

## The Meaning of Yoga

The popularity of *Yoga* is on the rise. The Government of India has also joined the bandwagon of promoting *Yoga*. But all that seems to be based on a grave misconception. The term and the concept were born in India thousands of years ago. Krishna and the Buddha were among the highest *Yogis*. We get the core ideas of *Yoga* from their teachings. But the popular connotation of the word has now become confined to mean what should actually be called *yogasana* or yogic exercise. Originally the purpose of *yogasana* was also spiritual in the main – to keep the body and particularly its nervous system in order, so as to enable ourselves to control and concentrate the mind. The inordinate and almost exclusive thrust upon physical fitness and stress management through *yogasana* was first popularized in the West and fits well with *Hatha Yoga*. Yogic exercises are adopted chiefly from *Hatha Yoga*, and Sri Ramakrishna advised spiritual seekers to avoid too much of such stuff, as they have the potential to distract us from the path of spirituality.

Young people should build their body properly, no doubt of that. Swami Vivekananda suggested, ‘Body and mind must run parallel.’ A strong body alone can hold a strong mind. Without a strong body it is difficult to control the mind and to stem the reactions that may arise when one begins to practise mind control seriously. And *yogasana* is certainly one of the ways one may adopt. Its efficacy in the prevention and treatment of various medical problems is also not in question. But one should have a sense of proportion, understand the meaning and import of things, and use one’s ability to discriminate between apparently similar things. Everything must be put in its right place. We should examine whether our inclination is for simple, strength-giving things, or for bombastic terms, or for something eerie and mysterious.

A similar confusing idea is *Transcendental Meditation*, used as a technique for stress management. It is basically repetition of a *mantra*. It is not meditation or *dhyana*, as traditionally understood. Rather it may be something akin to *japa*, though differing in purpose. The purpose of *japa* is also strictly spiritual.

Spirituality is the manifestation of the inner man, the divinity within, the power and purity and love that reside in the depth of all beings. So long as our consciousness is overly engaged in the physical aspect of our being, we remain materialists. The more we forget the physical aspect, the more we manifest our inner divinity. Swami Vivekananda held that the best indication of good health is complete forgetfulness of the body.

The *Yoga Aphorisms* of Patanjali are clearly meant for spiritual realization. *Asana* or sitting posture for meditation and *pranayama* or control of internal forces with the aid of breath control are but two steps out of eight, the goal being to reach the superconscious state of mind, called *Samadhi*. The first two steps advised by Patanjali are, however, the absolute prerequisites for progress in this direction. They are *Yama* and *Niyama*. *Yama* stands for five universal principles for controlling the mind: Non-injury, truth, non-stealing, continence, and non-receiving of gifts. *Niyama* comprises of five practices: Cleanliness (external and internal), contentment, hardship, repeated thinking or studying great ideas for character-building, and devotion to God. Without making some progress in these, if one tries to go for *pranayama*, it will not work the right way.

*Yoga*, as discussed by Patanjali, is also called *Raja Yoga*. It is the science of mind control, not of breath control, nor of physical exercise. To control the mind, the internal forces, called *the vital forces* or *prana*, are to be controlled. And to control *prana*, it is necessary to control the nervous system. As there is no direct way to control the nervous system, Patanjali suggests the method of breath control as an external tool. So, that is the

purpose. Swami Vivekananda cautioned us against practising *pranayama*, beyond a few simple ones, before achieving a considerable degree of control in our daily life and without the able guidance of a teacher of selfless, spotless character. Because it is a powerful tool, and even a little wrong use may damage our system seriously. *Pranayama* is not a necessary step for character building or for spiritual realization. It may be suggested here that deep, rhythmic breathing is enough for us while practising a little mental concentration.

There are many other methods of self-realization, which do not involve the risk that is in *pranayama*; and each is called a *Yoga*. Swami Vivekananda explains that man has four major tools in his hand: intellect, emotion, activity, and psychic control. Some people are more inclined to use their intellect, some their emotion, and so on. He taught us to consciously use one or more or all of these to express our inner potentials. But in his view the perfect character should have all the four elements harmoniously combined. When intellect is used for this purpose of expressing the inner potential, it is called *Jnana Yoga*. When the emotion of love is directed to this purpose, it is *Bhakti Yoga*. If one is trying to be pure through selfless work, it is *Karma Yoga*, and if through mind control and mental concentration, it is *Raja Yoga*.

In the Gita, sometimes the word, *Yoga*, means *Karma Yoga*. But the highest meaning is constant communion with the real Self. The inner man, the Self or the *Atman*, is one and not many. So, my Self is the same as another person's Self. When one realizes the Self within in deep meditation, it is called *jnana*. Sri Ramakrishna said, when this Self is seen in everybody and in everything even in a normal state of consciousness, it is called *vijnana*. He said, *vijnana* is higher than *jnana*. Since the *Vijnani* sees the same Self in all, he realizes his oneness with all and feels others' joys and sufferings as his own. This state belongs to the highest *Yogi*, says Sri Krishna in the *Gita*:

*Ātmaupamyena sarvatra samam pashyati yo 'rjuna/  
Sukham vā yadi vā dukham sa yogi paramo matah.*

– O Arjuna! In my view that *Yogi* is the best, who, out of a sense of identity with others on account of the perception of the same Self in all, feels their joy and suffering as his own.

Swami Vivekananda advised us to apply this idea on the ordinary plane thus: 'Before we can crawl half a mile, we want to cross the ocean like Hanumān! It cannot be. Everyone going to be a *Yogi*, everyone going to meditate! It cannot be. The whole day mixing with the world with *Karma Kānda*, and in the evening sitting down and blowing through your nose! Is it so easy? Should *Rishis* come flying through the air, because you have blown three times through the nose? Is it a joke? It is all nonsense. What is needed is *Chittashuddhi*, purification of the heart. And how does that come? The first of all worship is the worship of the *Virat* — of those all around us. Worship It.'