



## CONNECTIONS BETWEEN YOGA AND BUDDHISM

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### Introduction

Buddhism and Yoga are great traditions which evolved out the same spiritual culture of ancient India. They use many of the same terms and follow many of the same principles and practices. Yoga and Buddhist teachings are so similar that those who study Buddhism may find so much similarity in Yoga that they suspect a strong Buddhist influence on Yoga. Those who study Yoga may find so much similarity in Buddhism that they see a strong yogic influence on Buddhism. There is a strong yogic tradition in Buddhism, which for centuries, has been kept uninterruptedly and practiced according to the Buddha's teachings.

The Buddha himself was a great Yogi, disseminating yogic teachings for forty-five years. History shows that the main foundation upon which the Buddha became enlightened was a combination of Haṭha Yoga (physical practice) and Rāja Yoga (yoga philosophy), having been taught by two famous teachers before he became fully enlightened. It is fair to say that Yoga helped the Buddha to attain the Highest Truth in his lifetime. Yoga existed before the Buddha and the Buddha learned and practiced Yoga before he was enlightened.

Yoga and Buddhism are both meditation traditions which guide practitioners to transcending karma and rebirth, and to realizing the truth of consciousness. Both traditions see suffering and impermanence inherent in all birth, whether it is animal, human or god, and seek to alleviate it through developing a higher awareness. Both emphasize the need to dissolve the ego, the sense of the 'I' and the 'mine,' and return to the original reality that is not limited by the separate self. Both traditions emphasize enlightenment or inner illumination to be realized through meditation.

## Yoga in Theravāda Buddhism

Theravāda Buddhism is one of the three major branches of Buddhism. There are many Yogic teachings residing in the Theravāda literature but most practitioners are unaware of them. In Theravāda Buddhism, the path of purification includes three main principles that are also parts of Yoga. They are Śīla, Samādhi and Prajñā. The Visuddhimagga, a main Theravāda text that was written by the great Buddhist master Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa in the 5th century A.D., gives a detailed description of Śīla, Samādhi and Prajñā. These comprise the Noble Eight Fold Path of Buddhism, which is connected to the eight limbs of Yoga as explained in the Yoga Sūtra by the great Sage Patañjali (see Table 1). Georg Feuerstein in The Yoga Tradition says, “Like Patañjali’s Yoga, the Yoga of the Buddha comprises eight distinct members or ‘limbs,’ hence it is known as the noble eightfold path.”<sup>1</sup>

YOGA	BUDDHISM
Yama - Self Control (restraints, universal morality)	Right Speech, Right Action
Niyama - Discipline (personal observances)	Right View, Right Effort
Asana - Postures	Iriyāpatha Pabba - Meditation on the bodily postures
Pranayama - Breath exercises	Ānāpānasati - breathing meditation practice
Pratyahara - Control of the senses	Vipassana - insight meditation which enables observation the Sense-bases (āyatana)
Dharana - Concentration and cultivation of inner awareness	Right Effort, Right Mindfulness
Dhyana - Meditation and devotion to the divine	Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration
Samadhi - Union with the divine	Right Concentration (Nirodha-samāpatti)

Table 1

<sup>1</sup> Georg Feuerstein. *The Yoga Tradition*. Hohm Press, Arizona. 2001. Print. p.161.

Around the same time that Buddhaghosa wrote Visuddhimagga, Buddhism went to Tibet and China. At this time the yogic teaching of the Buddha was flourishing all over east Asia. Visuddhimagga means the path of purification. The contents of this book are the entire summary of the Buddha's teaching. Anyone who has read the Yoga Sūtra and who looks very closely at the Visuddhimagga, can easily see the connections between the teaching of Yoga and the Buddha's teachings. The Visuddhimagga expands the Yoga Sūtra in addition to providing the whole of the Buddha's teachings. Comparing the two classic books, one can see that the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali describes all aspects of Yoga including meditation, whereas Visuddhimagga is primarily an encyclopedic guide to meditation and provides us with detailed elaborations of the standardization of the meditation by the Buddha himself.<sup>2</sup>

### **Yoga in Mahāyāna Buddhism**

Mahāyāna means the great vehicle. After the second council which met a hundred years after the Buddha attained Mahāparinibbāna, a group of monks split with the orthodox practitioners of Theravada Buddhism because of differences in their ideologies. Mahāyānas focus on compassion towards all living beings and motivating countless beings to cultivate wisdom and liberation from suffering. Mahāyāna practitioners, who follow the Vinaya which is the monastic code for monks, focus more on the ten pāramitās. Their views are different than the Theravada practitioners, especially in the area of Bhakti-yoga and Karma-yoga. Mahāyāna Buddhism is connected with Yoga through Bhakti-yoga which is a devotional practice, and Karma-yoga which is the practice of self-less action.

Mahāyāna was originally sub-divided into four schools: Vaibhasika, Sautrantika, Mādhyamika and Yogācāra. In the course of time Vaibhasika and Sautrantika gradually merged with the Mādhyamika (School of Śūnyavāda led by Nāgārjuna) and Yogācāra (School of Vijñānvāda led by Asaṅga). The word Yogācāra is comprised of the two components Yoga and ācāra. Yoga, in this case, refers to meditative analysis, and ācāra means practice.

There are many Buddhist yogic texts in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Mahāyāna yogic literature falls into three classes such as Sūtras, Śāstras, and Tantras. Some of the yogic literatures composed and well kept by Nāgārjūna, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu and other great masters include

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<sup>2</sup> Basant Pradhan. *Yoga and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy: A Clinical Guide*. Springer, New York. 2015. Print. p.140.

Lalitavistāra, Samādhirāja Saddharmapūṇḍarīka, Sukhavatī Vyūha, Daśabhūmika Sūtra, Vajracchedikā Sūtra, Laṅkāvatāsūtra, and Yogācāra-bhūmi-śāstra.

The Yogācāra school presented the Buddhist original path of meditation in clear and psychological terms. It also tried to give an analysis of the psychology of mind. Instead of engaging into philosophical speculation, it returned to pure Buddhist mysticism. It was known as the school of Buddhist Yoga or the Yoga Practice School. Clearly, Yoga and Buddhism are very connected in the Mahāyāna tradition.

### **Yoga in Vajrayāna Buddhism**

Vajrayāna is also known as Tibetan Buddhism. The words Yoga, Buddhist Yoga and a Yogic System as taught by the Buddha are also found in the Vajrayāna teachings. Among the Tibetan Buddhists, the great practitioner of highest Yoga tantra<sup>3</sup> will not disclose the teachings unless they get permission from their masters. These secret teachings have been practiced for thousands of years, transmitted orally from masters to disciples. Therefore, even many Buddhist practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism are not familiar with the terminology “Buddhist Yoga” or “Yogic Practice in Buddhism.” One has to be qualified to be a Yogi in Tibetan Buddhism to know these teachings. Only then can he study the depths of the yogic practice in Buddhism. There are many great yogis in Tibetan Buddhism including Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa and Milarepa.

### **Similarities Between Yoga and Buddhism**

The following chart is a very high level representation of some of the key similarities between Yoga and Buddhism:

YOGA	BUDDHISM
A philosophy and a practice that leads to enlightenment	Same
Emerged from spiritual culture of ancient India	Same
Is not a religion	Same
Accessible for lay people as well as advanced spiritual practitioners	Same

<sup>3</sup> Considered by Tibetan exegetes to be the supreme of the four classes of tantras, it involves visualization exercises that manipulate and transform subtle energies called winds and drops.

YOGA	BUDDHISM
Liberation from worldly entanglements is required for enlightenment	Same
Emphasizes enlightenment or inner illumination to be attained through meditation	Same
Correct āsanās required for proper practice	Same
Ignorance is beginning cause that gives rise to the factors which create suffering	Same
Ignorance must be eradicated for liberation to occur	Same
Cycle of rebirth is result of karma	Same
Nature of everything is impermanent	Same
Teachings provide everything from ethics to realization	Same
Yamas/Niyamas	Sila (Morality)
Āsanās, pranayama, pratyachara, dharana	Samadhi (Concentration)
Dhyana, Samadhi	Pañña (Wisdom)
Tradition of meditation (Raja Yoga)	Same
Tradition of wisdom development (Jnana Yoga)	Same ~ uses the mind to enquire into its own nature and eradicate ignorance and delusion

### Conclusion

Yoga and Buddhism have the same spiritual root, which focuses on inner practices to attain the highest wisdom through Samādhi. The Buddhist practitioner finds yogic influences in Buddhist practices; likewise the yogic practitioner will find elements of the Buddha Dharma in their practices. There are yogic traditions continuously being practiced in the three major branches of Buddhism (Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna). These three traditions of Buddhism are similar to each other but because of each one's unique ideology, their view and perspective appear different. Cultural influences from various countries also impact how the

practices of the three sects are undertaken. Of course all the three traditions follow the teachings of the Sakyamuni Buddha.

Historical facts quite clearly show how the Buddha used yogic postures to meditate, and incorporated the yogic teachings in his lessons; furthermore, he attained Mahāparinibbāna using yogic postures. Buddhism owes a great debt of gratitude to the lineage of great sages and yogis who maintained and passed down the yogic tradition for thousands of years until it reached the Buddha. One of the great qualities of the yogic tradition is the freedom it provides the practitioners to question, explore and have their own experience. As a result of the Buddha's training in Yoga, and the teachings he developed as a result of those trainings, it is clear that Yoga and Buddhism are connected and intertwined. These two great spiritual traditions are really inseparable, and provide a practitioner with powerful teachings to liberate themselves and thereby, attain enlightenment.

## References

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