

Research Paper

## Psychotherapeutic Dimensions of Kriya Yoga in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras

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### ABSTRACT

An integrative approach is required lately to address psychological issues and disorders. Psychotherapeutic methods and techniques, when rooted in holistic principles, support clearing the mind, refining cognition, and promoting total well-being. The present study examines and contemplates the psychotherapeutic dimensions of Kriya Yoga (Yoga of Action), as described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, including *Tapas* (Austerity or disciplined action), *svādhyāya* (Self-study or study of scriptures), and *Īśvara-praṇidhāna* (devotion to the supreme), to clarify the mind. Additionally, the effect is comprehensively studied by examining the Yoga Sutras' commentaries and related research through qualitative and hermeneutic methodology. The various practices and processes of Kriya Yoga bestow one with mental clarity and control over the senses by enhancing psychosocial and emotional competence. It has a clear effect on the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual dimensions, ultimately promoting psychological stability and holistic growth.

**Keywords:** *Tapas (Austerity), Yogic Philosophy, Psychological, Well-being, Consciousness, Spiritual Growth*

Humans today face an enormous array of physical and mental illnesses and ailments. Throughout the last ten years, there has been a noticeable increase in mental health problems, particularly among young adults. This condition has many underlying causes, including a sedentary lifestyle, unfulfilled desires, inborn or acquired negative instincts, and other physical and environmental factors.

The use of Yogic Science has been shown to offer many advantages, as it holistically addresses the mind, body, and soul. One of the six orthodox schools of Hinduism, Yoga originated as a philosophical system known as 'Yog Darshan' (Yoga philosophy). This system was founded by the great Indian sage Patanjali, a great author and philosopher who wrote 196 sutras (Aphorisms) on Yoga, divided into four chapters: *Samadhi pada*, *Sadhana pada*, *Vibhuti pada*, and *Kaivalya pada*. These contain the core ideas and key principles of Yoga. With fewer words and intense meaning, these aphorisms, written eloquently, when understood and applied in one's life, induce wisdom, ease away the mental impurities, unveil the powers within, and manifest the utmost potentials of human consciousness. One of the

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techniques mentioned in Maharishi Patanjali's Yoga Sutra (2.1) to attain the purity and clarity of mind is "Kriya Yoga," which comprises three interwoven processes with pertinent ideologies: *tapas* (austerity), *swadhyaya*, and *Ishvara Pranidhana*.

### THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: KRIYA YOGA

The word 'Kriya' means action, and 'Kriya Yog' means Yoga in Action or doing. The Kriya yoga is mentioned in the second chapter of the Yoga Sutras, known as '*Sadhana pada*' in the first aphorism, which is specified as follows:

तपःस्वाध्यायेश्वरप्रणिधानानि क्रियायोगः ॥ २.१॥

*Tapahsvādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānāni kriyāyogaḥ* ||1|| (Patañjali, 2.1)

**"Austerity or asceticism, study of the self (of scriptures or chanting mantra), surrendering the fruits of actions to the supreme, is called Kriya Yoga."**

Tapas, Svādhyāya, and Ishvara-Pranidhana are the three practices that constitute *Kriya Yoga*, and they are also known as the means of *Kriya Yoga*. (Pravarjak, S. 2003). The components of this triad framework of Kriya yoga encompass profound meanings, an extensive approach, and a myriad of processes, techniques, and progressions. Understanding the denotation and connotation of each one of them could be of great value for initiation.

**Tapas:** 'Tapah', a word derived from the Sanskrit root 'tap', has no exact possible literal English translation (Taimni, 1961) it can be understood through several English words like 'to heat', 'to refine' 'purify', and as a practice, it can be called as 'austerity' 'penance' or 'discipline'. Enduring hardships such as heat and cold, pleasure and pain, respect and disrespect, gain and loss, while practicing righteousness (dharma) is *Tapah*.

**Svādhyāya:** Svādhyāya is made up of two words: one is 'Swa', which means 'self', and 'adhyaya' means 'to study' or 'to explore'. It is the study of scriptures related to liberation (moksha) and also refers to chanting mantras such as Om and the Gayatri Mantra while contemplating their meaning. It helps to know ourselves and elevate our personality through spiritual wisdom and sagacious teachings.

**Īshvara-praṇidhāna:** It is derived from the Sanskrit words *Īshvara* (from the root *īś*, meaning "God" or "supreme consciousness") and *Pranidhana* (from pra + ni + dhā, which means "to dedicate, or surrender in total"). Thus, in literal terms, it means complete dedication of oneself and surrendering all actions, mental, verbal, and physical, to the Supreme (*Ishvara*), without desiring or sticking to any worldly fruits from those actions.

The repetition of these terms (three-action-oriented praxis) in Sage Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, as part of *the niyamas* (observances) in aphorism 2.32, underscores their importance and genuineness in bringing about the desired change in the state of mind. Kriya Yoga does psychophysiological changes, leading to the total control of the body (Bapat, Sarita Vivek, 2016).

### TAPAH (AUSTERITY) FOR PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL GROWTH

The first component is *tapah* (austerity or penance), which is often misapprehended as merely penance, torturing the body, putting ourselves in agony, and forcefully mastering physical postures; none of these stand up to the actual meaning of *tapah*. In the real sense, it is a way of leading a disciplined and spiritual lifestyle for mental stability and the purification of the senses; it means restraining oneself from degrading habits, materialistic

desires, and material comforts. It is said that self-actualization cannot be attained by a person who does not follow austerity.

In *laghu-Yoga Vasishtha*, *Tapas* is explained as a disciplined practice which includes austerities, supportive in enhancing concentration, ethical, moral values, and cultivation of inner awareness with an aim to attain spiritual purification and enlightenment or liberation. It is emphasized in the text that integration of mind, body and consciousness should be there in real *tapas*, rather than merely physical penance. (Saraswati, 1995)

*Tapa* is to accept and confront the challenges that come on the way with an optimistic attitude after embarking on the route of a yogic lifestyle. To purify metals and render them lustrous and valuable, one must heat them to high temperatures. Likewise, to purify the mind, cultivate one's personality, and elevate one's level of consciousness, *tapa* is required.

The practice of *Tapas* is supported by several inner qualities that are emphasised in classical yogic texts (Yoga Sutras of Patanjali I.20; II.32–43; Bhagavad Gita 2.14). These principles or inner qualities include *Śraddhā* (faith), *Dhairya* (patience), *Ātmānuśāsana* (self-discipline), *Anāsakti* (detachment/non-attachment), *Sahana* (forbearing/endurance), which is connected with the virtue of *Titikṣā* in Bhagavad Gita (2.14), and *Saceta* (mindfulness), offering a substantial foundation for living a balanced and harmonious life. These principles, when followed lead to increased physical, psychological, social, emotional and spiritual well-being. (Bisht, 2023).

The favourable outcomes of practicing '*tapa*' are mentioned in the following aphorism:

कायेन्द्रियसिद्धिरशुद्धिक्षयात्तपसः ॥ २.४३ ॥

*kāyendriyasiddhiraśuddhikṣayāttapasah* || 2.43 ||(Patañjali, *Yoga Sutra* 2.43)

**Through austerity results the purity and mastery of the body and the senses, through the decay and eradication of impurities.**

*Tapa*, in the form of perseverance or spiritual austerity, fosters better mental and spiritual development, which starts with minor changes in overt behavioural actions and in routine tasks like eating healthily and consciously, maintaining a correct body posture, avoiding unnecessary speech, performing yogic techniques like pranayam, and waking up before sunrise. According to an analysis, those individuals who are predisposed to be early risers had a lower risk of depression, and adjusting the sleep schedule by one hour earlier can decrease that risk by 23%. (Daghlis et al., 2021). It also includes various forms and practices such as self-abnegation, non-possessiveness, integrity, celibacy, self-dependence, frugality, consistent practice of yogic disciplines, fasting, etc. One instance of physical *tapas* is *fasting*, which is encouraged and recommended by many religions and science for the good of an individual. Fasting (often done under supervision) purifies the mind and body and develops self-control. Fasting interventions have shown effectiveness in alleviating stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Berthelot et al., 2021). Abstinence aids in spiritual strengthening, willpower, and spirituality (Jerone et al., 2023). While the austerity of the body is discussed, the austerity of the mind is indicated by contentment of the mind, agreeable temperament, silence, religious meditation, and positive thoughts in the Bhagavad Geeta in the 16<sup>th</sup> verse of the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter.

This would, in turn, not only preserve the bio-psychological energy but also burn the impurities and several deep-rooted negative instincts and attributes, which are often the main underlying factors of psychological disorders. This is a disciplined effort to endure hardships and voluntarily engage in practices that manage and refine the mind. By consciously

embracing discomfort, whether through physical discipline, mental focus, or emotional endurance, we fortify ourselves to face psychological challenges. Just as vaccines introduce a controlled amount of a pathogen to strengthen the immune system, *Tapah* acts as a tool for personal growth, helping us build resilience against the adversities we encounter in life. As we perform austerities, the obstacles and adverse conditions that arise on our path toward righteousness are not seen as setbacks but as opportunities for training. Once clarity of mind happens, holistic health or well-being can be attained.

Furthermore, consistent practice of *Tapah* brings to the surface the buried desires, fears, and unresolved emotions rooted deep within our unconscious mind. These latent psychological elements, once dormant, are now confronted and cleansed. This process of confronting and resolving inner turmoil mirrors the principles of psychoanalysis, where repressed thoughts and emotions are brought to the conscious mind to be understood, processed, and healed. However, this Western approach does not incorporate metaphysical constructs such as soul, consciousness, or rebirth. The structural model of personality has its components as the Id, Ego, and Superego, and emphasizes childhood experiences or traumas and motivations from the unconscious being the major determinants of behavior. Thus, the understanding and process are limited to psychological processes that are empirically observable. By cultivating *Tapah*, ingrained and deep-seated impurities are cleansed, creating a space for mental clarity and emotional equilibrium, which helps strengthen our ability to deal with internal and external challenges. To nourish our cognition with truth and optimism, one needs to practice Svādhyāya, as discussed in the next aphorism.

#### **SVĀDHYĀYA : INTROSPECTION AND THE STUDY OF SACRED SCRIPTURES)**

Svādhyāya, is a great way to instill wisdom, mental stability, and psychological well-being.

*svādhyāyādi iṣṭadevatāsamprayogaḥ ॥44॥*

स्वाध्यायादि इष्टदेवतासंप्रयोगः ॥४४॥

*Through self-study and introspection, one comes into contact with the supreme consciousness, reality, or force.*

Again, Svādhyāya is not just what its English translation suggests; it is not just reading scriptures or doing self-study. Being aware of one's inner world, the operations of one's thoughts, emotions and cognition with imaginations is the genesis of self-introspection, then further contemplating deep to understand our real nature. One begins to see how thoughts and emotions affect behaviors and actions by observing them, without judging from within. In turn, this awareness shall assist in the development of a state of mindfulness, leading to greater control over one's reactions and behaviors. It can be considered an effective method for cognitive restructuring and for developing introspective awareness.

The concept of Svādhyāya also refers to the study of sacred texts for the purpose of knowing self and truth, such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, or other spiritual scriptures. These texts offer wisdom, guidance, and reflections on the nature of existence, the self, and the universe. The process of reflecting pragmatically upon the scriptures studied quenches the thirst of understanding the real self. The process is gradual yet yields mystical and prominent growth in the brain, cognition, and mind. With the regular practice of *svādhyāya*, one's personality is refined in all dimensions. Moreover, 'it helps get rid of many mental and psychosomatic diseases, fall-oriented ideology and subversive activities.' (Verma, G., 2021). By feeding our minds with the wisdom of renowned spiritual scholars and Yogis, having a productive and optimistic outlook accelerates the development of one's thinking ability and

cognition, eliminating the lower energies of attachment, fear, lust, anger, etc., eventually eradicating the roots of mental disorders. People who practice *svādhyāya* get a greater sense of purpose and moral conduct, which transforms their societies for the better. (Tandel & Parmar, 2025)

Mantra Chanting is the supreme way of doing *Svādhyāya*. One can chant the Gayatri, Mahamritunjaya, or any other mantra related to any religion or deity, or even "Om." Chanting creates balance, according to a study. Om chanting gradually lowers engineering college students' stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Kar, Ashis & Taqa, Amer. 2023). The mantra, when chanted wholeheartedly with centering on its meaning or the deity, creates higher energy and connects us directly to the omnipresent power.

The experiments show that the correct frequency and pronunciation of the mantra sound, along with the correct intentions, helps the practitioner reduce heart rate, blood pressure and cure many ailments. It induces calm brainwave activity, and achieve immunity from external mental disturbances (Dudeja, Jai. 2017). Each of these methods is a tool for peeling back the layers of ego and illusion, helping the doer uncover the true self and cultivate psychological strengths and qualities like love, compassion, and wisdom. Over time, this leads to deeper spiritual insight, greater peace, a calmer mind, and a more purposeful life.

To get the utmost benefit, consistency, concentration, and contemplation are important. With the growing cases of short-temperedness in adolescents, it is found that when inculcated in the daily routine, *svādhyāya*, as a great psycho-spiritual intervention, can do cognitive restructuring, which in turn can alleviate hostility (Bajpai, D. 2016). The improvement for an optimistic emotional personality in teenagers has also been shown to be positively impacted by mantra chanting (Ganguly et al., 2020).

### **ĪŚVARAPRAṆIDHĀNA (DEVOTEMENT TO SUPREME)**

*Īśvara-praṇidhāna* (surrender to the God or supreme consciousness) is to be understood with a wiser approach, as when one says, "Surrender to the supreme" or "leave it to God", it should not be regarded as being inactive or becoming apathetic. In fact, it does bring us that confidence and potential to execute our responsibility in a better way without getting into ego-driven distress. The spiritual faith and devotion are proven to improve the overall well-being, resilience, and productivity; it is also found in a study done on acknowledging these spiritual constructs as coping mechanisms in missionaries and aid workers while dealing with traumatic conditions in particular (Peres et al., 2007; Selby et al., 2009).

समाधिसिद्धिरीश्वरप्रणिधानात् ॥ २.४५ ॥

*samādhisiddhirīśvarapraṇidhānāt* ॥ 2.45 ॥ (Patanjali, *Yoga Sutra* 2.45)

**Attainment of Samadhi/ Self-Realization and Trans happens by surrendering to Īśvara (also regarding Īśvara as the core of all motives, actions, and outcomes)**

This aphorism reveals the secret to attaining the greatest possible state of human consciousness: to trust and surrender ourselves to *Īśvara (God)*, being devoted entirely and believing in his everlasting presence and providence at all times. Even while following the qualities of divinity and performing righteous actions as part of *tapa*, one must devote the fruit of all our actions (good or bad) to the supreme, the God, the divine energy, the mystic vital force. Its complete devotion and faith furnish one with real bliss within and out.

The process seems very easy to follow as one has to surrender; however, it may present arduous challenges, with ego-driven actions and egotism being the most prominent. The first

progression here is understanding *Īśvara*, the great conscious being who is omnipresent in this universe, as immortal and eternal. Maharishi Patanjali in his Yoga Sutra 1.24, describes *Īśvara* as that '*Purushvishesh*' (Exceptional and eminent Self) who is untouched by any affliction (*klesha*), actions (*karma*), results (*vipak*), or desires (*Aashya*). In the very next aphorism, it is stated that *Īśvara* is identified as *Pranava* or *Aum*. Apart from being the most primordial mantra and having strong rational and scientific underpinnings, it holds its significance with multifarious explanations. The dedication to the divine comprises continuous, consistent remembrance and rendering to the eternal, with progression. The third is to embrace and forbear all the torments and pains that we get in our lives in every situation. To make this practically applicable, the concepts of *tapah* and *Svādhyāya* are presented in prior aphorisms, whose practice makes our mind unruffled. This makes it clear that the elements or components of *Kriya yoga* are to be followed in an integrated way and not necessarily in succession.

It is not a science of discerning, of outer laboratory experimentations; it is a science of feeling and experiencing spirituality, of perception beyond ordinary sight. There is nothing illogical or wizardry about its praxis; if one does it, the incredible results are inevitable, one remains sanguine, and gets tranquility.

Research studies state that spiritual/religious experiences and positive mental health have frequently coexisted (Papaleontiou, 2021). Along with the initial benefits of psychological well-being, the continued practice of *Kriya Yoga* will lead to self-actualisation, the opening of the super potentials of human consciousness, and absorption into ultimate reality.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study concludes that by integrating the psychophysiological discipline, cognito-affective and spiritual dimensions, the Triad model of *Kriya Yoga* offers a comprehensive framework to enhance psycho-spiritual well-being. *Tapah* (Austerity or asceticism), which burns up obscurity, cleans the grime of impurities of our mind and senses, and brings psychological competence and potential. This is a technique of confronting and alleviating psychological disorders like stress, anxiety, depression, hostility, or personality disorders. With bio-psycho-physiological refinement and nourishment, *Svādhyāya* will make us restructure our cognition to seek the truth and to engross in the qualities of supreme being, the mantra chanting not only make neurological changes like stimulating vagus nerve and calming nervous system, (Bongarge et al., 2022) but also induce subtle positive changes at spiritual level and with *Īśvarapranidhāna* the process goes well-ordered and ultimately leads to full-fledged development of personality and real self-reflection. Thus, *Kriya yoga*, as laid out in the Yoga Sutras by Maharishi Patanjali, holds a very significant psychotherapeutic dimension and potential to be incorporated as a therapeutic model to alleviate not only the psychological distress and disorders in contemporary psychological settings but also for the attainment of higher states of consciousness, being its pivotal purpose.

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