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Yoga and Transpersonal Experiences: An Intertwined Perspective

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Abstract

Transpersonal psychology is the study of humanity's highest potential. It largely focuses upon the transcendent states of consciousness. As in the mainstream of psychology, spiritual dimension was missing. Transpersonal psychology helped in bringing spiritual dimension into the study. Now, it is considered to be the fourth force of psychology. When the experience of transpersonal experiences is discussed there are various avenues by means of which people can attain it. Largely, transpersonal experiences are numinous by nature but in the field of psychology most of the times, it is related to spirituality. An individual can reach to the highest level of awareness by means of dancing, singing, praying or even by doing drugs. Among all these paths, yoga is one way of the attainment of highest potential and realization. In this paper, types of yoga such as raja yoga, jnana yoga, karma yoga and ashtang yoga is discussed with respect to their relationship with attainment of highest consciousness and hence, spirituality.

With these, as per Patanjali's showed path of internal purification, which talks of ashtang yoga, will be seen. In detail, eight spiritual practices- yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana and samadhi will be discussed in the context of direct experiences of non-ordinary aspects and dimensions of reality.

Keywords: transpersonal, spirituality, yoga, numinous, transcendent

Introduction

Spirituality is the new trend in modern life. It has become a kind of fashion statement for the newer generation. It is a widely known statement that a person can be religious but not necessarily spiritual and a person need not be religious to be spiritual. Though religiosity can be one means by which spirituality can be attained. Psychology as a scientific subject has long before acknowledged the importance of spirituality. Field of study which deals with this is, 'Transpersonal Psychology'. It is concerned with the study of humanity's highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992). Some of the things are very subjective by nature and has to be dealt with an individualistic approach. Some unique experiences cannot be studied by means of well-defined rigid scientific methodologies. Flexible approach helps in gaining deeper understanding. Flexibility also allows personal healing, transformation, and self-actualization to unfold organically without adherence to any specific dogma or strict set of directives.

Having an insight in our way of doing things gives greater meanings to our lives. In the middle of the 20th century, American psychology was dominated by two major schools- behaviorism and Freudian psychology, which are considered to be the first and second force of psychology. Thereafter, came humanistic psychology which believed in the individual's ability to attain their fullest potential came to be identified as the third force of psychology. But the wave did not stop here. Somewhere it was realized that spiritual dimension of the human psyche was missing (Sutich, 1976). In 1967, a small group of Abraham Maslow, Anthony Sutich, Stanislav Grof, James Fadiman, Miles Vich and Sonya Marguile came together to mark the beginning of new psychology to honor the entire spectrum of human experience, including various non-ordinary states of consciousness. This is when Maslow and Sutich accepted Grof's suggestion and named the new discipline as, 'transpersonal psychology'. This term replaced their own original name 'transhumanistic', or 'reaching beyond humanistic concerns. Hence, transpersonal psychology became the fourth force of psychology, which addressed some major misconceptions of mainstream psychiatry and psychology concerning spirituality and religion. (Grof, 1992). It was realized that mainstream psychiatry had no name for this important subgroup of non-ordinary states and dismisses all of them. Therefore, Grof (1992) coined the term holotropic. This composite word means 'oriented towards wholeness' or 'moving in the direction of wholeness'. In holotropic states, the spiritual dimensions of reality can be directly experienced in a way that is as convincing as our daily experience of the material world.

Jungian psychologists refer to this domain as imaginal to distinguish from imaginary products of individual fantasy. Jung also believed that transpersonal experiences have certain quality called numinosity. Numinous is relatively neutral in comparison to other words such as sacred, religious, holy, magical and mystical. Hence, it was found to be more appropriate to use this term for such subjective and unique experiences. Property of transpersonal experiences can be compared to water, it is neutral by nature. One adds any color or favor to it and water imbibes its features. Similarly, how one experiences spirituality it is very much subjective to the ones who experience it. It can be a happy, sad, scary, divinely or any other sort of experience. Spirituality is based on direct experiences of non-ordinary aspects and dimensions of reality. It is a personal and private affair and is some of the times result of special relationship between the individual and the cosmos. It can be attained by any means. There are various avenues to gain transpersonal experiences praying, dancing, singing, doing substance or yoga.

Yoga and Transpersonal Experiences

Yoga holds that the universe is a complete organism, a wholeness by itself. The so-called parts and isolated units in this universe are, to an extent, comparable to the parts or limbs of the human body, constituting a wholeness never independent of one another. If you see the body only through some blinkers, the whole organism of the body cannot become an object of perception. According to the philosophy of Yoga, the universe is not made up of discrete particles, as material science may make out. Even science has now started thinking thrice before pronouncing any judgment on the nature of the universe ultimately. The universe is not constituted of atoms, molecules, etc. It is not connected with a 'transcendent' meaning in the sense of a creator extending beyond the universe of creation. There is no transcendence in the universe; the so-called transcendence is only a word that we use in respect of that which we cannot comprehend or that which has not yet become the object of our consciousness. If our understanding can expand itself adequately, it can visualise the cosmos as a completeness. Somewhere this notion of yoga experiences are connected to transpersonal experiences hence, it is worth seeing the relationship of the two (Krishnanda, 2019).

Basics of Yoga Darsana

Yoga is one of the six asthika school of thought in Hindu philosophy. It accepts three of the six pramanas as valid source of knowledge. It accepts Samkhya's evolutionary stream along with three gunas. Yoga theory is related with more pragmatic issues of how to acquire the practical knowledge that will lead to release from phenomenal world in which true self is trapped. The aim of this school is to explain and teach the method by means of which the self can be purified and liberated. The practitioner has to learn how to understand and control the different elements of the human existence, both physical and psychological. The origin of the school is not traced however it is attributed to sage Patanjali.

Samkhya and Yoga differs in the aspect of god. Samkhya is an atheistic theory while yoga is a theist. It believes in the existence of god. Yoga regarded Ishwara as a special kind of Purusha- one that is never entangled in matter. Yoga-darsana is concerned primarily with acquisition and perpetuation of two states of mind referred to as "collocative" (sapaksa) with Yoga, namely, the state of the one-pointed mind (ekāgratā) and the state of the inhibited mental functions (niruddha). The ultimate objective is to attain Samadhi. While the Samkhya school suggests that jnana (knowledge) is a sufficient means to moksha, the Yoga school suggests that systematic techniques and practice, or personal experimentation, combined with Samkhya's approach to knowledge, is the path to liberation. Yoga philosophy is a form of experimental mysticism.

Types of Yoga and Attainment of Transpersonal State

There are as many types of yoga as there are to unite with bliss and enlightenment. Essentially, following discussed types are the primary ones (The four different types of yoga, n.d.):

Raja yoga- A type of yoga that conceptualize yoga as samadhi and not as method of attaining it. It enables the yogi to reach the illustrious king within oneself, the supreme Self.

Bakthiyoga. Attaining- liberation with the focus on loving devotion towards a personal God. This yoga is mostly promoted in Bagavad Gita and Puranas.

Jnana yoga-Jnana yoga is a spiritual practice that pursues knowledge with questions such as "who am I, what am I" among others. The practitioner studies usually with the aid of a counsellor (guru), meditates, reflects, and reaches liberating insights on the nature of his own Self (Atman, soul) and its relationship to the metaphysical concept called Brahman

Karma yoga-Karma yoga is the path of unselfish action. It teaches that a spiritual seeker should act according to dharma, without being attached to the fruits or personal consequences. Mostly influenced by the mimamsa theories.

Ashtanga yoga-Ashtanga yoga literally means "eight-limbed yoga," as outlined by the sage Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. According to Patanjali, the path of internal purification for revealing the Universal Self consists of eight spiritual practices:

Eight limbs.

1. Yama [moral codes]
2. Niyama [self-purification and study]
3. Asana [posture]
4. Pranayama [breath control]
5. Pratyahara [sense control]
6. Dharana [concentration]

7. Dhyana [meditation]
8. Samadhi [absorption into the Universal]

Yama- *Yama* are the "don't do these" list of self-restraints, typically representing commitments that affect one's relations with others and self. Five yamas are:

1. Ahimsa (nonviolence)
2. Satya (truthfulness)
3. Asteya (non stealing)
4. Brahmacharya (celebacy)
5. Aparigraha (non possessiveness)

Niyama- The five "observances". Niyamas literally means positive duties or observances.

The five niyamas are:

1. Śauca (purity, clearness of mind, speech and body).
2. Santoṣa (contentment, acceptance of others and of one's circumstances as they are, optimism for self)
3. Tapas (self-discipline)
4. Svādhyāya (study of self, self-reflection, introspection of self's thoughts, speeches and actions)
5. Īśvarapraṇidhāna (contemplation of the Ishvara, God/Supreme Being, Brahman, true self)

Asanas- Asanas are yogic postures or exercises. Some asanas are performed just for health purposes. Asanas do promote good health, although in different ways compared to physical exercises, "placing the physical body in positions that cultivate also awareness, relaxation and concentration.

Pranayama- Translated as "extension of the prāṇa (breath or life force)" or "breath control." The word is composed from two Sanskrit words: prana meaning life force (noted particularly as the breath), and either ayama (to restrain or control the prana, implying a set of breathing techniques where the breath is intentionally altered in order to produce specific results

Pratyahara- It means 'withdrawal of the senses'. It is a bridge between the bahiranga (external) aspects of yoga namely, yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, and the antaranga (internal) yoga. Having actualized the pratyahara stage, a practitioner is able to effectively engage into the practice of Samyama. At the stage of pratyahara, the consciousness of the individual is internalized in order that the sensations from the senses of taste, touch, sight, hearing and smell don't reach their respective centers in the brain and take the sadhaka (practitioner) to next stages of Yoga.

Dharana- It means collection or concentration of the mind. Dhāraṇā is the initial step of deep concentrative meditation, where the object being focused upon is held in the mind without consciousness wavering from it.

Dhyana- Intense contemplation of the nature of the object of meditation. It is yoga state when there is only the "stream of continuous thought about the object, uninterrupted by other thoughts of different kind for the same object. Dhyana is "a refined meditative practice", a deeper concentration of the mind.

Samadhi- Samadhi is the merging consciousness with the object of meditation. It is a meditative absorption or trance, attained by the practice of dhyāna. In samādhi the mind becomes still. It is a state of being totally aware of the present moment; a one-pointedness of mind.

Seven Chakras and Transpersonal Experiences

Chakras are energy centers of subtle body believed to be psychic-energy(kundalini) centers. Kundalini is a form of primal energy(or shakti) said to be located at the base of the spine. Different spiritual traditions teach methods of "awakening" kundalini for the purpose of reaching spiritual enlightenment and a range of supernormal powers.

There are seven chakras- Muladhara, Swadhisthana, Manipura, Anahata, Vishuddha, Ajna and Sahasrara. By working with these centers in yoga practice, one can begin to unravel any blocks that may prevent the unfolding into one's highest potential.

Summary

Though the experience of transpersonal can be seen as very subjective and there are various ways to attain it but as the rich Indian text and practices connect the two it seems to be a very common and usual phenomena which anyone can experience. Connection of yogic practices with transpersonal experiences can be determined by the definite path which the former shows.

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