

Introduction

Yoga in Indian Visual Arts

Yoga is a multifaceted concept and could be expounded in different ways. According to the Ancient Cosmological theory, *yoga* is the experimental method. Accordingly, any form in the animate or inanimate world can be the door through which one can rise above the visual world and any mode of action or inaction can be the means of spiritual experience. *Yoga* aids us in finding the least guarded points in our imprisoning envelope, the levels at which contacts with other worlds can be easily established, and the most rapid methods for attaining freedom from consciousness limited to mundane existence to celestial entity.

Yoga reflects the rich philosophical and cultural currents that traversed the Indian subcontinent over thousands of years. Epistemologically, this word has its root in Sanskrit word *yuj*, implying 'to integrate' or 'to unite'. Our senses provide fragmentary and deformed picture of the macrocosm, that is, of the cosmos. To understand the secret nature of things, one must seek it within oneself, where the limitations of senses do not interpose between our consciousness and our perceptions. It is by studying the microcosm that one can understand the macrocosm, that is, to integrate various senses. It is through one's own impermanent being that one can reach the Universal being. It is in the cavern of our heart that we may realise the immensity of spaces. By controlling the vital rhythms, one may escape limitations imposed by time and space. By uniting with the storehouse of eternal power and source of life, one may overcome the fear of death by self realization. By exploring the unknown spheres within oneself, one may visit the celestial and infernal worlds.

There is a link between subtle body and cosmic body which is aptly elaborated in cosmic circles, that is, the *mandalas*. The *mandalas* represent the microcosm of the universe. In Buddhism, the *mandalas* are regarded as not mere images to see, but rather as worlds to traverse.

The Indian tradition of yoga, first codified in the *Yoga Sutra* of *Patanjali* in circa 3rd -4th CE, constitutes one of the world's earliest and most influential traditions of spiritual practices. It has embraced a variety of practices and orientations, borrowing from and influencing a vast array of Indic religious traditions down through the centuries.

Recent years have witnessed an increased production of scholarly works on the *yoga* tradition that demonstrate the important role it has played in the development of India's religious and philosophical traditions.

Yoga practice as presented in the epic *Mahabharata* tends to have four main aspects: general preparations through such things as moral conduct; diet, posture and surroundings; the practice of breath-control (*pranayama*); the withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*); and concentration and meditation.

Yoga and *yogins* occur quite widely in the *Mahabharata* – indeed, the terms occur well over 300 times in the *Shanti Parva* and not far short of 900 times in the *Mahabharata* as a whole. Descriptions of *yoga* are quite frequent in the *Moksha dharma Parva* and a common feature of them is a strong emphasis on discipline and meditation.

In the *Aranyaka Parva Shaunaka* urges *Yudhishira* to pursue success by *tapas* and by *yoga*, holding out the example of the gods who attained their sovereignty because they possessed the power of *yoga*.

The present exhibition, titled- '**Yoga in Indian Visual Arts,**' explores the rich and ancient visual cultural treasure in the form of sculpture, paintings, scrolls, illustrated manuscripts and books which explain the key aspects of *yoga* from micro- to macro- level. The visual imagery depicted in the art works displayed in the exhibition transverse the limitations of the space and time.

The collection has been taken from following foreign museums/institutions:-

1. British Library, London, U.K.
2. British Museum, London, U.K.
3. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, U.K.
4. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, U.K.
5. Cleveland Museum, U.S.A.
6. Los Angeles County Museum of Arts, U.S.A.
7. Asia Art Museum, San Francisco, U.S.A.
8. Brooklyn Museum, U.S.A.

This exhibition is broadly divided into three independent but integrated sections, that is, *jnana, dhayana and karma*.

1. **Jnana:-** it is *jnana* that reveals *Brahman*. *Yoga* is concentration on *Brahman*. *Yoga* is the perfect union of *Jivatma* and *Paramatma* according to *Agni Purana* [ch. 372]. It may be doubted how a mere physical *karma* helps to experience the Supreme Being. Yet, seers assert that there is inseparable connection between the matter and the soul. Matter and soul are merely two phases of single '*Astitva*'.

The objective of *Yoga* is to achieve the union with the Supreme Being, in other words, to achieve salvation. *Yoga* is reintegration with the divine through knowledge. In this auspicious method, the mind has the ultimate objective, i.e., Liberation which finally leads to all attainments.

2. **Dhyana:-** It implies contemplation and meditation. It leads to '*self-realisation*'. It is the path of self directed awareness, realising self and experiencing the Supreme Being. This term is used in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism with somewhat different meaning, yet, influencing each other.

In the *Dhyana Yoga* chapter of the *Bhagavad-gita*, *Bhisma* outlines to *Yudhisthira* the fourfold *yoga* of meditation (*dhyana-yogam caturvidham*), where one should collect together all the senses, fix the mind on a single point and sit like a log of wood and, after passing through further stages of meditation (*vitarka, vichara* and *viveka*.) and finally withdrawing the senses through concentration, one becomes completely tranquil and gains *nirvana*.

According to Patanjali's *Rajayoga*, *Dhayana* is different meditative practice which involves breath control and mental focus.

3. **Karma:-** In the *Yogasutra Patanjali* describes the practice of *yoga* as *abhyasa*, which literally means repetition. *Abhyasa* is thus the repeated effort to maintain a state of mental stability.

This is particularly true of what he calls *Kriyayoga* or the *yoga* of action. Key elements of *Kriyayoga* involve specific forms of repetition. *Patanjali* introduces his notion of *Kriyayoga*, the *yoga* of action or the *yoga* of performance, at the beginning of the second book of his *Yoga Sutra*, the *Sadhana Pada*, or book on spiritual practice.

The soul in the process of several rebirths and due to acquiring vices, which are not natural to its original being, gets depleted. It is through good deeds and actions which includes purity of thought that it can again regain its original virtues. Every religion teaches the right way of life. One, through the actions performed for the welfare of humanity, can elevate ones soul and can come close to the Supreme Being by adopting the qualities- unconditional love, peace, purity, humility, forgiveness, compassion etc. embodied by the latter. *Jataka* stories also are good example to illustrate how *Buddha* went through several births, performing good deeds and actions to finally attain *Buddhahood*. Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad-gita* which is a part of the great epic Mahabharata also has laid emphasis on *Karma*. *Karma*, more specifically good actions is also a method of reintegration with the divine thoughts which ultimately transform in actions, is essential for all human.

Virendra Bangroo
Curator
Exhibition