

The Meaning and Purpose of Yoga

by Bhole Prabhu *

Like many arts and sciences that are profound, beautiful, and powerful, yoga has suffered from the spiritual poverty of the modern world--it has been trivialized, watered down, or reduced to cliches. The deep and eternal essence of yoga has been misrepresented and packaged for personal profit by clever people. At the hands of some, yoga has been reduced to the status of just another exercise program available on videotape. In other contexts, yoga has been presented as a cult religion, aimed at attracting "devotees." Such a haze of confusion has been created around the clear and pure concept of yoga that it is now necessary to redefine yoga and clarify its meaning and purpose.

Yoga defines itself as a science--that is, as a practical, methodical, and systematic discipline or set of techniques that have the lofty goal of helping human beings to become aware of their deepest nature. The goal of seeking to experience this deepest potential is not part of a religious process, but an experiential science of self-study. Religions seek to define what we should believe, while a practical science such as meditation is based on the concrete experience of those teachers and yogis who have previously used these techniques to experience the deepest Self. Yoga does not contradict or interfere with any religion, and may be practiced by everyone, whether they regard themselves as agnostics or members of a particular faith.

Throughout history, yogic techniques have been practiced in both the East and West, so it would be an error to consider yoga an "Eastern import." In fact, yoga, with its powerful techniques for creating a sense of inner peace, harmony, and clarity of mind, is absolutely relevant to the modern world--both East and West. Given the increasing pace and conflict present in modern life, with all its resulting stress, one could say that

yoga has become an essential tool for survival, as well as for expanding the creativity and joy of our lives.

THE LIVING TRADITION

Although yoga does not "belong" to the East, it is easiest to trace its roots there, because cultural change has not obscured the origins of the science, and an ongoing tradition of yoga has continued to the present day. No one person "invented" yoga--yoga is a living tradition, a set of practices that dates back for centuries. These practices were codified by a scholar and teacher named Patanjali in The Yoga Sutras, written about the second century B.C.

The most important teaching of yoga has to do with our nature as human beings. It states that our "true nature" goes far beyond the limits of the human mind and personality--that instead, our human potential is infinite and transcends our individual minds and our sense of self. The very word "yoga" makes reference to this. The root, "yuj" (meaning "unity" or "yoke"), indicates that the purpose of yoga is to unite ourselves with our highest nature. This re-integration is accomplished through the practices of the various yoga disciplines. Until this re-integration takes place, we identify ourselves with our limitations--the limitations of the body, mind, and senses. Thus we feel incomplete and limited, and are subject to feelings of sorrow, insecurity, fear, and separation, because we have separated ourselves from the experience of the whole.

In the modern world we have become quite successful in our external achievements--we have created powerful technologies and a variety of products, we are obsessed with accumulating power, wealth, property and objects--and yet we have not been able to create either individual or social peace, wisdom, or happiness. We have only to look around and see the destructiveness of our weapons, the emptiness of our pleasures and entertainments, the misuse of our material and personal resources, the disparities between rich and poor, and above all, the loneliness and violence of our modern world. We see that amid all our success in the external world, we have accomplished little of

lasting value. These problems will not be solved through new technological developments. Instead, the resolution to these human problems will come only when we discover within ourselves that for which all of mankind is searching--inner peace, tranquility, and wisdom. This attainment is the goal of yoga, for yoga is the practical science intended to help human beings become aware of their ultimate nature.

AN ASCENT INTO PURITY

The process of yoga is an ascent into the purity of the absolute perfection that is the essential state of all human beings. This goal requires the removal of our enveloping personal impurities, the stilling of our lower feelings and thoughts, and the establishment of a state of inner balance and harmony. All the methods of yoga are based on the perfection of our personalities and may help to create a new world order.

In the beginning of our work, the greatest problem we experience is our inherent restlessness of mind. Mind, by its very nature, is outgoing and unsteady. The highest state of meditation, however, requires a calm, serene, one-pointed mind, free from negative emotions and the distractions created by cravings, obsessions, and desires. To reach the subtler levels of consciousness and awareness, we need willpower, clarity of mind, and the ability to consciously direct the mind towards our goal. This is possible only when we turn away from preoccupation with external acquisition and seek to stop all inharmonious or negative mental processes. To achieve this, we do not need to give up our homes and society and retire to a monastery. Instead, we can achieve a state of peace, harmony, and contentment in our daily meditation, and thus, go on carrying out our life's duties and activities with the love and devotion that emerges from our meditative experience.

For those who want to follow the path of yoga towards peace and evolution, there are a few prerequisites. We need good health, a calm mind, sincerity, and a burning desire to rise above our human imperfections. Our health is maintained by a simple and well-regulated diet, adequate sleep, some physical exercise, and relaxation. Imbalance or

excesses in food, exercise, sleep, or our personal relationships produce physical and emotional disruptions that disturb the practice of yoga and meditation.

If the aspects of our daily lives are well balanced, then certainly we can make progress in yoga in the modern world. Regardless of where we live or what we do, we can create a life conducive to yoga.

PATHS TO THE SUMMIT

As we indicated earlier, there is much confusion about exactly what yoga is, especially since there seem to be so many approaches, all described by the name "yoga." A mountain climber may take a variety of routes to reach the top of a mountain. From the plain at the base of the mountain, all these paths seem distinct and different, but from the mountain summit, the view is always the same! The same is true of the seeming diversity of the yogic paths. These different paths are not mutually exclusive or conflicting, but are intended to accommodate the various inclinations, personalities, and temperaments of individual students, and yet they all have the same goal. These various paths of yoga include:

1) Hatha yoga, which deals mostly with body and breathing exercises that help the student to become aware of his or her internal states. Hatha yoga exercises help to make the body a healthy and strong resource for the student.

2) Karma yoga, which means "the yoga of action." This path teaches us to do our own duties in life skillfully and selflessly, dedicating the results of our actions to humanity. Practicing this aspect of yoga helps us to live unselfishly and successfully in the world without being burdened or distressed.

3) Jnana yoga is the path of knowledge and wisdom. This path involves intense mental discipline. Knowledge dawns as we learn to discriminate between the real and the unreal, between the transient and the everlasting, between the finite and the infinite.

This path is meant for only a fortunate few, who are aware of the higher and subtler realities of life.

4) Bhakti yoga is the yoga of devotion. This path is the way of love and devotion. It is the path of self-surrender, of devoting and dedicating all human resources to attaining the ultimate reality.

5) Kundalini yoga is a highly technical science. The guidance of a competent teacher is required to learn methods for awakening the serpent-like vital force that remains dormant and asleep in every human body.

6) Mantra yoga, which involves meditation and the use of certain sounds called "mantras," which are traditionally transmitted to the student, and are used as objects of concentration. Mantras help the student in self-purification, concentration, and meditation. These mantras were discovered in deep meditation by highly advanced sages and teachers.

Finally, there is raja yoga, the "royal path" which is very scientific and thorough. By following this path methodically, we learn to refine our desires, emotions, and thoughts, as well as the subtle impressions and thoughts that lie dormant in the unconscious mind. Raja yoga helps us to experience the inner reality by using an eight-runged ladder. The ultimate goal is for the aspirant to attain the eighth rung, samadhi.

THE ROYAL PATH

Raja yoga encompasses teachings from all the different paths. Because of its variety it can be practiced by people of many backgrounds and temperaments. It involves all three dimensions of human interaction-- physical, mental, and spiritual. Through this path, we achieve balance and harmony of all three levels and then attain full realization of the Self.

Raja yoga is a scientific discipline that does not impose unquestioning faith, but encourages healthy examination. Certain practices are prescribed and the benefits derived from them are described so that this path can be scientifically verified by anyone who experiments with the methods. Because of this, raja yoga is ideally suited to the modern world, in which scientific skepticism is so prominent.

Raja yoga is also called astanga yoga, or "the eight-fold path," because its eight steps create an orderly process of self- transformation beginning on the level of the physical body, and eventually involving the subtler levels of life. The eight steps are yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi.

EXTERNAL PRACTICES

The first four rungs or steps--yama, niyama, asana, and pranayama, comprise the path of hatha yoga, which is preparatory to the last four stages of raja yoga.

Yama and niyama are ten commitments of attitude and behavior. One set of disciplines (niyama) is meant to improve the human personality and the other (yama) is meant to guide our relationships and interactions with other beings in the world. Thus yoga is an education for both internal and external growth.

The five yamas, or restraints, are nonviolence, truthfulness, nonstealing, sensual moderation, and non- possessiveness. Their practice leads to changes in behavior and emotions, in which all negative emotions are replaced by positive ones. The five niyamas, or observances, are cleanliness (both external and internal), contentment, practices which bring about perfection of body and senses (tapas), study of the scriptures, and surrender to the ultimate reality. The niyamas lead to the control of our behavior and eventually are extremely positive factors in developing the personality.

In the beginning we should not be discouraged by the challenge of these first two steps. For example, even before we have succeeded in developing the trait of

nonviolence completely, we will see increasing peace in our lives and meditation as a result of attempting to practice this yama.

Usually, when hatha yoga is taught in the modern world, only asanas (physical postures) and certain breathing practices are taught. Yama and niyama often are ignored. Because of this, hatha yoga has become somewhat superficial, sometimes emphasizing only physical beauty or egoism about skill and strength in postures. Certainly asanas and breathing exercises create physical health and harmony, but only when our minds are free from violent emotions can we achieve a calm, creative, and tranquil mental state.

Actually, there are two types of asanas--meditative postures and postures that ensure physical well-being. A stable meditative posture helps us create a serene breath and calm mind. A good meditative posture should be comfortable and stable, ensuring that the head, neck, and trunk are erect and in a straight line. If the body is uncomfortable, it makes the mind agitated and distracted. The second kind of postures are practiced to perfect the body, making it limber and free from disease. These postures stimulate specific muscles and nerves and have very beneficial effects.

The fourth step of raja yoga is pranayama. Prana is the vital energy that sustains body and mind. The grossest manifestation of prana is the breath, so pranayama is also called the "science of breath." These exercises lead to calming and concentration.

INTERNAL PRACTICES

The four steps of hatha yoga prepare the student for the four internal practices of raja yoga. These internal practices are pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi.

The fifth step of raja yoga is pratyahara or withdrawal and control of the senses. While we are awake, the mind becomes involved with the events, experiences, and objects of the external world through the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell.

The mind constantly gathers sensations from the external world through these senses

and our mind reacts to them. To attain inner calmness, the student of yoga will want to develop the ability to voluntarily remove the distractions of the world outside. This is not a physical process but a voluntary, mental process of letting go of our involvement with external sensations.

Our sensory impressions distract the mind when we want it to become aware of serenity within. Thus, it is useful to learn dharana, or concentration, the sixth step in raja yoga. In concentration, the scattered power of the mind is coordinated and focused on an object of concentration through continued voluntary attention. This voluntary attention uses a conscious effort of the will, and it is developed through consistent practice. Through concentration, a scattered, weak mind is focused and made more powerful.

The seventh step in raja yoga is dhyana, or meditation. Meditation is the result of continued, unbroken concentration. Concentration makes the mind one-pointed, calm, and serene. Meditation then expands the one-pointed mind to the superconscious state. Meditation is the uninterrupted flow of the mind toward one object or concept. When the mind expands beyond conscious and subconscious levels and assumes this superconscious flow, then intuitive knowledge dawns. All the methods of yoga prepare us to eventually reach this stage of meditation and thus attain peace, perfection, and tranquility.

In our daily lives, meditation can be very helpful in eliminating many physical and psychological problems. A significant amount of the disease we experience is actually either directly or indirectly the result of conflicts, repression, or emotional distress arising in the conscious or unconscious mind. Meditation helps us to become aware of these conflicts and to resolve them, establishing tranquility and peace. In this way, meditation becomes a powerful resource for facing the challenges of daily life.

If we really consider how we learn in the modern world, we realize that despite all our emphasis on education, our education is one-sided and shallow. We may learn to

memorize equations and facts, but we do not really learn to understand and develop our own inner life. Our minds remain scattered and our emotions persist as negative, conflicting forces. We are able to use only a small portion of our mental abilities, because we are preoccupied with confusion, fear, and inner conflict. Meditation helps us to overcome these limitations; it helps us to become aware of the subtler and more positive powers within. In gaining this awareness, we become creative and dynamic. Abilities such as intuition, which many consider unusual or rare, are actually within the potential of all human beings who meditate. Such gifts are available to those who make contact with the deeper aspects within themselves.

Prolonged and intense meditation leads to the last step of raja yoga-- the state of samadhi, the superconscious state. In this state we become one with the higher Self and transcend all imperfections and limitations. The state of samadhi is the fourth state of consciousness, which transcends the three normal states of waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep.

A person who attains samadhi becomes a gift to his or her society. If humanity is ever to achieve a more evolved civilization, it will be possible only because of our growth and evolution as human beings. A person who is established in samadhi lives his or her whole life as a spontaneous expression of the unhindered flow of supreme consciousness. This superconscious level is our human essence; it is universal and transcends all the divisions of culture, creed, gender or age. When we become aware of this state within, our whole life is transformed. When we transform ourselves and experience serenity, peace, and freedom, we also transform our societies and all of human civilization. This awareness of the infinite consciousness is the practical and real goal of yoga.

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* Bhole Prabhu lived in the Himalayas, and was a yogi, poet, and philosopher renowned as an original thinker.

This (above) site is devoted to presenting the ancient Self-Realization path of the Tradition of the Himalayan masters in simple, understandable and beneficial ways, while not compromising quality or depth. The goal of our sadhana or practices is the highest Joy that comes from the Realization in direct experience of the center of consciousness, the Self, the Atman or Purusha, which is one and the same with the Absolute Reality. This Self-Realization comes through Yoga meditation of the Yoga Sutras, the contemplative insight of Advaita Vedanta, and the intense devotion of Samaya Sri Vidya Tantra, the three of which complement one another like fingers on a hand. We employ the classical approaches of Raja, Jnana, Karma, and Bhakti Yoga, as well as Hatha, Kriya, Kundalini, Laya, Mantra, Nada, Siddha, and Tantra Yoga. Meditation, contemplation, mantra and prayer finally converge into a unified force directed towards the final stage, piercing the pearl of wisdom called bindu, leading to the Absolute.