

Research Paper

Atha - The Connection Between *Yoga* and Mindfulness

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ABSTRACT

Background: With Mindfulness gaining popularity in recent years, several papers have been published on this theme. However, while most authors trace its history to Buddhism, the connection between *Yoga* and Mindfulness goes unnoticed. **Purpose:** In order to fill this research gap, this paper has been written, defining and describing Mindfulness through two lenses — the modern science of Psychology and the ancient philosophy of *Yoga*. **Review Of Literature:** *Atha*, the first word in the *Yoga Sūtra-s* of *Patañjali*, is said to represent a life characterised by moment-to-moment attention — precisely what Mindfulness advocates. The nuances of the philosophy capture many aspects of Mindfulness that modern Psychology in recent years has discovered. The paper starts with a comprehensive account of various definitions of Mindfulness, moves on to the connection of Mindfulness with the heart and ends with a note on the axioms of Mindfulness. **Conclusions:** This study is not without drawbacks since it is a secondary paper. However, the importance of comparative studies and the presentation of Mindfulness from a traditional Indian as well as a modern psychological perspective can benefit the development of Indigenous Psychology.

Keywords: *Atha*, Indian Psychology Mindfulness, Meditation, *Patañjali*, *Yoga*, *Yoga Sūtra-s*

Most studies on Mindfulness begin with the statement — "Mindfulness has its roots in the East" — and support this claim with evidence from Buddhism. The following paper is unique, and I hope to substantiate this declaration with proof from the Indian school of thought - *Yoga*.

While *Yoga* brings to mind colourful rubber mats and fancy poses for most people, the term has lost its true meaning as a school of Philosophy and a way of life. *Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras* present many concepts that may be helpful to the modern psychologist, and it is one such facet, Mindfulness, that I wish to focus on in this paper.

Since it is a literary review, this paper does not need an elaborate 'methods' section. Keywords like "Yoga," "Mindfulness," and "Mindfulness meditation" were used in a number of databases to gather congruent articles. The relevant points from these are consolidated in the following section. The structure is as follows — An overview of definitions of Mindfulness, axioms or components of Mindfulness, and benefits or outcomes of Mindfulness.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Definitions

Patañjali begins the *Yoga Sūtra* (Y.S.) with the term "*Atha*."

अथ योगानुशासनम्। Y.S. 1.1

Translation: Thus begins the teaching of *Yoga*.

Commentators often spend extensive time and effort to identify the reason for the use of this particular word. Some say *Atha* is an auspicious word and follows the Indian literary tradition of beginning the text and teaching in a positive manner.

Vyāsa's commentary proposes that *Atha* is used in *Adhikārārthaḥ* — meaning it indicates a sense of achievement of the teacher as well as the student. The teacher assures that he is well versed in the subject and declares that the student is eligible to receive the knowledge.

But another interpretation of the word *Atha* is 'Now.' This may be taken along with other words in the *Sūtra* to translate as — "Now begins the teaching of *Yoga*." But, on its own, this word is considered the essence of all teaching, not just in *Yoga* but also in *Vedānta*. *Śaṅkarācārya* has a lot to say about this word in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra* that also begins with the word *Atha*. He says, '*Atha*' can be taken as a sequence, a progression of knowledge, rather than as a commencement of learning.

Atha as 'Now' may indicate the nature of *Samādhi*, which is the goal of *Yoga*. Or, it could be a synonym for the state of *Yoga* like *Vyāsa* says, "योगः समाधिः। स च सार्वभौमाश्चित्तस्य धर्मः।"

Meaning — *Yoga* is *Samādhi*, the characteristic of the mind pervading all its levels.

Samādhi, according to *Patañjali*, is the culmination of *Dhāraṇā* and *Dhyāna*. *Dhāraṇā*, he says, is the sustained attention towards one particular entity chosen over many potential objects of meditation. And *Dhyāna* is the creation of a link between the mind and the object or an uninterrupted flow of the mind's activity or *Mano-Vṛtti* towards the object, in exclusion of others. *Samādhi* ideally should be *Nirbīja* or without an object so that the individual experiences his true nature. But in the psychological sense, we can simplify the definition of *Samādhi* to mean a state where the individual experiences something as a part of themselves.

Returning to the interpretation of *Atha* as 'Now,' we must examine the *Yoga Sūtra-s* again

क्षणात्क्रमयोः सम्यग्मातृ विवेकजं ज्ञानं । Y.S. 3.52

Translation: *Samyama*, on time and its sequence, brings absolute clarity.

What is interesting is *Vyāsa's* commentary on this sutra. He says that time is just the sequence of moments. No moment can coexist with another. They simply follow each other. When one ends, another begins. Now, what exists in a moment is what we experience. The past no longer exists and, in a way, has been destroyed, and the future is unmanifest. Thus, at each moment, the universe experiences a change. So, *Patañjali* tells us *Samyama* or focus, concentration, and complete absorption with *Kṣāṇa* and its *krama* gives *Viveka*, or the ability to discern. This knowledge about the world leads to the purification of the mind and makes it a mirror for the *Puruṣa* to exist in his true form — simply observing the world in a detached manner. *Vairāgya* or detachment is an important aspect of this process. It is

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enjoying the waves of *Samsāra Sagara* (the cycles of birth and rebirth) without getting one's feet wet.

Thus, *Samādhi*, for the purpose of knowing oneself, requires *Samyama* on every second, which is nothing but a sustained state of Mindfulness. This is in line with the several definitions of Mindfulness presented by modern authors in Psychology.

The *Yoga*-definition of Mindfulness can be simplified as experiencing each moment in its entirety, as a separate entity from other moments, both past and present. Contemporary psychology definitions agree with this and define it as a state of consciousness, attention, or even a method of information processing that focuses on the present. Each moment is experienced non-judgementally and is 'taken notice of' and not engaged in (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Zabat-Zinn, 1994; Germer, Siegel & Fulton, 2005; Nyanaponika, 1973). It is also considered synonymous with insight or clear awareness (Gunaratana, 2002). These modern definitions are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: Shows the various definitions of mindfulness

S.No	10	Year	Title	Journal/Book	Definition
1	Brown, K.W., & Ryan, R.M.	2003	The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being.	Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84(4), 822–848.	They defined it as a state of consciousness involving conscious attention to one's moment-to-moment experience. It is said to involve a self-regulatory capacity.
2	Kabat-Zinn, J.	1994	Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life.	New York: Hyperion.	He believed mindfulness is paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.
3	Brown, K. W., Ryan, R. M., & Creswell, J. D.	2007	Mindfulness: Theoretical foundations and evidence for its salutary effects.	Psychological inquiry, 18(4), 211-237.	Mindfulness is said to concern a non-interference with experience by allowing inputs to enter awareness by simply noticing what is taking place.
4	Nyanaponika, T.	1973	The Five Mental Hindrances.	Chicago	Mindfulness is when a stimulus is sufficiently strong, attention is engaged, which is manifest as an initial 'taking notice' of or 'turning toward' the object.
5	Shapiro, S. L., Carlson, L. E., Astin, J. A., & Freedman, B.	2006	Mechanisms of mindfulness.	Journal of clinical psychology, 62(3), 373-386.	They define it as a psychological state of awareness, a practice that promotes this awareness, a mode of processing information, and a characterological trait.
6	Bishop, S.R., Lau, M., Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Anderson, N.D., Carmody, J., et al	2004	Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition.	Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 11, 230–241.	He emphasised intention — why one is practising mindfulness — as a central component of mindfulness.
7	Santorelli, S.	1999	Heal thy self: Lessons on mindfulness in medicine.	New York: Random House	Mindfulness in Japanese traditions comprises two interactive figures — the heart and the mind.

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8	Germer, C. K., Siegel, R. D., & Fulton, P. R.	2005	Mindfulness and psychotherapy.	New York: Guilford Press.	Mindfulness is described as a mode of processing information.
9	Walsh, R., & Shapiro, S. L.	2006	The meeting of meditative disciplines and western psychology: A mutually enriching dialogue.	American Psychologist, 61, 227–239.	Mindfulness describes the group of self-regulatory practices focusing on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control.
10	Gunaratana, H.	2002	Mindfulness in plain English.	Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.	Drawn from the Pali word – Vipassana, Mindfulness is the word for insight or clear awareness and is a practice designed to gradually develop mindfulness or awareness.

Mindfulness and the Heart

The concept of a mind and heart, as described by Santorelli (1999), is not unique to Japanese mindfulness traditions but also finds some base in *Yoga*. The concept of *Hṛdaya* or Heart is also important in *Yoga* since the heart is considered the seat of the mind, just as believed by Aristotle.

Patañjali, in the *Yoga Sutra-s* says — हृदये चित्तसंवित् । Y.S. 3.34

Translation: Samyama on the heart reveals the qualities of the mind.

In the context of psychological investigation, that meditation on the heart was recommended shows the deep connection between the two.

It is critical to remember that what is referred to as the heart here is not the physical pumping organ. At least, that is not what the Japanese and Indian traditions had in mind. In today's empirical research field, these references are not enough substantiation. Mindfulness-based interventions have found their way into medical treatments as well. MBSR or Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs are used not just in treating chronic pain and cancer but find themselves increasingly useful to cardiologists as well (Ditto, Eclache, and Goldman, 2006). Mindfulness meditation seems to significantly reduce the reparation rate and heart variability associated with respiration (Leher, Sasaki and Saito, 1999). Transcendental meditation seemed to increase cardiac output (Ditto, Eclache, and Goldman, 2006). It is interesting that also heart rate has a complex relationship with meditation — while increasing parasympathetic activity reduces heart rate, meditation also increases cardiac sympathetic activity (Holmes, Solomon, Cappel and Greenberg, 1983). While it is unclear how these factors influence the therapeutic benefits, it is clear that there is a complex interaction between mindfulness-based interventions and the heart.

Axioms of Mindfulness

Some of the most commonly cited definitions of mindfulness are from Kabat-Zinn (1994), that puts forth three axioms of mindfulness:

1. "On purpose" or intention,
2. "Paying attention" or attention,
3. "In a particular way" or attitude (mindfulness qualities).

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This model was further researched by several scholars, and their findings are discussed below. It is essential to keep in mind that in some cases, mindfulness is studied synonymously with mindfulness meditation. But in the context of mindfulness in *Yoga*, this is acceptable as well. Let us examine them more closely.

The intention in meditation practitioners sets the stage for what is possible (Kabat-Zinn, p.32, 1994). This author writes that it is the intention that reminds the meditator moment to moment why they are practising in the first place. Shapiro's 1992 study showed that intention shifted along a continuum of self-regulation to self-exploration to self-liberation.

Intention:

Kabat-Zinn writes, 'Your intentions set the stage for what is possible. They remind you from moment to moment of why you are practising in the first place.' (1999). Several researchers in Psychology have identified the importance of intention in Mindfulness and mindfulness meditation (Shapiro, 1992; Bishop et al., 2004). This is seen in the *Yoga* concept of *Dhāraṇā*.

Generally, in Indian traditions, there is a practice of making a *Samkalpa* — or setting an intention before undertaking any activity. In *Yoga*, the intention must be set before *Dhāraṇā*. It is the fifth of the eight steps to *Samādhi*, and the first of the *Antaraṅga*, the inward-directed *Yogāṅgas*. This step follows *Pratyāhāra*, or restraint of the senses. It involves directing the mind to one object, despite the availability of many objects. The meditator or *Yogi* must decide at this stage what his intention is. In the *Yogasūtra*, *Patañjali* spends one whole chapter enumerating the various possible objects of meditation and the benefits of the *Samyama* on them. Thus, identifying the 'why' in Mindfulness is important.

Attention:

Most definitions of mindfulness bring in the concept of attention, especially to the present. Present moment awareness or mindfulness is thought to have therapeutic properties, as encapsulated in the words of Fritz Perls — 'attention in and of itself is curative.' Cognitive psychologists know sustained vigilance to be a complex process since, evolutionarily speaking, it is advantageous to split attention to hacking details in the environment rather than a single object (Parasuraman, 1998).

Attention in *Yoga* is *Dhāraṇā*, a step before complete absorption into one object, a process about which *Yogī-s* concur with modern psychology about how difficult it is. However, while talking about Mindfulness, it may not be appropriate to compare it to *Dhāraṇā* since it is more meditative in nature. Mindfulness can also be practised without meditation, in which case, the present moment is the object of focus.

An important part of Attention is self-regulation (Williams, Mathews, & MacLeod, 1996), which the *Yogī-s* talk about through various *Niyama* or disciplines. These include cleanliness, contentment, removal of impurities — physical and psychological, intensive study and prayer or service to others. *Niyama* are activities that train the individual to be more self-disciplined and will benefit the *Yogi* while practising *Dhāraṇā*, where self-regulation is required.

Attitude:

Kabat-Zinn's final axiom diverges from *Yoga* significantly. The qualities of the individual who is practising mindfulness are put forth by him as the third step (Kabat-Zinn, 1990,

Shapiro & Schwartz, 1999, 2000). This, however, is more or less the qualification for one to begin the study of *Yoga*. Attitude or temperament is generally evaluated by the teacher even before putting the word '*Atha*' in the first sutra. As discussed before, *Atha* implies the eligibility of both teacher and student, and a good attitude is among the list of requirements.

While this paper talks of Mindfulness and mindfulness meditation, it is essential to remember that modern *Yogī*-s are not expected to sit quietly in the mountains and live a life of austerity. Instead, they are supposed to be, at the very least, mindful of their activities no matter where they are. Like *Maitreya* demanded *Yāgñavalkya* not to give up his responsibilities in the pursuit of knowledge, the modern *Yogī* must remember that mindfulness in everyday actions, decisions and relationships embodies the principles of *Yoga* better than several hours of transcendental meditation.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have examined the definition of Mindfulness, its relationship to the heart, and some axioms of Mindfulness as seen in the model put forth by Kabat-Zinn, from both a modern psychological perspective and through the lens of *Patañjali's Yogasūtras*. It is interesting to see the similarities and differences between the two sciences of the mind, especially when Mindfulness, both as meditation and a way of life, is becoming more popular today.

Though a secondary paper, we believe work like this is essential to shed new light on these psychological interventions so as to view them more holistically. It is important for psychology to consider indigenous knowledge bodies and become more global in its approach. This is why psychology fields like Indian psychology, which blends the modern school with age-old traditions that have local roots, are better suited to serve the endemic population.

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Conflict of Interest

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