

The Eternal Roots of Yoga: Insights from the Vedas and Upanishads

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Abstract

This paper examines the foundational philosophy and spiritual insights of Yoga, as revealed in the Vedas and Upanishads, the ancient Indian scriptures considered to have their profound roots. While modern Yoga is recognized for its holistic well-being, its origins can be traced back to early Vedic concepts of "union" (*yuj*) and inner discipline, particularly in the *Rigveda* and *Yajurveda*. The Upanishads, culminating Vedic knowledge, significantly elaborate on these ideas, discussing the nature of the Self (*Ātman*), the supreme reality (*Brahman*), and the path to liberation (*Moksha*). Through an in-depth study of key Upanishadic verses (e.g., Katha, Mandukya, Shvetashvatara Upanishads), this research illuminates Yoga's metaphysical underpinnings: the journey from ignorance (*avidyā*) to self-realization (*ātma-jñāna*). Concepts such as *prāṇa*, *dhyāna* (meditation), *mantra*, and mind discipline, extensively discussed in these texts, form the philosophical backbone of Yogic practice. The Upanishadic vision presents Yoga not merely as a technique but as a transformative way of life—a means to transcend dualities and unite the individual with universal consciousness. Given increasing global interest in Yoga's physical aspects, this paper advocates for deeper engagement with its spiritual and philosophical origins, arguing that reconnecting with the eternal wisdom of the Vedas and Upanishads offers practitioners and scholars a more complete and authentic understanding of Yoga as a timeless inner journey.

Keywords: Yoga, Ved, Upnishad, Indian Philosophy.

Introduction

Yoga, today synonymous with physical postures and mindfulness, originally referred to a spiritual path of liberation. Its roots lie in the earliest spiritual texts of India—the Vedas and

Upanishads. Unlike modern interpretations that emphasize physical flexibility, these ancient texts outline a comprehensive framework for inner transformation and transcendence. This research examines the profound and philosophical foundations of yoga as outlined in Vedic hymns and Upanishadic revelations.

"Yoga is not merely a discipline; it is a path to the ultimate reality (Brahman)."

— Swami Sivananda (1)

Yogic Elements in Vedas

The tradition of yoga is quite ancient- it relates to the Vedic era. The Vedas, Upanishads, and epics are considered the basic source of ancient Indian philosophy and education. The Sanskrit word Veda is derived from the root word Vid. Vid means to know(knowledge perse), to be(one with God), and to obtain(salvation). There are four Vedas named Rigveda (consisting of hymns), Yajurveda (dealing with the procedure of sacrifices), Samveda (dealing with indian music), and Atharvaveda (dealing with medical sciences). The six Vedangas, which help in understanding the Vedas, are Vyakarna (grammar), Shiksha (phonetics), Chandas (metres), Nirukta (etymology), Jyotish (astronomy), and Kalp (rituals). There are also four subsidiary Vedas called as four upvedas, each dealing with a different topic. These are Ayurveda (Medicine), Dhanurveda (Military Science), Gandharvaveda (Music), and Shilpaveda (Arts and Architecture). Each of the four Vedas had four parts- Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upnishads. Samhitas refer to 'collections' of mantras, hymns, and chants. They contain expressions of joy at the majesty of nature. The phenomenal powers, raised to the level of deities, were worshiped through Mantras. Brahmanas were the prose and made-up rituals and prayers. They contain instructions and descriptions of the methods for the conduct of various rituals and sacrifices for invoking divine power. Aryanakas were appendages of Brahmanas. These are forest treatises which were products of the contemplation of an individual who retired to the quiet of a Himalayan valley. The word Upnishad is made up of upa (nearby), ni (devotedly), and shad (sitting). Upnishad means knowledge, which is passed from the Guru to the disciple when the latter sits close to the Guru devotedly. Being the fourth and last part of the Vedas, the Upanishads are also called Vedanta (anta of Vedas). The anta or end can also be understood as aim or essence. Hence, the Upanishads are considered as Vedanta or the essence of the Vedas.

- **Early References in the Rigveda:** The **Rigveda**, the oldest of the Vedas (~1500 BCE), contains **symbolic references to yogic principles**. Though the term ‘yoga’ in its classical sense does not appear frequently, the ideas of **mental discipline, tapas (austerity), and inner contemplation** are well represented. For instance, **Rigveda 10.136** describes the **Keśin**, a silent sage immersed in deep meditation, detached from the world, living on air, and moving between realms. He symbolizes the **proto-yogi**. *"The long-haired ascetic, wind-girdled, clad in yellow, friend of all gods, alone he wanders. The sage, the seer, himself all forms assuming, goes where the gods have gone before him."*

Rigveda 10.136 (2)

The foremost pioneer of yoga is considered none other than Hiranyagarbh after intensive research. Hiranyagarbho Yogsya vakta nanyah puratanah. (Br.yo.ya 12.5 u). Rigveda supports this statement through this depiction, ‘when there was nothing created, then there was one unique Hiranyagarbha, from whom the sun, like dazzling objects, were born. He was the creator, He was the first and foremost one; He was the ancient, prime, and legendary creator of the whole creation.’ (Hiranyagarbhah samavartatagre bhutasya jatah patireeka aseat)

(Rig: 10-121-1, Yaju: 13-4 Arabhivinay).

This passage reflects a state of spiritual realization, self-control, and mystical union — the **essence of yoga**.

- **The Vedic Notion of Rta and Meditation:** The Vedas present the concept of **Rta** (cosmic order), which resonates with the yogic idea of aligning the individual with the **universal rhythm**. Meditative practices, prayers (mantras), and yajñas (sacrifices) aimed at harmonizing the inner being with the cosmic principle are precursors to yogic practices.

"Through disciplined sacrifice and inner purity, one attains immortality."
— Yajurveda 19.30 (3)

Such references form the embryonic stage of yoga philosophy.

Evolution of Yoga in the Upanishads

The Upanishads (~800–300 BCE), forming the Vedanta, explore the inner spiritual dimensions of reality, introducing systematic reflections on the Self (Ātman), Ultimate Reality (Brahman), and the path to liberation (Moksha) — all central to yoga. The Upanishads form the 4th and last part of the Vedas. Standing as the end of the Vedas. The philosophy taught by the Vedas and the Upanishads is called Vedanta (end of the Vedas). The Upanishads are generally in the form of dialogues, but they are more poetic than philosophic.

Definition of Yoga in the Upanishads

- **Katha Upanishad (1.2.15)** offers a classic definition:

“When the senses are stilled, the mind is at rest, and the intellect does not waver, that, say the wise, is the highest state.” (4)

This is a clear description of **Samādhi**, the highest stage of yoga. The Upanishads emphasize **inner control, withdrawal of senses (Pratyāhāra)**, and **meditative absorption**, aligning closely with the eight limbs of yoga later systematized by Patanjali.

- **Yoga as Union: Shvetashvatara Upanishad:**

The **Shvetashvatara Upanishad (Chapter 2)** explicitly uses the term **yoga** and discusses techniques of concentration and the nature of the Supreme Being:

“Holding the body steady, with the head and neck erect, let the sage focus his mind on the heart, restrain his senses, and cross the sea of ignorance through yoga.”
— Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2.8–9 (5)

Here, yoga is presented as a **discipline of body, breath, and mind** to realize the indwelling God.

Key teachings on Yoga in the Upanishads

- **Katha Upanishad: The Chariot Analogy**

This Upanishad offers the famous chariot metaphor (1.3.3–9), where:

- The body is the chariot,

- Senses are the horses,
- Mind is the reins,
- Intellect (Buddhi) is the charioteer,
- The Self (Ātman) is the passenger.

"Only he who has understanding as his charioteer and a controlled mind as reins reaches the goal — the highest abode of Vishnu." (4)

This allegory encapsulates the essence of yogic control and self-awareness.

- **Mundaka Upanishad: The Two Birds**

"Two birds, bound together in friendship, perch on the same tree. One eats the sweet fruit, the other watches without eating."

— Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.1 (6)

The first bird is the individual soul (Jiva) engaged in worldly actions, while the second is the transcendental Self, untouched and witnessing. The yogic path is the realization of this non-dual awareness (Advaita).

- **Prashna Upanishad: Breath and Mind**

Prashna Upanishad discusses the role of Prāṇa (life force) and its relation to the mind and Self. Control of breath is seen as a method for self-realization:

"All life arises from prāṇa, and it is the thread connecting the Self with the mind."

— Prashna Upanishad 3.3 (7)

This directly connects to Prāṇāyāma in later yoga traditions.

Philosophical Contributions to Yoga

- **Ātman and Brahm**

The central teaching of the Upanishads is **"Tat Tvam Asi"** — *You are That* (Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7) — revealing the essential oneness of individual consciousness (Ātman) and the universal spirit (Brahman). Yoga is the means to experience this non-duality.

- **Karma and Liberation**

The concept of **Karma** and its transcendence through **Jnana (wisdom)** is also emphasized. The Upanishads guide seekers from action-based rituals to **inner realization**, marking yoga as a **path of wisdom and contemplation**.

- **Self-Realisation**

Miseries and sufferings being due to avidya or false knowledge about the nature of Reality, their removal can be only through right knowledge. This training for the right knowledge is three-fold:

- I. **Sravana:** Stands for the study of the Upanishads under a proper guru. Personal contact with the living embodiment is of great help.
- II. **Manana:** Sravana should be supplemented by manana or continued reflection upon what has been learned for deriving intellectual conviction.
- III. **Nidhidhyasana:** Refers to Meditation, by which one realizes within oneself the unity underlying the multiplicity of the universe. Nidhidhyasana is the highest form of meditation and is possible only after considerable practice is concentration of thought.

Modern Relavance

In modern times, yoga is often seen as a physical or psychological practice. However, the **spiritual core** of yoga — **liberation from ignorance and union with the Self** — remains as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago. Modern spiritual leaders like **Swami Vivekananda**, **Sri Aurobindo**, and **Paramahansa Yogananda** revived these ancient teachings, highlighting the Upanishads as a guide not just for mystics, but for **all humanity seeking peace and meaning**. “Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity through control.”

— Swami Vivekananda (8)

Conclusion

The Vedas and Upanishads provide a timeless foundation for yoga, rooted in deep philosophical inquiry, spiritual insight, and practical wisdom. Far from being a mere health practice, yoga in its original form is a path of transcendence, unity, and liberation. The eternal truths contained in these scriptures continue to illuminate the seeker’s path in a chaotic world,

reminding us that yoga is not a trend but a revelation of the eternal Self. Across millennia, Yoga has evolved from ritual hymnody in the *Rigveda* and metaphysical discourse in the *Upanishads*, to global health and mindfulness practices. The Vedas articulate **Rta** and disciplined ritual as early vehicles of inner alignment; the *Upanishads* deepen this into metaphysical union—*Ātman-Brahman* non-duality—and practical steps like breath-control and mental absorption. Key metaphors—the two birds, the chariot, the four states of consciousness—offer vivid maps for practitioners on the path to self-realization. Today’s science validates Yoga’s impact on the mind and body; however, the tradition’s fullest potential lies in engaging with its spiritual core—ethical grounding, insight meditation, self-inquiry, and unity consciousness. By re-integrating Yoga’s philosophical legacy into modern practice, practitioners gain not only wellness but inner liberation.

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