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The theory of vairagya in yoga philosophy and its worldly relevance

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Abstract

Out of all the orthodox Indian philosophies the Yoga philosophy can be defined as the most technically inclined. This school of thought has presented the human kind with the boon of mental and corporal peace through intricate exploration of the nuances related to the body, self (atman), nature and its components. One of the many crucial concepts of this philosophy is the concept of Vairagya. Rather than focusing on the outer – worldly objects, it requires an inward journey into the 'chitta' for a person to realise the actual truth i.e. the unity of all the elements into the ultimate being till the last atom. The entire process and segmentation of the concept of Vairagya is intricately laid out in the Patanjali Yoga Sutra. Vairagya isn't simply a concept of detachment (nivritti) but a 'state of being detached'. Detaching oneself from the worldly and transcendental desires is only the first step towards Vairagya. But ensuring the non - retreat of the indriyas towards the vishayas in the future remains the key and the final step of the process of Vairagya. Hence, Vairagya can more accurately be translated into - 'non - indulgence'. If considered solely in seclusion then the scope of this theory becomes limited to the higher yogic practitioners. But if carefully deciphered, it's outstretch can be noted in the life of every ordinary being on a regular basis whenever the person indulges in a dedicated pursuit.

Keyword: Vairagya, sampragyata, asampragyata, chitta, worldly (Apara), transcendental (Para)

Introduction

Famously known as the Patanjala- Yoga Sutra, it is the main treatise defining the fundamental principles of Yoga Philosophy, called so because of its proponent, Patanjali Muni. As all the other Indian school of thoughts (except Charvaka) this philosophy also defines a spiritual path to the ultimate state of bliss (Sat – Chita - Ananda) through some highly logical steps. Starting from the most material, physical stage it goes on to the most subtle and metaphysical stage while exploring the subtleties of body and the nature. Thus it enables the Yogi to attain the transcendental knowledge of the self.

Vairagya

The first and the foremost instruction provided by the Yoga Sutra remains that the Yoga (eightfold – as defined in the Yoga Sutra) should be practiced to detach the indulging self (Chitta) from the Vishayas.

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः

According to Yoga philosophy, one cannot gain the actual knowledge of the 'self' until one understands the futility of the vishayas and puts all the derived efforts of yoga philosophy into detaching oneself from the material world. The knowledge that is required to be achieved only comes to a yogi who stays persistent and determined in his efforts. Hence it is even said in the Yoga Sutra –

अभ्यासवैराग्याभ्यां तन्निरोधः

There are two pre-requisites of controlling the fickle nature of the chitta i.e.-

1. Abhyasa
2. Vairagya

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According to the Vyasa Bhashya on the Yoga sutra the Chitta is compared to an unusual river which has two streams of flow in exactly opposite directions. One of them leads to the ultimate knowledge and bliss (the state of Kaivalya) and is hence known as the stream of goodwill. The other one which makes the individual indulge in the material pleasures of the world is said to be the stream of negativity. These two streams are perennial and hence none of them could be destroyed completely. Rather it depends upon our wilful inclination through which we can block the flow of water in either of the streams ultimately increasing the flow in the other. Vairagya itself is said to be the way through which the flow or indulgence of the negative stream leading towards the contact of futile vishayas can be decreased. The intelligence to differentiate between the right and the wrong kind of indulgence only comes through Abhyasa. Hence these are the two ways of controlling and balancing our Chitta.

Abhyasa is further defined as

तत्र स्थितौ यत्नोऽभ्यासः

A persistent effort itself to detach the chitta from vishayas is abhyasa. Just like the Sthunakhanana Nyaya, in order to get a better assurance in the firmness of the chitta in the state of sattva or knowledge the concept of Vairagya appears. Vairagya is an elaborate concept which makes an integral part of the Yoga philosophy.

दृष्टानुश्रविकविषयवितृष्णस्य वशीकारसंज्ञा वैराग्यम्

A state of complete dejection as well as non-indulgence of chitta in any type of vishayas either Drishta or Anushravika is termed as the Vashikara Vairagya.

As the Vairagya is given a specific name here, we need to know about the various types of Vairagya. Vachaspati Mishra in his Tattva-Vaisharadi Tika explains the four types of vairagya while simplifying the Vyasa Bhashya further. The differentiation is done mainly on the basis of the depth of permanence of the Vairagya at that stage. However the ultimate aim at any stage remains to reach the Vashikara Vairagya which is the highest stage of Vairagya. The other stages are :-

1. Yatamana – When the pursuer has just started his efforts in the field of Vairagya and he tries to control his indriyas from indulging in the futile vishayas then this stage is said to be Yatamana Vairagya.
2. Vyatireka – After trying for a while when the yearning for some of the Vishayas is totally nullified while some of them still remain, it is said to be the stage of the Vyatireka Vairagya.
3. Ekdriya – This is the stage when most of the longings for the futile vishayas of the world are cancelled and only one of the indriyas still remains in contact with the vishayas.
4. Vashikara - This is the ultimate stage when all the worldly vishayas are discarded and no more longing for any worldly and material object is at all left.

Due to the ignorance sometimes a yogi might feel satisfied at an intermediate state of vairagya lesser than the Vashikara and stops working ahead in the direction of attaining the ultimate stage of self-realisation. This highlights the power of vairagya. Even a small step towards strengthening our

conviction can lead us to great satisfaction. Although it needs to be ensured that the satisfaction thus generated doesn't make us complacent. In the worldly context Vairagya can be called the determination of achieving one's desired goal. Even though the smaller achievements could provide us immense satisfaction and happiness, one must not stop mid-way and should keep on striving even harder to achieve the ultimate aim without being distracted by any possible hindrances and troubles.

Even Gita endorses the concept of Vairagya by saying that

असंशयं महाबाहो मनः दुर्निग्रहं चलम्
अभ्यासेन तु कौन्तेय वैराग्येण च गृह्यते ॥

Hence according to the Vyasa Bhashya – when the yearning for both worldly and transcendental desires is destructed and no further motivation to indulge in those vishayas arises even when they are offered to us very easily and accessibly; when even the slightest desire for getting any futile vishayas dies in the chitta of the pursuer then only he reaches the stage of Vashikara vairagya. The Drishta vishayas are said to be the worldly vishayas like – any material object- fame, lavish food, drinks, treasures, etc. The transcendental (anushravika) vishayas are broadly defined under three categories – Swarga (the concept of a mythical place where all the pleasures are accessible), Videha (a state of yogic bliss at a stage just after the Sampragyata samadhi stage in which the sense of the belongingness with the body is erased.), Prakritilaya (a state of yoga just before the Asampragyata stage in which the samskaras are also lost). If a yogi becomes greedy of earning the ultimate stage of Asampragyata Samadhi or becomes boastful of his achievement, then even this thought could pull him back and won't let him reach the ultimate stage of Vashikara vairagya. However this is just the material vairagya. After this stage the Chitta becomes-

1. Anabhogatmika (Non Indulgent)
2. Heyopadedyashunya (Indifferent)

Hence Vashikara Vairagya gets the Yogi out of the material world and its distractions but still the yogi hasn't learned the actual identity of his true self. Even when the material objects of the world have been rendered futile, the difference between prakriti and jeevatma is not clear. Here an ignorant yogi may cease to aspire for a better state of knowledge but a dedicated yogi undergoes Asampragyata Samadhi in order to break that illusion and gets to see a virtual image of self in the chitta like mirror.

Thus, there is still another level of Vairagya i.e. the Para Vairagya, which needs to be attained through the practice of Asampragyata Samadhi where the self is seen directly without the help of any virtual instrument and this is said to be the ultimate stage of knowledge which, if maintained would eventually turn into the ultimate bliss (Kaivalya). It is stated –

तत्परं पुरुषखातेर्गुणवैतृष्यम्

The knowledge derived by differentiating between prakriti and purusha and the ultimate identity of self in the purest form, uncontaminated by the nature of the material (trigunatmika) Prakriti is known as the Para Vairagya, which when attained gives us the ultimate happiness (Sat- Chit- Ananda). According to Vyasabhashya, it is said that the yogi reaches such a stage that all the knots of life and death get

untied and the jiva is totally free of this cycle of life and death moreover placed in a state of the 'Paramananda'.

Vairagya is not just a pre-requisite for a yogi in achieving the cessation of cycle of life and death but it also works as a motivation for any ordinary human being who wants to achieve success in life and thus needs to stay determined and persistent in the cause. For achieving any short term or a long term goal an unbridled dedication is eminent. This concept has been discussed and appreciated abundantly in Gita, by other names like 'Nirvedam' -

यदा ते मोहकलिलं बुद्धिः व्यतितरिष्यति,
तदा गन्तासि निर्वेदं श्रोतव्यस्य श्रुतस्य च॥

Also the texts like Vishnupuran, Skandapurana, Panchatantra, etc. are such varied texts which discuss the concept of Vairagya vividly in their own context.

Conclusion

Vairagya is the yogic procedure of attaining the ultimate level of non-indulgence by controlling the senses. Vairagya in the worldly sense may be referred to as the collection and utilisation of the senses to achieve a very pin pointed objective. It is interesting to note that the same concept of Vairagya which detaches in the procedure of spiritual yoga, helps to build up the concentration for something passionately desired in the material world. During the course of this process the only thing that occupies one's mind is the achievement of the desired result and ultimately causes non-indulgence in all else. The example of Arjun's focus of contracting his senses into just one eye of a wooden fish away from all the other objects is a worldly interpretation of the highest level of Sampragyata Samadhi. The history is filled with great examples of people who achieved a remembrance till eternity by developing the power of their concentration. The clear devotion invested into achievement of a goal which prioritises it above everything else generates passion and this passion further helps the person achieve the desired success. The passion hence derived for anything materialistically big or small is driven by a worldly form of Vairagya itself. Achieving singular indulgence by practicing non indulgence is the worldly concept of Vairagya.

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