



A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PATANJALI'S ASHTANGA YOGA AND YOGI VEMANA'S POETRY ON YOGA

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the intersections and distinctions between Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga and the poetic insights of Yogi Vemana, a Telugu poet on Yoga. Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga is renowned for its systematic and structured approach to self-realisation, while Yogi Vemana's mystical poetry provides a unique perspective on the same spiritual journey. The study delves into the principles and practices emphasised by these two traditions. Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga encompasses the eight limbs, including *yama* (moral principles), *niyama* (observances), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breath control), *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation), and *samadhi* (absorption). The author highlights how Yogi Vemana's poetry aligns with and expands upon some principles, such as truth, non-stealing, celibacy, purity, contentment, devotion to God, and more. The article reveals that Yogi Vemana's poetry weaves various yogic traditions into his verses, such as Shiva Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Sankhya Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, and Raja Yoga. While Patanjali provides a structured framework, Yogi Vemana's work bridges spirituality and daily life, offering a more practical perspective on the spiritual journey. The comparative analysis demonstrates that both traditions share common themes, emphasising principles like truth and concentration. However, Yogi Vemana's poetry provides a broader view of the diversity of yogic practices and their practical applications in everyday life, enriching our understanding of the multifaceted nature of the spiritual path.

This study contributes to a deeper appreciation of the rich tapestry of Yoga and spirituality, shedding light on how ancient traditions intersect and complement each other, offering multiple paths to self-realisation.

Keywords: Ashtanga Yoga, Yogi Vemana, Yoga Principles, Spiritual Journey, Self-realization, Comparative Study

Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga and Yogi Vemana's poetry on Yoga both offer profound insights into the path of self-realisation and spiritual awakening. Patanjali is known for his Sanskrit text *Yogasutras*, where he proposed Astanga Yoga for spiritual seekers. In contrast, Yogi Vemana is a Telugu poet known for his poetry on Yoga and spirituality. This research article delves into the similarities and differences between these two spiritual traditions, shedding light on the practices and principles they emphasise. While Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga is a systematic and structured path to self-realisation, Yogi Vemana's poetry, steeped in the mystical tradition, offers a unique perspective on the same goal. Patanjali, an ancient sage, is credited with laying the foundation for Yoga Darshana, one of the six theistic philosophies of Hinduism. His text, *Yoga Sutras*, is a comprehensive guide to Ashtanga Yoga (the eightfold path) leading to self-realisation. Yogi Vemana, a mystic poet, is renowned for his spiritual verses. His poetry reflects a deep understanding of the yogic path intertwined with devotion, compassion, and wisdom. For Yogi Vemana, Ashtanga Yoga is one of the practices of realising Brahman:

The one who understands and practises

Astanga Yoga and realises one's Reality

The one that subdues the hidden Maya

which jumps on knowingly and unknowingly

The one that awakens the Kundalini snake

And the one that restores Shiva in his mind

will attain the knowledge of Brahman.

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Astanga yogamu laatmalo dalaposi

Drishtantaramuga tan teliyu vaadu

Telisi teliyaka daagi dumukulaaduchu paina

Nelakonna maaya nanachu vaadu

Nanigi padukoni yunna naagu paamunu batti...

Shivuni charamandu nilpina vaade Brahma

Chaala tattvambu vinuchunna jaada Vema. (my trans.; Sastry 64; poem 247)

In Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga, the first limb, *yama*, encompasses moral and ethical principles, including *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *aparigraha* (non-possession), and *brahmacharya* (celibacy). All these social restraints help in forbidding sinful activities. Yogi Vemana advocates a set of ten principles under *yama*, emphasising virtues like *satya* (truth) *daya* (compassion), *kshama* (forgiveness), *dhriti* (steadiness), *mithahara* (moderate food), *suchi* (purity), *samatha* (tranquillity) *asteya* (non-stealing) and more in his poems.

The ten principles of Yama

Truth, compassion, patience,

Steadiness, moderate food, purity,

Serenity and non-stealing are here virtuous deeds, Vema!

Yama lakshanamulu padi yagu

Kramamuga satyambu dayayu kshamayun drithiyun

Vimala mitha bhojanamu suchi

Samathayu nastheya milanu satkrithi Vema! (my trans; Sastry 3997)

Patanjali says that the words of the practitioner of *satya* (truth), the second principle of *yama*, become true. Vemana, too, gives much importance to *satya* (truth) and talks about the greatness of truth with the examples of mythological characters such as Harischandra. “The mouth that speaks the truth is the purest in the world.” (“*Satyamaina noru jagathipai shuddhiraa*”; Brown 1126). “Harischandra drawing near in truth, in former time, established himself in eternal fame. Truth is the chief grace of kings.” (Brown 519). Patanjali proclaims that all wealth comes to the practitioner of *asteya* (non-stealing), the third principle of *yama*. Vemana says that the spiritual seeker should not long for others' wealth. “He who holds himself (a paramahansa) a perfect ascetic, by merely wearing a dress and longs for the wealth of others is no ascetic (paramahimsa) death itself.” (Brown 827) Patanjali claims that the practitioner of *brahmacharya* (celibacy), the fourth principle of *yama* will acquire spiritual energy. Vemana explains how cupidity degrades not only men but also Gods like Indra and Brahma. “Did not Indra, through cupidity become degraded? Was not cupid through desire, turned into earth? When Brahma contracted desire did not he lose his principal head.” (Brown 920). According to Patanjali, the practitioner of *aparigraha* (non-possession), the fifth principle of Ashtanga Yoga, gains knowledge of the past, present, and future existences. Vemana opines that possessions will never give satisfaction and mocks greediness:

A cat that catches a rat gets no delight;

It still runs after a fowl within its sight:

Do possessions please desires and greed of any?

Listen to Vema, Spokesman of ‘vox populi’ (Kameshwar Rao 57)

Purity is the first principle of *niyama*, whereas it is one of the ten principles of *yama* for Vemana. According to Patanjali, purity makes the practitioner gain a peaceful nature, cheerfulness of mind, concentration, and control over one's body and mind and makes one eligible to have the vision of one's own self. He also says purity makes one not identify oneself with the physical body. Vemana also gives importance to purity and composed several poems on it. Patanjali talks only about the positive effects of purity. However, Vemana states both its positive and negative effects. Vemana proclaims that purity is the condition required for the vision of God. “Without purity one cannot have the vision of Shiva” (“*Chittha suddhi leka Shivudu kaanpinchunaa?*” ; my trans; Subrahmanyam 40)

Vemana indicates that one suffers due to the impurity of one's own mind. "Sorrow originates in impurity of heart."

("Kalusha maanushamuna kaanpinchu duhkhambu"; Brown 1085)

Vemana has composed several poems on other principles, such as forgiveness, steadiness, moderate diet, worthiness, tranquillity and virtue, which are not part of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga. Vemana preaches that one should forgive even the worst enemy.

Do not harm a foe

Though he deserves to be slain;

Be good and let him go;

Listen Vema the beloved one. (Rangacharya 64)

Vemana asserts that one should be persistent in achieving one's goal.

Don't stand steady till it's a must at first;

But once you hold, hold it fast with all your might

One would rather die than live, if one's grip gets lost.

Listen to Vema, Spokesman of 'vox populi' (Kameshwar Rao 51)

Vemana says that moderate food protects life, and overeating results in death.

Overeating indeed leads to death.

Not eating leads to pain.

Food is responsible for life and death.

Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema.

Annamadhikamaina araya mrithyuvu nijamu

Annamantakunaa atma nochu

Champa pempa buvva chaaladaa veyela

Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema. (my trans.; Lakshmi Narasimha Rao 2079)

Niyama, the second limb of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga, involves personal observations like *saucha* (purity), *santosh* (contentment), *tapas* (austerity), *swadhyaya* (self-study), and *Ishvara pranidhana* (devotion to God). Yogi Vemana, although not explicitly detailing *niyama* principles, emphasises that the regular practice of *yama* and *niyama* results in bliss by removing all the suffering.

O Vema, by the regular practice of the

Yoga limbs such as *yama* and *niyama*

Astonishingly, all one's sufferings will be gone

And lead one's mind toward blissful perfection.

Yama niyama yoga vritthula

Gramamuna gamaninchi minchi kadu chitramugaa

Srama lella deeru sumanah

Pramuditha paripoornamandu paragumu Vema (my trans.; Sastry 3996)

Though Vemana has not discussed the exact principles of *niyama*, he composed several poems on the principles of *niyama* proposed by Patanjali. His poetry underscores the importance of purity, contentment, and devotion to God. Vemana mentions *saucha* (purity) the first principle of Patanjali's *niyama*, as one of the principles of *yama*. The second principle of *niyama* is *santhosha* (contentment). According to Patanjali, the result of contentment is supreme happiness. It is the desire that leads to suffering. Vemana also advised people to give up their desires and cultivate contentment for liberation and eternal bliss. "Unless thou give up thy lusts, thou shall not be released from thy ties. (lit. cord: earthly ties). Unless thou be free thou art no devotee. None but a devotee can

be freed from all desires.” (Brown 41) The third principle of Patanjali’s *niyama* is *tapas* (austerity). Austerity is the spiritual discipline concentrating on enlightenment without caring about the difficulties. This fiery discipline burns away the impurities of the practitioner. Patanjali proclaims that austerity removes impurities and results in *siddhis* (special powers). Vemana defines the practitioner of austerity as a yogi. “He who looks upon rain, wind and sunshine as equal and abstains from thinking of honour or the like and continue in subjection- this is a stout hearted saint (*yogee*).” (Brown 223)

The fourth principle of Patanjali’s *niyama* is *swadhyaya* (self-study). Self-study is studying one's true nature and realising it. Patanjali proclaims that self-study results in the vision of God. For Vemana, the true nature of man is divinity, and God exists in man. He asserts that one should know that God is present in oneself. “Know that Siva exists in the body.” (“Dehambuna nunna Shivuni deliyara Vema”; Brown 950) The fifth principle of Patanjali’s *niyama* is *Ishwara pranidhana* (devotion to God). Devotion to God is common to all the theistic religions. It works at the level of the affective domain and is very natural. Unconditional love for God leads the devotee from worldly desires to desire for God. Devotion leads to single-minded concentration on God and prepares the ground for self-realisation. According to Patanjali, the result of devotion to God is *samadhi* (*absorption*), where one sees God or *Atman*. Vemana states that devotion to God leads to liberation.

By searching for Shiva in the Atman
and by fixing devotion on Him
One gets liberated and becomes all
Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema.

Atmaloni Shivuni nanuvugaa shodhinchu

Nischalamuga bhakthi nilipeneni

Sarvamukthudagunu sarvambu thanagu

Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema. (my trans.; Subrahmanyam 97)

Asana, the third limb of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga, emphasises the practice of physical postures to attain a firm and relaxed body, aiding in the practitioner's spiritual journey. According to Patanjali, the true practitioner of *asana* is no longer troubled by the pairs of opposites such as pain and pleasure, heat and cold, etc. Yogi Vemana discusses the significance of proper postures and their role in extending one's life. He also emphasises the importance of learning *asana* from a guru and practising meditation while sitting in that *asana*. "If ignorant of the postures thou learnt not of thy teacher, their secret force (*murma & currma*) and fix not thy heart how shalt thou become of the second birth?" (Brown 130).

Pranayama (breath regulation), the fourth limb of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga, teaches control over the breath to purify the mind and prepare it for deeper concentration. Vemana composed several verses on *pranayama*. *Pranayama* has three steps, namely *pooraka*(inhalation), *rechaka*(exhalation) and *kumbhaka*(retention). *Pooraka* is of two types, namely *anthara kumbhaka* and *baahya kumbhaka*. *Anthara kumbhaka* is holding the breath after inhalation, and *bahya kumbhaka* is holding the breath after exhalation. The order of pranayama is inhalation, retention, exhalation, and retention. The ideal ratio of these four activities is 1:4:2:1. Inhalation and exhalation are natural for every living creature, but one should practice breath retention. So, holding one's breath is an essential activity in pranayama. Yogi Vemana's verses emphasise breath regulation and breath retention as essential practices. "The securest situation is the retention of respiration" (Bhadramaina padavi pavana layamu ; Brown 105). He sees this as a means to attain longevity and spiritual awakening. "A man shall attain long life when he has learnt to low breathing (i.e. to save up some respirations daily of the portion predestined to each man). Then shall he grow, he shall wear his body throughout the age of Brahma" (Brown 113).

Pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses, the fifth limb of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga, *focuses* on withdrawing the senses from external objects, akin to a tortoise retreating into its shell. According to Patanjali, with *pratyahara*, the practitioner gets complete mastery over the senses. Yogi Vemana encourages spiritual aspirants to withdraw their senses from the external world and turn inward to experience the divine. "Withdraw the senses and see God."¹("Indriyamula rosi Isuni choodaraa" ; Subrahmanyam 22)

¹ Subrahmanyam Bhagavathula, Vemana Padya Ratnakaramu, Navaratna Book House Vijayawada 2013, verse 22.

Dharana(concentration), *dhyana*(meditation) and *samadhi* (absorption), the sixth, seventh and eighth limbs of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga, collectively form *Samyama* (integration). *Samyama* is also known as *anharanga* (*internal*) *Yoga* whereas *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama* are called as *bahiranga*(*external*) *Yoga*. *Pratyahara* is known as both *internal and external Yoga*. According to Patanjali, the practice of *samyama* leads to profound knowledge and self-realisation. *Dharana* (concentration) is focussing on a single thought, and *dhyana* (meditation) is a process of a continuous flow of that single thought, and finally, getting absorbed into that single thought results in *samadhi* (absorption). Through practice, the yogi makes the mind thoughtless, and the mind gets into a state of equanimity. *Samadhi* leads to the attainment of supreme bliss or enlightenment. Yogi Vemana discusses single-minded concentration, meditation, and absorption as vital aspects of spiritual growth. He portrays the ultimate goal of spirituality as fixing the mind on the divine. "Casting away the mind and turning it back knowing the secret of the heart and if thou fix thy mind, this is the greatest task of religion." (Brown 64)

Vemana also talks about concentration, meditation, and absorption in many of his verses. "The hooded serpent by knowing well to fix its gaze like as the crow under the cover gazes, thus does the yogee by inner wisdom gaze; This is the path of perfection." (Brown 239). Meditation minimises thought patterns gradually and makes the mind calm, leading it to *samadhi*, where the mind becomes still and can realise Consciousness. Vemana magnificently explains the state of absorption or *samadhi* in his verse. "Like as water flows in its channel, thus does an immersion in that knowledge of truth that arises in the mind ultimately (through an absorption in the final essence) constitute the perfect saint. Then is he like to the Ganges when her streams reach the ocean." (Brown 63)

In addition to Ashtanga Yoga, Yogi Vemana's poetry includes references to various yogic traditions such as Shiva Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Sankhya Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Raja Yoga, Jnana Yoga and more in his poems. Here is a poem of Vemana that talks about the greatness of Shiva Yoga to the practitioners of Sankhya Yoga and Raja Yoga. "To them who understand the meaning of the excellent Sankhya Yoga I will in this world declare the truth through the most noble Raja-yoga. Listen to the greatness of Siva Yoga" (Brown 206).

While Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga provides a systematic framework for spiritual growth, Yogi Vemana's poetry weaves spirituality and Yoga into everyday life. Their common emphasis on principles like truth, purity, and concentration demonstrates that the quest for self-realisation has multiple paths. Understanding these two traditions can deepen our insight into the multifaceted nature of the spiritual journey. Patanjali mostly talks about the results of the practice of these limbs, as Vemana talks about the methodology of these practices. Along with the practices of Ashtanga Yoga, Vemana talks about the practices of several other types of Yoga such as Shiva Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Sankhya Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Raja Yoga and Shiva Yoga in his poems. As Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga is treated as the base for all other types of Yoga, it appears Vemana also used it in his practices along with the other types of Yoga.

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