

## **The Practical Theosophy: H.P. Blavatsky on Yoga and Meditation.**

**Dr.Suman Yadav**

Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Delhi.

### **Abstract-**

H. P. Blavatsky (1831-1891) was one of the founding member of the theosophical Society who puts the concept of theosophy with relation to other concepts like religion, science, occultism, spiritualism, soul, life, philosophy, ethics, morality etc. with social-political content and this paper explains the theoretical-methodological interdependence of the social history and conceptual history by investigating the Self-understanding, self-interpretation, and self-constitution of the overlapping concepts that constitute a collective singular of theosophy in relation to the practical aspect of theosophy particularly yoga and meditation. The paper briefly explains the historiographical interpretations and then attempts to articulate the practical life of the concepts in modern esoteric life as a method to revive the ancient Indian philosophy concept and its practices.

**Keywords:** H. P. Blavatsky, Theosophy, Yoga, Meditation, Revivalism.

### **Introduction:**

H.P. Blavatsky popularized the concept of theosophy in India, with the foundation of 'The Theosophical society' in 1882. Society was working with the following three objective- 1. To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, colour, or creed. 2. To promote the study of Aryan and other Scriptures, of the World's religions and sciences, and to vindicate the importance of old Asiatic literature, namely, of the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Zoroastrian philosophies. 3. To investigate the hidden mysteries of Nature under every aspect possible, and the psychic and spiritual powers latent in man especially. So, the yoga and the meditation were the practical aspect that the followers of the theosophical principle use to practice to revive the hidden mysteries already constituted in him/her. The practice of yoga and meditation in socio and political domain attracted the Hindu intellectual elite because they got a self confidence in their public life that was dominated by the colonial hegemony.

### **Yoga-**

Bimal Krishna Matilal sketches a popular notions, concern, and enthusiasm of the westerners about Yoga, Spiritualism, Meditation. And he explains that why Yoga is so popular in the west and explains the reasons that he notes-

- a. Yoga is supposed to be a spiritual system, so it must be an answer to what is commonly expressed as 'Western materialism'
- b. Yoga is connected with psychic phenomena, which sympathizers designate as parapsychology. So, it is a way of getting away from the

'suffocating' behaviourism and materialistic metaphysics which are in conflict with the religious sentiment of common people. Yoga is believed to have proven that extra-sensory mental powers, ESP, clairvoyance and telepathy are all possible. Thus, one can be satisfied that there is a soul apart from the material body. For without a soul, how can one possibly think of spirituality?

- c. Yoga is said to be the gateway to a healthy life. One feels that Hatha Yoga does something for one's body. One becomes more joyful and energetic. Being healthy means for most of us being more happy and more holy! Witness the 3HO Foundation of Yogi Bhajkan—the Healthy, Happy and Holy Organization. Maybe the 'Yogic' physical contortions appear to be a bit weird to the Western mind, but then that is why they do 'all those good things' to your body and mind.
- d. Yoga system is an Oriental occultism—an esoteric system, and therefore, if we know about it, we might be in possession of all those 'powers' we always wanted to have—levitation, thought reading, clairvoyance, and so on.
- e. Yoga is also an aphrodisiac. Many writers of Yoga exploit the theme of Yoga and sexuality. In this respect, Yoga is joined by its counterpart, Tantra. Thus, the two extremes of Indian spirituality, asceticism and eroticism, meet here in making Yoga a marketable commodity in the West. In Kundalini Yoga, the 'serpent power' (which is also interpreted as sexual power or sexuality) is harnessed and therefore you can do impossible things! (0 Yoga is relaxing. Yoga releases tensions. Yoga buys mental peace and calmness of mind.

Among the Westerners theosophists were the important ideologue who projected the conception of Yoga differently. They recognised it as a legitimate philosophical way of life and criticized their contemporaries who did not value more as it deserve or as the theosophists see. Particularly, H. P. Blavatsky recognises the value and relates it as a 'Nobel' intellectual practice. Blavatsky did not mock the poor condition of the most of the thousands of fakirs, gosāins, bairāgīs and others of the mendicant order, who throng the villages and religious fairs of India in our present age, may be and undoubtedly are worthless and idle vagabonds, modern clowns, imitating the great students of the philosophic ages of the past. But Blavatsky tried to look closely at the origin of their school and to study the Patañjali's Yoga-Vidyā that will be better able to understand and hence appreciate their seemingly ridiculous practices. For Blavatsky, "If the ancients were not as well versed in the details of physiology as are our physicians of the Carpenterian modern school — a question still sub judice — they may perhaps be proved, on the other hand, to have fathomed this science in another direction by other methods far deeper than the former; in short, to have made themselves better acquainted with its occult and exceptional laws than we are.

That the ancients of all countries were intimately acquainted with what is termed in our day's "hypnotism" or self-mesmerisation, the production, in a word, of voluntary trance — cannot be denied."

In Blavatsky's perception Yoga as a 'Universal' system. And this system, evolved by long ages of practice until it was brought to bear the above-described results, was not practiced in India alone in the days of antiquity. According to Blavatsky, "the greatest philosophers of all countries sought to acquire these powers; and certainly, behind the external ridiculous postures of the Yogis of today, lies concealed the profound wisdom of the archaic ages; one that included among other things a perfect knowledge of what are now termed physiology and psychology. Ammonius Saccas, Porphyry, Proclus and others practiced it in Egypt; and Greece and Rome did not shrink at all even in their time of philosophical glory to follow suit. Pythagoras speaks of the celestial music of the spheres that one hears in hours of ecstasy; Zeno finds a wise man who having conquered all passions, feels happiness and emotion, but in the midst of torture; Plato advocates the man of meditation and likens his powers to those of the divinity; and we see the Christian ascetics themselves through a mere life of contemplation and self-torture acquire powers of levitation or aethrobacy, which, though attributed to the miraculous intervention of a personal God, are nevertheless real and the result of physiological changes in the human body."

Blavatsky by referring Patañjali emphasise on the trance-human aspect of the Yoga that includes the hearing of celestial sound, development of spiritual eye, spiritual ear and the ability to see the unseen and the ability for transmigration from living to dead. All these activities develop a different body- the astral body- that differs from the physical body. Blavatsky writes, "The Yogi," says Patañjali, "will hear celestial sounds, the songs and conversations of celestial choirs. He will have the perception of their touch in their passage through the air," — which translated into a more sober language means that the ascetic is enabled to see with the spiritual eye in the Astral Light, hear with the spiritual ear subjective sounds inaudible to others, and live and feel, so to say, in the Unseen Universe. "The Yogi is able to enter a dead or a living body by the path of the senses, and in this body to act as though it were his own." The "path of the senses" — our physical senses supposed to originate in the astral body, the ethereal counterpart of man, or the jiv-ātma, which dies with the body — the senses are here meant in their spiritual sense — volition of the higher principle in man."

Blavatsky's explanation of Yoga is Hindu revivalist in nature because she emphasized and explored the Hindu Concepts that are lost in the past and so there is a sense of lose to achieve them. Yoga is one of them that is chiefly divided into Rāja-Yoga and Hatha-Yoga. For Blavatsky, the true Raja-Yogi is a Stoic; and Kapila, who deals but with the latter — utterly rejecting the claim of the

HathaYogis to converse during Samadhi with the Infinite Īśvara — describes their state in the following words:

To a Yogi, in whose mind all things are identified as spirit, what is infatuation? What is grief? He sees all things as one; he is destitute of affections; he neither rejoices in good, nor is offended with evil. A wise man sees so many false things in those which are called true, so much misery in what is called happiness, that he turns away with disgust . . . He who in the body has obtained liberation (from the tyranny of the senses) is of no caste, of no sect, of no order, attends to no duties, adheres to no shastras, to no formulas, to no works of merit; he is beyond the reach of speech; he remains at a distance from all secular concerns; he has renounced the love and the knowledge of sensible objects; he flatters none, he honours none, he is not worshipped, he worships none; whether he practices and follows the customs of his fellow men or not, this is his character.

Theosophical conception of Yoga is esoteric and spiritually elitist in nature. It emphasises on that aspect of the practice of Yoga that was similar to their conception of theosophy with the help of the Hindu philosophy in the ancient and with the Jargon of the modern sciences. Theosophical character of as Blavatsky writes, “A Yogi, in a state of self-trance, acquires the power of predicting future events, of understanding unknown languages (a), of curing divers’ diseases (b), of divining the unexpressed thoughts of others (c), of hearing distant sounds, of seeing distant objects, of smelling mystical fragrant odours . . . and of understanding the language of beasts and birds (d).”

Meditation:

For Blavatsky, “Real culture is spiritual. It proceeds from within outwards, and unless a person is naturally noble-minded and strives to progress on the spiritual before he does so on the physical or outward plane, such culture and civilization will be no better than whitened sepulchres full of dead men’s bones and decay.” And “Spiritual culture is attained through concentration. It must be continued daily and every moment to be of use.” And this “concentration can be achieved by meditation that has been defined as “the cessation of active, external thought.” Concentration is the entire life-tendency to a given end.” Blavatsky explores the relations of life with ‘soul’, ‘the supreme’, devotion and psychic powers and she sketches it textual authority from Hindu text Bhagavad-Gītā. She writes, “life is the great teacher; it is the great manifestation of Soul, and Soul manifests the Supreme. Hence all methods are good, and all are but parts of the great aim, which is Devotion. “Devotion is success in actions,” says the Bhagavad-Gītā. We must use higher and lower faculties alike, and beyond those of mind are those of the Spirit, unknown but discoverable. The psychic powers, as they come, must also be used, for they reveal laws. But their value must not be exaggerated, nor must their danger be ignored.”

Blavatsky emphasises on the cultivation and training of the psychic powers in the lower degrees through meditation because there is no other way

of attaining the power of concentration because this power, largely developed, no progress can be made in Practical Occultism, no beginning even of it being possible. According to Blavatsky, “Like despondency, like doubt, like fear, like vanity, pride, and self-satisfaction, these [psychic] powers too are used by Nature as traps to detain us. Every occurrence, every object, every energy may be used for or against the great end: in each, Nature strives to contain Spirit, and Spirit strives to be free.”

In Blavatsky’s perception of the aim of meditation stated in the most general terms is to realize the reality or truth which is hidden behind any form, idea or ideal conceived only on the plane of the intellect. Its essential nature consists, therefore, in going behind outer appearances and knowing things as they are in truth and reality. It is esoteric in a sense that it is ‘hidden’, and it demands to know the thing that is ‘in truth’ or in-itself. For Blavatsky, meditation has, therefore, to deal with two things. First, with the outer form which represents or embodies an inner reality, and second, the inner reality itself which though indicated by the outer form is hidden behind this form and can be known only by transcending the form. There are other minor purposes or aims of meditation such as training the mind, or building up required traits in one’s character but these are all secondary and are meant merely to prepare the ground for and sub serve the main and essential purpose.

Blavatsky recommends for the aspirants the kind of contemplation or meditation/the Elixir of Life that follows the reasoning from the known to the unknown meditation that must be practised and encouraged. In which the “known” is the phenomenal world, cognisable by our five senses. And all that we see in this manifested world are the effects, the causes of which are to be sought after in the noumenal, the unmanifested, the “unknown world”: this is to be accomplished by meditation, i.e., continued attention to the subject. And for Blavatsky, contemplation, in its true sense, is to recognise the truth of Éliphas Lévi’s saying:

To believe without knowing is weakness; to believe, because one knows, is power.

Or, in other words, to see that “KNOWLEDGE IS POWER.”

What Blavatsky says The Elixir of Life in her Five Years of Theosophy not only gives the preliminary steps in the ladder of contemplation but also tells the reader how to realise the higher conceptions. It traces, by the process of contemplation as it were, the relation of man, “the known,” the manifested, the phenomenon, to “the unknown,” the unmanifested, the noumenon. It shows to the student what ideal he should contemplate and how to rise up to it. It places before him the nature of the inner capacities of man and how to developed them. To a superficial reader, this may, perhaps, appear as the acme of selfishness. Reflection or contemplation will, however, show the contrary to be the case. For it teaches the student that to comprehend the noumenal, he must identify himself with Nature. Instead of looking upon himself as an isolated being, he must learn

to look upon himself as a part of the INTEGRAL WHOLE. For, in the unmanifested world, it can be clearly perceived that all is controlled by the “Law of Affinity,” the attraction of one to the other. There, all is Infinite Love, understood in its true sense.

To live a theosophical form of life Blavatsky preaches for Manteia and Samādhi and she shows the similarity of the thinking of Iamblichus’s Manteia and the conception of Indian perception of Samādhi. In Blavatsky’s perception, Iamblichus shows us how this union of our Higher Soul with the Universal Soul, with the Gods, is to be affected. He speaks of Manteia [μαντεία] which is Samādhi, the highest trance. “Samādhi is a state of abstract contemplation, defined in Sanskrit terms each of which requires a complete sentence to explain it. It is a mental, or, rather, spiritual state, which is not dependent upon any perceptible object and during which the subject, absorbed in the region of pure spirit, lives in the Divinity.”

In the favour of her theosophical form-of-life, she criticised the ‘the superficial and inattentive habits of thought, engendered by Western civilization,’ and preached the student of the theosophy to give up the western superficiality and emphasised on the instructions of the Theosophists masters regarding the mind concentration. Blavatsky preaches that student are required to practise the habit of careful and constant concentration of mind upon every duty and act in life they may have to do, and not to reserve their efforts in that direction for the consideration of these teachings only. The student must make all his desires lean to, and centre upon, the acquirement of spiritual knowledge, so that the natural tendency of his thought may be in that direction. He must, therefore, in every moment of leisure revert to these subjects, as well as have a special time set apart for their consideration.

The real meaning of contemplation for Blavatsky includes a sense of purity through the ‘unremitting thought’ for the spiritual progress and it depends on the WILL follows. Blavatsky explains it metaphorically and writes, “just as the physical body requires incessant attention to prevent the entrance of a disease, so also the inner man requires an unremitting watch, so that no conscious or unconscious thought may attract atoms unsuited to its progress. This is the real meaning of contemplation. The prime factor in the guidance of the thought is WILL.” And without that all else is useless. And, to be efficient for the purpose, it must be, not only a passing resolution of the moment, a single fierce desire of short duration, but a settled and continued strain, as nearly as can be continued and concentrated without one single moment’s relaxation.

For genuine concertation and meditation Yoga has been an instrument or method to achieve in theosophical perception. Philosopher like K. C. Bhattacharya also notes that “Yoga is concentration on a variety of objects and in many grades and each form of Yoga is believed to yield a special-siddhi or vibhuti-super-normal knowledge or magical control over the objects.” But the ‘sitting for the Yoga’ demands some guidance because is deals with the vital

centres of mind and without guidance it may be dangerous. So, Blavatsky suggests that if someone wants to learn the power of concentration, he should concentrate upon the Higher Self, and aspiration toward the Higher Self. Also, if you will take some subject or sentence from the Bhagavad Gītā, and concentrate your mind upon that and meditate upon it, you will find much good result from it, and there is no danger in such concentration.

H.P. Blavatsky alerted her own inner circle of the dangers of this practice. Blavatsky writes, “Genuine concentration and meditation, conscious and cautious, upon one’s lower self in the light of the inner divine man and the Pāramitās, is an excellent thing. But to “sit for Yoga,” with only a superficial and often distorted knowledge of the real practice, is almost invariably fatal; for ten to one the student will either develop mediumistic powers in himself or lose time and get disgusted both with practice and theory. Before one rushes into such a dangerous experiment and seeks to go beyond a minute examination of one’s lower self and its walk in life, or that which is called in our phraseology, “The Chela’s Daily Life Ledger,” he would do well to learn at least the difference between the two aspects of “Magic,” the White or Divine, and the Black or Devilish, and assure himself that by “sitting for Yoga,” with no experience, as well as with no guide to show him the dangers, he does not cross daily and hourly the boundaries of the Divine to fall into the Satanic.”

Blavatsky preaches the minor advantages of contemplation. And emphasises on the active part of the practice that will develop the psychological faculties and criticised the passive and the medium potential practice of contemplation. She glorifies the adepts who are intensely active. According to Blavatsky, “It (contemplation) develops one set of physical faculties as gymnastics does the muscles. For the purposes of physical mesmerism, it is good enough; but it can in no way help the development of the psychological faculties as the thoughtful reader will perceive. At the same time, even for ordinary purposes, the practice can never be too well guarded. If, as some suppose, they have to be entirely passive and lose themselves in the object before them, they should remember that by thus encouraging passivity, they, in fact, allow the development of mediumistic faculties in themselves. As was repeatedly stated — the Adept and the Medium are the two Poles: while the former is intensely active and thus able to control the elemental forces, the latter is intensely passive, and thus incurs the risk of falling a prey to the caprice and malice of mischievous embryos of human beings, and — the Elementaries.”

In Blavatsky’s perception of meditation and contemplation it is clear that she was developing esoteric form-of-life that was spiritually elitist and have some transcendence content that was difficult in approach for the common masses but at the same time she authorizes the ancient (Hindu) practices that attracted the Hindus and developed a sense of superiority on the basis of epistemology, spirituality, and metaphysics.

## Bibliography

Matilal, Bimal Krishna. (2002). *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal: Ethics and Epics*. Edited by Jonardan Ganeri. New Delhi. Oxford University Press.

Bhattacharyya, Krishna Chandra. (1956), *Studies in Philosophy Vol-I*. Edited by Gopinath Bhattacharyya. Calcutta: Progressive Publishers.

Blavatsky, H. P. (2006). *The Key to Theosophy: Being a clear exposition, in the form of question answer, of the Ethics, Science, and Philosophy*. Theosophy Trust.

Blavatsky, H. P. (1881), "Yoga is a wolf in sheep's clothing" First published in *The Theosophist*. Vol. II, No. 2, January.

Blavatsky, H. P. (1890). on *Progress and Culture*. First published in *Lucifer*, Vol. VI, No. 36, August 1890, pp. 441-50. Republished in *Blavatsky Collected Writings, (PROGRESS AND CULTURE) XII* pp. 266-79. Frontispiece by Georges Croegaert.

Blavatsky, H.P. (1917). *Meditation: Practicalities and Pitfalls*.

<sup>1</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, (2006). *The Key to Theosophy: Being a clear exposition, in the form of question answer, of the Ethics, Science, and Philosophy*. Theosophy Trust.

<sup>1</sup>See Bimal Krishna Matilal, 2002. *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal: Ethics and Epics*. Edited by Jonardan Ganeri. New Delhi. Oxford University Press. pp. 309-310.

<sup>1</sup>See H. P. Blavatsky (1881), "Yoga is a wolf in sheep's clothing" First published in *The Theosophist*. Vol. II, No. 2, January, pp. 71-75.

<sup>1</sup> H. P. (1881), "Yoga is a wolf in sheep's clothing" First published in *The Theosophist*. Vol. II, No. 2, January, pp. 71-75. /[Yoga is a wolf in sheep's clothing by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky \(z-lib.org\).pdf](#). pp. 11.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>1</sup>Madame Blavatsky, on *Progress and Culture*. First published in *Lucifer*, Vol. VI, No. 36, August 1890, pp. 441-50. Republished in *Blavatsky Collected Writings, (PROGRESS AND CULTURE) XII* pp. 266-79. Frontispiece by Georges Croegaert. [Blavatsky on Progress and Culture \(Helena Petrovna Blavatsky\) \(z-lib.org\).pdf](#)

<sup>1</sup> [file:///C:/Users/dheer/Downloads/Meditation%20-%20Practicalities%20and%20Pitfalls%20\(Helena%20Petrovna%20Blavatsky\)%20\(z-lib.org\)%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/dheer/Downloads/Meditation%20-%20Practicalities%20and%20Pitfalls%20(Helena%20Petrovna%20Blavatsky)%20(z-lib.org)%20(1).pdf). Pp.3.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>1</sup> Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya, (1956), *Studies in Philosophy Vol-I*. Edited by Gopinath Bhattacharyya. Calcutta: Progressive Publishers. Pp. 315. (Italicised mine).

<sup>1</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *Meditation: Practicalities and Pitfalls*. Pp.16.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

\*\*\*