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## Socrates in the Light of Yoga: A comparative study of self-knowledge and ethical living

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### Abstract

This paper delves into a comparative study of Socrates and yoga, exploring how their respective philosophies converge in the pursuit of self-knowledge and ethical living. By examining their methods, core values and potential applications in contemporary life, we gain valuable insight into the universal human quest for truth, meaning and self-realization.

**Keyword:** Dialogue, ethics, self-knowledge, socrates, yoga

### Introduction

Across the vast expanse of time and culture, two distinct traditions, Socratic thought and yoga, have profoundly impacted human thought and practice. Though seemingly disparate, they converge in their profound concern for ethical living, inner transformation, and the pursuit of truth.

In the annals of intellectual history, few figures stand as prominently as Socrates, the enigmatic Athenian philosopher of the 5th century BCE. Revered as the progenitor of Western philosophy, Socrates' influence resonates across millennia, shaping the very fabric of philosophical inquiry, ethics, and human thought (Brickhouse & Smith, 2000) <sup>[1]</sup>. Born into a modest Athenian household, Socrates emerged as an indelible icon amidst the tumultuous political and cultural landscape of ancient Greece (Navia, 2017) <sup>[5]</sup>. Unperturbed by the trappings of wealth or political power, he traversed the streets of Athens, engaging citizens in dialogues that probed the depths of human existence. His singular mission: to seek wisdom and truth through relentless questioning, challenging assumptions, and unravelling the intricacies of moral and intellectual dilemmas (Brickhouse & Smith, 2000) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Socrates' commitment to truth and virtue often collided with the prevailing norms of Athenian society. His unwavering dedication to ethical inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge led to profound introspection, challenging the status quo and inviting the ire of those threatened by his relentless pursuit of intellectual integrity (Brickhouse & Smith, 2000) <sup>[1]</sup>. While Socrates left behind no written records of his own, his ideas and persona were immortalized in the works of his students, most notably Plato. Through the dialogues penned by Plato and others, the essence of Socrates' philosophical musings, his trial, and eventual execution by the Athenian state resonate across centuries, encapsulating the enduring conflict between wisdom and societal conformity (Vlastos, 1991) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Among the vast tapestry of ancient Indian traditions, yoga stands as a testament to the enduring quest for self-realization, inner harmony, and spiritual enlightenment. Originating from the Sanskrit word 'Yuj,' signifying union or integration, yoga embodies a transformative journey toward harmonizing the individual self with the universal consciousness. It is not merely a set of physical postures but an all-encompassing path to holistic well-being: physical, mental, and spiritual. With roots tracing back to one of the oldest civilizations, the Indus-Saraswati Civilization, yoga finds its genesis in texts like *The Vedas*, *The Upanishads*, *The Bhagavad Gita*- scriptures echoing diverse meanings yet converging on a singular goal: liberation (*moksha*), self-realization (*samadhi*), or union with the divine. Patanjali, often revered as the sage who systematically codified the principles of yoga, stands as a luminary in the realm of ancient yogic philosophy.

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His seminal work, the Yoga Sutras, comprising 195 aphorisms, delineate a step-by-step guide to Liberation/*Samadhi*. The art of *Yoga* consists in bringing under control and purifying the three lower vehicles of man, namely, the body, the mind and the spiritual Self. Yoga's multifarious paths- *Karma Yoga* (selfless action), *Bhakti Yoga* (devotion), *Jnana Yoga* (knowledge), and *Raja Yoga* (meditation)- cater to varied approaches for self-transformation and spiritual evolution.

Plato's dialogues and the Yogic Scriptures, including *The Upanishads*, *The Bhagavad Gita* and *The Patanjali Yoga Sutras*, serve as profound explorations into the intricate tapestry of human existence, delving into ethics (good living), epistemology (knowledge), and metaphysics (the nature of reality) with distinctive approaches (Feuerstein, 2012)<sup>[2]</sup>.

## Similarities in Methodology and Core Values

### 1. Dialogue as its core theme

The method of using dialogue as a tool for explaining the formidable and subtle concepts of philosophy are found in all the ancient civilizations of the world (Sridhar, 2007)<sup>[8]</sup>. In Plato's dialogues, particularly works like the "Meno", "Phaedo", and "Crito", the dialectical method of inquiry takes center stage. Here, the protagonist, Socrates, adroitly employs probing questions, challenging assumptions, and unravelling inconsistencies to guide the interlocutors towards glimpses of truth (Grube & Cooper 2000)<sup>[3]</sup>. Through this Socratic dialectic, the quest for knowledge unfolds as a collaborative journey, where discourse and critical thinking foster the pursuit of wisdom and understanding.

Similarly, *The Upanishads* and *The Bhagavad Gita* are fundamental texts in the Yogic tradition, these dialogues (or *Samvada in Sanskrit*) epitomize the compassionate guidance of the guru, illuminating the path to self-realization through allegorical stories, metaphors and in-depth philosophical discussions. *The Gita* is a conversation between two warriors, *Sri Krishna* (The Guru) and *Arjuna* (The Disciple). *Adi Shankaracharya*, in his commentary on the *Gita*, calls it the *samsta-vedartha-sara-sangraha: 'the collection of the essence of The Vedas'* (Ranganathananda, 1995)<sup>[6]</sup>. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan calls *The Gita* an Ethical, Metaphysical and an Epistemological text of the highest order. The Upanishads deal with the topics of- *Brahman* (Universal Consciousness), *Jagat* (World) and *Jeeva* (Individual Consciousness) and the inter relationship between them. They contain aphorisms pregnant with wisdom, only to be understood by those who have refined intellect. In these dialogues we find an intelligible body of verifiable spiritual insights mixed with a mass of myths and legends and cosmological speculations relating to nature and origin of the universe (Ranganathananda, 1995)<sup>[6]</sup>. They are packed with simple, direct and cogent words, however there are some prose passages that are poetic in nature, in many places the authors have deliberately hidden the meaning so that an intelligible and true seeker can find the meaning themselves (Sridhar M.K, 2007)<sup>[8]</sup>

The dialogical exploration in both Plato's works and the Yogic Scriptures signifies a convergence in their pedagogical approaches. While Plato employs rigorous questioning and philosophical debate, the Yogic texts emphasize the guru's compassionate mentorship, both aiming to illuminate the human quest for truth, moral living, and a deeper understanding of reality.

### 2. Self-Knowledge as the Foundation

Both Socrates and the philosophy of yoga converge in their emphasis on the pivotal role of self-knowledge. Socrates' renowned dictum, "The unexamined life is not worth living," encapsulates his belief in the imperative nature of introspection and self-reflection as depicted in Plato's "Apology" (Reed, 2010)<sup>[7]</sup>. He advocated for a life dedicated to questioning, examining assumptions, and seeking self-understanding to attain true wisdom and fulfilment.

Similarly, yoga, articulated in the Patanjali Yoga Sutras (Vivekananda, 2022)<sup>[9]</sup>, underscores the practice of *Swadhyaya*, translated as self-study or introspection. *Vyasa Bhasya* says The Gods, the Rishis and the Siddhas become visible to him who is given to study. *Swadhyaya* encourages individuals to explore their inner landscape, engage in self-reflection, and delve into the depths of their being. This practice forms a fundamental aspect of yoga philosophy, aiming to unveil one's true nature, recognize personal limitations, and facilitate holistic well-being.

### 3. Cultivating Ethical Living

Both traditions emphasize the importance of leading a life guided by virtue and ethical principles. Socrates relentlessly challenged the Athenians to examine their values and strive for justice, temperance, courage and wisdom (Meno 79a, Reed 2010)<sup>[7]</sup>. Similarly, yoga prescribes ethical guidelines known as *Yamas* (Moral Disciplines) and *Niyamas* (Physical Disciplines), encompassing principles like Non-Violence, Truthfulness, Non-Covetousness, Purity, Contentment, Austerity, Self-Study and Devotion to God (Vivekananda, 2022)<sup>[9]</sup>. These ethical foundations are considered essential for achieving inner peace and aligning with a higher purpose.

### 4. Detachment from the Material World

Both Socrates and yoga advocate non-attachment to worldly possessions and desires. Socrates believed that true happiness cannot be found in external objects and emphasized the importance of contentment and simplicity (Phaedo 67e, Reed 2010)<sup>[7]</sup>. He gave no thought to appearances, went regularly barefoot and his critics called him 'unwashed'. Hardiness, temperance and self-control were the most prominent features of his character (Guthrie, 1971)<sup>[4]</sup>. Yoga similarly teaches the impermanence of material things and encourages cultivating detachment to avoid suffering. The Yoga Sutras define *Vairagya* (Detachment), as Detachment from the objects seen or heard (Vivekananda, 2022)<sup>[9]</sup>. This detachment is not about renunciation, but rather a shift in focus towards finding lasting joy within oneself. The *Gita* advocates *Nishkama Karma*, or Desireless action- Performing action while being detached from its fruits. *Shri Krishna* is urging *Arjuna* to do his duty and not worry about the result.

### 5. Mastery of the Mind

Both Socrates and yoga recognize the powerful influence of the mind on our experiences and actions. Socrates engaged in relentless questioning and dialogue to challenge assumptions and cultivate critical thinking (Meno 80a, Reed 2010)<sup>[7]</sup>. *Patanjali* defines Yoga as the cessation of all the modifications of the mind (Vivekananda, 2022)<sup>[9]</sup>. *Abhyasa* (Practice) and *Vairagya* (Detachment) become key to achieve purification and mastery of the mind (Vivekananda, 2022)<sup>[9]</sup>. Practices like *Pranayama* & *Dhyana* (Meditation), aim to quieten the mind, control its fluctuations, and ultimately achieve mental clarity and inner peace. Both approaches seek

to harness the mind's potential recognizing the importance of a disciplined and pure mind.

### 6. Seeking Guidance beyond the Self

While emphasizing self-reliance and introspection, both Socrates and yoga acknowledge the value of guidance and support. Socrates referred to his "daimonion", an inner voice that provided him with direction and warnings (Apology 31d, Reed, 2010)<sup>[7]</sup>. Similarly, yoga emphasizes the role of a guru, a wise and experienced teacher who guides and supports the disciple on their yogic path (Yogananda, 2007)<sup>[11]</sup>. *Patanjali* in his yoga sutras mentions liberation is also possible through complete surrender and devotion to *Ishwara* (God). Both traditions recognize the importance of seeking wisdom and perspective from those who have walked the path.

### Conclusion and Applications in Contemporary Life

The teachings of Socrates and yoga retain profound relevance in our contemporary world. In an era characterized by uncertainty, anxiety, and rapid technological advancement, their emphasis on self-knowledge, ethical living, and inner peace offers invaluable guidance.

Socratic questioning can be applied to critically analyze information, challenge biases, and make informed decisions in a world saturated with misinformation. Similarly, yogic practices like meditation and mindfulness can be utilized to manage stress, cultivate emotional resilience, and improve focus in our fast-paced society. The juxtaposition between Socrates' philosophical approach and yogic teachings underscores a shared belief in the transience of materiality and the pursuit of an internal, lasting source of contentment. Both philosophies echo the sentiment that genuine fulfilment transcends the ephemeral allure of external possessions, emphasizing the pursuit of inner fulfilment as a path to genuine happiness. By integrating the wisdom of both the Indian and Greek traditions, we can navigate the complexities of modern life with greater clarity.

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