

Excerpts from Light on Astanga Yoga

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Yoga is as old as civilisation. *Brahma*, the creator of the world, created yoga and therefore the world and yoga came into existence together. It has been known to yogis since time immemorial. The Vedic text *Pancharatra* declares,

Hiranya garbha yogasya prokta nanyah puratanah

Brahma, the creator, is the founder of yoga. Yoga is a divine subject given by a divine being, the creator himself. It is very interesting to see how yoga was visualised by our ancestral sadhakas, and practitioners.

The word yoga is derived from the *Sanskrit* root-word 'yuj' meaning to bind, join, attach and yoke. Yoga means to concentrate one's attention or direct one's energy in search of the Ultimate Truth. It also means union or communion, the true union of one's will with the will of God. Yoga is a complete science having the firm foundation of Philosophy and Art.

Each science has a clear and a distinct definition, classifying its scope, aims and its utilities. Similarly, yoga has its definition, its scope, its subject matter and aim. But all these things happen only when the science has reached its full development. No definition on any subject or science can be pre-decided or pre-determined. Chemistry was not defined right at its beginning when it was discovered. As the picture of chemistry began to get refined by the scientists, they were able to give a definition of chemistry. Now, we read chemistry and are able to arrive at its definition immediately. We do this because what had been unknown is made known. But when we see the full history of science, we realise how long it took for that unknown to become known.

Yoga has not been an exception. Lord *Brahma* certainly did not hand over a fully refined, complete yogic science straight away to human beings. It was discovered by the *rsis*, the *munis*

and yogis in order to find out the truth. Though it was *Brahma's* creation, it was the yogis' discovery. Lord *Brahma* did create everything, but left it to mankind to search and research, to discover and rediscover, to invent and find the subtlest and finest points in yoga.

Man is full of desires, hopes, temptations and attachments. Our ancestors realised that these desires and attachments are never-ending. The more one tries to fulfil and satisfy the desires, the more momentum they gather, until they become like a huge tidal wave.

The ocean's waves make the sand wet and at the same time they have the potential to draw man completely under, or wash away the cities. The *rsis*, *munis* and *yogis*; being very sensitive, could see people getting drawn into the great ocean of desire – *vasana*. They could see the need for freedom from desires. They felt the need for a solution, for a light which could save lives from being drawn into the ocean of desires. They realised that if one can get drawn or pulled into the ocean of desires there must be a possibility of saving one from getting drawn in or a way to be pulled out.

The Definitions of Yoga

It was with this need to save human beings from the ocean of desires that yoga was discovered. The light of yoga was uncovered. They did not find its definition at first. That came later, after the subject matter was discovered and the method had been practised and scrutinised. Therefore, we have to look back over its history, to trace yoga's origins and definitions.

Some of the early definitions can be found in the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Aranyakas*, *Samhitas* and *Yoga Sutras*, as well as in the *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita*. When we see these definitions and reflect on them, we realise how the definitions of yoga changed in accordance with the needs of the society and the ways as understood by the

sadhakas. As the needs changed, the capacity of man's intelligence changed and the definition also changed. Let us look at these changes.

The *Ahimbudhnya Samhita* gives a clear and complete definition of yoga,

Samyoga yoga ityukto jivatma paramatmanah

It explains that yoga is the union between the individual soul and the Universal Soul. At the time of the *Vedas* and *Samhitas* needs were less and greed was rare. The intelligence of human beings had reached a culmination point. The *sadhakas* were mature, their religiosity in *sadhana* was strong and consequently they could think at the level of the soul. Therefore, in the *Ahimbudhnya Samhita* we read that yoga is a union between *jivatman* - the individual soul and *paramatman* - the Universal Soul. In fact, the *Ahimbudhnya Samhita* has its origin in *Pancaratra* - *panca* = five, *ratra* = nights. It is said that Lord *Narayana* taught spiritual knowledge as well as Yoga to *nitya suris* - eternal souls, for five days and five nights, hence the word - *Pancaratra*.

Later, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord *Krsna* realised that the intellectual capacity of the yoga practitioner, the *sadhaka*, had lessened from what it had been at the time of the *Vedas*. Naturally, He had to soften the path and make it understandable. Lord *Krsna* showing His "mother's heart" towards His devotees, defined yoga on two levels: *jnana* and *karma* - knowledge and action. He defined,

Samattvam yoga ucchyate

Equanimity is yoga
and

Yogah karmasu kausalam

yoga is skillfulness in action

Let us look at the first one: equanimity as yoga. This equanimity is not just external, to show off. This equanimity has to come from within, from the heart. There should be a thorough understanding between the intelligence of the soul and the intelligence of the consciousness. The soul and all its vehicles, such as *citta* - consciousness, *buddhi* - intelligence, *manas* - mind, *ahamkara* - ego, *karmendriyas* - organs of action and *janendriyas* - senses of perception, have to be unified and integrated so that one realises the soul. When one realises the soul, then one knows that the soul in everyone is the same and consequently one treats everyone with equanimity. The practitioner

who is a *jnani* experiences this sense of equanimity.

Now, let us look at the second one: yoga is skillfulness in action. What is a skillful action? It is an action that is performed with skillful intelligence. Every action yields fruit. One cannot perform any action purposelessly without there being some fruits or results. No one does action without expecting or receiving its fruit. Lord *Krsna* is not saying to do the action aimlessly. He is saying that it is the selfish motive behind the action that one has to avoid. The moment selfishness interferes, the action is tainted. If the good purpose behind the action vanishes, then the work undertaken and scope for action gets distorted. So Lord *Krsna* says that one should not expect or accept any reward or fruit of one's actions. The action undoubtedly ends with fruits. Your responsibility is to remove the 'selfish' aspect in any action. Then you realise that, that action becomes skillful and vast in its scope.

It is impossible to do any action without an aim, but it is possible to do it without ambition. Aim and ambition are not the same. Aim must be for the universal good, for universal use and utility, but ambition always has a selfish motive and a selfish end. The desires - *vasanas* - are eternal in us. Ambitions are the sprouts of *vasana*. It is the *vasanas* that lead us to work with ambition. Work done with ambition is *sakama karma*. Work that is performed abandoning the fruits of action or done desirelessly and dispassionately, without a tinge of selfishness is *niskama karma*. Lord *Krsna* prefaced his teaching by explaining *niskama karma* - action without the expectation of fruits. He recommends *kausala karma* or skillful action to feel what *niskama karma* is.

The word *kausala* or *kausalam* has its projection in *abhyasa* and *vairagya* (see table No.13). *Abhyasa* means just practice and *vairagya* means desireless practice. The action or *karma* indicates *abhyasa*. Lord *Krsna* is not discarding *karma*. He wants everyone to do *karma* and that is *abhyasa*. However, the *abhyasa* has to be done with *vairagya*. *Vairagya* is hidden in the word *kausalam*. Lord *Krsna* does not want *vairagya* to be expressed or exhibited. He wants the *sadhaka* to do the *karma* with skillful application of consciousness, so that the action is untainted by the ego, the intelligence and the mind. He says, "Let not the mind hanker after the fruits. Let not the intelligence calculate the gains. Let not the ego take pride in success or gain."

The *Ahimbudhnya Samhita* defines yoga in terms of devotion - *bhakti*. Being a *samyoga yoga*, it is advocated as the union between the individual soul and the Universal Soul. The *Bhagavad Gita* defines yoga as,

Samattvam yoga ucchyate
Equanimity and
Yogah karmasu kausalam
Skillfulness in action

Now, let us see how Patanjali defines yoga. In his time, he had to change the definition to codify the subject of yoga, not only with scientific analysis but also with precise, practical means. Perhaps he was able to see the lack of understanding and ignorance in people regarding the very principal - The Soul. He made a distinction between *citta* and *cit*. *Citta* is consciousness, *cit* is soul. A common man treats *cit* and *citta* as one, the soul and consciousness as one. However, without disciplining the *citta*, the *cit* cannot be distinguished from the *citta*. So, Patanjali defines yoga at two levels. Firstly, as *anusasanam* - yoga as a discipline and secondly as *citta vrtti nirodha* - restraint of mental fluctuations and modifications. These two sutras, cover the entire gamut of the yogic

Atha yoganusasanam
and
Yogah citta vrtti nirodhah

philosophy of Patanjali - firstly the discipline of yourself and finally the restraint on yourself. Yogic philosophy is a practical philosophy. It is not a matter to be described, discussed or debated. It is a subject to be experienced. If we read these first two sutras carefully, we see that *abhyasa* and *vairagya* are hidden in them. "*Atha yoganusasanam*" - means discipline of yoga and "*Yogah citta vrtti nirodhah*" - means cessation or restraint or renunciation of the movement of consciousness. The former indicates *abhyasa* - practice - and the latter indicates *vairagya* - renunciation or dispassion.

Yoga philosophy is purely a practical subject which revolves around *abhyasa* and *vairagya*. If *abhyasa* is the positive current of the consciousness, then *vairagya* is its negative current. Patanjali blends *abhyasa* and *vairagya* in a very practical way.

We in the modern age have to look at this practical subject from a different angle. *Abhyasa* - practice and *vairagya* - desirelessness are too heavy to bear for the modern *sadhakas*, who want to be *sadhakas* without doing any *sadhana*. People take pride in saying that they are practitioners of yoga though their practice may be at a zero level. It is our tendency to take pride in whatever little we do. That is the psychology of modern mind. We have interest but we are not intense. To do anything we have to be tempted.

We need an incentive. Therefore, I am adding a little more to these definitions. Let me put it as,

Yogah dukkhavrtti nirodhah
Yoga is restraint of the sorrows of *citta*

We all have pains, pinches, sorrows and hurts. We all have depression and dejection at sometime or other. We may hide inside and we may not like to express these externally, but all these are present in us and all of us want to get rid of our sorrows. Therefore, we need an incentive, a temptation to practise yoga in order to eradicate the sorrows. Many people have a misunderstanding or misconception regarding the practice of yoga. They think that yoga is to get practised only when they suffer from disease. Whenever one claims that one is practising yoga, the question commonly asked is, "Why, what's wrong with you, are you not keeping well?" That is how yoga has become negatively popular. Many believe that yoga is practised only by those who are sick or those who need to improve their health. I cannot blame people for this. It is through sickness, illness, physical and mental disease that a person develops sensitivity to sorrows and pains. These sorrows and pains force one to find a way to be rid of the problems and tempt one to take to yogic practices. Though the incentive might be trifling and negligible, it is not of minor importance.

There is a hidden cause behind disease, behind health problems, apart from the causes of disease claimed by medical science. Patanjali invites our attention to look at the root cause of disease. The root cause of disease is within us. It is hidden in our own behaviour, our own habits, our character, our nature, our mental attitude, whether good or bad, right or wrong. Take for example, chocolate. We like chocolate, we eat and cherish it, but we do not know when it leaves an imprint on our liver, making it sluggish, causing diabetes. Our own behaviour and character may add fuel to diabetes. It is only when we become aware of the danger of disease that we embrace yoga.

Lord Patanjali knew this weakness and tendency. He saw that man searches the way only when he has problems. Until problems and troubles arise, the will of man does not surface in the mind to find a way or a solution. Problems such as fear of disease, fear of suffering, fear of old age and the fear of death are there in every human being. Therefore, he says,

Heyam dukham anagatam
The sorrows which are yet to come can be avoided

He assures us; promises us; that the pains which are yet to come, the problems which are in store for the future, the diseases which are waiting to arise, can be avoided and must be prevented. The sorrows and agonies can be kept away with the practice of yoga.

Lord Krsna too, smoothes the path of yoga with the following advice, He says,

*Yuktahara vibharasya yuktacestasya karmasu
Yukta svapnavabodhasya yogo bhavati dukkhabha*

The conquest of sorrow is possible, provided man regulates his diet, recreation of mind, performance of actions, sleep and wakefulness. Yoga helps one to get rid of the sorrows. If one regulates and balances life, the practice won't be so difficult. The path of yoga becomes smoother and easier to cross if one disciplines oneself. The path is not only open, but made smooth to practise for the sufferer.

Undoubtedly we are all keen to get rid of sorrow. Just analysing sorrow does not eradicate sorrow. You have to act for that. You may find through analysis the root cause of sorrow hidden in the root mind as samskaras. Samskara is a very meaningful word, which means to culture oneself. Though we culture ourselves with good thoughts, good words and good behaviour, the samskaras of bad thoughts and wrong behaviour leave imprints behind in the form of impressions. The positive thoughts and behaviour leave positive impressions; negative or wrong thoughts leave negative impressions.

If the heart is to be cleansed and purified, a beginning has to be made by culturing the mind and culturing the consciousness. The process of culturing has two facets. One is to cultivate new samskaras which help to cleanse one's body, senses, mind, intellect, ego and consciousness. The other is to eradicate the old, unwanted and wrong samskaras.

However, the latent and hidden impressions which leave their imprints deep in the heart, deep in the core of the consciousness, cannot be washed off easily. These hidden impressions called vasanas - desires - are unending, continuous and inexhaustive. They are stored and imprinted in the memory from time immemorial. These imprints are what form our tendencies. The desires leave the imprints behind and the imprints ignite the desires again. This is how the cycle continues. If the imprints are the seeds, the desires are in the form of the tree. From every seed the tree grows and the tree gives seeds again. This is how the chain of tendencies continues.

Our inner tendencies cannot be changed easily. They haunt us, not only in this life, but also in successive lives. Yoga is the only method that heals the wounds created by wrong or negative samskaras in the heart. It minimises the imprints of memories and desires and finally eradicates them. Yoga is the only way to cultivate new and positive imprints, so that the onslaught of desire is lessened. Its practice cultivates new impressions which are corrective and conducive to taking one towards the very core of the being. These are called yogic - samskaras. The yogic- samskaras free one from the sorrows and also eradicate those samskaras which are antagonistic to the yogic - samskaras. Finally, a time comes where all samskaras have to be restrained. Patanjali says in the first chapter, that one has to restrain not only the imprints which are antagonistic, but also those that are conducive to yogic practice.

One has to remove the opposing tendencies by cultivating suitable tendencies and finally, restrain all the tendencies. Yoga is a process of cleansing and eradicating the tendencies and imprints. This gives us one more definition,

Yogah samskaravrtti nirodhah

Yoga restrains the modifications of the samskaras

The yogic path is such that the imprints are eradicated one by one with the new light of wisdom called *rtambhara prajna*. Finally, even this wisdom is relinquished. The weapon is first used to destroy and after the destruction the weapon is also relinquished. Similarly, the ultimate samskara that is *rtambhara prajna*, is used as a weapon to destroy the last residue of the impressions, finally the impression of *rtambhara prajna* is also left behind.

Rtambhara is a very beautiful, poetic word. The word indicates its profound weight and depth. It cannot be translated in a single word. *Rtambhara* means a truth-bearing state. It is a matured state of the unalloyed wisdom of the intellect. *Prajna* means intelligent awareness. *Rtambhara prajna* is the highest peak of intelligence. High on the icy peak of the Everest of wisdom, there remains nothing except the light of the Soul. That is why I say,

Yogah samskaravrtti nirodhah

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Editors Note: Diacritical marks in the original text have been omitted.

