

Yogic Interpretations Of Veṅkaṭeśa In His Vṛttaratnāvali Or Sarasvatīstotra

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Abstract:

The concept of Yoga has been developed by our ancestors in the ancient period. Maharṣi Patañjali, the author of Yogaśśāstra or Yogasūtra is regarded as the founder of the Yoga school of Indian Philosophy. After the Yogaśśāstra, various authorities have been contributed to this discipline through their numerous contributions. It is also found that, some scholars incorporate the concept of Yoga Philosophy in their works though they don't compose independent work on Yoga. Our author Veṅkaṭeśa is one among them. He is an exponent of medicine (āyurveda) and prosody as well as devotional literature. Although he describes various metres in the work Vṛttaratnāvali, but he also praises goddess Sarasvatī, goddess of learning in each and every verse of the work. So the text is otherwise known as Sarasvatīstotra. The author also auto-commented on this work. At one place, the author mentions the concept of aṣṭāṅga-yoga in praising goddess Sarasvatī and also commented on it. The present study emphasises on his interpretations on aṣṭāṅga-yoga with a comparative approach with the Yogaśśāstra of Patañjali.)

Keywords: Yoga, Patañjali, Yogaśśāstra, Vṛttaratnāvali, Veṅkaṭeśa, aṣṭāṅgayoga, Sarasvatī

1.0.Introduction:

The Yoga is a holistic practice originating from ancient India that harmonizes the body and mind. It encompasses various techniques, including physical postures (āsanās), breath control (prāṇāyāma), meditation, and ethical principles. Through regular practice, yoga cultivates flexibility, strength, balance, and inner peace.

The Yogic interpretations is made by Veṅkaṭeśa in praise of goddess Sarasvatī, (goddess of learning) in his work Vṛttaratnāvali or Sarasvatī-stotra. The Vṛttaratnāvali is a work on Sanskrit prosody in which Veṅkaṭeśa praises the goddess of learning in each and every verse. All the verses of the work exhibit the magnanimity of mother goddess. Veṅkaṭeśa praises the goddess in the form of the goddess as well as the river. Each of the verse carries four fold characteristics of the Sanskrit metre (chandas) i.e. characteristics (lakṣaṇa) of the metre concerned, name of the metre, example and devotion to the goddess. In the text the author mentions the concept of aṣṭāṅga-yoga at one verse and commented on it extensively.

1.1. The author:

Our author Veṅkaṭeśa is the son of Avadhāna Sarasvatī of ātreya-gotra and the grandson of Ekāmranātha¹. His works include Vṛttaratnāvali or Sarasvatī-stotra and auto commentary on it,

¹ śrīmāndantimukho devaḥ śreyāmsi vidadhātu vaḥ/
yatprasādena nirvighnaṁ sidhyanti kṛtīnām kriyāḥ//
ekāmranātho yattātaḥ sāyaṇāmātyacoditaḥ/
samagrahīsubodhārtham āyurvedasudhānidhim//

Prāśnottaratnamālā on āyurveda (composed in the form of question and answer), commentary namely Bheṣajakalpavyākhyā on Bheṣajakalpa (a work on āyurveda). His father Avadhāna Sarasvatī was born in Makṣikāraṇa (a village called Īkkāḍu in Tamil) near Trivellore in the region of Tuṇḍiramaṇḍala (now called Toṇḍamaṇḍalam in Tamil)².

1.2. His Yogic Interpretations:

In the verse 67 of Vṛttaratnāvali, while describing the metre meghavisphūrjityābha, he explains the concepts of Yoga and later, in the commentary of the same verse he describes the eight limbs of Yoga viz. yama, niyam, āsana, prāṇāyāma, pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, dhyāna and samādhi. Veṅkaṭeśa says that the person (sādhaka) restrains his mind through the yama and inhales the air through nose. The air flows speedily through the nose and the sādhaka restrains the same air by following the process of prāṇāyāma by recaka, pūraka and kumbhaka. Then the sādhaka performs the dhyāna (meditation). Due to the dhyāna, the sādhaka feels better and at a result his eyes are filled with tears of happiness (ānandāśru). The author again clarifies that the sādhaka meditates the goddess of learning Sarasvatī, who is having the beauty of the clouds in autumn season (śarat ṛtu). And the Sādhaka, who does all the activities, receives all the good fortune (aṣṭa-guṇas/siddhis³) and all his problems will be eradicated by the blessings of goddess Sarasvatī. Here the author emphasises the yogic practices as the prime methods to get the blessings of the goddess Sarasvatī⁴. The verse is:

yamī nāsārandhrād-gatimupagataṁ vāyumantar nirundhan
sadā yaḥ prodañcat pulakabharito vāripūrṇekṣaṇas te/
vapūr dhyāyaty amba! prahasitaśaran meghavisphūrjitābham
guṇān aṣṭau so'yaṁ bhṛśam asulabhān saṁlabhetānimādyān//⁵

sarasvatībhūṣaṇaṁ tamāyurvedābdhipāragam/
vande kāmēśanāthāryaṁ guruṁ kāśyapagotrājam//
atrigotrābdhicandrasya svādusūktisudhāmucāḥ/
tuṇḍiramaṇḍalākṛāntamakṣikāraṇajanmanah//
suvistīrṇāyurāmnāyasārasaṅgrahakāriṇaḥ/
avadhānasarasvatyāḥ putreṇa brahmavedinā// See Acharya, K. P., Vṛttaratnāi of Veṅkaṭeśa: A Study, p. 11.

² ibid, pp. 11-13.

³ The aṣṭa-siddhis are aṇimā (small), mahimā (great), garimā (heavy), laghimā (light), prāpti (gain), prākāmya (desire), Īśitvam (Lordship), Vaśītvam (influence)

⁴ Veṅkaṭeśa auto-commented on the verse as: yamī yamavān. yamāḥ pañca itihāsottame 'ahimsā satyamasteyaṁ brahmacaryasaṅgrahaḥ' iti. Yamaśabdo'tra niyamāderupalakṣakaḥ. asmadācāryāstu saṁkṣepeṇa yogānevamāhuḥ. yama-niyamāsana-prāṇāyāma-pratyāhāra-dhāraṇā-dhyāna-samādhaya ityaṣṭau yogāṅgāni.....

nāsārandhrād gatimupagataṁ niḥśrtamityarthaḥ. tam vāyumantarnirundhan niyamayan recakapūrakakumbhakaiḥ prāṇāyāmaṁ kurvanniti yāvat. Sadā yāvaddhyānaṁ prodañcadbhīr-udgacchadbhīḥ pulakaiḥ romāñcaih bharitaḥ. vāriṇā ānandabāṣpeṇa pūrṇe nirīkṣaṇe yasya sa tathoktaḥ. yaḥ puruṣaḥ prahasitaśaranmeghavisphūrjitābham prahsitā parihasitā śaratkāḷīnameghasamūhasyābhā prabhā yena tat te tava gātraṁ dhyāyataḥ cintayataḥ so'yaṁ bhṛśamasulabhānatyarthaduśprāpān aṇimādyāṣṭaguṇān saṁlabheta. meghavisphūrjitīm vṛttam. yamanasarairgena ca lakṣaṇa. See Acharya, K. P., Vṛttaratnāi of Veṅkaṭeśa: A Study, pp. 78-80.

⁵ Vṛttaratnāvali- v. 67.

1.3. Aṣṭāṅga-yoga in Vṛttaratnāvali Patañjali defines the eight limbs of the Yoga popularly known as aṣṭāṅga-yoga in his Yogasūtra⁶. Following the path of Patañjali, Veṅkaṭeśa describes the eight limbs of Yoga in verse form while commenting on the 67th verse of the Vṛttaratnāvali.

1.3.1. Yama

Yama is the first limb of the eightfold path of yoga, as outlined in the Yogasūtra of Patañjali. It refers to a set of ethical guidelines or moral restraints that serve as the foundation for living a mindful and virtuous life. He says that there are five kinds of yamas as mentioned in the itihāsa as ‘ahimsā satyamasteyam brahmacaryam-asamgrahaḥ’. The five yamas are: ahimsā (non-violence), satya (truthfulness), asteya (not stealing), brahmacarya (chastity), aparigraha (non-possessiveness)⁷. But in the commentary he mentions about 10 kinds of Yama. Veṅkaṭeśa says kṛpā (sympathy) instead of aparigraha and adds ārjava (honesty) kṣamā (compassion), dhṛti (fortitude), mitāhāra (eating less), śauca (purification)⁸ as yamas. To quote: ahimsā satyamasteyam brahmacaryam kṛpārjavam/ kṣamā dhṛtir mitāhārah śaucam caiva yamā daśa//⁹

1.3.2. Niyama

The Niyama, the second limb of the eightfold path of yoga, consists of observances or personal practices that cultivate self-discipline and spiritual development. Similar to Yamas, Niyamas serve as guidelines for living a balanced life, focusing more on individual behaviour and attitude. Patañjali mentions five kinds of Niyamas as: śauca (purification), santoṣa (satisfaction), tapa (austerity), svādhyāya (self-study), and īśvara-praṇidhāna (devotion to the godhead)¹⁰. The Niyamas as defined by Veṅkaṭeśa are: tapa (austerity), santoṣa (satisfaction), āstikya (belief in god), dānaṁ (charity), devasya pūjanam (worship of the god), vedānta-śravaṇam (listening the Vedānta), hrī and mati (thoughts), japa (chanting)¹¹.

1.3.3. Āsana:

In yoga, āsana refers to the physical postures or poses practiced during yoga practice. These postures are often designed to promote strength, flexibility, balance, and relaxation. Patañjali says about āsana that the posture should be steady and comfortable (sthira sukham āsanam¹²). However Veṅkaṭeśa does not mention about the definition of the āsana, but he defines about five kinds of āsanas as padmāsana, svastikāsana, bhadrāsana, vajrāsana and vīrāsana¹³.

1.3.4. Prāṇāyāma:

The Prāṇāyāma is the practice of controlling the breath, which is an integral part of yoga. The word ‘prāṇāyāma’ is derived from two Sanskrit words ‘prāṇa’, (meaning life force or vital energy), and ‘āyāma’ (meaning expansion). Therefore, prāṇāyāma can be understood as the extension or expansion of one's life force through breath control. Patañjali defines the prāṇāyāma as: regulating the breath

⁶ yama-niyamāsana-prāṇāyāma-pratyāhāra-dhāraṇā-dhyāna-samādhayo’ṣṭāvaṅgāni. Yogaśāstra- 2/29.

⁷ Patañjali says about five kinds of Yamas. ahimsāsatyāsteyabrahmacaryaparigrahā yamāḥ. Yogaśāstra- 2/30.

⁸ The śauca is a kind of niyama in Patañjali’s Yogaśāstra, but Veṅkaṭeśa adds it under yama.

⁹ Commentary of verse 67 of Vṛttaratnāvali.

¹⁰ śauca-santoṣa-tapaḥ-svādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānāni niyamāḥ. Yogaśāstra- 2/32.

¹¹ tapaḥ santoṣamāstikyaṁ dānaṁ devasya pūjanam/

vedāntaśravaṇam caiva hrīmatīśca japohutam// Commentary of verse 67 of Vṛttaratnāvali.

¹² Yogaśāstra- 2/45

¹³ padmāsanaṁ svastikākhyam bhadraṁ vajrāsanaṁ tathā/

vīrāsanamiti proktaṁ saramāsanapañcakam// Commentary of verse 67 of Vṛttaratnāvali.

which is the separation of the flow of inhalation and exhalation is known as *prāṇāyāma*¹⁴. Veṅkaṭeśa mainly focuses on the process of breathing in and breathing out and keeping the air inside the body in his description of *prāṇāyāma*. He also says that the *sādhaka* must inhale through *iḍā* and exhale through *piṅgalā*¹⁵.

1.3.5. Pratyāhāra:

The *Pratyāhāra* is the fifth limb of yoga. *Pratyāhāra* involves turning one's attention inward and consciously disengaging from the external stimuli of the senses. Patañjali says that the *Pratyāhāra* is the withdrawal of senses, when they are not contacting their own object of perception¹⁶. Veṅkaṭeśa also opines the same view with regard to the views of Patañjali. He says that when the senses come in contact with sensory objects, then they have been withdrawn forcefully from those material contamination by *Pratyāhāra*¹⁷.

1.3.6. Dhāraṇā:

The *Dhāraṇā*, the sixth limb of yoga as outlined in the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali, refers to concentration or single-pointed focus. Patañjali says that contemplation of the *citta* at one point (inside or outside the body) is known as *dhāraṇā*¹⁸. Veṅkaṭeśa describes the *dhāraṇā* elaborately as he mentions that keeping the life force (*prāṇa vāyu*) at twelve points inside the body is known as *dhāraṇā*. The twelve points viz. finger *aṅguṣṭha*, *gulpha*, *jaṅgha*, *jānu*, *urutala*, *hr̥t*, *gr̥ivā*, *kaṅṭha*, *lambikā*, *nas*, in between the *bhrū*, *mastaka*¹⁹.

1.3.7. Dhyāna:

The *Dhyāna*, the seventh limb of yoga according to Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*, is often translated as meditation. It represents the sustained and uninterrupted flow of concentration that arises from the practice of *dhāraṇā*. Patañjali says in this context that where the continuous threadlike flow in the place/point in which the *citta* links is known as *Dhyāna*²⁰. Veṅkaṭeśa says the meditation is called as meditation in which the *Sādhaka* meditates the godhead in himself by the convinced mind which is nearer to the *Caitanya*²¹.

1.3.8. Samādhi:

In *Samādhi*, the boundaries of the individual self (ego) dissolve, and the practitioner experiences a profound sense of oneness with the universe or the divine²². Veṅkaṭeśa also opines the same view as

¹⁴ tasmin sati śvāsaprasvāsayorgativicchedaḥ prāṇāyāmaḥ// *Yogaśśāstra*- 2/49.

¹⁵ iḍayā pūrayet bāhyaṁ ṣoḍaśamātrayā/

dhārayetpūritam yogi catuṣṣaṣṭyāstu mātrayā//

suṣumnā madhurām samyak dvātrimśanmātrayā śanaiḥ/

nāḍyā piṅgalayā caiva recayediyogavittamaḥ// Commentary of verse 67 of *Vṛttaratnāvali*.

¹⁶ svaviṣaya asaṁprayoge cittasya svarūpānukāraḥ iva indriyāṇām pratyāhāraḥ/ *Yogaśśāstra*- 2/54.

¹⁷ indriyāṇām vicaratām viṣayeṣu nirargalam/

balādāharaṇam tebhyaḥ pratyāhāro'bhidhīyate// Commentary of verse 67 of *Vṛttaratnāvali*.

¹⁸ deśabandhacittasya dhāraṇā. *Yogaśśāstra*- 3/1.

¹⁹ aṅguṣṭhagulphajaṅghāsu jānunyūrutale tathā/

hr̥dgr̥ivakaṅṭhakūpeṣu lambikāyām tato nasi//

bhrūmadhye mastake caiva dvādaśānte yathāvidhi/

dhāraṇam prāṇamaruto dhāraṇeti nigadyate// Commentary of verse 67 of *Vṛttaratnāvali*.

²⁰ tatra pratyayaikatānatā dhyānam. *Yogaśśāstra*- 3/2.

²¹ samāhitena manasā caitanyāntaravartinā/

ātmanyabhīṣṭadevānām dhyānam dhyānamihocyate// Commentary of verse 67 of *Vṛttaratnāvali*.

²² tadevamātranirbhāsam svarūpaśūnyamiva samādhiḥ. *Yogaśśāstra*- 3/3.

he says that in Samādhi, there would be the thought of equality (samatva) among individual soul (jīvātmā) and paramātmā (supreme soul)²³.

1.4. Conclusion:

As a proponent of Indian ethos, Veṅkaṭeśa incorporates the ideas of Yoga in his Vṛttaratnāvali or Sarasvatīstotra. The work exhibits the idioms of Sanskrit prosody as well as the stotra for goddess Sarasvatī. Though the verse is one, but Veṅkaṭeśa involves the philosophical thought of aṣṭāṅga-yoga and in the commentary on the same verse he narrates the eight limbs of Yoga in a unique way. Sometimes he is in agreement with Patañjali and sometimes not. Most probably the author was influenced by some other texts on Yoga philosophy other than that of Patañjali. His interpretations manifest the ancient Indian wisdom in general and the Yoga philosophy in particular. Though the work is a strotra literature, but the way it presents the philosophical ideas in noteworthy and gives a holistic approach into the study of ancient texts.

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²³ samatvabhāvanām nityam jīvātmaparamātmanoḥ/

samādhimāhurmunayastattvayogaviśāradāḥ// Commentary of verse 67 of Vṛttaratnāvali.