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## YOGA PRACTICE AS A COMPLEMENT TO SAMATHA MEDITATION

Sureeporn Moeisawat and Warayuth Sriwarakuel

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### ABSTRACT

The demands of contemporary life have led to various kinds of practices to promote physical and mental health. In Buddhist countries, yoga is increasingly attractive to people as a complement to the older Theravada approaches to meditation like Samatha. This paper will explore the phenomenon and show that this increasing practice of yoga is not at odds with Buddhism. Both traditions focus the mind to attain *Samādhi*. Increasingly, laypersons and religious people have integrated yoga practice with Samatha meditation, to promote physical and mental health. This paper will introduce the approach of Banyat Dhammasaro, the Thai monk who has attempted to integrate yoga with Samatha meditation.

**Keywords:** Yoga; Samatha Meditation, Dynamic Meditation; Banyat Dhammasaro

### Introduction

Unhappiness and mental suffering (*dukkha*) is common, especially for those who live in big cities. The demands of contemporary life often have had detrimental effect on physical and mental health. While Theravada Buddhism has its own meditation techniques, they often do not involve dynamic movement. As a result, in Buddhist countries, yoga is increasingly attractive to people as a complement to the older

Theravada approaches to meditation such as Samatha meditation. This paper will contend that these two traditions are not in conflict but are complimentary, as they both attempt to enable the mind to attain *Samādhi*. Increasingly, laypeople and religious people are integrating yoga practice with Samatha meditation, to promote physical and mental health. As people in Buddhist countries are increasingly attracted to the more dynamic meditation techniques of yoga, there has been a movement to consider it as a complement to Buddhism. This paper will explore the attempts to use yoga as a complement to Theravada meditative practices, especially the work of Banyat Dhammasaro.

### **Understanding Yoga and Samatha meditation.**

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit root ‘yuj’ which means “to bind, to join, to attach and yoke, to direct and concentrate the attention to use it for meditation”.<sup>1</sup> Yoga is the union of the individual of the soul with the absolute. This state is called calm mind, or *Samādhi* which is similar to the goal of Samatha meditation. In contemporary society, people practice yoga as a way of improved life and health but not as a religious practice.<sup>2</sup> It is practice primarily for meditation and to create an “intimate physical-spiritual” bond.<sup>3</sup>

Around the world, the adoption of yoga has emphasized its benefits for physical and mental health. Currently, the modern medical institute in the West has accepted yoga “as an alternative treatment for many disorders and can complement the conventional medicine system.”<sup>4</sup> So while yoga has its roots as a kind of spiritual practice, its value is not limited by religion.

The ultimate goal of yoga is the ability of the mind to reach the highest state of comprehension of nature (*Samādhi*), “to free from a past impression of any sort, not sought, clear and simply transparent.”<sup>5</sup> Yoga in terms of spirituality is to control the senses, the concentrated mind, and also eliminate negative emotions. This is because the outcomes of yoga in terms of mental health brings benefits toward people who regularly practice yoga and keep it as a daily habit. The brain and the mind improve

in many ways such as becoming relaxed, calm, tranquil, stable, and then develop towards intelligence and consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

### **Samatha mediation or Tranquility mediation**

Samatha is to make the mind concentrate on the object or is meditation. Because Samatha meditation aims to obtain *Samādhi*, which has the same meaning as in the Pali canon that “Samatha is to still, to certain, to concentrate the mind, and to make the mind have a power or Samma *Samādhi*.”<sup>7</sup>

In another words, Samatha means “concentration on another form with open eyes to focus on an object such as a candle, incense, and fire, etc., or color and then silently repeating its name as blue, blue, or white, white; it is called *Kasiṇa*.”<sup>8</sup> When the mind has sustained and gained experience of mindfulness, it becomes tranquil and calm.

Samatha is “peace of mind, calm, comfort, and happiness to obtain *Samādhi*.”<sup>9</sup> *Samādhi* is essential for people’s lives because “it helps develop the quality of mind and capacity of humanity for perfection.”<sup>10</sup> Samatha meditation can be practiced in many forms and any place. For example, we concentrate the mind on one object when it is stable and still with the object without getting distracted or lost such as chanting a mantra in any comfortable posture, sitting to pray in a temple, standing with calms, walking with a concentration on something, lying down with control breathing in-out, moving body on an activity with concentration or controlling of breathing, and so on. Similarly, we focus on something with breath-in and breath-out while sitting in a car or train or airplane, etc.

Samatha meditation has been the foundation of Vipassanā meditation (Insight meditation). The goal is for the mind to be able to maintain stable concentration allowing it to reach a higher stage, where it achieves enlightenment wisdom.<sup>11</sup> But newer methods were sought to make Samatha meditation more dynamic. Luangpor Teean Jittasubho, the Thai Buddhist monk, taught a method of dynamic meditation which involved developing awareness (*Sati*) by bodily movements. This was directed to lay people and involved simple and easy to practice movements that

people could do on their own such as “turning hands, raising and lowering forearms, walking forward and back, turning and nodding head, blinking eyes, opening mouth, inhaling, exhaling, swallowing saliva, and so on, to be aware of these movements.”<sup>12</sup> He taught that when people have *Sati* in every moment which is seeing themselves as; “*roop-nahm*: *roop* is the body, *nahm* is the mind, then they will arise “*sampajañña*, awareness of oneself to know reality as it is, or *pañña* (knowing) to see Dhamma (the truth of nature, of existence). This practice is called *Satipaṭṭhāna* (the grounds of awareness).”<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, Samatha meditation or Tranquility meditation, or Samatha bhāvāna or concentration are the same things. Because these meditations are aimed to make, to train the mind to obtain ‘*Samādhi*’.

The ultimate goal of Samatha meditation or Tranquility meditation or concentration is to develop inner peace, to calm the mind to attain *Samādhi*.<sup>14</sup> As a result, when we practice Samatha meditation until the mind performs on a calm level of concentration, tranquil and more focused, the mind can be said to reach the stage of *Samādhi*, which is known to be able to allay suffering.<sup>15</sup> In terms of connection of human life in the present, the objective of Samatha meditation is essential “to build up the mental power.”<sup>16</sup> In the Buddhist dictionary, concentration or *Samādhi* means “one-pointedness of mind: mental discipline.”<sup>17</sup> The word of concentration is similar to *Samādhi* in the Pali term, for which P. A. Payutto described the meaning as follows:

*Samādhi* in simple meaning is the state of a steadfast mind. In academic terms, *samādhi* is anchored on one point, it stays with the object and is not distracted or lost when the mind can stay with the object of its choice.<sup>18</sup>

Also, *Samādhi* is the same meaning as *sammā-samādhi* in the Noble Eightfold Path, which means right concentration. In other words, *samādhi* is the stability of mind, not distracted from one point, strong power, tranquility, peace, and clarity.

## The Integration of Yoga practice and Samatha Meditation

As previously mentioned, yoga practice and Samatha meditation or Meditative mind are universal forms that everyone can do; they are not limited by religious considerations. Besides, both arrive at the same results as *Samādhi*. In modern times, yoga practice is well-known and widespread in terms of helping improve physical health and mental health. Whenever laypersons and religious people have integrated practice yoga and Samatha meditation together, it will bring high benefits to the whole of the physical body and spiritual mind.

Especially, for Thai Buddhist monks who presently have increasing health problems, physical inactivity or less physical movement such as sitting for long hours are the causes of physical and mental health problems. Thus, applying yoga practice together with the traditional meditation process is seen as a way to help enhance the ability to practice meditation more efficiently and improve the quality of life for Thai monks and laymen alike. Moreover, this integration is not against the rules of Thai monks and Buddhist teachings. Yoga practice has been adopted by the management of Pancā-Khandha or the five aggregates, Rupa-khandha, to maintain good health. This approach can also be seen elsewhere in Theravada Buddhism; Luangpor Teean's Mahasati meditation or dynamic meditation in Thailand was also in conformity with Theravada principles. Luangpor Teean writes:

We don't have to sit with eyes closed to get calmness, but we can have calmness in this very society. Whenever conceiving thought arises, *samādhi* will see it immediately. *Samādhi* doesn't mean to sit with eyes closed. ***Samādhi* means setting up the mind to see our own mind, to see our own work.**<sup>19</sup>

Humans cannot stay still, so we find some work for the body to do and then use the *sati* to be with the movement. You can call it *sati* or you can call it *samādhi*. The feeling is called *sati*; ***samādhi* is setting up the mind.**<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, the compatibility of the complimentary nature of Yoga and Theravada Buddhist Samatha meditation can be supported. This can be seen in a more comprehensive way by looking at the approach of Banyat Dhammasaro, and the meditation approach of Luangphor Viriyang.

### **The Integrative Approach of Banyat Dhammasaro**

Banyat Dhammasaro was a Thai monk who integrated yoga practice and Samatha meditation to increase the power of meditation, to help improve better concentration and establish mindfulness based on the body. In terms of the meditation process, he complied as walking for one hour, sitting for one hour, and doing yoga for one hour each day. For instance, at the beginning of meditation practice, he applied yoga *prāṇāyāma* to concentrate on breathing, by taking a deep inhalation of 10 seconds and longer exhalation of 20 seconds.

The next step is to practice yoga *asānā* such as *Suriya Namaskara* or the Sun salutation, a series of yoga poses created for practice in the morning, which consists of 12 postures. He described that while practicing yoga *asānā*, the bodily movement must align with smooth and slow breathing. This concentration on breathing and movement calms and stills the mind. It also benefits alertness and blood circulation.

First he applied yoga standing poses, as *Vrikshāsana* or Palm tree pose is to stand erect, raise the hand above the head, while taking a deep inhalation, and stretch the arms and fingers upward. Then continue the stretching of the whole body upward on the heels and hold the pose for a few seconds. And bring the body down on the heels while exhaling. Its benefits are to improve balance and flexibility of leg, chest, and arms, blood circulation of feet and toes.

Then he applied Yoga sitting poses, such as the *Padmāsana* or Lotus pose, where one sits in a crossed legged yoga pose. This pose aids to sustain and deepen meditation, and calm and relax the mind. It also benefits digestion, and reducing muscle tension of the legs and thighs.

Concerning the lying down poses, he practiced *Dhanurāsana* or the Bow pose, where one lies face down with arms along one's side. One

raises the knees upward, the hands holding the ankles for 5 seconds. After exhaling, one can then return the body down. This is repeated eight times. It helps to increase strengthen muscles of the hip, legs, and spine. It also benefits the digestive systems.

The *Sayana Buddhaāsana* or the Reclining Buddha pose is lying down on the right side, placing the forearm on the floor, and supporting the head with the right hand. The left hand is in line with the hip and bend slightly the knees. Hold the pose 2-3 minutes while breathing in-out softly. It may also be a form of meditation if one observes one’s breathing. This pose helps to increase the strength of muscles of the legs and spine. Additionally, it improves blood circulation and overall bodily balance.<sup>21</sup>

Changing physical movement every hour helps improve strengthen bodily muscles and overall health, which promotes the ability to sustain sitting meditation for long hours. Banyat Dhammasaro had integrated yoga practice and Samatha meditation by practicing breathing control (*prānāyāma*), inhalation, and exhalation in order to establish the mindfulness of breathing which is called *Ānāpanasati* in Buddha teaching. Another meaning is “mindfulness established on an object all time of each breathing in and breathing out.”<sup>22</sup> This method consists of sixteen stages, it is called “*Solasavattuka-ānāpanassati*. or mindfulness of breathing with sixteen bases.”<sup>23</sup> It is explained in the *Ānāpanasati-sutta* of Majjhimanikāya in Pali canon. Physical body movement (*āsana*) is aligned with breathing in and breathing out to improve overall health and to make the efficiency of practicing meditation for long hours. It implies that his practice is the first of four foundations of mindfulness (*Satipaṭṭhāna*), which is called ‘*Kāyānupassanā*’ which is “contemplating the body in the body, out of the entire body, physical and mental.”<sup>24</sup> P. A. Payutto has described *Kāyānupassanā* as “mindfulness as regards the body” which he clarified as follows:

*Ānāpanasati*; a contemplation on breathing in and breathing out,

*Iriyāpatha*; contemplation on all the bodily movement or posture,

*Sampajañña*; clear comprehension, discrimination, circumspection, clear consciousness, awareness.

*Paṭikulamanasikāra*; contemplation on impurity of body.

*Dhātumanasikāra*; contemplation of the four elements; determining of the elements.

*Navasivatika*; contemplation of the dead body.<sup>25</sup>

This integration of the yogic practice of breathing control (*prāṇāyāma*), physical body movement (*āsana*), and Samatha meditation, is in accord with Buddha teaching that is *Kāyānupassanā* which is a part of *Satipaṭṭhāna* or the four foundations of mindfulness. Yogic breathing control (*prāṇāyāma*) accords with the method of *Ānāpanasati* and physical body movement (*āsana*) accords with the method of *Iriyāpatha*.

Integration and synthesis refer to combining practice and knowledge from multiple sources in order to create a new approach. In the synthesis of yoga practice and Samatha meditation, walking and sitting meditation is combined with yoga, and reciting is combined with breathing control.

Luangphor Viriyang stated that practicing meditation is like “eating easily and comfortably without taking time and place into account.” Even if people only meditate a few minutes at a time, they can get great results. He suggested that people “can meditate in any posture, anywhere and at any suitable time”.<sup>29</sup>

**Focus on the body.** Keep the mind focused and awareness on the body such as head, hair, chest, nose, and forehead, etc., during breathing in and breathing out all the time of meditation.

**Focus on the breath.** Close the eyes and deeply breathe in, hold a few seconds, and then give a long breath out. This practice can be done while sitting on the bus, standing pose, laying down, and any comfortable pose in any place.

**Focus on reciting words.** Keep the mind focused on reciting words in the mind; ‘Inhale, Exhale’, or any other suitable words during breathing in and breathing out.

**Focus on reciting the mantra.** Keep the mind focused on reciting words in the mind; ‘Buddho’, ‘Buddho Dhammo Sangho, Buddho Dhammo Sangho, Buddho Dhammo Sangho, or any other suitable mantra during meditation.’<sup>30</sup>

Accordingly, Banyat Dhammasaro stated that “meditation is a timeless practice. We can mediate on pranayama (breathing control) during the act of breathing.”<sup>31</sup> He emphasized that this simple meditation practice can be practiced any place and any time. That is concentration on breathing along with word-counting the breaths, leading to the calming of the mind.

### **The outcome of the synthesis of yoga and Samatha meditation.**

Not only does yoga improve physical health but it also contributes to mental well-being. As the outcome of yoga is the same as Samatha meditation and also similar to Vipassanā. Following S. N. Goenka’s description, Vipassanā meditation or Buddha’s Dhamma, is a universal knowledge which enables everyone to obtain deliverance, by self-observation of physical and mental and by focusing on inhalation and exhalation. This practice can help the people to establish mindfulness on body and breathing. In addition, it allows practitioners to see and to understand nature’s laws of the interconnection of body and mind in order to “dissolve mental impurity, resulting in a balanced mind full of love and compassion.”<sup>41</sup> S. N. Goenka claimed that in the popular perception, yoga is only a type of practice *asānās* and *prānāyāma* to dispose of diseases or a cure for a particular illness. But he stresses that yoga is a highly spiritual knowledge to obtain peace of mind and the wisdom to emancipate people from suffering. As a result, Patañjali’s yoga sutra has been described in the context of its spiritual meaning “the universal truth or omnipresent reality”<sup>42</sup> which everyone can understand the real meaning and the truth of natural laws by personal experience. These truths can lead people to

reach calm mind, happiness, and wisdom. When people have *Samādhi*, the mind develops wisdom (*Pañña*), so they can know the cause of their unhappiness and find the solutions to solve their problems by themselves. It can help release people from suffering. These outcomes are similar to what can be gained in Vipassanā.

According to Banyat Dhammasaro when people regularly practice yoga and meditation, “the defilement of anger, craving, delusion, and jealousy will naturally recede.”<sup>59</sup> Also, positive thinking, compassion, and loving-kindness for others will be increased. People will realize that when they show compassion, and loving-kindness to other people, especially with those who are suffering, it can lead them to increase their happiness. These outcomes bring the benefits for improving the good relationship of people in societies. If the number of yoga practitioners increase, it will help societies by reducing crime, violence, and homicide. It can contribute to peace and happiness.<sup>60</sup>

Yoga is important in different contexts: as a type of exercise, a part of mental rejuvenation, and a practice to develop a spiritual mind. Especially, in terms of the spiritual mind which is the highest value for people to improve peace in mind.

In modern life, yoga is an aspect as a type of exercise. It presents itself through the practice of physical exercise (*asānā*) and breathing exercise (*prāṇāyāma*), which is important for healing. It is significant to help improve hypertension and deducing cholesterol, blood circulation flow, hormone system, nervous system, strengthen and flex muscles, improve balance of the whole of the body system, and so forth. Even though yoga practice seems like an alternative medicine, it must work together in conjunction with conventional medicine.

In terms of mental health, practicing yoga can emphasize improving the capability of the mind to become more energetic, relaxed, calm, peaceful, still, clear from negative thoughts and reach meditation or *Samādhi*. Because when people concentrate on one object with breathing in and breathing out, it is the practice of *prāṇāyāma*. And also focus on the step of feet or body movement or any posture is the practice of *asānā*.

Additionally, yoga helps develop a positive attitude and morality of people, because the harmony of physical health and mental health brings sycg positive changes as good attitude and behavior, feeling of sharing and friendliness to another people. These benefits can help improve the quality of people’s lives –high well-being, and the good relationship in working life, and also reduce suffering (*dukkha*).

In the context of spirituality, yoga is a powerful practice. Because yoga is dynamic meditation, it enables the development of the type of concentration found in Samatha meditation, and becomes a path toward the achievement of *Samādhi*. Nevertheless, when laypeople and religious people have integrated yoga practice and Samatha meditation, it can help to alleviate the physical problems associated with sitting in meditation for long hours and to promote relaxation. This is in addition to improving the quality of mind power to achieve focus and bliss. Furthermore, when people continuously practice yoga, it can bring about personal happiness service to other people. These results are similar to the ones gained by Samatha meditation. Moreover, when people attain *Samādhi*, it can be transfered towards Vipassanā to cultivate wisdom and to see the truth of nature’s laws.

It can be said that yoga is an alternative way for the practitioner to concentrate on body and breathing, *Kāyānupassanā*, in order to make the mind still and stable. This process paves the way for everyone to improve the mind to reach the high stage of Samatha meditation, which is *Samādhi*. Therefore the integration between yoga and Samatha mediation involes practicing yoga together with practicing traditional meditation. So one can combine walking meditation, sitting meditation, breathing control, and reciting together with the practice of yoga. It becomes an enhancement of the ability to practice meditation and acts as a complement to Samatha meditation for both religious people and laypersons in the age which makes so many demands on physical and mental health.

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