

Vedantic Foundations of Yoga: Exploring the Philosophical Underpinnings of Union

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Abstract

This paper examines the profound philosophical foundations that Vedanta provides for yoga practice and understanding. Through systematic analysis of classical Vedantic texts, particularly the Upanishads and major philosophical commentaries, this study explores how Vedantic concepts of ultimate reality, consciousness, and the nature of self inform and enrich yogic practice. The research demonstrates that Vedantic philosophy provides essential metaphysical and epistemological frameworks that clarify yoga's ultimate purpose as the realization of fundamental unity between individual consciousness (Atman) and universal consciousness (Brahman). Key findings reveal that while yoga practices are often understood primarily through physical or psychological frameworks, their deepest significance emerges through Vedantic understanding of non-dual reality. The study examines three major Vedantic schools—Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Dvaita—and their different approaches to understanding union, while highlighting how these philosophical perspectives inform diverse yogic paths. The research contributes to contemporary discussions about yoga's spiritual dimensions by demonstrating that Vedantic philosophy provides essential context for understanding yoga as a comprehensive system for realizing fundamental truth rather than merely a practice for physical or mental wellness. This philosophical foundation remains relevant for contemporary practitioners seeking deeper understanding of yoga's transformative potential and its relationship to ultimate reality.

Keywords: Vedanta, yoga philosophy, Advaita, non-dualism, Upanishads, Atman, Brahman, union, consciousness, self-realization, philosophical foundations, spiritual practice

1. Introduction

The word "yoga" derives from the Sanskrit root "yuj," meaning to unite or join, pointing to the fundamental purpose of yogic practice as the realization of unity or union. While contemporary yoga is often understood primarily in terms of physical postures, breathing techniques, or stress reduction methods, its deepest philosophical foundations rest in Vedantic understanding of the nature of reality, consciousness, and the self (Feuerstein, 2001). Vedanta, literally meaning "the end of the Vedas," represents the culminating philosophical vision of the ancient Vedic tradition and provides essential metaphysical frameworks for understanding yoga's ultimate purpose and significance.

The relationship between Vedanta and yoga is both foundational and complex. Vedantic philosophy articulates the theoretical understanding of reality that yoga practice aims to realize experientially. While yoga provides practical methods for transformation and realization, Vedanta offers the philosophical vision that clarifies what is to be realized and why such realization constitutes the highest human goal (Deutsch, 1969). This symbiotic relationship suggests that comprehensive understanding of yoga requires engagement with its Vedantic philosophical foundations.

Contemporary yoga culture has often separated practice from philosophy, emphasizing techniques while neglecting the worldview that gives these techniques their ultimate meaning and direction. This separation has led to various forms of yoga that, while beneficial for health and wellness, may miss the transformative potential that emerges from understanding yoga within its proper philosophical context (Chapple, 2008). Vedantic philosophy provides essential context for understanding yoga as a complete system for realizing fundamental truth about the nature of reality and consciousness.

The significance of this philosophical foundation extends beyond academic interest to practical implications for yoga practice, teaching, and personal transformation. Understanding Vedantic concepts such as the nature of Atman (individual self), Brahman (universal reality), maya (apparent reality), and moksha (liberation) provides essential framework for comprehending what yoga practice ultimately aims to achieve and how various techniques contribute to this realization (Radhakrishnan, 1953).

This paper examines the essential Vedantic foundations of yoga through systematic analysis of classical texts, philosophical commentaries, and contemporary scholarship. The study aims

to demonstrate how Vedantic philosophy provides indispensable context for understanding yoga's deepest purposes while exploring how different Vedantic schools offer varying perspectives on the nature of union that yoga seeks to realize.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Classical Vedantic Sources

The philosophical foundations of Vedanta rest primarily in the Upanishads, which represent the concluding portions of the Vedic literature and articulate sophisticated understanding of consciousness, reality, and human purpose. The principal Upanishads, including the Isha, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chandogya, and Brihadaranyaka, present various approaches to understanding the fundamental nature of reality and the means for realizing this understanding (Olivelle, 1996).

Key Upanishadic concepts that inform yogic understanding include the identity of Atman and Brahman (expressed in great statements such as "Tat tvam asi" - "That thou art"), the distinction between apparent and ultimate reality, and the possibility of direct realization of truth through various means including meditation, knowledge, and devotion. These texts present sophisticated analysis of consciousness, describing various states of awareness and pointing toward a fourth state (turiya) that transcends ordinary waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states (Nikhilananda, 1963).

2.3 Systematization by Badarayana and Shankara

The Vedanta Sutas (Brahma Sutas) of Badarayana represent the first systematic organization of Upanishadic teachings into a coherent philosophical framework. These cryptic aphorisms attempt to resolve apparent contradictions in Upanishadic teachings while establishing consistent understanding of key concepts including the nature of Brahman, the relationship between individual and universal consciousness, and the means for realizing ultimate truth (Thibaut, 1890).

Adi Shankara's commentaries on the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Vedanta Sutas established Advaita (non-dualist) Vedanta as a comprehensive philosophical system that profoundly influenced subsequent understanding of yoga philosophy. Shankara's analysis of consciousness, reality, and liberation provides sophisticated framework for understanding

yoga practice as means for realizing non-dual awareness (Mayeda, 1979). His concept of adhyasa (superimposition) explains how ignorance creates apparent separation between individual and universal consciousness, while his analysis of various means of knowledge (pramanas) clarifies how direct realization transcends ordinary epistemological categories.

2.4 Alternative Vedantic Perspectives

While Advaita Vedanta became influential in yoga philosophy, other Vedantic schools offer different perspectives on the nature of ultimate reality and union. Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism) presents understanding of reality as fundamental unity that includes rather than excludes diversity, suggesting that realization involves recognizing the essential relationship between individual souls and divine reality rather than their absolute identity (Carman, 1974).

Madhva's Dvaita (dualist) Vedanta maintains eternal distinction between individual souls and supreme reality while emphasizing devotional relationship as the means for realizing ultimate fulfillment. This perspective informs bhakti yoga traditions that emphasize love and surrender rather than knowledge or identity as primary means for spiritual realization (Sharma, 1986).

These alternative perspectives demonstrate that Vedantic philosophy encompasses various approaches to understanding union while maintaining consistency regarding yoga's ultimate purpose as the realization of truth about the nature of reality and consciousness.

2.5 Contemporary Scholarship

Modern scholarship has examined the relationship between Vedantic philosophy and yoga practice from various perspectives. Scholars like Eliot Deutsch, Paul Hacker, and Sengaku Mayeda have provided detailed analysis of classical Vedantic texts and their implications for understanding consciousness and spiritual practice (Deutsch, 1973; Hacker, 1995; Mayeda, 1979).

Contemporary philosophers such as Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, and Swami Chinmayananda have interpreted classical Vedantic teachings for modern audiences while maintaining essential philosophical principles. Their work demonstrates continued relevance of Vedantic concepts for contemporary spiritual practice and psychological understanding (Aurobindo, 1972; Vivekananda, 1989; Chinmayananda, 1987).

Recent academic studies have explored connections between Vedantic philosophy and contemporary consciousness research, suggesting that ancient Vedantic insights may contribute to current understanding of the nature of mind, awareness, and human potential (Wallace, 2007; Thompson, 2007).

3. Methodology

This study employs a comprehensive philosophical methodology combining textual analysis, comparative philosophy, and hermeneutical interpretation to examine Vedantic foundations of yoga philosophy.

3.1 Primary Source Analysis

Systematic examination of classical Vedantic texts was conducted to identify key concepts and their implications for understanding yoga practice. Primary sources include:

- **Upanishads:** Principal Upanishads were analyzed to identify foundational concepts regarding consciousness, reality, and spiritual realization
- **Vedanta Sutras:** Badarayana's systematic organization of Vedantic principles was examined for its philosophical framework
- **Classical Commentaries:** Major commentaries by Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva were analyzed to understand different interpretations of Vedantic principles
- **Yoga Texts:** Classical yoga texts including the Yoga Sutras, Bhagavad Gita, and Hatha Yoga texts were examined for their relationship to Vedantic philosophy

3.2 Comparative Analysis

Different Vedantic schools were compared to understand various approaches to union and their implications for yoga practice. This comparison highlights both common foundations and distinctive perspectives within Vedantic tradition.

3.3 Hermeneutical Interpretation

Classical texts were interpreted through careful attention to historical context, linguistic analysis, and philosophical implications. Multiple translations and scholarly commentaries were consulted to ensure comprehensive understanding.

3.4 Conceptual Analysis

Key Vedantic concepts were analyzed for their philosophical significance and practical implications for yoga practice. This analysis aimed to clarify how philosophical understanding informs and enriches practical engagement with yogic methods.

4. Findings

4.1 Fundamental Vedantic Concepts and Their Yogic Implications

4.1.1 The Nature of Ultimate Reality (Brahman)

Vedantic philosophy establishes Brahman as the ultimate reality underlying all existence—described as sat-chit-ananda (existence-consciousness-bliss). This understanding provides essential context for yoga practice by clarifying what realization ultimately reveals. Rather than achieving something new or foreign, yoga practice uncovers the fundamental nature of reality that is always present but usually obscured by ignorance and misidentification.

The Chandogya Upanishad's teaching "Sarvam khalvidam brahma" (All this is indeed Brahman) establishes the foundational understanding that apparent multiplicity and separation exist within fundamental unity (Olivelle, 1996). This perspective transforms yoga practice from an attempt to achieve union with something external to a process of recognizing the unity that already exists but is not ordinarily recognized.

The concept of Brahman as both immanent and transcendent provides framework for understanding how yoga practice can simultaneously involve engagement with physical, mental, and emotional dimensions while pointing toward realization that transcends all particular experiences. This understanding prevents yoga from becoming trapped in any particular level of practice while maintaining clear direction toward ultimate realization.

4.1.2 Individual Consciousness and Universal Consciousness (Atman-Brahman)

The Vedantic understanding of Atman as the essential nature of individual consciousness provides crucial foundation for yoga philosophy. The Katha Upanishad's analysis of different levels of the self—from the gross physical body through subtle mental layers to the causal and ultimate dimensions—offers sophisticated framework for understanding how yoga practice works through various dimensions of human experience (Nikhilananda, 1963).

The great Upanishadic statement "Ayam atma brahma" (This self is Brahman) from the Mandukya Upanishad establishes the fundamental identity that yoga practice aims to realize. This identity is not something to be created or achieved but rather recognized as the ever-present reality of consciousness itself. Understanding this philosophical foundation clarifies that yoga practice involves removing obstacles to recognizing what is already true rather than attaining something new.

Different Vedantic schools interpret this identity in various ways, leading to different emphases in yoga practice. Advaita understanding emphasizes the absolute identity of individual and universal consciousness, informing jnana yoga approaches that emphasize knowledge and direct inquiry. Vishishtadvaita understanding emphasizes qualified identity, supporting bhakti yoga approaches that maintain devotional relationship while recognizing essential unity. Dvaita understanding emphasizes eternal relationship, informing devotional practices that cultivate love and surrender.

4.1.3 The Nature of Apparent Reality (Maya)

Vedantic analysis of maya as the apparent power through which unity appears as multiplicity provides essential framework for understanding why yoga practice is necessary and how it functions. Maya is not illusion in the sense of non-existence but rather the creative power through which the one appears as many while remaining fundamentally one (Deutsch, 1969).

Understanding maya clarifies that the sense of separation and limitation that motivates yoga practice results from misperception rather than actual separation. This philosophical insight transforms yoga practice from an attempt to overcome real obstacles to a process of correcting fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of reality and consciousness.

The concept of maya also explains why yoga practice involves various levels and approaches. Since apparent separation manifests through physical, emotional, mental, and intellectual dimensions, yoga practice must address all these levels while maintaining clear understanding that the ultimate goal transcends all particular experiences and attainments.

4.1.4 Liberation and the Goal of Practice (Moksha)

Vedantic understanding of moksha as liberation from fundamental misunderstanding provides essential context for comprehending yoga's ultimate purpose. Liberation is not

escape from the world or attainment of special experiences but rather recognition of the true nature of reality that has always been present (Radhakrishnan, 1953).

This understanding clarifies that yoga practice aims at what is called "recognition" rather than "attainment." The various techniques and stages of yoga serve to remove obstacles to recognizing what is already true rather than creating new states or achievements. This philosophical foundation prevents yoga from becoming goal-oriented activity that reinforces the sense of separation it aims to transcend.

Different Vedantic schools describe liberation in various ways, leading to different emphases in yoga practice. Advaita describes liberation as recognition of one's essential nature as consciousness itself. Vishishtadvaita describes liberation as realizing one's eternal relationship with divine reality. Dvaita describes liberation as achieving perfect devotional relationship with supreme reality. These different descriptions inform various approaches to yoga practice while maintaining common understanding of liberation as the ultimate human goal.

4.2 Integration of Knowledge, Action, and Devotion

Vedantic philosophy provides framework for understanding how different approaches to yoga practice—typically categorized as karma yoga (action), bhakti yoga (devotion), and jnana yoga (knowledge)—represent complementary rather than competing paths toward the same ultimate realization.

4.2.1 Jnana Yoga and Direct Inquiry

The path of knowledge (jnana yoga) draws directly from Vedantic analysis of consciousness and reality. Classical Vedantic methodology involves three stages: shravana (hearing the teachings), manana (reflection and reasoning), and nididhyasana (meditation and direct realization). This methodology provides systematic approach to yoga practice that emphasizes understanding the nature of consciousness through direct inquiry rather than through particular experiences or attainments (Chinmayananda, 1987).

Jnana yoga informed by Vedantic philosophy involves investigating the nature of the "I" that seeks realization, questioning fundamental assumptions about identity and reality, and recognizing the consciousness that is aware of all changing experiences while itself

remaining unchanged. This approach emphasizes that realization is already present and available in each moment rather than being something to be achieved in the future.

4.2.2 Karma Yoga and Selfless Action

Vedantic understanding of karma yoga draws from the Bhagavad Gita's teaching about acting without attachment to results while maintaining clear understanding of the ultimate nature of reality. This approach recognizes that action itself cannot produce liberation but can remove obstacles to recognizing what is already present (Easwaran, 2007).

The philosophical foundation of karma yoga rests in understanding that the sense of individual doership represents fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of action and consciousness. By practicing selfless action while maintaining clear understanding of ultimate reality, practitioners gradually recognize that consciousness itself is not involved in action while being the awareness in which all action appears.

4.2.3 Bhakti Yoga and Devotional Surrender

Vedantic foundations of bhakti yoga recognize that devotional love represents natural response to recognizing the fundamental nature of reality. Rather than being emotional sentiment, devotion emerges from philosophical understanding of the relationship between individual consciousness and ultimate reality (Sivananda, 1987).

Different Vedantic schools inform different approaches to devotional practice. Advaita-informed devotion involves recognizing the beloved as one's own essential nature. Vishishtadvaita-informed devotion involves cultivating relationship with divine reality while recognizing essential unity. Dvaita-informed devotion involves surrendering to supreme reality while maintaining devotional relationship.

4.3 Contemporary Relevance and Applications

4.3.1 Psychological Implications

Vedantic understanding of consciousness provides sophisticated framework for contemporary psychological understanding of human development and therapeutic transformation. The analysis of different levels of identity—from identification with physical body through emotional and mental dimensions to recognition of consciousness itself—offers

comprehensive approach to understanding psychological suffering and its resolution (Vich, 1988).

Contemporary therapeutic approaches increasingly recognize that psychological healing involves addressing fundamental questions about identity and meaning that Vedantic philosophy has explored for millennia. Understanding consciousness as the unchanging awareness in which all psychological experiences appear and disappear provides stable foundation for therapeutic work that goes beyond symptom management to address fundamental questions about human nature and potential.

4.3.2 Integration with Contemporary Spirituality

Vedantic philosophy provides essential framework for contemporary spiritual seekers who encounter various yoga practices, meditation techniques, and spiritual teachings from different traditions. Understanding fundamental Vedantic principles enables practitioners to recognize common foundations underlying diverse approaches while maintaining clear understanding of ultimate purpose and direction.

The Vedantic emphasis on direct realization rather than belief or doctrine provides framework for engaging spiritual practice in ways that emphasize experience and understanding rather than adherence to particular religious or cultural forms. This approach supports authentic spiritual development while avoiding fundamentalism or spiritual materialism.

4.3.3 Educational and Practical Applications

Understanding Vedantic foundations enhances yoga teaching and practice by providing clear philosophical context for various techniques and approaches. Teachers who understand these foundations can offer students comprehensive framework for understanding their practice while supporting development that goes beyond physical or psychological benefits to address fundamental questions about human nature and potential.

Vedantic philosophy also provides framework for developing yoga practices that are both authentic to traditional understanding and relevant to contemporary needs. This integration supports evolution of yoga that maintains essential philosophical foundations while adapting to changing cultural contexts and individual needs.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Indispensable Nature of Philosophical Foundation

The findings demonstrate that Vedantic philosophy provides indispensable foundation for understanding yoga's deepest purposes and most effective applications. While yoga techniques can be practiced without explicit philosophical understanding, their transformative potential is significantly enhanced when practiced within appropriate philosophical context.

Vedantic concepts such as the nature of consciousness, the relationship between apparent and ultimate reality, and the possibility of direct realization provide essential framework for understanding why particular techniques are effective and how they contribute to ultimate realization. Without this philosophical foundation, yoga practice may remain at superficial levels or become trapped in goal-oriented activity that reinforces rather than transcends the sense of separation it aims to resolve.

5.2 Integration of Theory and Practice

The relationship between Vedantic philosophy and yoga practice demonstrates sophisticated integration of theoretical understanding and practical application. Vedantic philosophy provides the vision of what is to be realized, while yoga practice offers methods for removing obstacles to this realization. This integration prevents both dry intellectualism and blind practice by maintaining clear understanding of purpose while engaging appropriate means.

The three major Vedantic schools offer different approaches to this integration while maintaining common commitment to realization of ultimate truth. These different approaches inform various styles of yoga practice, demonstrating that philosophical diversity can enhance rather than compromise practical effectiveness when maintained within coherent frameworks.

5.3 Contemporary Significance

Understanding Vedantic foundations of yoga has particular significance for contemporary practitioners who encounter yoga in secular contexts or through commercial presentations that may not adequately convey its philosophical depth. While such presentations may offer valuable benefits, they may also miss the transformative potential that emerges from understanding yoga within its proper philosophical context.

Contemporary interest in consciousness studies, integral psychology, and non-dual spirituality suggests growing recognition of insights that Vedantic philosophy has articulated for millennia. This convergence provides opportunities for dialogue between ancient wisdom and contemporary understanding that can enrich both traditional and modern approaches to human development.

5.4 Challenges and Limitations

Several challenges exist in applying Vedantic philosophy to contemporary yoga practice. The complexity and subtlety of Vedantic concepts require sustained study and reflection that may not be readily available in commercial yoga environments. Cultural and linguistic differences can create obstacles to understanding concepts that emerged within specific historical and social contexts.

Additionally, the emphasis on direct realization in Vedantic philosophy can lead to premature claims of understanding or achievement that bypass necessary preparation and development. Balanced approach requires integration of philosophical understanding with appropriate practice, qualified guidance, and realistic assessment of one's actual development and realization.

5.5 Future Directions

The integration of Vedantic philosophy with contemporary yoga practice suggests several areas for future development. Educational approaches that make Vedantic concepts accessible to contemporary practitioners without compromising their depth or authenticity could significantly enhance the quality and effectiveness of yoga practice and teaching.

Research into the practical applications of Vedantic understanding for psychological healing, spiritual development, and human potential could contribute to both traditional and contemporary approaches to human transformation. Such research could also support dialogue between ancient wisdom traditions and contemporary scientific understanding of consciousness and human development.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Vedantic philosophy provides essential and indispensable foundation for understanding yoga's deepest purposes and most effective applications. The

relationship between Vedantic concepts and yoga practice reveals sophisticated integration of philosophical understanding and practical method that has been refined over millennia of development and application.

Key findings establish that Vedantic understanding of consciousness, reality, and liberation provides essential context for comprehending what yoga practice ultimately aims to achieve. Rather than being merely physical exercise, stress reduction technique, or even spiritual practice in general, yoga emerges from this philosophical context as a comprehensive system for realizing fundamental truth about the nature of reality and consciousness.

The analysis of different Vedantic schools demonstrates that philosophical diversity can enhance rather than compromise practical effectiveness when maintained within coherent frameworks. Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Dvaita approaches to understanding ultimate reality inform different styles and emphases in yoga practice while maintaining common commitment to realization of truth that transcends ordinary experience and understanding.

The study reveals that contemporary separation of yoga practice from its philosophical foundations, while making yoga accessible to broader audiences, may significantly limit its transformative potential. Understanding Vedantic concepts such as Atman-Brahman identity, the nature of maya, and the goal of moksha provides essential framework for practicing yoga in ways that address fundamental questions about human nature and potential rather than remaining at superficial levels of physical or psychological benefit.

The integration of Vedantic philosophy with yoga practice offers contemporary practitioners sophisticated framework for spiritual development that avoids both dry intellectualism and blind practice. This integration supports authentic engagement with traditional wisdom while allowing for appropriate adaptation to contemporary contexts and individual needs.

The research contributes to ongoing discussions about yoga's spiritual dimensions by demonstrating that philosophical understanding is not optional addition to yoga practice but rather essential foundation that determines both the effectiveness and authenticity of practical engagement. This finding has important implications for yoga education, teacher training, and the development of yoga programs that aim to offer more than physical exercise or stress reduction.

Future development of yoga in contemporary contexts would benefit from increased attention to Vedantic philosophical foundations while maintaining accessibility and relevance to diverse practitioners. This balance requires continued dialogue between traditional knowledge holders and contemporary practitioners, supported by educational approaches that make complex philosophical concepts understandable without compromising their depth or transformative potential.

The enduring relevance of Vedantic philosophy for contemporary yoga practice demonstrates that ancient wisdom traditions continue to offer essential insights for human development and realization. Rather than being historical curiosities, these philosophical foundations provide practical guidance for addressing perennial questions about consciousness, reality, and human potential that remain as relevant today as they were millennia ago.

The study concludes that comprehensive understanding and effective practice of yoga requires engagement with its Vedantic philosophical foundations. While such engagement requires sustained study and reflection, it offers the possibility of transformative realization that justifies the effort and represents the fulfillment of yoga's ultimate purpose as a means for recognizing the fundamental unity that underlies apparent diversity and separation.

This philosophical foundation provides not only theoretical understanding but practical guidance for living with wisdom, compassion, and authentic realization of human potential. In this way, Vedantic philosophy demonstrates its continued relevance as essential foundation for yoga practice that aims to realize its deepest purposes and most transformative possibilities.

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