

Yoga as a Part of Sanātana Dharma

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The definition of religion is not easy as the views on this point are very different. The Indian *Sanātana Dharma*, the “Eternal Order”, is how Indians call their system that has also a connotation that relates to what we call religion. What we understand as Yoga was defined by Patañjali, Svātmārāma, Gorakhnath, and other Yoga masters. Yoga is a part of Sanātana Dharma and is called *Mukti Dharma*, the “Dharma of Liberation”. Yoga as one of the six orthodox philosophies is free from religious traits. The difference between the Indian and Western understanding of Sanātana Dharma is investigated from a practical point of view reflected in the literature and in a dialogue with Indian pandits. The reflection of the Western (namely Christian) understanding of Indian Sanātana Dharma and its effect on the way how Christians look at Yoga is also mentioned.

1 Introduction

The topic of Yoga and its relation to religion are an issue that is a matter of discussion for some time. For some, religion and *darshan*, “philosophy”, are nearly synonyms, for some they are not. The concept of “Hindu religion” [1] – as will be shown later – is also a relatively vague concept, but this is how in the West and now also in the East, the Brahmanic tradition [2], plus the six philosophical *darshans* are often called. As pointed out also by Siddharth (personal communication with the author, 2019), the need to define “religious identity” of the Indians was originally more needed for non-Indians than for Indians. Still, by now religious identity is a formally acknowledged concept. At times, also the other philosophical and religions systems present in India are included in the concept of Sanātana Dharma [3].

The concept of religion is not easy to define and there are a number of ways how it is done. Thus, in religious studies references (Horyna 1994, 11–15, 18–19), after showing how difficult it is to define religion, arrives at the statement that religion defines the relationship of humans to God (Horyna 1994, 19). There is a number of views on this point. Usually religion links humanity with the “transcendental” or “spiritual” elements (Morreall and Sonn 2013, 12–17), others consider the procedural aspects: “*Religion is a non-divisible system of beliefs and processes related to sacred things, i.e. things set apart or prohibited, that unite to the one and the same moral association called the church*” (Durkheim 1964, 25). Štampach (1998, 30) described it in a way that religion is a socially anchored relationship of human to the numinous transcendence.

Horyna (1994, 18) in his definition of religion in the context of religious studies admits that neither religious studies nor any other science has a generally accepted definition of religion. Thus, religious studies deal with real aspects of religion in various cultures or communities. They are usually studied under three areas: (1) Religiously interpreted realities (“sacred reality”); (2) Experiences interpreted in religious context (e.g. mystical experience); and (3) Religious interpretation of standards (religious rules of normative, “sacred” character). Another concept is faith, which here relates people to the Sacred (Horyna 1994, 23–25).

The broader essence of religion can perhaps be described as human beings’ relation to that, which they regard as Holy, Sacred, spiritual, or Divine. Worship is probably the basic element of religion, but moral conduct, right belief, and participation in religious acts are usually also elements of religious life. In practice, a religion is a particular system, or a set of



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systems, in which doctrines, myths, rituals, emotions, institutions, and other similar elements are interconnected.

The definition of Yoga relates either to the process or the goal. Patañjali defined the process saying that it is the cessation of the movements of the mind continuum (Patañjali 1911, 9). Vyāsa, in his commentary to the first verse of the first chapter of the Patañjali *Yoga Sūtras*, wrote that Yoga is *samādhi* (Patañjali 1986, 62).

The Sanskrit word Yoga means “yoking”, or “union” (Patañjali 1968, 73–77). It also refers to one of the six classic systems, *darshans*, of Indian philosophy. Its influence has been widespread among many other schools of Indian thought. Its basic text is considered to be the *Yoga Sūtras* by Patañjali (2nd century BC?). There are, however, almost countless schools and sub-schools of Yoga, which provide an unimaginable wealth of practices and models of Yoga.

As mentioned also in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (n.d.), “the practical aspects of Yoga play a more important part than does its intellectual content, which is largely based on the philosophy of Sāṃkhya, with the exception that Yoga assumes the existence of God”. Further, Yoga of Patañjali defines the state of *chitta* (working space or continuum of the mind) as key factor to success. Yoga holds together with Sāṃkhya that the achievement of spiritual liberation (*moksha*) occurs when the individual self (*Purusha*) is freed from the bondages of matter (*Prakriti*) that have resulted due to ignorance (*avidyā*) and illusion (*maya*). The Sāṃkhya view of the evolution of the world through identifiable stages, leads Yoga to an attempt to reverse this order, as it were, so that a person can increasingly de-phenomenalize himself until the Self re-enters its original state of purity and consciousness. Once the aspirant has learned to control and relax from the obscuring mental activities of his mind and has succeeded in ending his attachment to material objects, he will be able to enter *samādhi*, i.e., a state of union with the absolute consciousness that is a “blissful, ecstatic” [4] union with the ultimate reality (*brahman*). The one ascetic consequence of the Sāṃkhya–Yoga is an emphasis on austere asceticism and a turning away from the ritualistic elements of Hinduism coming from the Brahmanical sources.

There are a few points that would need elaboration. Some interpretations consider Íśvara to be equivalent to the Creator, others – as mentioned below – identify it with the absolute consciousness. Further, *avidyā* (“ignorance”) and *maya* (the “veil” that gives rise to incorrect interpretation of all what is perceived) give birth to *jñāna* (the usual knowledge of the multiple perceivable entities). And as the *Shiva Sūtra* (2007,

l.2) declares: “*Jnanam bandhah – [This] knowledge causes bondage [in maya]*”. Therefore, one has to be able to relax from it (Timčák 2018, 23). *Samādhi* as described by Vallalar is a “*melting into the Absolute Consciousness*” (Vallalar 2016, vii). All this process of “relaxing” from *avidyā* and “melting into Being” through a *samādhi* is not depending on rituals or faith in religious systems.

Regarding the question of process-oriented systems of Yoga and Yoga-darshana being a part of religion, Eliade sees darshans as “philosophies” (1997, 48) and for him Indian religion is Brahmanism. There are, however, other Indian philosophies and religions that do not fall into the category of Brahmanism (or *Vaidika Dharma*). Werner describes Yoga as a classic darshan that was originally a tradition that developed in the forest schools and ashrams where the practical aspects [5] were preferred over the philosophy. Still, it developed its own philosophy. Werner also mentions that Yoga does not need rituals in achieving its aims (Werner 2008, 65). On the other hand, Vedic religion does not rely on Yoga texts or practices. Fišer (in Zbavitel 1964, 39–40) reminds once again, that the term Hinduism was fostered by Western researchers in order to “hide the inadequate knowledge of the jungle of vast cultural, philosophical and religious heritage of Indian society”. Merhaut (in Zbavitel 1964, 43–45) declares that darshans are philosophical ways how to grasp the object of philosophical enquiring. He cites Vreede who holds that the individual darshans are not antagonistic but form a unified order. Thus, Nyāya deals with logic, Vaiśeṣika with physics, Sāṃkhya with classification of parts as well as forms of being, Yoga deals with the method of human personality development, Mīmāṃsā deals with ethics and Vedānta with metaphysics. Neither of them links to what in West is understood as religion. The understanding of the core of all the darshans was gradually deepening throughout the history, also due also to the interaction with “competing”, e.g. Buddhist philosophies.

It can be noted, that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* offers the opinion that is of interest to note, that since the late 19th century, Hindus have reacted to the term Hinduism in several ways. Some have rejected it in favor of indigenous formulations. Others have preferred “Vedic religion” using the term Vedic to refer not only to the ancient religious texts known as the Vedas but also to a fluid corpus of sacred works in multiple languages and an orthopraxy (traditionally sanctioned) way of life. Still others have chosen to call the religion Sanātana Dharma, “Eternal Law”, a formulation made popular in the 19th century and emphasizing the timeless elements of the tradition that are perceived to transcend local interpretations and practice (Baktay 1990, 16–20). Finally, others, perhaps the majority, have simply accepted the term

Hinduism or its analogues, especially *Hindu Dharma* (Hindu moral and religious law), in various Indic languages.

Hindus subscribe to a diversity of ideas on spirituality and traditions, but have no ecclesiastical order, no unquestionable religious authorities, no governing body, nor a single founding prophet. Hindus can choose to be polytheistic, pantheistic, monotheistic, monistic, agnostic, atheistic or humanist (Lipner 2009, 17–18 [6], Kurz 2008, Gandhi 1996, 3 [7]). Because of the wide range of traditions and ideas covered by the term Hinduism, arriving at a comprehensive definition is difficult (Flood 1996, 6). A Hindu may, by his or her choice, draw upon ideas of other Indian or non-Indian religious thought as a resource, follow or evolve his or her personal beliefs, and still identify as a Hindu (Long 2007, 35–37).

Scholars state that Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain identities are retrospectively-introduced modern constructions (Orr 2014, 25–26, 204). Inscriptural evidence from the 8th century onwards, in regions such as south India, suggests that medieval era India, at both elite and folk religious practices level, likely had a “*shared religious culture*” (Orr 2014, 42, 204), and their collective identities were “*multiple, layered and fuzzy*” (Orr 2014, 204). Even among Hinduist denominations such as Shaivism and Vaishnavism, the Hindu identities, states Leslie Orr, lacked “*firm definitions and clear boundaries*” (Orr 2014, 42).

2 Yoga and Religion

As shown above, Yoga means a re-union of the individualized consciousness with the universal consciousness (called also Ultimate reality, Absolute consciousness etc.). From procedural point of view, apart from ascetic observances, Yoga has different tools for achieving *samādhi* than the sāmkhyan way does (Larson and Bhattacharya 2014, 162, 223, 352). It has to be noted that Yoga has a great number of pathways (*tantra, hatha, rāja, jñāna, dhyāna, bhakti, karma* etc.) that use specific processes for achieving *samādhi*. *Samādhi* is of a number of types. Patañjali (1979 33–40, 72–88, 127, 158–172, 249–250) defines *samprajñāta, asamprajñāta, savitarka, nirvitarka, savichara, nirvichara* (these are called *sabīja*) and *nirbīja, samyama (dhāraṇā + dhyāna + samādhi)* and *dharmameghā samādhi*. It is also important to note that Yoga as we know it from the various works on Yoga like Patañjali *Yoga Sutras, Hatharatnāvalī, Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā, Gheranda Samhita, Goraksha Śatakam* etc., do not include elements of religious processes as known from the Vedic religion (see also Werner 2008, 65–66).

Yoga, when practiced by Indians or other nationals belonging to the Vedic religion (“Hinduism”) naturally may be merged into a fusion of Yoga and faith. Nevertheless, Yoga is well distinguishable from faith. Further, as Yoga started to spread around the globe, reference to Hinduism in its context usually disappear.

Ambikananda (email conversation with the author, 2018) notes that “[*T*]he word *darshana* comes from the root verb ‘*drs*’ which means ‘to see’. It is perhaps possibly translated as ‘a view taken’. However, the translation of *theology* is closer to what we understand as such in Hinduism than when it is translated as ‘*philosophy*’. In the West, generally speaking, *philosophy* is shaped outside the boundary of religion. That is not the case in India. So neither *Samkhya* nor *Yoga* are isolated from the religion of India, they were arguments made within the context of the religious thought and tradition of their time and as such are *theologies*. In fact, they are two of the ‘*accepted*’ or ‘*orthodox*’ *theologies* within Hinduism. You mention Patañjali’s *Yoga Sutras* indeed, Patañjali’s *Yoga Sutra* is the *orthodox* and *theologically accepted* text of the *Yoga Darshana* of Hinduism.”

This seems to mean that Sāmkhya and Yoga are part of Hindu theology. It is difficult to agree with this as Sāmkhya is a non-theistic philosophy and Yoga refers to Īśvara but does not refer to anything related to Vedas, even though Indian yogis accept the authority of the Vedas.

In the 1990-ies in Czechoslovakia there was a big (ideologically motivated) discussion about Yoga and its being or not being a part of Indian religion as well as about Yoga being or not being a religion. All, who knew Yoga were of the opinion that Yoga is not a religion as Yoga did not fulfil the criteria of religion – a point that was discussed earlier. In a presentation of Dojčár, a religious scholar, on a Yoga Conference, it was said that “*It is important to distinguish between Yoga as such and the various applications of Yoga in different social, cultural and religious contexts. In the first case Yoga is a spiritual discipline and a path of spiritual development that is based on universally valid principles of spiritual life, In the other case it is a phenomenon of the so called new or non-traditional religiosity. These two meanings cannot be combined or interchanged and mutually non-transferable. Religion is a socially anchored relation of man and the numinous transcendence.*” (Dojčár 2001). In any case religion is a highly complex phenomenon that incorporates myths, rituals, prayers, ethical standards, community and similar aspects (Gálik and Gáliková 2017, 4).

On the background of the aforementioned explication, Yoga seems to be a specific type of relationship with the numinous transcendence that is based on direct experience and is not

tied to any elements typical for religions of institutionalized or social type. Thus, even though religious scholars research the phenomenon of numinous experience, religions cannot monopolize the “right to such experience”. The absence of the religious elements – according to our view, makes it impossible to put Yoga-darshana into the category of religions.

Various authors like Werner (2008, 64–65) say that Yoga as a darshan was first a method developed in ashrams as a special area of training, but it developed also its philosophical system to give a reference frame to the training.

Werner, does not seem to see a link between Yoga or Sāmkhya and religion. Eliade (1997, 50–51) considers Yoga as a practical system and a philosophy. He states that Sāmkhya is an atheistic system, whilst Yoga is theistic.

Presently, in the UK a new wave of discussion about Yoga as a part of “Hindu religion” or its independence from religion started, due to an emerging pressure from UK government related institutions that would like to have Yoga teaching standardized (IYN 2018). This is in turn due to an exponentially growing wellness and fitness industry that needs simple, formalized Yoga training devoid of any mystical or spiritual elements.

It also brings up the question, who is qualified to teach Yoga (here Yoga means not only *āsanas*, but the whole spectrum of yogic practices). Ambikananda (email conversation with the author, 2018), holds that “*I do not believe we have to be Hindus to practice Yoga nor do we have to be Hindus to teach Yoga. It can indeed, be taught outside of a ‘religious’ context if you are teaching simply asana and a bit of pranayama. Once you go into its theology and start teaching that... well, it becomes more complex and people should know the limitations better than they do now. For example, one of the fastest growing ‘yogas’ in the States is ‘Christian Yoga’. Now, there are some very real and definite differences between the Yoga-darshana and Christian theology. Which one is going to be subverted, do you think?*”

Whilst there is no evidence of the existence of Yoga theology (of the Western type), it appears as if Yoga should be taught by a Hindu, as otherwise the deeper essence of Yoga is incomprehensible for a Yoga teacher not familiar with “Hindu religion”. Thus, even though it is true that many Yoga teachers had not studied Indian philosophy, but this depends on their understanding of Yoga. It is also true that to master the essence of any Yoga system needs a lot of study (theoretical and practical). Nevertheless, it is not a “theological” study, but the study of the processes and aims defined within a given school of Yoga.

The great popularity of Yoga evoked an equally wide spectrum of Christian reactions ranging from concordance to discordance, as many Christians do practice Yoga (Manjackal 2018). Jain (2012, 1–8) investigates the ways of transforming Yoga from its “pre-colonial” forms to the present multifaceted but mainly postural Yoga. She notes that some Christians call Yoga demonic due to fear from eastern influence. Some Hindus call postural Yoga a Yoga designed for business purposes and call for recognizing all the structural aspects of Yoga. She also notices that Christian communities designed a number of applied Yoga types such as Christian Yoga or Holy Yoga, where Yoga is claimed to provide a universal set of techniques that can be used to strengthen a Christian’s relationship with Christ.

Malkovsky (2017, 34–36) relates that he as a theologian gained much from practicing postural Yoga. Then he continues to analyze the Patañjali *Yoga Sūtras* from the point of view of benefits to a Christian. He also expresses a view on *Īśvara-pranidhāna* – the last point of the *niyamas*. The term *Īśvara* which – as it was mentioned above – in fact covers a wide range of interpretations from Lord, Creator to the Absolute Consciousness. *Pranidhāna* also has a number of interpretations from surrendering (our deeds) to *Īśvara*, to acknowledging that we are “players” in the grandiose project of manifested existence evoked by *Īśvara*. He then compares the differences between the perception of God by Christians and Yoga, though he notes that postural Yoga does not deal with other *angas*, “limbs” of Yoga. His conclusion is that postural Yoga and Christianity can be reconciled and practiced one along the other. He recommends to the Christian critics of Yoga that there is little doubt regarding the validity and significance of the Yoga experience of interiority, spirit, and transcendence.

Ambikananda (2018) further notes: “*To deny that Yoga is a part of Hinduism is a cultural misappropriation that is shameful and one that Western yogis have indulged for far too long.*” This view is quite close to the observations of Veer (2009, 263–278) that in India Yoga became a “cultural heritage” and became also a part of nationalist politics.

There have been Catholic monks like Déchanet (1965) [8], who discovered also that practicing Yoga helped them in both health-wise and in their Christian life. Also, it was found that through “Christian Yoga” religious people, who are dissatisfied with the standard tools of their religion, often have the desire to get deeper in their spiritual quest and for that purpose they start using Yoga. At present there is a vast number of publications and organizations that offer support in this direction (like Christian Yoga Association). Still, as Yoga

is not a part of the Christian theology it was met by dislike in the Christian hierarchy. In 1989 though, The Congregation for Matters of Faith issued a document signed by Cardinal Ratzinger (the later pope Benedict XVI.), which admitted that certain spiritual techniques that come from Orient are used by Christians. Here TM, Zen and Yoga were included. They were included because of their non-religious character (Ratzinger 1998).

The Catholic view on Yoga also underwent some changes. Presently Yoga and its position from such point of view is starting to be freed from some suspicion of its being a risk. Kalliath (2016, n.d.) gives that “[t]here are scholars who argue that yoga has nothing to do with any religious tradition, although it should be recognized that yoga is, by and large, associated with the Hindu dharma and way of life. Yoga was a discipline and a way of life for seekers and seers in their quest of the Divine even before organized religions came into existence. We can go so far as to say that it is encrypted in the collective DNA and chemistry of the Indian psyche and is now being accepted globally as a way of life beyond religious bias and geography. Yoga has already become the patrimony of humanity, a unique contribution of India to the whole humanity.”

Kalliath (2016, n.d.) concludes that “[p]erhaps Christian Yoga offers a new methodology for exploring an Asian version of Christ. It is all the more important for the Church in India to explore the promise of yoga since our attempts at inculturation have lost momentum. If the initiative for Indianization comes from the people at the rank and file, it will be more likely to be accepted and to endure. There can be no doubt that yoga has immense potential for being an Indic expression of the ‘Joy of the Gospel’. The promise of yoga is that it would indeed help us live out the identity Jesus ascribes to us when he says, ‘You are [already] the light of the world’, words that are so reminiscent of the Buddha, who says, *atma deepo bhava* (Be a light unto yourself)! It is precisely along these lines that we can present the role of yoga in Christian spirituality as a veritable way (*sadhana*) to the inner sanctum of our being – the Kingdom of God Within.”

Jain (2017, 1–7) offers more information on new “Yoga strains” – there are also *Yahwe Yoga* and *Christ Centered Yoga*, *WholyFit* or *PraiseMovers*. Evidently the opposition from traditionalist churches created a new way of presenting Yoga to various interest groups. She cites a number of Catholic priests, who acknowledge that Yoga brought them closer to God. She suggests that Yoga, has never belonged to any one religion, but has always been packaged in a variety of ways. Thus, history has shown that people whether with or without religious affiliation can practice Yoga without losing their faith. As the question of various concepts of God – they are

not really an issue in a commercial postural Yoga. Those few, who care about the philosophical aspects of Yoga, could decide in what way Yoga could support their quest for holistic health and/or spirituality.

Corigliano (2017, 1–12) considers it natural that Yoga and Christianity not only meet but have vital interactions that may lead to a number of positive effects on Christian people of all ages. She also cites the mobilizing effect of Western Yoga practice to Indians, who seem to have lost enthusiasm for Yoga. Similarly, Stoeber (2017, 1–17) relates that an Indian/Hindu organization (Hindu American Foundation) launched a “Take Back Yoga Campaign” in 2008. This reflects the fear of cultural misappropriation of Yoga by Westerners.

Stoeber cites also that purely physical Yoga may lead to narcissist attachment to body, what is true. He also discusses the doctrinal issues that tend to appear in such a context. He mentions the issue with *mantras*. It is an interesting point, as – in principle – both Christianity and Yoga uses *mantras*. Thus “*O Lord have mercy on me*” is a *mantra*, the *rosary* is used like a *mala*. Still, some *mantras* can be translated in an Indian way (like *Om namo Bhagavate Rudraya* meaning a remembrance of Lord Rudra), or in a Western way – remembering the Absolute consciousness (which is the concept behind Rudra).

In a study related to *Transnational Transcendence* (Csordas 2009), one chapter is devoted to *Global Breathing* by P. van der Veer. The author analyzes the role of Yoga in the rise of nationalism in India and later the spread of Yoga related spirituality in the US and in the West in general. Though his definition of Yoga is very imprecise (“*Historically yoga is an ancient system of breathing and body exercises.*” Csordas 2009, 265–266) and he does not seem to have read the key works on Yoga [9], he makes an interesting point on a possible cause of Indians perceiving Yoga as a national heritage item and that Westerners often took Yoga as a new tool for Eastern type of spirituality as opposed to Western materialism.

He observes that Vivekananda (disciple of Ramakrishna) was able to present Yoga to the Western world as a system of core Indian spirituality devoid of any specific devotional context (thus it does not need temple worships and theologian debates). He also informs that Yoga has become a political tool (“national heritage” issue) (Csordas 2009, 267). This dilutes Yoga and could make it more difficult for Christians to adapt yoga techniques even for its health or spiritual benefits. On the other hand, Indians may feel that Yoga is a part of their religious tradition and can be transmitted only by persons well versed in Hindu religion, i.e., mostly by Indians.

The book *Pensée Indienne et Mystique Carmélitaine* of Swami Siddheshwarananda (1974) was translated into English as *Hindu Thought and Carmelite Mysticism* (1998). So, the translation of the term Indian may affect the interpretation of the inner meaning of the world.

The same book mentions also the difference between religion and spirituality discussed above: “*Religion erects barriers between men because it rests on concepts which are provocative slogans and rallying points. That is why there cannot be amity between particular religions if one considers doctrinal and theoretical values. The word ‘spirituality,’ closer to our ideas, is of a more universal order: it designates this life which expands slowly in the deepest part of ourselves and which is indefinable because it is ceaselessly renewed.*” (Siddheshwarananda 1998, 3).

When investigating the question of who is entitled to practice and/or teach Yoga it is necessary to note that authorities like Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Sivananda, Swami Satyananda or Swami Rama accepted also foreigners into the population of their followers. Historically many Yoga *āchāryas* transmitted Yoga knowledge to Tibet, Nepal, China and other Eastern countries, where they are practiced even today, but sometimes under Buddhist intellectual environment. Later, many Yoga *āchāryas*, “teachers”, left India for the West and taught Yoga there. They did not demand a conversion to the Hindu religion. This export of *āchāryas* happened in spite of the fact that yogis who were Brahmins were considered polluted if they left India and foreigners a priori were considered as *mlecchas*, “impure ones”. Impurity is considered as a barrier for Yoga *sādhana*. Thus it is more the level of spiritual maturity that is important for Yoga *sādhakas*, “practitioners”.

Yoga is indeed a part of Indian spirituality and culture. Nevertheless, it is also true that it is “an intangible cultural heritage of humanity” as endorsed by the UNESCO (2016). The experience of the last century has shown that Yoga can bring the same effect whether followed in India or in the West, provided that it is not a commercial postural Yoga. In the present, attention has shifted from the non-physical aspects of Yoga to the physical ones (the majority of Yoga practitioners practice *āsanas*, “postures”). We have to say that this also happened in India, where swami Gitananda and others even started Yoga competitions and there are efforts to get Yoga into the Olympic Games (this is also supported by International Yoga Federation that initiated National and World championships in Yoga).

When the present author was complaining against this new tendency to shift the attention even further from the essence

of Yoga, one swami Shankarananda (2003) wrote [10]: “*Here in India we have yoga competition for 2000 years in many Kumbha Melas, where all the yoga masters, yogacharyas, sadhus, yogis come together each year. We have pranayama competition and philosophical competitions because yoga competition is our tradition. The Yoga Competition was born in India. The Yoga Federation of India, Indian Yoga Federation, Yoga Confederation of India, North India Yoga Federation, South North Yoga Federation, World Yoga Congress of Pondicherry, World Yoga Society of Calcutta, Vivekanda Kendra Yoga Foundation, play yoga competition, Indian Yoga Championship, Indian Yoga Cup, States Yoga Championship and World Cup, because for many years is OUR TRADITION, because we are Indians and most of us are Hindu... In our land Mother India, our government supports the promotion of yoga sport in each University and High School by supporting Yoga Competition, because it is our TRADITION. We have in India a very nice book we call Mahabharata. Part of this book is another text, the Yoga Sastra, that most people call Baghavad Gita. In Yoga Sastra, Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna about Life and Yoga. Because Life is Competition. How to fight in the war. Because the war is the big Competition, like Mahabharata. Krishna teaches about attitude in action. Krishna teaches this in the war to be a yogi, and this attitude we teach in the game of yoga sport... Sports is Health and health is Yoga.*”

Thus, it cannot be said that it is only the Western concept of Yoga that shifted the attention from Patañjal’s Yoga or true Hatha Yoga to *āsana* competitions and thus to a commercial approach.

3 Yoga and Science

Swami Ambikananda (email conversation with the author, 2018) wrote: “*My inbox has been inundated with Yogis very definitely disturbed by my referring to Yoga as an intrinsic part of the Hindu religion and my refusal to accept that it is a science. Still, it is something that may depend on the definition of the essence of yoga. The root sci refers to knowing and e.g. Jnana is knowledge. Yoga is about knowing the Self, even though this is imprecise as it is impossible to know the Self as it is the Self who is the sakshi – witness of everything.*”

Yoga was submitted to science-based research and it was shown that it has definite health benefits (Rama, Ballentine, and Ajaya 1976), but is in itself not a science in the Western sense.

Swami Rama of the Himalayas, in a foreword to the book of Justine O’Brien, *A Meeting of Mystic Paths* (1996, ix), wrote: “*The word yoga is much misunderstood in the Western hemi-*

sphere; some see yoga as a fad, and others as a kind of religion. Actually, yoga is a systematic science, a set of techniques, and while yoga itself is not a religion, its practical teachings are an integral part of the great religions of the world.”

4 Conclusions

Because of the difficulties in defining exactly what a religion is and because Yoga is also understood in a number of different ways, it is possible to conclude that Yoga is an precise system of practices, *independent* of beliefs or rituals even though the defined practices always relate to spirituality (i.e. to the relation between the individual self and the transcendental Self).

Yoga is one of the six classic philosophical systems (*darshans*) but seems not to be dependent on the Vedic religion, or Hinduism. When speaking about Vedic religion, the ritualistic part of the Vedic heritage (given mainly in *Yajurveda*) is meant here. The subsequent teachings of Yoga masters known as *Upanishads* the emphasis is shifted to inner ways of discovering the Transcendental reality (Aurobindo 1981, 4). Thus, *Katha Upanishad*, e.g. mentions Yoga in a couple of verses, e.g. I. 2, 12, where *Adhyātma-yoga* is mentioned; II. 3, 10–11, 15–17, where a version of the “*chitta writti nirodhah*” process is defined (Fig. 1.) together with the concept of *hrd* (the spiritual centre) and *nādis* [11] (Aurobindo 1981, Prem 1956, 227–229). *Prashna Upanishad* in II. 2–III. 12 describes the *tattvas* and *pranās* (Nikhilananda 1963, 150–152) as well as the principles of *prānāyāma* (Aurobindo 1981, 304–306). These definitions are given after the ritualistic parts of the *Upanishads* were transcended. The *Upanishads* give also a new meaning to Vedic procedures. Thus, e.g. in *Chāndogya Upanishad* (VIII. 1.) it is said that “[n]ow, what people call *yajna* (sacrifice) that is really continence (*brahmacharya*)... What people call *ishta* (worship), that is in reality continence (*brahmacharya*).” (Nikhilananda 1963, 351). Yoga as such [12] does not enter the area of Vedic cultic practices and processes (Woodroffe 1990, 69–126).

तां योगमतिमिन्नयन्ते स्थरिमन्द्रियधारणाम्।
अप्रमत्तस्तदा भवत्योगो हि प्रभवाप्ययौ॥११॥

Verse 11. The state unperturbed when the senses are imprisoned in the mind, of this they say ‘It is Yoga’. Then man becomes very vigilant, for Yoga is the birth of things and their ending.

Fig. 1. Katha Upanishad II. 3, 11 (Aurobindo 1981) defining the state of Yoga as defined in verse I. 2 of Patañjali Yoga Sutras (Patañjali 1911, 9; 1986, 93).

The Yoga *sādhana* can be practiced independently of the religious stance of the practitioners, even though it is beneficial to know the Indian cultural context of Yoga, as shown above, e.g. by Corigliano (2017, 1–12), Jain (2012, 1–8). Kalliath (2016 without pagination) or Malkovski (2017, 33–45).

Whilst at present, Yoga is often identified with *āsanas* (“postural Yoga”), and there is a movement towards “Yoga competitions”, where the basic principle of Yoga practice – *sādhana* is disregarded, Yoga can help to experience *samādhi* – i.e. the culmination of efforts to transcend the state of *avidyā* only if all the eight limbs of Yoga are practiced – as defined by Patañjali (1911, 1–320), or by Gheranda in *Gheranda Samhita* (Gheranda 2007, 11–92). This is a far greater “result” than the effects of postural Yoga.

A coexistence of Yoga and religions (Christian and other) is beneficial to Yoga practitioners inasmuch as Yoga can help to discover the depths of human spirituality. It is regretful, though; that nowadays Yoga became mostly postural Yoga and that it is being transformed into a sports-like appearance. Hopefully this will change in the future.

Further, there is a “fight” between Hindus and Westerners as regards who will own Yoga as a commodity. Vivekananda as well as present day activists called on Indian youths to re-own Yoga, otherwise they will have to learn Yoga from Westerners, which seems to be politically unacceptable.

Thus, there are a number of vested interests present in Yoga as we know it at present. Some seek to find the essence of Yoga as described, e.g. in the Patañjali *Yoga Sūtras*, *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā*, *Katha Upanishad* and other sources. Some would like to see Yoga as a globally accessible postural Yoga for health improvement, others would like to bar some religious people from Yoga, still others use Yoga for political purposes etc. It can only be hoped that an understanding will come as regards Yoga being a key to spiritual development of humans regardless their faith, race, culture or *varna* (cast; social status).

Notes

- [1] There used to be a difference between the Hindu (Aryan, Northern) and Dravidian (Southern) understanding of *dharma*.
- [2] As the term “Brahminic tradition” may have a *cast (varna)* related colour, when possible, the term Vedic religion is used. This is used in spite of the fact that Western researchers see as Vedic religion only a past form of Sanātana Dharma.
- [3] Sanātana Dharma as an expression of Indian dharmas is also only >200 years old.
- [4] Ananda is an expression very difficult to translate, but “bliss” may be close to it.
- [5] Presumably training – *sādhana*.
- [6] See: “one need not be religious in the minimal sense described to be accepted as a Hindu by Hindus, or describe oneself perfectly validly as Hindu. One may be polytheistic or monotheistic, monistic or pantheistic, even an agnostic, humanist or atheist, and still be considered a Hindu.” (Lipner 2009, 8, also pages 17–18).
- [7] According to Gandhi, “a man may not believe in God and still call himself a Hindu”.
- [8] His views were originally written in French under the title *La Voie du Silence* and published in 1956.
- [9] He declares that Ramakrishna was a Tantra Yoga practitioner (which is incorrect), the *bijā mantra* resembles for him the reproductive cycle (what is incorrect), he considers Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* as the fundamental Sanskrit Yoga text and continues asserting that Yoga consists of bodily and breathing exercises. Patañjali does not elaborate on bodily postures (he refers to principles that relate to sitting positions). He, however, omits the Hatha Yoga texts, where bodily postures are inherent. He states incorrectly, that bodily postures were developed as parts of religious procedures, what is doubtful. Thus, his insight into Yoga is very limited and somewhat distorted.
- [10] The text lacks perfection in English, but it is a citation.
- [11] Verse IV. 16 of the *Katha Upanishad* on *nādis* is similar to the verse III. 6 of the *Praśna Upanishad* (Nikhilananda 1963).
- [12] With the exception of *bhakti*, later forms of Vedānta influenced by the *Āgamas* and the traditions inspired by Vaishnava masters or some Tantra Yoga branches, where rituals may occur (Siddhath 2019).

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