Prathyahara* is withdrawing (the withdrawal) of senses from all worldly objects and desires, observance of setting up in (the) pure nature of *chitta* (Consciousness) (Prasada 176). The happiness that comes from material possessions does not last for long as the craving for something better than what has been achieved begins to grip humans. It is true that millionaires who want to become billionaires, and once that is achieved, crave to become wealthier. In fact, they often keep on running unsatisfied throughout their lives until the final decay of their physical being. On the other hand, if a person, by practising control of the *chitta*, can harness the senses that deal with a phenomenal world to yield lasting contentment, the resulting happiness will not be dependent upon constant self-aggrandisement by amassing material comforts and wealth.

*Aparigraha* (non-covetousness) is another important ethical content of *Ashtanga Yoga* with the potential to change human behaviour for the welfare of humanity. Patanjali calls for adopting non-covetousness in day-to-day life. The echoes of the same can be found in verse one of the *Ishopanishad*, which exhorts in the very first verse: "Whatever moves in this world is enveloped by Isha. Enjoy it with renunciation; do not covet any man's wealth" (Aurobindo 5). *Aparigraha* is a potent answer to the challenge posed before the world by greed and scrambling

for more, even at the cost of others. Apart from the violence, as we have discussed above, the ecological challenges are a must be negotiated by the present generation to leave the world with enough resources for posterity of the entire life on the planet.

The 1987 Bruntland Commission Report described the concept of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"(UNESCO). Perhaps, the befitting cure for this illness of overexploitation of the natural resources by the present generation lies in the *Niyama* limb of the 'Yoga Sutra.' The *Santosha* (contentment) is a conditioning of the human mind by controlling the desire for more. *Santosha* is a virtue almost every major religion teaches its followers. God has created everything for all His progeny. If one takes more than what one needs, it will amount to greed that is impossible to meet. Therefore, the virtue of contentment must be mastered to leave enough for the needs of the future generations of all living beings.

## 6. Conclusion

It would be factually incorrect to say that prosperity and poverty, peace and violence, and the relation of humans with nature have not been the subject of popular and philosophical discourse before the United Nations came up with seventeen sustainable development goals. In fact, the above goals have always been the major issues that have concerned humans the most. The history of every part of the globe is replete with instances of violence. Almost all the ages across geographies have seen the presence of the binary of prosperity and poverty. The relations of humans with nature have also been the subject of scrutiny for long. But, the exhortation of the UN the attaining the SDGs by 2030 is remarkable for the simple reason that in contemporary times violence, poverty, and ecological distress are on their way to becoming insurmountable challenges or perhaps catastrophes waiting to devour the life from the planet. An insatiable craving for more than what actually corresponds to their needs has led humans to a conspicuous pattern of

overconsumption. It has actually become a part of the lifestyle humans have become used to. This spree has led to an unimaginable level of exploitation of natural resources at the cost of the global environment, which faces the heat of global warming. Apart from the ecological distress, the people themselves have entered into the vicissitude of physical and mental stress threatening their overall wellbeing. Therefore, the call for SDGs to address the challenges not only intends to goad the comity of nations but also appeals to every citizen of the planet to adopt a sustainable lifestyle to help the UN in achieving the SDGs before it's too late.

Remarkably, a careful perusal of the Sustainable Developmental Goals indicates that for goals like universal peace and a sustainable planet, without a resolute moral and ethical framework that deals with day to day lifestyle-related restraints, it will be tough to translate the lofty ambition of SDGs into a concrete reality. This is where even a couple of limbs of the *Ashtanga Yoga*, especially the *Yamas* and *Niyamas* help people achieve the desired end because these ethical observances and restraints, along with breathing exercises and meditation, if practised regularly, will help people lead a distressed, happy, healthy, and need-based life rather than the one driven by greed. For this, we also need to ensure that in accomplishing the SDGs, the Yoga must not remain in the confines of the mega-events organised by the governments of a few nations but reach out to the households of all the parts of the world sooner than later. It requires the people to undertake a resolute and unflinching promise that they will not let greed and covetousness, destroy the planet, which we collectively must look after as present guardians to ensure that the future generation gets their deserving share of resources of the world. To achieve this end, let us imbibe the principles of Yoga as the means in our day-to-day life to make our lifestyle consonant with nature. Let us also strive to pay heed to our inner selves by acting strict martinets to control our *Vritti* and reign our senses which tend to drown us in the ocean of desires.

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