

Role of Sanskrit Knowledge in the Practice of Yoga –

Dr. Lata Satish¹

Introduction

According to Krishnamacharya, yoga is a saṁskāra, saṁskāra forms the body and the mind. Similarly, Saṁskṛtam, is a language which has got such a refinement (Saṁskāra) in its presentation. Yoga is an experiential knowledge (anubhava śāstra). Its objective is to understand the body mind complex and realize the goals that are beyond. Learned sages state that the Saṁyoga of Jīvātman and Paramātman is yoga emphasizing spiritual transcendence. Sage Patañjali in the yogasūtra proposes "citta-vṛtti-nirodha" as yogalakṣaṇa – A state of mind which is free from distractions. Lord kṛṣṇa in Bhagavadgīta counsels his Disciple Arjuna that "yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam" and "Samatvaṁ Yoga ucyate". All these definitions present the concept and objective of Yogābhyāsa. Yoga has to be experienced and for that experience knowledge of Sanskrit is essential.

There are many different practices in yoga, viz āsanās, prāṇāyāma, dhyāna etc. Confining only to āsanās is not yoga. Yoga, is also understanding the valuable knowledge that are presented in the scripture and that are presented by the great masters in their own yogic dṛṣṭi. That also forms an important part of the learning. For this Sanskrit knowledge becomes the medium.

Let us consider a few aspects of Yoga where the knowledge of Sanskrit plays a vital role.

¹ Eminent Psychologist, Managing Trustee, Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram. Email: lathamesha@gmail.com

i) Svādhyāya

One of the important components of yoga practice is Svādhyāya². Svādhyāya, in western psychology may be termed as self-reflection. It is where one reflects on his own thoughts and feelings. In the yogic context, Svādhyāya has got a very broader meaning. It is not only the sva- śākhā adhyāya not only you learn the scriptural knowledge, but also reflect on "who I am". Where I come from, where I am going, what is that happening to me, do I confine to this body alone? Am I beyond this body? What is my relationship with people outside. So, the very vast knowledge of self-analysis is Svādhyāya. And for that process of Svādhyāya, one has to acquire the scriptural guidance encapsulated in Sanskrit.

ii) Japa

There is an important meditative component called Japa which is mentioned in the Yogasūtras³. Japa, cannot be complete unless the artha (meaning) and the bhāvanā (visualization) of the words that are being used are understood. Further, Vāk is one of the Karaṇa and is a Karmendriya which is directly linked to the mind and thus thoughts get expressed through speech. Speech and its meaning are eternally interlinked and can never be separated like the divine couple. Thought coherence, control, clarity of speech, its regulation speed and pronunciation, pitch, fluency are fine indicators of state of mind and vice versa. Both silence and appropriate communication is an important indicator of a yogis state of mind.

According to Dr Benson⁴, when a person chooses a word sound or phrase or prayer to repeat or focuses on breath, it induces a

² Tapassvādhyāya-īśvarapraṇidhānāni kriyāyogaḥ yogasūtra 2.1

³ Tajjapastadarthabhāvanam 1.28

⁴ The Relaxation Response, H.Benson (New York, Avon Books 1975)

state of relaxation. He termed it as relaxation response. He said that one can choose any word. This was tested with phrases such as "relax", "I am calm", "I am better" etc. These words were given to a group of people. For another group of people some specific chants were given. There were significant differences in both the groups even though they showed relaxation response. Now, those people who were receiving the specific chants were faster in stabilizing their mind and coming to the state of well-being compared to the people who used these random words.

Now similar experiment was replicated in a School in Chennai⁵. Where, a group of children were given a set of thirty randomly chosen English letters and words. The children were asked to choose a favorite word that they liked. And another group of children were given Sarasvati mantra. On the final analysis, the group which received Sarasvatī mantra demonstrated very good improvement in their intellectual capacity, processing speed, and also mental maturity. They were more disciplined, more quite and they were able to do their home work and assignment much faster and compared to the group which had random words. The random words that they were chosen by the non-mantra group was 'relax', 'popular' 'father' etc. This does not mean that other languages doesn't have a meaningful structure or doesn't have an artha or bhāvana. But the study revealed that mantras, certain letters, phonetic pronunciations have an impact on the mind and body much higher than what we would use in a common parallel.

⁵ When Does Yoga Work – Short term and Long term effects of Yoga Intervention among pre adolescent Children, Shilpa Ashok Pandit, Latha Satish, Journal of Psychological Studies 2013. (<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs12646-013-0209-7#page-1>)

It is also to be noted that Praṇava or omkāra is stated by Patañjali⁶ as indicator of the Supreme Being. Hence it can be understood that specific sounds have impact and relevance in the practice of Yoga.

Further, mantra for Japa is chosen according to the condition of the individual (mind and body). Not everybody is given the same mantra. And that will have an impact on that person. It is not only based on the family background or natural background. It also involves genetic mapping. Research is in progress in this area. Researchers are striving to find out the impact of specific mantras on specific areas of the brain. And, this is what is called as phonemic intelligence.

Therefore a practitioner of yoga should be never far away from the language aspect because otherwise his practice will become mechanical.

iii) Nādānusandhāna

Nādānusandhāna is a meditative practice on specific sounds. It is considered a way to do Īśvarapraṇidhāna (devotion to the almighty). In this practice every divinity is addressed with a particular akṣara, one particular bijākṣara, which has been dealt in detail in Sanskrit literature.

iv) Prāṇāyāma and Āsana

For yoga practice breath is central. And breath is directly influenced by the sound or pronunciation. In the tradition of yoga practice in Krishnamacharya yoga mandiram, some form of Sanskrit phonetic sounds would be used when the breath of the practitioner is intended to be influenced. Through this the

mind of the people are also influenced. In āsanas, mantras are used to regulate the movement of the body. If somebody is very aggressive and behave in a neurotic manner, to control the movements, sounds are used at Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram. It is also a matter of experience that one attains great focus in the practice of Āsana using various sounds and words from Sanskrit. Distraction is reduced by this. Mechanical nature of practice of Āsana is also overcome by this. It has been observed by practitioners that the length of the sound (mātrā), gender (liṅga), aspiration (alpaprāṇa and mahāprāṇa) influence the state of mind.

V) The Philosophy of Yoga

Further, the whole Śāstra of yoga is only available in Saṁskṛtabhāṣā. The knowledge of the philosophy gives very good theoretical support to understand the practices of yoga. Further if one knows the language one can get at the root of things. Even if one comes across some hundred different versions one will not be misled. Moreover, Patañjali's yogasūtras are also chanted in Sanskrit language so that the yoga practitioners not only memorize the sūtras but are able to meaningfully link the thoughts presented with any dilution.

Conclusion

Thus, if subtler dimensions of yoga has to be experienced, it is desirable to have adequate knowledge of Saṁskṛta. One may not be a paṇḍit. But adequate knowledge of Sanskrit will always be very valuable in the field of Yoga.

⁶ Tasya vacakah pranavah Yogasutra 1.27