

Compare and Contrast Between Buddhism and Yoga

Nowadays, Buddhism and Yoga, Eastern philosophies and practices originating in India, have a great impact on the West, and specifically, on the United States, spiritually and religiously. Indeed, Yoga studios and Buddhist meditation centers have sprung up almost everywhere throughout the United States to provide alternative ways of improving people's wellbeing. It is a common understanding that Yoga assists people to improve their physical health, whereas Buddhist meditation helps them to calm and control the mind—a view exemplified in the title of Jane Tuma's book, *Yoga Body, Buddha Mind*. If one studies both of these practices carefully, however, one will notice that Yoga deals not only with bodily attitudes and postures (*asana*), but also with meditation and concentration (*dharana* and *dhyana*). In addition, although the Buddha utilized some of Yoga's spiritual aspects, his meditation techniques and goals may be different from that of Yoga. To clarify these misconceptions, let us investigate these traditions historically, philosophically, and practically, in order to delineate their similarities and differences so that people can better utilize them as tools for spiritual and religious development.

Etymologically, the Sanskrit word *yoga* derives from the root *yuj*, meaning “to bind together,” “hold fast,” or “yoke,” which is also the source of the Latin *iungere* and *iugum*, and thus of the French *joug*, and so on. In Indian religion, the term Yoga relates to ascetic practices and to any method of meditation; its classical meaning is “a view, doctrine,” or system of philosophy.¹ Historically, although Yoga, an older system of thought than that of the Rigveda, had existed in Indus Valley for thousands of years, it is referred unofficially in the Katha, Taittiriya, and the Maitrayani of the Upanishads, which were written during or after the time of

the Buddha; namely, it is technically and consensually compiled and edited by Patanjali around 300 BCE.² Although there are many systems of Yoga prior to the Patanjali period, the present paper will deal mainly with the complete set of eight aspects of classical Yoga in the Yoga sutras, including moral observance (*yama* and *niyama*), the posture (*asana*), the controlling of the breath (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the sense (*pratyahara*), fixed attention (*dhyana*), contemplation (*dharana*), and concentration (*samadhi*). Spiritually, Yoga plays a great influence as an all-pervading element of Indian traditions and religious development due to the various Yogic practices being disseminated throughout Indian religion, from its highest to its lowest manifestations.³

In order to examine Yoga's effectiveness, a brief overview of the Yoga Sutras will be helpful. Following Patanjali's compilation of the Yoga Sutras, we can classify them into four parts: morality and discipline (*yama* and *niyama*), bodily posture and controlling of the breath (*asana* and *pranayama*), meditation and concentration (*dharana* and *pratyahara*), and Yogic ecstasies and the final achievement (*dhyana* and *samadhi*). Let us talk about them generally.

Yogic morality and discipline teaches that one should uphold the five cardinal rules: non-violence (*ahimsa*), abstaining from stealing (*asteya*), abstaining from sexual relationship (*brahmachariya*), not speaking untruth (*satya*), and non-possession (*apagrha*). However, one also should join the practice of bodily and psychic disciplines if one wishes to purify one's body: "Cleanliness, serenity, asceticism [*tapas*], study of Yoga metaphysics, and an effort to make Īsvara [God] the motive of all [one's] actions constitute the disciplines," writes Patañjali (*Yoga Sūtra* 2.32).

Next, *asana*, bodily posture, provides a stable body and a concrete step to unify and centralize the body into a single position so that one can transcend the human body's condition of being attached to one's natural inclinations; namely, one may control or refuse to breath (*pranayama*); Patanjali puts it, "*Prāṇāyāma* is the arrest [*viccheda*] of the movements of inhalation and exhalation and it is obtained after *āsana* has been realized" (*Yoga Sūtra* 2.49). By controlling respiration's rhythm through the three moments of inhalation, retention, and exhalation equally for a few minutes, one may unify one's consciousness in a way that may not be accessible walking or standing.

Being able to control the senses without letting them interact with external stimuli, one may be able to fix and focus on an object and prolong the meditation. As a result, one may achieve yogic meditation, "a current of unified thought" (*Yoga Sūtra* 3.2), or become free from any other effort to assimilate objects, as Vyasa mentioned. Then one can achieve to several of the crowning states of mind of *samadhi*, that is, the faculty of knowledge, spiritually. Therefore, one could have the direct revelation of oneself or the Supreme Self, Ishvara, the Lord.

In short, the ultimate goal of Yoga is that through these practices, one may be able to have levitation, suspended animation, knowledge of past births and others' minds, and mastery over the first cause, which results in absolute independence.

Now, let us turn to Buddhist philosophy and practice. After his enlightenment around 500 BCE, the Buddha, "the one who has awakened," began his teaching with the four central

principles known as the Four Noble Truths;⁴ virtually everything that follows in the succeeding years—the Buddha’s sermons, books written over the next several centuries, commentaries on earlier writings—can be regarded as flowing from these Truths. They are as follows:

1-The Truth of Sufferings is the physical and mental sufferings of being born, having illness, aging, death, pain, hunger, dissatisfaction, etc.

2-The Cause of Sufferings is greed, hatred, and ignorance.

3- The End of Sufferings comes about because everything is changing; namely nothing lasts forever.

4- The Path to the End Sufferings is through the practice of the Eightfold Paths of Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Concentration, and Right Mindfulness. Right View and Right Thought belong to the Wisdom group; Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood belong to the Morality group; Right Effort, Right Concentration, and Right Mindfulness belong to the Concentration group.

Here, in order to transcend physical and mental sufferings, the Buddha advises us that we need to have the transcendental wisdom of having the Right View of recognizing the moral law of karma, namely, that every action of thought, body, and speech carries its own reflected and corresponding karma; one also should recognize the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Besides having a Right View, one should develop the Right Thought of renunciation for oneself and non-violence, harmlessness, goodness, etc., to others. Having these transcendental insights—Right View and Right Thought—one can conduct oneself properly by having Right Speech, that is, not having false speech, divisive speech, abusive speech, and idle chatter. Moreover, having Right Action, one can restrain oneself from killing, stealing, and

sexual misconduct. In addition, having Right Livelihood, one may not conduct any business in trading humans, animals, weapons, intoxicating substances, etc. These three compose the ethical obligations for common people to live in harmony with each other. Lastly, in order to generate genuine wisdom coupled with morality, one would need to develop Right Effort, namely, continuing to do whatever good deeds one is doing, starting to do good deeds that one has not yet done, stopping any bad deeds one is committing now, and restraining oneself from initiating any bad deeds that one has not yet committed. Furthermore, if there is no mental training, i.e., restraining or controlling the mind, it is difficult for one to develop true wisdom and ethics. In fact, the Buddha mentioned this mental training, or meditative states,⁵ in his early teaching. Obviously, in many of his early teachings,⁶ he expressed yogic ideas frequently. Therefore, according to the Buddha's advice, one should develop the skill of concentration properly, Right Concentration. In addition, the Buddha combined meditative absorption with the practice of mindfulness.⁷ Indeed, through the practice of mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasatti*), of visualization of objects, of repetition of phrases, etc., one may be able to focus on the object of attention until reaching full concentration and the state of meditative absorption, *samadhi*, and therefore one may have ability to enter and go through several stages of *dyanha* (in Pali, *jhana*) that may assist one to realize and awaken the mind transcendently. Similarly, having Right Mindfulness can help one to stay with and be alert to any phenomenon that may affect one's body and mind.

Having explained the eightfold principle of Yoga and of Buddhism above, we can compare these two systems as follows:

Yoga's morality and discipline aspect is similar to that of the Buddhist Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. However, since the Buddhist approach is more moderate, especially in the teaching of breath meditation (*anapanasatti*), which is a preparation for concentration⁸ and appropriate for beginners,⁹ and applicable in daily life, a layperson may marry and own possessions; this approach is the opposite of the extreme practice of a Yogic ascetic. Also, regarding breath meditation, instead of holding or manipulating the breath as a Yogi, a Buddhist just needs to follow his breath mindfully,¹⁰ without applying any external or internal force, so that he can calm his body and pacify his mind—in other words, there is no need for breath manipulation; one just needs to be mindful and breathe moderately.¹¹ Moreover, although a Buddhist and a Yogi may have the similar achievement of *samadhi* in its various stages mentally and spiritually, the Buddhist may be able to advance further into the higher attainment of the sage-hood states of mind, namely, arahatship, which can stop and transform the cycle of life and death permanently. Specifically, instead of attaining to the achievement of having spiritual powers of recognition of one's past or future life, having the ability of levitation, obtaining the knowledge of others' thoughts, etc., for the purpose of worldly gain and fame, one may attain to the non-dual states of mind by purifying oneself completely of all mental afflictions. In fact, according to the Buddha's advice, based on the practice of mindfulness one could achieve the mental state of liberating the cognition, because attaining a complete cessation of thought alone is not enough, even attaining the highest meditative states. This is one of the major differences between Buddhist meditation and Yogic mediation.¹²

In addition, Buddhism and Yoga have many different thoughts, principles, and practices. In spite of sharing many Hindu ideals, at the beginning of his teaching, the Buddha proclaimed

the *anatman* ideal, rejecting the inner *atman* or Supreme Self of the Hindu Yogi.¹³ Following that principle, later on both Mahayana and Theravadin texts contain refutations of the *atman*, Brahman, Ishvara, and the key tenets of Yoga and Vedanta, which are regarded as false doctrines.

Also, instead of advocating the liberation at death¹⁴ of the yogic adept (“becoming cool” and “going out,” in the classical yogic metaphor), the Buddha pointed out that one can achieve liberation, or nirvana, which accords with “the ideal personality, the true human being,”¹⁵ or the state of mind that free from craving, anger, and other afflicted states, even in this lifetime, as he and many of his *arahat* disciples did.

Furthermore, although both Buddhist and Yogic traditions emphasize Karma as a spiritually oriented law, the Buddhism states that the world exists due to the beginningless karma of sentient beings, namely the self-existence principle, whereas the Hindus see Ishvara, a personal supreme God, as having a direct involvement and playing a role in the working out of karma.¹⁶

Moreover, two important principles that relate to the Buddhist rebirth concept are *anatman* (or in Pali, *anatta*)—that there is no irreducible *atman* or “self” tying the lives together, and *anitya* (or in Pali, *anicca*)—that all things are impermanent, including all aspects of the human person and personality; thus, as the dying candle’s flame can pass itself to light the flame of another candle, so a new personality will come into being after death.¹⁷ In Hinduism, in contrast, the soul (*atman*) is immortal, while the body is subject to birth and death, as stated in

the Bhagavad Gita: “Worn-out garments are shed by the body; Worn-out bodies are shed by the dweller within the body. New bodies are donned by the dweller, like garments” (2:22).¹⁸

Another crucial principle that differentiates Buddhism from other traditions is the rejection of a supreme God or Creator since the time of the Buddha.¹⁹ Hindus believe in their extraordinary and powerful God,²⁰ Ishvara, and they also revere the Divine Mother like Durga or Kali. In contrast, Buddhists venerate Bodhisattvas, the Wise-Beings²¹ as great beings who once lived and attained enlightenment at some point in time and took various vows to stay in the world to help save living beings; examples include Tara in Tibetan Buddhism and Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva in Chinese Buddhism. These are the main points of difference between the Buddhist and Yogic (i.e., Hindu) systems of belief.

Conversely, there are many similarities between the Buddhist tradition and that of Yoga since both spring from the same ancient roots. For instance, both use similar terms and identical meanings for *samadhi*, *dyanha*, *samapatti*, *samyama*, etc. Both emphasize similar concepts of faith, energy, thought, concentration, and wisdom. Both recognize *dharma*, the principle of truth or natural law, as the basic law of the universe that is the unity of all sentient beings. Both share the same basic ethical values, such as non-violence, truthfulness, non-attachment, and non-stealing. Both see karma as the main causative factor behind rebirth in the world. Both agree that the truth (nirvana) transcends all concepts.

For example, a school of philosophy and psychology that developed in India during the 4th to 5th centuries B.C.E, the Yogacara sect, teaches Yoga in order to reach enlightenment²². In the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, along with the Yantra Yoga, a discipline which

includes breath work (or *pranayama*), meditative contemplation and precise dynamic movements to centre the practitioners,²³ among nine yantras of Yoga practice, the last six are described as “Yoga yantras”: *Kriya Yoga*, *Upa Yoga*, *Yoga Yana*, *Mahā Yoga*, *Anu Yoga*, and the ultimate practice, *Ati Yoga*²⁴. The Sarma traditions also include *Kriya*, *Upa* (called *Charya*), and Yoga, with the Anuttara Yoga class substituting for Mahayoga and Atiyoga. Other tantra yoga practices include a system of 108 bodily postures practiced with breath and heart rhythm.

Presently, both Buddhism and Yoga are appreciated by many current psychologists such as Marvin Levine, who has listed several similar points in his book, *The Positive Psychology of Buddhism and Yoga: Paths to a Mature Happiness*:

Both are concerned with alleviating inner suffering (p. 6); are humanistic and naturalistic (especially Buddhism), in that they focus on the human condition and interpret it in natural rather than religious terms. Both see the human being as caught in a causal framework, in a matrix of forces. Among these forces are cravings or drives (pp. 29-33, produced by both our biology and our beliefs (p. 40). Both teach the appropriateness of compassion, concern, and unconditional positive regard toward all beings (p. 51). Both share the ideal of maturing and growth.

In short, while having many differences in theory and practice, Buddhism and Yoga have in common a large number of ideas and thoughts developed during the thousands of years of their existence together seeking the good of humankind. To conclude, I would like to offer a quotation from Dr. Ananda Gururpe about the complementarities of Buddhism and Yoga in India:

The elaborate system of meditation, which the Buddha formulated with as many as forty subjects of meditation, thirteen vows of physical restraint, and many aids for concentration (Vajiranana p.71; VM. Dhutanga and Kammatthana niddesas), had an effect on the development of classical Yoga, while the developed Yoga techniques subsequently influenced the evolution of the Yogacara Buddhist school (Bapat p.122).²⁵

Notes

¹ Mircea Eliade, "Yoga." *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, vol. 14, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005). 9893-9897. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Gale University of the West (accessed Sept. 10, 2009).

² Ananda Guruge, "The Place of Buddhism in Indian Thought: Buddhism and Patanjali Yoga," *Indologica Taurinensis* 34 (2008): 170-174.

³ Thomas Berry, *Religions of India: Hinduism, Yoga, Buddhism: Yoga*. (New York: Bruce Publishing Co., c1971), 75-76.

⁴ Walpola Ruhula, *What the Buddha Taught: With a Foreword by Paul Demieville and a Collection of Illustrative Texts Translated from the Original Pali*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1974).

⁵ Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, Vol. 1: India and China*, trans. James W. Heisig and Paul F. Knitter (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 22.

⁶ Barbara Stoler Miller, *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom: The Yoga Sutra Attributed to Patanjali; a Translation of the Text, with Commentary, Introduction, and Glossary of Keywords* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 8.

⁷ Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (Routledge, 2007), 73.

⁸ G. C. Pande, *Foundations of Indian Culture: Spiritual Vision and Symbolic Forms in Ancient India*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1990), 97.

⁹ Edward Conze, *Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 66. Regarding the Buddha's incorporation of *pranayama*, see also Buddhadasa, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, Rev. ed. (Wisdom Publications, 1997), 53.

¹⁰ Frederic Spiegelberg, *Living Religions of the World* (Prentice-Hall, 1956), 164.

¹¹ Conze, 29.

¹² Wynne, 105.

¹³ Marvin Levine, *The Positive Psychology of Buddhism and Yoga: Paths to a Mature Happiness*, 2nd ed. (Taylor and Francis, 2008).

¹⁴ Wynne, 105.

¹⁵ Guenther, *The Problem of the Soul in Early Buddhism* (Curt Weller Verlag, Constanz, 1949), 156-157.

¹⁶ Alex Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present* (Princeton 1998), 154-56.

¹⁷ PTS: Miln 71-72; 82-83; 84 (Pali Canon).

¹⁸ Bhagavad Gita II.22.

¹⁹ B. Alan Wallace, *Contemplative Science* (Columbia University Press, 2007), 97-98.

²⁰ Edwin H. Bryant, *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, book X with chapters 1, 6 and 29-31 from book XI*. Harmondsworth [Eng.]: Penguin, 2003.

²¹ Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (Boston: University Books, Inc., 1975), 225.

²² C. Alexander Simpkins and Annellen M. Simpkins, *Simple Tibetan Buddhism: A Guide to Tantric Living* (Tuttle Publishing, 2001).

²³ Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, *Yantra Yoga: The Tibetan Yoga of Movement* (Snow Lion, 2008).

²⁴ Reginald A. Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet* (Shambhala: 2002), 37-38.

²⁵ Guruge, 170-174.

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