



Yoga Practices in the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad

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Received: 02 June 2025; Revised: 14 June 2025; Accepted: 27 June 2025

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Abstract

The ultimate goal of yoga is to escape from the cycle of birth and death. Yoga in the Upaniṣads emphasizes the Ātman, Jivātman, Paramātman and Brahman. It is a practice that uses the mind to control the Indrīya (consciousness). The Kaṭha-Upaniṣad, one of the 108 Upanishads, contains many interesting Hindu philosophical teachings, especially on yoga or meditation. The content of the scripture tells the story through two people: Yama as the teacher and Najiketa as the listener. Yama explains how to meditate to examine oneself, to distinguish opposites from each other, to control emotions and senses, to focus inward, to restrain speech, to unite the mind with wisdom, and to have the ultimate God, Brahman, as the goal. Most importantly, practicing yoga requires diligence and discipline. Practitioners will have to face many tests and obstacles before finding the path to success, which is the attainment of enlightenment

Keywords: Yoga, Kaṭha-Upaniṣad, Yama, Najiketa, Ātman

1.Introduction

The word “yoga” comes from the root word “yuj” which literally means to put together, to unite or to bring together. It refers to the method of practicing meditation to become one. Yoga is a spiritual practice that originated in India. It is originally one of six schools of philosophy. Its basic scripture is the Yoga Sutras of Patañjalī, who lived in India around 150

BC.

The ultimate goal of yoga practice is to attain moksha and release from the cycle of rebirths (samsāra), returning to one's true nature and becoming one with the other. The word "yoga" is first found in the Rīgveda, where it refers to the act of yoke-harnessing, or harnessing a cart, such as by tying an ox to a yoke. Over time, the meaning has been expanded to include the joining of one thing to another. When it came to the Upaniṣads, which was the period of serious study of the Ātman (self) and Brahman (ultimate reality), the word "yoga" was used, meaning to use the mind to control the sense Indrīya (perceiving emotions) and force them to act as desired. Later, the Vedānta school used this word to mean the union of the Jīvātman with the Paramātman, which is the highest goal of life.

The Bhagavad Gita (5th-2nd century BC) defines "yoga" as the highest state of enlightenment. Despite the most painful circumstances, yoga is the most worthwhile reality to practice (Chandrarhar Sharma, 2003 : 169). The dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna contains various yogas which correspond to the natural duties of each person, namely: 1) Karma Yoga : the yoga of right action; 2) Jñāna Yoga : the yoga of knowledge and intellectual endeavor; 3) Bhakti Yoga : the yoga of fealty and devotion to the divine.

The Yoga Sutra composed by Patanjali have a system or perspective that is related to the Sāṅkhyā philosophy because it accepts the epistemology and metaphysics of the Sāṅkhyā. However, the difference is that the Yoga philosophy accepts the worship of God. It can be said that the Sāṅkhyā philosophy is like a theoretical part while the Yoga philosophy is like a practical part. In figurative terms, yoga means the cessation of mental behavior (cittavṛtti nirodha) because the mind is in a state of fickleness and rebelliousness. If it is left uncontrolled, it will sink deeper into suffering. Therefore, it is necessary to use principles to train and control the mind.

Yoga philosophy has the same principle of puruṣa and prakṛiti as the Sāṅkhyā philosophy, explaining that the world comes into being because of the conjunction (saṅyoga) of prakṛiti with puruṣa, and all things cease because of the separation of puruṣa and prakṛiti. Yoga philosophy holds that neither the union nor the separation of the puruṣa or prakṛiti is accidental or karma-related, but rather it must have been acted upon by a higher being, i.e. God, called īśvara. Those who wish to attain mokṣa must adhere to God. God is the controller of karma, which affects both good and evil people. Without God, Prakṛiti cannot evolve and puruṣa cannot attain mokṣa.



Yoga philosophy holds that practice and knowledge lead to complete freedom. The main practice in yoga philosophy is called “Aṣṭaṅga Yoga” or Eightfold Path : 1.) Yama : restraint; 2.) Niyama : doing good deeds; 3.) Āsana : sitting in the correct manner to support health and concentration; 4.) Prāṇayama : controlling the breath in and out in the correct manner; 5.) Pratyahāra : controlling the Indriya from being pleased or displeased by emotions that affect them; 6.) Dhāraṇa : focusing the mind on the emotion of concentration; 7.) Dhyāna : entering meditation, which is setting the mind firmly on the emotion at all times. 8.) Samādhi : unity of mind, which is setting the mind on a single emotion, the mind immersed in meditation to the point of being unconscious (Samniang Luemsai, 2003 : 7-8).

However, yoga is inextricably linked to the religious beliefs and ritual practices of Buddhism and Hinduism, with differences in the terminology used in the two religions (Georg Feuerstein, 1998 : 111). In Hinduism, yoga generally refers to the eight yogas as defined in the Yoga Sutras. Almost all schools of thought are founded on the worship of Śiva and Śakti. Hinduism has the concept of the Supreme Brahman, Parameśvara, manifested as Śiva (representing the masculine, strong force) and Śakti (the force of creation, representing the feminine, known as Kālī, Durgā, Śakti, Pārvatī, etc.). These forces focus on the kuṇḍalinī, the dormant spiritual force at the base of the spine, which moves through the cakras. This is the successful union of Śiva and Śakti (also known as samādhi) (New World Encyclopedia., 2025.).

In the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad, there are interesting Hindu philosophical teachings, such as the life and death of all things, the nature of the ātman, the ultimate reality, the magical sound of "Om", the steps of practice to the highest point, the theory of doing yoga for attainment, the cause of rebirth, etc. (V.M. Badekar, Paul Deussen : 1980, 269-273). The author of this article is interested in the theory of doing yoga, so I will study and analyze this issue in this article. The summary of the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad will be written later. Then, the verses about yoga in the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad will be studied and analyzed further.

2. Views on yoga in other scriptures

Yoga is an oriental philosophy with roots in ancient India. It was invented by yogic scholars as a means of self-discipline and liberation. The practice of yoga develops both the body and mind. Many scriptures have incorporated their perspectives on yoga into their teachings. For example:

Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita refers to the path of liberation from the cycle of birth and death to reach Moksha, the highest goal of life. There are many ways, but in the Bhagavad Gita, it is stated in three ways: Jñāna Yoga, Karma Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga, as in the following

example :

yogasamnyastakarmāṇaṃ jñānasamchinnasamśayaṃ |
ātmavantam na karmāṇi nibadhnanti dhanamjaya || 4.41 ||
tasmādajñānasambhūtaṃ hr̥tsthaṃ jñānāsinātmanaḥ |
chittvainaṃ samśayaṃ yogamātiṣṭhottīṣṭha bhārata || 4.42 ||

He who has renounced actions through Yoga, whose doubts have been dispelled by knowledge, and who is self-possessed—such a one is not bound by actions, O! Dhanamjay (Arjuna). || 4.41 ||

Therefore, with the sword of knowledge (of the Self), cut asunder the doubt of the self, born of ignorance, residing in your heart, and take refuge in Yoga. Arise, O! Bharata (Arjuna) || 4.42 || (Samniang Luemsai : 2003, 149-150).

In the Pañcakrama, it is mentioned that yoga practice is to attain the Dharma according to the model of training oneself to be a Bodhisattva who must practice the perfections in all 10 realms (bhūmi) according to the practice in the Daśabhūmika Sūtra. But in the Pañcakrama, it is mentioned that there are 3 final realms (bhūmi) that one must practice in order to attain complete Buddhahood, as follows:

ādikarmikayogena cāṣṭamīm bhūmim āpnuyāt |
ālokatrayadarśī ca daśabhūmyām pratiṣṭhitaḥ || 3/79 ||

By practicing beginner's yoga we reach the eighth stage (bhūmi) and when we are in the tenth stage (bhūmi) we see three more stages of light. || 3/79 || (Louis de la Vallée Poussin, 1896 : 31)

In the Guhyasamāja Piṇḍikṛta-sādhana, the practice of yoga is mentioned as following the general tantric rituals, namely, the four stages of yoga: yoga, anuyoga, atiyoga and mahāyoga, and is linked to the practice of meditation by using the mind's thoughts as a basis for formulating various mantras. When the practice of yoga reaches a high level, the self becomes like the inseparable self of the gods, as follows:

evaṃ catur yoga karas tu yogī hūmkāragarbham pravacintya lokam |
dr̥ṣṭvā jagattadbhavavajrasattvam vyutthāya taddhīr vicared yathāvad iti || 217 ||

Then, after the yogin who has undertaken the four yogas has imagined the world in the centre of the “hūṃ” syllable and seen the beings there arisen as vajra-beings, so after they have arisen everywhere, this meditation should go forth in the same manner.” || 217 || (Roger Wright, 2010 : 117.)

In the Yoga Sutas of Patanjali, there are sutras that teach about practicing the body according to the philosophy of yoga in combination with controlling one's mind. There are 8 steps and elements of yoga. When following the steps until reaching true knowledge, it will be the cause of reaching the ultimate attainment, as it says :

yogaṅgānuṣṭhānādaśuddhikṣaye jñānadīptirāvivekakhyāteḥ ||2/28||
yamaniyamāsanaprāṇāyāmapratyāhāradhāraṇādhyānasamādhayo' ṣṭāva
aṅgāni ||2/29||

From the consistent practice of the parts of the yoga process, on the elimination of the impurity, the radiant organ of perception becomes manifest, until there is steady discriminative insight. ||2/28||

Yama, Niyama, Āsana, Prāṇayama, Pratyā hā, Dhāraṇa, Dhyāna and Samādhi, are the eight parts of the yoga system. ||2/29||
(Swami Vivekananda, 2012 : 84-85)

In the Guhyasamājatantra, it is written that there are instructions for attaining Buddhahood through the process of yoga with 6 components : 1. Pratyāhāra 2. Dhyāṇa 3. Prāṇāyāma 4. Dhāraṇa 5. Anusmṛti 6. Samādhi as follows :

sevāṣaḍaṅgayogena kṛtvā sādhanamuttamam |
sādhayadenyathā naiva jāyate siddhiruttamā || 139 ||
pratyāhārastathā dhyānaṃ prāṇāyāmo' tha dhāraṇā |
anusmṛtiḥ samādhiśca ṣaḍaṅgo yoga ucyate || 140 ||

The instrument leading to Uttama (higher level) must be performed by the six yogas of Seva. Not only perfection is obtained from the highest point, but also the accomplished one is born. || 139/18 ||

The six yogas should be mentioned: pratyahara (withdrawal) (of external objects), dhyana (meditation), pranayam (restraint of breath), dharana (holding, stillness), anusmriti (remembering) and samadhi (perfection of knowledge). || 140/18 || (Dr. S. Bagchi, 1965 : 132)

Yoga in the Tripitaka is different from the other scriptures mentioned above. The Tripitaka describes yoga as being like the defilements that bind beings to existence, like yoking an ox to a yoke, binding beings to kamma, namely kāmayoga, bhavayoga, diṭṭhiyoga and avijjāyoga. If one can shake off these yogas (according to the Buddhist way), one will attain enlightenment, as stated in the text:

[259] Cattāro yogā kāmayogo bhavayogo diṭṭhiyogo avijjāyogo. (Dī. Pā. 11/259/208) (*Syāmaratṭhassa tepitakam*, 2017 : 208)

[404] Katame cattāro dhammā hānabhāgiyā. cattāro yogā kāmayogo bhavayogo diṭṭhiyogo avijjāyogo. ime cattāro dhammā hānabhāgiyā.

[405] Katame cattāro dhammā visesabhāgiyā. cattāro viśaṃyogā kāmayogaviśaṃyogo bhavayogaviśaṃyogo diṭṭhiyogaviśaṃyogo avijjāyogaviśaṃyogo. Ime cattāro dhammā visesabhāgiyā. (Dī. Pā. 11/404-405/ 252-253) (*Syāmaratṭhassa tepitakam*, 2017 : 252-253)

[259] *There are these four yoga(s): the yoga of sense desire(kāma), the yoga of becoming(bhava), the yoga of views(diṭṭhi), the yoga of ignorance.*

[404] *Which four dhamma(s) lead to decline? These four yoga(s) : the yoga of sense desire, the yoga of becoming, the yoga of views, the*

yoga of ignorance(avijjā). These four dhamma(s) lead to decline.

[405] What are the four distinctive qualities? Four kinds of detachment: detachment from the yoke of sensual desire, detachment from the yoke of becoming, detachment from the yoke of views, detachment from the yoke of ignorance. These are the four distinctive qualities.

3. The contents of the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad

Kaṭha-Upaniṣad is a Sanskrit text, one of the Mukhya Upaniṣads (the main Upaniṣads) and is ranked 3rd in the Mukti Upaniṣads (108 Upaniṣads). If Kaṭha-Upaniṣad is to be classified in the Vedas, it is considered to be in the Kṛiṣṇa Yajurveda. Kaṭha-Upaniṣad consists of 2 parts, each part has 3 chapters (valli), the two parts total 6 chapters.

The story of the Katha-Upanishad begins with a sage named Vajśarāvasa, who was very generous with his wealth. He had nothing left to give away. He gave away his last possession, an old, useless cow. His son, Najiketa, innocently asked his father, “To whom will you give me?” His father did not answer. So he asked again. His father was angry and replied, “I will give you to death.” Najiketa then went to visit Lord Yama at his temple, but Lord Yama was not there. Najiketa waited there for three nights. When Lord Yama arrived, he granted him three boons.

This then follows a conversation between Yama and Najiketa. Najiketa asks Yama about the nature of the Ātman and the Ultimate Truth. Yama, impressed by the boy's devotion and determination, answers his questions and imparts to him the knowledge of the Ultimate Truth. The teachings of the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad include Brahman, Atman, Eternal Truth and Enlightenment.

Yama also explained the nature of yoga. Yoga is a path to self-realization and liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The practice of yoga helps to control the senses and mind, creating a state of balance and detachment. We should be steadfast in our practice of yoga, despite obstacles and difficulties, in order to attain the ultimate truth. Yama also explained two paths of yoga: the path of action (karma yoga) and the path of knowledge (jñāna yoga). The first path is to act with detachment and devotion, while the second path is to cultivate self-knowledge and the realization of the ultimate truth. (Shahid Khan, 2025)

4. Views on Yoga in the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad



In the Katha-Upanishad, Part 1, Chapter 2, Yama teaches Najiketa about Adhyātma-yogādhikam, the contemplation of the Atman within the body. When we are suffering, we should separate our mind from external stimulus, and then we will be able to overcome suffering. For those who have wisdom and understand and realize the identity of the Atman, the gates of Brahman (attainment to the highest truth) will be open to welcome them, as the text says:

taṃ durdarśaṃ gūḍhamanupraviṣṭaṃ guhāhitaṃ gahvareṣṭhaṃ purāṇam |
adhyātmayogādhigamena devaṃ matvā dhīro harṣaśokau jahāti || 2/12 ||
etacchrutvā samparigrhya martyaḥ pravṛhya dharmyamaṇumetaṃpya |
sa modate modanīyaṃ hi labdhvā vivṛtaṃ sadma naciketaṣaṃ manye || 2/13 ||
(K.L. Joshi, O.N. Bimali and Bindiya Trivedi, 2016 : 20)

When one realizes through self-reflection that the original God, which is invisible, imperceptible, hidden in the cave (of body and mind), resides deep within, the wise person leaves behind both happiness and sorrow. || 2/12 ||

Hearing and understanding, one who has separated the essence and realized the subtle (Atman) delights in that which gives rise to bliss. I think that the mansion (abode of Brahman) is wide open to you, O! Najiketa. || 2/13 ||

Yama tells Najiketa about the mystery of God that lies deep within us. We can reach the Supreme God through meditation. Brahma world is the highest point that practitioners want to reach. The word “gūḍham” means deep concealment. Our mind and self are covered by ignorance(aviḥjā). In Buddhists, it is called “obscured by karma”. “adhyātmayoga” means self-introspection. We should continuously practice meditation in silence, stillness, and solitude to attain the truth. “pravṛhya dharmyam” means separation of essence. We must separate out the essence nature, separate out the true nature, separate out the real from the unreal, separate out the eternal from the transient, separate out wisdom from delusion. “modanīyaṃ” means that which gives rise to delight. The highest delight is the attainment of that which is the highest, lasting, and eternal reality. “vivṛtaṃ sadma” means the abode of Brahman, the place of the highest truth. (Pandit Sri Rama, 2014 : 23-24)



In summary, according to the verse, it teaches us to practice yoga through meditation to examine ourselves, to separate suffering, to separate impermanence, to separate delusion, in order to attain the Supreme God, Brahman, to have eternal life and not have to return to the cycle of birth and death again.

Furthermore, in the Katha-Upanishad, Part 1, Chapter 3, which deals with the theory of yoga, Yama teaches Najiketa about the suppression of distracting thoughts, teaching him to purify the mind and control himself with right view (samyag-darśana), a process of yogic meditation by focusing deep within, closing the mouth, uniting the mind with wisdom, releasing the self with the highest self, which will lead to a state of high peace and bliss, as follows :

eṣa sarveṣu bhūteṣu gūḍho”tmā na prakāśate |
 dr̥śyate tvagryayā buddhyā sūkṣmayā sūkṣmadarśibhiḥ || 3/12 ||
 yacchedvānmanasī prājñastadyacchejjñāna ātmani |
 jñānamātmani mahati niyacchettadyacchecchānta ātmani || 3/13 ||
 uttiṣṭhata jāgrata prāpya varānnibodhata |
 kṣurasya dhārā nīṣitā duratyayādurgam pathastatkavayo vadanti || 3/14 ||
 aśabdam asparśam arūpamavyayam tathā’rasam nityamagandhavacca yat |
 anādyanantaṁ mahataḥ paraṁ dhruvaṁ nicāyya tanmṛtyumukhāt pramucyate
 || 3/15 ||
 nāciketamupākhyānaṁ mṛtyuproktaṁ sanātanaṁ |
 ukṭvā śrutvā ca medhāvī brahmaloke mahīyate || 3/16 || (K.L. Joshi, O.N.
 Bimali and Bindiya Trivedi, 2016 : 24-25)
*Although this Atman (self) is hidden in all beings, not shining forth, the wise
 can see it with sharp and subtle understanding. || 3/12 ||*
*A wise person should restrain his speech in his mind. The mind should be united
 with wisdom. The wisdom should be united with the great self (Atman) (the
 original source), and then it should be united with the peaceful self (eternal
 bliss). || 3/13 ||*
*Arise, when you have received the blessing, know that the razor's edge is sharp,
 difficult to pass, difficult to surmount, as the wise men have said (The path to
 the highest point, to return to God, is difficult, requires discipline in practice).*
 || 3/14 ||

One is freed from the mouth of death by discerning that (Paramātmān – through meditation) which is devoid of sound, beyond touch and without form, undecaying, which is likewise, tasteless, eternal, odourless, without beginning & without end, distinct from mahāt (jīvātman), ever constant. || 3/15 ||

Relating and hearing this eternal anecdote of Naciketa, taught by Death, an intelligent person is glorified in the world of Brahma. || 3/16 ||

Yama tells Najigeta that our conventional thinking is often rough and coarse. We should refine our thinking to purify our mind and control ourselves. We will then reach the peaceful truth. “Speech” indicates our interaction with the external world. Patañjalī said that “the restraint of speech” is the first step in a meditative process called “pratyahāra (the cessation of speech).” The next step is “dhāraṇa (samādhi), which means the unification of the mind with wisdom. In tantric-Vajrayana methods, in this step the practitioner creates an image of a deity or Buddha and imagines himself merging with the deity he has created. In this state of higher peace, there is no longer any separation between doer, object, and perception. When we focus on the deepest part of our being, we release our minds from the distractions. This process of subtle abstraction allows us to reach complete and peaceful oneness with God.

Yama also teaches the fundamental truth that in this cycle of existence, those who wish to return to the Supreme Being will find it difficult, as they face a path full of obstacles. What they desire is not easy, and the path they take is like a sharp razor, as the path to the highest point is steep, dangerous, and difficult. The path of spiritual practice and development is similar. We must be careful, disciplined in our practice, and must strive with utmost determination and effort. The weak cannot attain this path. (Pandit Sri Rama, 2014 : 40-42)

In the 15th verse, mahat is mentioned, which is wisdom. Here, it refers to jīvātaman (the individual mind). Jīvātaman is not an object, but it is the perceiver of all objects. We are the ātman with the five senses, often called the “gauṇa ātman,” the perceiver of worldly things. The “mahataḥ param” is superior to the principle of wisdom. Above all wisdom is the Paramātmān, the Supreme Being, who is beyond the comprehension of the senses or the ability of the mind to think, who is eternal. One who is devoted to God, escapes the cycle of saṃsāra and attains immortality.

5. Conclusion

The Kāṭha-Upaniṣad, one of the 108 Upaniṣads, is divided into two parts, each



containing three chapters (valli), which provide profound philosophical teachings on life, death and liberation, through dialogues between the main characters, the young man Najiketa and the god Yama. Meditation or yoga in the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad describes the path to liberation through practices such as self-control, speech and mind control, abandoning ignorance (avijjā), distinguishing opposites, and reaching one's true nature. Atman consists of the senses, mind and intellect. Brahman and Paramātmā are the original mind and the ultimate reality. We must practice with determination and effort to attain that ultimate point. Then we will never be reborn again.

6. Suggestion

The stories in the Upaniṣads offer us many interesting points to study and explore. The Upaniṣads are the foundation of Hindu philosophy and are the source of important religious ideas. We can connect these philosophical ideas with Buddhist philosophy. The main contents of this scripture are spiritual teachings, the nature of the self, the universe, the enlightenment, the interconnectedness of all things, and the ultimate truth. In addition to the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad that the author has presented, there are other interesting Upaniṣads, such as the Chāndogya-Upaniṣad, the Iśā-Upaniṣad, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad, the Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣad, etc. Researchers can use these scriptures to study and analyze many more philosophical teachings to maximize their benefits in navigating life and achieving peace in today's world.

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