

WHAT IS YOGA?

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Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – May 1962; Vol. 49; page 2

In the broadly acknowledged pathways to God, to Peace and Blessedness, yoga is one. But this word yoga has been so freely used that by usage and tradition it has come to carry a wide variety of meanings often quite contrary to what is implied by its use in the religious literature — so much so that today the utterance of the word projects in the minds of the common man pictures quite inconsistent with religious life. On the other hand to those minds that are acquainted with the philosophical lore of India the word yoga invariably brings to the fore the name of Patanjali. For it was he who collected the thoughts that were extant and arranged them into a science. He clearly defined what it meant; codified the instructions as to how to practise it; stressed on the successive stages in its practice and lastly the goal one reached by having recourse to it. But he was by no means the originator of this science or philosophy. He only systematized the thoughts. The thoughts and instructions were already there as far back as the age of the Upanishads. The first regular treatment of this system of philosophy and its practice we come across in the *Svetasvataropanisad*. Yet, in spite of clear indications, in spite of all philosophy and all the scriptures which declare in unambiguous terms as to what is meant by yoga, the human mind has been associating yoga with something that is not religion, that is not yoga. Why?

First of all it must be remembered that man usually tries to follow the path of least resistance. And what is more natural to man than the life of the senses, the life in the gross material world? What is so alluring, and captivating as the phenomena of nature; the beauty of the sunrise, the grandeur of the midday sun when he burns fiercely and makes everyone take shelter inside thatched huts or cool places? What is so refreshing as the cool breeze of the evening when the sun has no more of that power? What is more natural than the entertainments one so cheaply comes across? In short what is more natural than the life of the senses? Most of the human species is satisfied with these things and if at all they exert, it is only to heighten the tempo of these pleasures and extend their duration. All the external sciences deal only with this part of the problem. The scientist wants to get over anxiety by amassing wealth, by procuring food and clothing in ever increasing quantities by subjecting nature to disgorge its secrets to him. Man by his natural bent of mind thus tries to think of everything in terms of utility. If yoga can make him live a hundred years enjoying sound health it is welcome. If it can give him power to rule over others, help him to name, fame and wealth it is not to

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be discarded, otherwise he shall shun it. He has no use for the things which have no material utility.

But this science of yoga deals with the perfection of man, to enable him to commune with the Divine; to make him perfect as 'the Father in heaven is perfect'. Here the object of his experimentation is not outside. It is the mind, ever fleeting and never restrained that he has to deal with. Here the gigantic or microscopic instruments, that man uses in the physical sciences, cannot reach. Here the senses cannot help him, rather the more turbulent the senses, the more stupendous impediments they are in his path. Yoga is a going inward; diving deep into our own minds; finding out the loop-holes through which it seeks to suck in extraneous matter; plugging the loop-holes; throwing out, as it were, the putrefying matter, and cleansing the vessel of the mind to receive the nectar of Divine grace and enlightenment. It is a long process requiring immense patience of not one but several life-times and that is why people are afraid to take it up. Even a warrior like Arjuna cries out in despair that the mind is turbulent and uncontrollable. Hence it is not strange that a large part of the populace avoids the path.

The word yoga in Sanskrit has been used ordinarily in two senses one as concentration (*yuj samadhau*) and secondly as yoking, connecting or uniting (*yujir yoge*). Patanjali and the Upanishads preceding him mostly used it in the former sense. The Bhagavad Gita, however, makes use of it in both these senses.

Patanjali at the very outset defines what yoga is. He says: 'It is the restraining of the mind-stuff from undergoing modifications'. The question now is: Why should one restrain the workings of the mind? To attain peace, to go back to our original form which is Blessedness. What does one do, if one wants to retire to rest? Does one seek the market place or the quiet corner of one's humble cottage? Obviously the latter. Why? because the atmosphere in the market place is not conducive to rest. It seethes with activity and noise, no rest is possible there. Similarly if the mind stuff is seething like a cauldron taking in forms every second how can one have peace? Can a boat sail smoothly on a choppy sea? When a storm rages mountain-high breakers are raised in the ocean; chaos only prevails then. In a mind, disturbed by the storm of passions, disturbed by the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch presented to it by the various senses can there be serenity, can there be peace? The Kathopanishad in a telling manner emphasizes this idea:

'One who has not ceased from wicked actions, one who is not calm and collected, and one whose mind is not tranquilised that one cannot attain this Atman by the mere knowledge of Brahman.¹

Mind is like a wild horse unbroken, untamed. The rider on such a horse if he does not know how to break the horse and is not strong to control it, is sure to be thrown off with the consequent danger to his life and limbs. Swami Vivekananda gives, the mind the analogy of a monkey; 'How hard it is to control the mind! Well has it been compared to the

maddened monkey. There was a monkey, restless by his own nature, as all monkeys are. As if that were not enough some one made him drink freely of wine, so that he became still more restless. Then a scorpion stung him. When a man is stung by a scorpion he jumps about for a whole day; so the poor monkey found his condition worse than ever. To complete his misery a demon entered into him. What language can describe the uncontrollable restlessness of that monkey? The human mind is like that monkey, incessantly active by its own nature; then it becomes drunk with the wine of desire, thus increasing its turbulence. After desire takes possession, comes the sting of the scorpion of jealousy of the success of others, and last of all the demon of pride enters the mind, making it think itself of all importance.² Such a mind the yoga professes to control by a gradual process, rather, if we follow the process of yoga we will be able to control the mind, says the yogin.

What is the process? Patanjali says that *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi* are like the eight limbs of yoga. Yama and niyama are as it were its legs. They are the first to be practised: the moral disciplines like non-killing, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence, and non-receiving which are called yama;³ cultivation of internal and external purity; contentment, austerity, study and worship of God, which are termed niyama⁴. All these efforts are for subduing the mind which always runs riot. Sri Ramakrishna says, 'The upshot of the whole thing is that, no matter what path you follow, yoga is impossible unless the mind becomes quiet. The mind of a yogi is under his control; he is not under the control of the mind.' Sri Krishna exhorts: 'By constant practice and renunciation alone can the mind be controlled.'⁵ Further, Sri Krishna is very definite that for a man of unbridled senses and of a dissipated mind yoga is an impossibility.⁶

We see from the above that the very foundation of spirituality is a moral and pure life in which there is no thought of self-aggrandisement, no thought of acquisition, no thought for one's own self. The efficacy of practising each one of the above mentioned disciplines has been described at great length by Patanjali in his *Yoga sutras* and they have been demonstrated in the life of very many saints and seers, but that is not in the purview of this essay. They only go to prove that yoga is a science which can be demonstrated. But the purpose of yoga is not to prove that it is a science but that it is a science that is to be utilized to reach the Highest, the Supreme.

Simultaneously with the practice of these moral disciplines, yama and niyama, one has to cultivate the other steps like pranayama and pratyahara. A person proceeding on this path meets with wonderful experiences after some time. Concentrating the mind on the nose he would smell wonderful fragrances, concentrating in between the eyebrows, he would see many beautiful sights. This says, Swami Vivekananda, is an indication that the aspirant has just commenced his journey. But he has to discard all these and proceed further. As he

becomes more and more competent to concentrate, his capacity for dharana and dhyana (meditation) develops. A complete metamorphosis, as it were, takes place in the constitution of the aspirant. He begins to see extraordinary visions, and hear voices super-natural. His whole organism becomes well tuned to receive the finer manifestations.

Further on he comes in possession of wonderful powers. But these latter are the pitfalls into which unguided or misguided aspirants fall. They get enamoured of these powers. They think that by obtaining super-human and supernatural powers they have attained the goal. They slip from the path. Their attention is diverted from their declination. But this portends no good. A mountain climber is warned to be watchful of his steps. It is a narrow path that he treads. The scenes that unfold before him are marvellous and enchanting but if he heeds not the warning and proceeds on his path with his eyes diverted towards those wonderful sights and mind absorbed in the contemplation of the beauty he is sure to slip from the path into the bottomless chasm that stands yawning on the sides of the rugged path. Even more careful should one be in this spiritual path, which is sharp like the razor's edge.

Aspirants enamoured of these powers forget the purpose for which they gave up every-thing, the purpose for which they made bonfire of their desires. Or was there some desire still lurking in some inconspicuous corner of the heart? Infatuated with these powers they forget God and crave for material enjoyments, name and fame, the very things which they had discarded as useless and slip from the path and waste their life.

But is he completely lost? Do all his efforts go in vain like a scattered cloud? What happens to such a one who falls from the path even after sincerely seeking it in the beginning? A similar question was asked by Arjuna of Sri Krishna. But Sri Krishna replies, 'Never, does a man of benevolent action come to eternal grief. He, merited by his good acts, lives in higher regions for a long time and then takes birth in a pure and prosperous family or a family of spiritually advanced souls. There coming in contact with the knowledge he had acquired in the previous birth strives harder than before for perfection.' Though no effort is lost, a fall from the path retards greatly one's progress towards the goal.

By making samyama or concentration on any object a yogi can know its secret. The whole nature is in the form of one open book before him. But Patanjali says this does not help the main purpose of the yogi. The temptations to test those powers come. They are the obstacles in his path. One who is able to resist and overcome temptations and persevere in his pursuit that one only can succeed, and none else.

Now in the Bhagavad Gita the word yoga is sometimes used in the sense of karma yoga also. The whole of the Gita is described as a treatise on Brahma Vidya and as a yoga shastra: a scripture that purports to unite the Jivatman with Paramatman or teaches the identity of Atman and Brahman; as such whatever path is described therein is a path towards God, is a yoga. There is nothing incongruous in calling these paths as

yoga. Moreover, though in theory we can create water-tight compartments between Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Yoga, in practice a judicious blend of all these contributes to the healthy growth of the aspirant's nature and progress.

Having seen what Yoga is, we have to examine the credentials of what passes off for yoga in the world today. A physical culturist says he teaches yoga. What are the credentials of this yoga. It can make you strong; make you immune to diseases without a dose of drug. It can make you live long. It can make you really enjoy the material pleasures. In short it can make you concentrate all your energy on the body. But is that the purpose of real yoga? Health of course is imperative for the intensive spiritual sadhana but body is only an instrument and not an end in itself. One who gives all his attention and time to the body, when will he think of God? Therefore mere physical culture cannot be the yoga a religious aspirant desires to practise.

Next let us consider the claim that the possession of the miraculous powers — such as to travel through air, remain invisible, to walk on water and the like — is the criterion of yoga. If a yogi cannot or will not do these acrobatics, he does not impress the common run of men. A conversation some devotees had with Sri Ramakrishna expresses the typical attitude of the worldly-minded and the way they judge the eminence of a spiritual personality. One day the Master was talking with a person who had returned after a pilgrimage to Banaras. The person had met the great sadhu Trilinga Swami. Sri Ramakrishna who had also met him assigned him a very high place among the saints, but in the estimation of the worldly-minded he had lost his exalted state because he could not or would not perform miracles. The pertinent question of a true seeker at this stage should be: do the powers to perform miracles bring us nearer to God? Let us have the testimony of Sri Ramakrishna. Once Sri Ramakrishna asked Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda): 'My child as the result of practising austerities I have got all the supernatural powers, such as assuming the minute dimension of an atom etc. But I have no use for them. I am now thinking of asking the Mother to transfer all these to you. For She has told me that you will have to do much of Her work. If all these powers are imparted to you, you will be able to use them when necessary. What do you say?' Narendra put the counter question to the Master, 'Sir, will they help me in realizing God?' The Master replied, 'They might be of no help to you in that respect, but they stand you in good stead when you engage yourself in God's work after realizing Him.' Even then Narendra's reply was, 'Sir, I have no need of these things. Let me realize God first and then it will be decided whether to accept them or not.' The Master was testing Narendra by tempting him as it were but when the disciple stood the test, the Master was highly pleased. Here, in the categorical assertion of the Master there is no room left for any doubt as to the uselessness of these powers in realizing God. The natural tendency of power is to corrupt man, to degrade him, as such a real

seeker of God will not dabble in these supernatural powers. If at all he possesses them he will use them for the spiritual uplift of humanity and not for self-advertisement nor for personal gains. For him the highest gain is the realization of God, gaining which he considers not anything more covetable and established in which is not moved by the mightiest of calamities.⁷

Another misconception is that the power to communicate with the departed spirits is a highly advanced state in yoga. Apply the yardstick of progress towards God and what do we find? We will find ourselves miles away from the path of true spirituality in the darkest of woods without any path and without any light. It should therefore be, the duty of a true seeker of God to scrupulously and carefully avoid these so-called yogas and cultivate real love and longing for God without being enchanted by magic or mystery-mongering.

Now coming to the practice of Raja yoga there is the danger, says Swami Vivekananda, of a person being mentally deranged or becoming physically invalid if one plunges into it without the guidance of a competent Guru. The aspirant is to be practically under the observation and surveillance of the teacher until he reaches the goal or until the teacher thinks he can safely leave the aspirant to sail ahead under his own power. Such teachers are few and far between, the disciplines enjoined are rigorous and the period long and indefinite. Have we that enduring patience?

If not let us avoid such a path. For what is gained through this yoga can also be achieved with less danger by bhakti also. Sri Ramakrishna unequivocally assures us not from mere hearsay but by actual experience that: 'One may have the same kumbhaka through bhaktiyoga as well. The prana stops functioning through love of God too. In the Kirtan the musician sings, '*Nitai amar mata hati*'⁸. Repeating this, he goes into a spiritual mood and cannot sing the whole sentence. He simply sings, 'Hati! Hati!' When the mood deepens he sings only 'Ha! Ha!' Then his prana stops through ecstasy and kumbhaka follows.'

In reviewing we have: that yoga in the religious sense is not physical culture, is not in seances, is not manifesting of supernatural powers, is not mystery-mongering but the path which leads one to God. That none of these, take us anywhere near God has been testified by the scriptures, by saints, seers and Incarnations time and again. That which unites us with God that alone is yoga, all other things are of no value worth the mention. There are four paths which lead one to God, Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Yoga and each one can choose that which is fitted to his disposition or which the teacher by his intuitive knowledge thinks apt and suited to the aspirant's temperament. The first and last test of yoga therefore is whether it leads us Godward. If not it is not yoga but *bhoga* (enjoyment), or even *roga* (disease) and is to be discarded.

¹ II.24.

² Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.1, p.174, Seventh Edition.

³ Yoga sutras.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gita, VI.35.

⁶ Gita, VI.36.

⁷ Gita, VI.22.

⁸ My Nitai dances like a mad elephant.