

What Is Yoga?

Part One by Swami Jyotirmayananda

When Did Yoga Begin?

When you talk about the historicity of things, it is very difficult to ascertain a historical date for the beginning of yogic movement. Certainly, yoga was practiced much before Buddha, who existed nearly six centuries before Christ; therefore, yoga is very ancient. However, it is not the antiquity of yoga that lends authenticity to its teachings and philosophy, but its time proven techniques of self-control and spiritual perfection that give it an abiding meaning and significance.

When you speak about the historicity of things, you are simply referring to people who have discovered them at a particular period of time. For instance, Newton discovered the laws of gravitation in his time; so we say that he is the discoverer of this law. But, the law did not start with him. Much in the same way, the mystic laws of self-advancement, spiritual unfoldment, and Divine Realization did not start with a human being who was simply a discoverer of certain spiritual laws.

Therefore, who was the first discoverer of yoga, the first exponent of its philosophy, and when was it discovered? — these questions are of little importance for an aspirant of yoga who seeks to attain inner spiritual unfoldment and perfection. It is enough to understand that yoga has existed through a long course of time and has proven itself again and again to be the most powerful movement in nourishing the religions of the world and helping mankind to discover the essential unity of life.

It is reasonable to understand that the yogic atmosphere that was generated by Buddha must have been imbibed by Jesus. The Buddhistic teachings of nonviolence and simplicity echo in the Sermon of the Mount given by Lord Jesus. All religions, at their depth, speak of the same Divine Reality; they merely use different figurative expressions in doing so. Thus, you do not have to become a Hindu, or a Christian, or a Mohammedan to be saved from the bitterness of the world process; you need only to dive deep into your own faith and religion to discover that all religions are basically one and the same.

Is Yoga a Religion or a Philosophy?

Yoga is neither a religion nor a philosophy according to the general understanding of those terms. Yoga is not a religion from the point of view of a limited faith and belief. One can belong to any religion and yet be an adherent of yoga.

The literal implication of the term “religion” is re-union with God. Somehow people have become separated from the Divine Self, and religion helps to link them once again to that Divinity. Since yoga refers to that spiritual process of uniting yourself with what you are essentially, it can be considered a universal religion — the goal of which is Self-realization.

In the same way, yoga is not a philosophy from an academic sense. It is not based upon speculations of human reason, but is founded on the revelations of sages and saints. Yoga points out to the Ultimate Reality that is experienced by all illumined sages and presents a process of spiritual

discipline to realize that ultimate goal. In practice, yoga is a blend of religion and philosophy.

What Is Your Innermost Identity?

According to yoga philosophy you are not this limited, individualized personality. Deep in the core of your heart, you are all that is, universal, infinite. Although the physical body is divided into various limbs, hands, feet, eyes, ears, bones, and nerves, the life force that flows through them is one. Similarly, through advanced mental expansion it is possible to understand that one universal life force embraces all beings, regardless of how diverse they may seem.

It is possible for you to develop such an expansive heart that you can feel unity with those who are far away — unity not only with human beings but with the entire creation. The experience of such cosmic consciousness has been the ideal of every mystic movement, especially yoga. It is this ideal that was realized by great personalities of ancient times like Christ, Buddha, Rama, Krishna, and other Divine manifestations. They felt the pulsation of universal life in their hearts; and they reminded all human beings that they too could rise beyond the narrow confines of their minds and experience the joyous expansion of one who is in union with the Divine Self. Such union is the true meaning of the word “yoga.”

When a person develops a split personality due to a certain shock or accident, a psychotherapist tries to promote normality in their mind. When normality returns, the patient removes the wrong identity they had formulated for themselves and begins to remember things that they had forgotten. Similarly, you have become separated from your own real Self due to the limitations of the mind, which is subject to constant change and modification, contraction and expansion. However, it is possible for you to discover your true identity by integrating the mind properly and completely.

Have you ever thought what your experience of yourself would be when the mind is completely free from complexes and prejudices, from all limitations and defects? What it would feel like when your mind is absolutely satisfied and all its desires are fulfilled?

What you think yourself to be now is conceptual, and that concept of yourself goes on changing from day to day, from moment to moment. You say to yourself, “I am a failure. I cannot succeed in this project.” But, with a certain change in your conditions and a degree of transformation in your inner life, you begin to discover that you are not as feeble as you thought yourself to be; rather, you have abundant energy to overcome the obstacles which seemed so difficult before. You have endless possibilities for discovering within yourself ever-new horizons of the Universal Self.

(to be continued)

You can feel the pulsation of universal life in your heart and rise beyond the narrow confines of your mind to experience the joyous expansion of union with the Divine Self. Such union is the true meaning of “yoga.”



The Pillars of human Personality

Human personality is founded on four pillars: reason, feeling (emotion), will and action

Your growth or advancement in life depends upon a balanced and integrated development of these four aspects of your personality. You must not exclude any of them if you hope to attain true success in your spiritual movement.

If a person were to acquire vast knowledge of voluminous books written by great philosophers from all over the world, but he lacked integral unfoldment of his sentiments, will and action, he would be far away from the attainment of yogic perfection. His erudition might be admired by thousands, but he would be unable to glimpse the cosmic expansion of life that promotes true joy in a human being.

There is a humorous anecdote about a scientist who was so absorbed in his scientific research that he became oblivious of his day to day duties with his wife and children, and he was unable to understand their feelings and sentiments. Once his wife approached him with tears in her eyes in order to touch upon a softer string in his heart, but the scientist looked at her with a cold gaze and said, “Madam, let me analyze your tears. Your tears are constituted of water and a few salts. They cannot affect me.” Such is the predicament of any person who allows his intellect to advance, without simultaneously promoting increasing maturity in his feeling, will, and action. Such a disbalanced person can become a famous scholar, but he cannot enjoy the bliss of universal life, which is the goal of yoga.

The Major Aspects of Yoga

Jnana Yoga — the Path of Wisdom

There are four major aspects of yoga corresponding to the four aspects of human personality: reason, emotion, will and action. Jnana yoga (yoga of wisdom) is the yoga that aims at rendering reason healthy and pure, and further it leads to the transformation of reason into intuition. The purpose of jnana yoga is to enable a person to understand clearly what is the nature of the deeper reality within. What is life? What is the world? What is God or the Divine Self? This is the philosophical aspect of yoga and it demands that your intellect become so subtle and sharp that it is not hampered by sentimental attitudes and unconscious complexes.

Jnana yoga promotes the understanding that the Reality that is within you is the same as the Reality behind the whole world. Therefore, you have deep within you a basis through which you can commune with the whole world — a basis through which you can bring about a change in the whole world. The intuitive awareness of that essential Self and the realization that “I am That” has been taught by mystics in every religion — regardless of the different terms they use to describe the same truth.

A jnana yogi tries to understand God, not as a person, but beyond all mental attributes. Jnana Yoga is the philosophical understanding of God as Brahman, the formless, nameless, and attributeless Self. Even terms such as eternal and infinite are conceptual and therefore limited in presenting the understanding of Brahman. However, a Yogi is able to realize Brahman through intuitional unfoldment.

Bhakti yoga — the Path of Devotion

Most of the religions of the world have one dominant feature - encouraging love of God.

However, you cannot love God simply because you are threatened that if you don't you will be led to hell. The unfoldment of divine love must be studied and understood in a rational and scientific manner. In yoga philosophy, through bhakti yoga, you are guided in a process of discovering divine love and experiencing infinite sweetness through divine surrender.

When you integrate your personality in the light of yoga, you become humble and ego-less. Just as iron is drawn to a magnet when the intervening obstructions are removed, in the same way the soul is drawn to God when the egoistic movements are withdrawn through surrender and spiritual resignation. But, complete surrender to God is not a matter of a sentimental choice; it is, rather, a result of personality integration and spiritual unfoldment.

Even in your day to day life, when you are deeply fulfilled and satisfied, you do not need to assert your ego. You become humble and develop shyness towards praise and public recognition. In that state of humility you discover that you are backed up by a force so powerful, so divine, so sweet, that you cannot help but love that Divine Existence.

You ascend the ladder of bhakti yoga - the path of devotion — gradually. You begin to taste the joy of good association. You begin to enjoy increasing sweetness in discovering the operation of Divine will through your existence. You discover the power of prayer and Divine faith. As you promote divine sentiments in your heart, and purity abounds in your mind, your feeling for God becomes steady and sublime. This feeling (bhava) grows into Divine love, which leads to God-realization.

When you are confronted with problems that demand solutions, it is very important that you learn to view those problems objectively, without being entangled by them. In order to do so, you must discover the immutable basis within your mind that is untouched by all problems.

Psychologists and psychotherapists have long recognized the need for a transcendental faith through which an individual can lift himself from the turmoils of the mind. Yoga promotes the recognition of the transcendental basis of God within one's existence, and reveals the power of Divine faith and love to bring about an effective process of personality integration.

Raja Yoga — The Yoga of Meditation

Raja yoga or the yoga of meditation is widely known in the west. The basis of this system is an ancient work known as the Raja Yoga Sutras of sage Patanjali Maharshi. This work, written in aphorisms, deals with the study of mind, and gives insight into methods of unfolding the powers of the mind in order to attain the transcendental realization of the essential Self.

Raja Yoga gives you a deep insight into the science of psychology. A practitioner of raja yoga becomes his own psychoanalyst. He learns the art of controlling the mind and the senses. He is able to change a negative thought-current into a positive one as a result of his aptness in the art of thought-culture.

Any person can practise raja yoga, regardless of what religion he belongs to. Even those who do not feel the need of accepting a Divine Existence can still tread this path to mental concentration. Instead of concerning itself with the Abstract Reality behind the world phenomena, raja yoga focuses on the process that enables an aspirant to master his mind, to integrate his personality. And when his mind is rendered as serene and calm as a silent lake, it begins to reflect the transcendental reality of the Self. When the mind is rendered healthy, the truth shines forth automatically. A Yogi may, therefore, commence the practice of yoga with or without faith in God. However, those who commence the practice of Yoga with faith are endowed with a higher order of aspiration.

No matter what your ideal in life, no matter what you desire, you need a degree of mental concentration for realizing or acquiring it. If you hold in your mind two contradictory desires, you can't get any one of them. It is important to render the mind one-pointed for any form of achievement, success, prosperity, and attainment.

You do not have to wait until all the limitations and erroneous movements of your personality terminate in order to take up the practice of yoga. Rather, by adopting yoga you will be in a position to eliminate gradually all that is defective and erroneous in your personality in a more effective manner. When you develop deeper concentration of the mind, you begin to experience a more profound form of joy, and all lesser forms of involvements and addictions drop off automatically.

You should not think that the practice of meditation requires absolute withdrawal from the world. It is incorrect to think that unless all doors are shut and all the noises of the world are stilled, it is not possible to practise meditation. You can acquire concentration of mind even during a busy life. You can hold on to inner serenity even in the midst of intense activities. Yoga helps you develop an amazing ability to control your mind and think in a systematic manner even while journeying in a bus, or travelling on a fast running train, or flying in a jet plane. You begin to realize the serenity of the Himalayan caves even in the midst of noisy crowds.

It is your mind that chooses to accept or reject the impressions of the objects. Unless you permit your mind to pick up the perceptions of the senses, you will not be aware of them. Even if your eyes are open, you do not see the objects of the world unless the mind attends to them. It is possible to attain such a mastery over the mind that the various developments of day to day life will not thwart the steady flow of the mind towards the spiritual destination of Self-realization.

The method of thought-culture promoted by raja yoga is very advanced and effective. You are not asked to pursue the possible causes of your limitations; rather, you are asked to direct your mind to the positive potentiality of your personality. If you are irritable, you do not have to waste your mental energy in finding the cause that might have created a basis for your irritable nature. You do not have to go back to the varied data of your childhood days. You do not have to blame your parents for not providing for you an atmosphere of love, harmony and affection.

In the light of yoga you must realize that you are an incarnating soul who has passed through many embodiments. The causes of your present limitations are not to be found in the present embodiment alone. Therefore, any cause that you determine with reference to your weakness or limitation cannot be considered conclusive or final. It will be merely a conceptual understanding. This being so, an aspirant should adopt the following methods to overcome the limitations of his personality.

1. *Pratipaksha Bhavana* or adopting to a positive thought process: Suppose you want to overcome your irritable nature, you should not allow your mind to enter into a state of worry and gloom about your failure in controlling the mind. but, rather, you continue to elevate the mind by thinking of the glorious advantages of practising endurance, understanding and love. Continue to assert: "I am the architect of my own destiny. I am an embodiment of peace and love." Continue to endeavor towards the expression of love and harmony. You will find that this positive element is already in you. And as you continue to endeavor day by day, you will be able to promote it to such an extent that your habit of irritability will become a myth to your mind. But, if you continue to think of the negative habit and worry about it, you are intensifying it in an unconscious manner. Positive overcomes negative without any effort. Bring light and darkness is gone. Bring joy

and sorrow will vanish. Bring courage and confidence will disappear. Bring humility and pride will evaporate. Bring the understanding of your deeper Self, and all problems will be resolved.

2. Sakshi Bhava or adopting the attitude of being a witness to the thoughts of the mind. This is an advanced method. You learn the art of keeping yourself detached from the mental movements. Just as you would watch the formation of clouds in the sky, so too, you continue to watch the thought waves of your mind. Your mind will be rendered calm and steady in a short time.

3. Further, Yoga presents an elaborate technique of eight limbs for attaining complete mastery over the mind. These eight limbs are: Yamas (restraints such as non-violence), Niyamas (observances such as contentment), Asana or physical posture for meditation, Pranayama or control of vital energy by regulating the breath. Pratyahara or withdrawal of the senses. Dharana or practice of mental concentration, Dhyana or intense meditation, and Samadhi or the state of superconsciousness wherein the Self is revealed through intuition.

KARMA YOGA—The Path of Action

Karma Yoga is the fourth major aspect of Yoga. It is the test of Yogic development. Yoga does not teach you to remain confined to a cave. People have developed a misconception of Yoga. They think that Yoga can be better practised in the solitary caves of the Himalayan mountains, or in deep forests that are far away from the society of men. The idea that you will be free from the distraction of the world if you were to live in a cave, or in a forest, is wrong. You carry the basis of the world process in your mind wherever you go. You carry the impressions of attachment and hatred, fear and egoistic complexes along with your mind. Therefore, with a deeper insight into the mysteries of life, you should not seek a perspective of seclusion as a means to spiritual

development, rather, you will learn to see divine wisdom underlying all conditions of life. You will learn to be a Yogi while performing your duties in day to day life.

When you realize that the world unravels different conditions of pleasure and pain in order to aid your spiritual advancement, you will not live in contradiction with it. Rather, you will consider the world as an aid in your spiritual task of discovering your deeper Self.

When a Yogi advances he learns the art of converting every action into a purifying process of Yoga. He develops an insight into what is good and what is evil. He realizes that what seems to be good at one level of evolution, is evil when a person has progressed on the path.

Good and Evil

Good and evil are relative terms. There is no moral implication involved for a lion who kills an innocent fawn to appease his hunger. But, it is evil on the part of a person to hurt others even by mere speech. Further, as one's personality is integrated and perfected, even the egoistic processes of the mind are recognized as evil. As a Yogi advances he continues to express actions based upon increasing ethical and spiritual values of life.

Further, as the personality integrates, a Yogi is led to perform actions that are in harmony with the law of his spiritual evolution. He is not urged to perform actions out of selfishness or out of egoistic complexes. He begins to perform actions on the basis of a healthy mind and a clear understanding of the nature of the Self. His actions are characterized by spontaneity and effortlessness. They are characterized by a perception of increasing joy and creativity. They do not produce tension, fatigue and boredom.

Selfish actions arise out of a disbalanced personality. They are characterized by tension, confusion and boredom. But, self-less actions

are free from these traits. A Yogi learns the art of promoting self-less activity through his life. Advancement on the lines of Jnana Yoga (Yoga of Wisdom), Raja Yoga (Yoga of Meditation), Bhakti Yoga (Yoga of Devotion) enable a Yogi to convert his selfish actions into self-less actions. On the basis of this art he promotes a healthy process of activity through his body and mind. Such actions are the basis of harmony and peace.

Take for example you are a musician. you sing out of joy. You do not wait to consider what reward this singing will bring to you. You continue singing even as fragrance emanates from a flower. The consideration for a reward arises when you are not filled with joy and satisfaction. Much in the same way, all activities arise in an advanced Yogi as expressions of joy. A Yogi is not concerned whether he will receive due appreciation for his actions or not.

This was the ideal of great personalities such as Buddha, Jesus, and recently of Mahatma Gandhi and other great sages and saints. This ideal can be practised to a certain degree by any sincere aspirant. And by constant practice of this ideal, perfection can be acquired in due course.

It is important to understand the advantages of self-less activities. When you perform an action with cherished expectation, you have set forth a process of limiting your future. You perform an action, and expect a certain development as a reward, you do not leave things to happen on the basis of the Infinite Wisdom of the Divine Self. By setting before your mind a limited perspective of your future, you are conditioning your spiritual potentialities.

Advanced personalities are concerned with the right performance of their duties. They leave their future in the Divine Hands. By a mature vision they know that through a process of internal relaxation they will be more enriched with wisdom, joy and peace. But, by harboring a preconceived interest, they will be limiting a better perspective of the future. In the Divine Plan you

are given more than you expect. But, guided by egoistic interest, you continue to turn away from the abundance of spiritual expansion, and seek limited conditions of life.

Perceive the illusion of your desires. Perceive the vanity underlying your expectations. What you desire at a particular level you begin to hate as your mind advances. Certain developments that appear so enchanting to your mind today will appear very disgusting to you in future. Then, why should you limit the future? A Yogi develops an insight into this limiting process of the mind. He learns the art of performing actions without an egoistic expectation or a selfish involvement. Even when the expected result does not arise out of his action, he continues to maintain a spirit of surrender to God. He knows that Divinity knows better. He relies on the Will of the Almighty God. He does not give way to sorrow and frustration. Later, you begin to see the Wisdom of God. You say, "How wonderful it was that I did not acquire what I expected. I have been led to a state of greater enrichment and prosperity!"

*INTEGRAL YOGA—The Interdependence of the

Four Major Yogas*

I have outlined the four main Yogas in brief. There is an interrelation and interdependence among these four Yogas. If you perform your actions guided by the spirit of Karma Yoga you begin to discover profound streams of feeling in your heart. You begin to love the Divine Self. Therefore, Karma Yoga aids the development of the Path of Devotion. And, as you advance on the path of Love and Divine Feeling, your mind begins to withdraw itself from the objects of the world. It begins to detach itself from the external names and forms. This aids the movement in

Meditation. Thus, Bhakti Yoga or the path of Devotion begins to aid the practice of meditation or Raja Yoga. As meditation deepens, your intellect becomes sharp and subtle. The path of wisdom begins to reveal itself. Thus, Bhakti Yoga promotes the development of Jnana Yoga or Yoga of Wisdom.

In the same way, as you discover purer understanding within yourself, you begin to help the practice of meditation. Jnana (wisdom) aids Meditation. Further, success in meditation aids the development of devotion to God. With the advancement of purer feeling you begin to perform your action in the spirit of Karma Yoga. It is important to note that Yoga is basically one -- it is a movement towards the Goal of Self-realization. But it assumes different names due to different aspects of human personality. And these aspects are interdependent, you cannot progress on the line of any one of the four aspects of your personality, without progressing on the line of the other three. A Yogi, therefore, blends the important elements of all these four major Yogas in his day to day life. By doing so, he advances steadily on the spiritual path. But, there are others who adopt one of these four and continue to ignore the other three as inferior methods of Self-realization. In this case, the movement becomes slow and eccentric. Some are able to come out of their limitations, but, many remain involved in their egoistic concepts. It is important for an aspirant to understand the ideal of integral Yoga and to practise it in his day to day life.

LAW OF KARMA AND REINCARNATION

As you advance in the practise of meditation, you begin to understand that even death cannot destroy you. You existed even before your physical birth, and you will continue to exist even after the death of the body. Every condition that you encounter in your day to day life

is divinely planned for your spiritual evolution.. Therefore, it cannot be a mere accident.

The world is an organized and intelligent system. It is impossible to think that any thing can happen as a mere accident. A deeper study of mind shows that what appears as an accident at the surface, is in reality the result of a conscious will operating through the mind.

Some psychologists have demonstrated this fact by their experiments. A person is led to a hypnotic trance by powerful suggestions given by the psychologist. During the trance state a command is given that when he recovers from his trance he will walk to the window and drop a glass vase out the window thus, destroying it. The subject obeys the command that was planted in his mind during the hypnotic state. He wakes up from that trance, walks up to the window and drops the glass vase. He calls it an accident, while the psychologist knows that it was a result of a conscious will. Much in the same way, in the perspective of Yogic philosophy one learns to understand that every development in life has a meaning and significance, It is not a mere accident to be ignored. You do not need to blame the world for your troubles and turmoils. You are the architect of your own destiny There is no need to develop bitterness towards people.

You must realize that you have the possibility of changing the pattern of your mind, and directing the mind to any object of your choice. You should develop endurance towards the bitter conditions of your life. You will tide them over.

If you develop a deep insight into the law of Karma; and understand that your past actions, thoughts and intentions are the basis for you present condition, and that you are the immortal soul having the infinite potentiality to change and reconstruct the conditions of your life, you will learn to confront your conditions in an artistic manner. You will maintain a balance of mind during pleasure and pain, gain and loss, and other diverse conditions of life.

Instead of becoming affected by adversity and developing insensitivity and crudeness, you will develop humility and gentleness. You will develop more understanding about the problems of others. You will realize that if a person is cruel or vicious, he should not be hated. He is a patient. His disease must be cured, but he should not be hated for his disease. Hate the disease, but not the patient.

PROGRESS ON THE PATH

As you advance on the Yogic Path, you discover the endless resources of your deeper Self. You discover the art of culturing your mind. You realize that your capacity to perfect yourself is endless, your resources are infinite. An aspirant is guided by a Guru (spiritual teacher) towards the understanding and the practice of Yoga. He strengthens his spiritual inclinations by taking recourse to good association (Satsanga), and by listening to the meanings of the scriptures. He combines the practice of meditation, Japa (repetition of Divine Name), reflection, study of scriptures, and self-less service of humanity in his day to day life.

MINOR YOGAS

There are many minor Yogas which are offshoots of the four major Yogas that I have described in brief. Hatha Yoga is the Yoga of psychophysical exercises. It promotes a healthy mind in a healthy body. Laya Yoga is a process of discovering a divine melody within oneself: and the mind is led to a state of purification through this practice. Kundalini Yoga is the Yoga of meditation upon different centers of vital energy located in the spinal column. This Yoga enables an aspirant to prepare the mind for entry into Raja Yoga and its ascending summits. Kriya Yoga is a Yoga of purifying the mind through the practice of various specialized observances and ex-

ercises. Pranayama is the practice of controlling the universal vital energy through a process of breath-control.

YOGA FOR UNIVERSAL WELFARE

Some people ask, "Doesn't all this sound too selfish? One must live to realize the Self all for himself." Yoga is not selfish. Yoga has far-reaching results. Any degree of integration that you promote within yourself, you have rendered an effective service to humanity.

The manner in which you operate in the world depends upon the nature of your mind. If your mind is highly complexed, if it is filled with the impressions of fear, sorrow, selfishness, greed, hatred, violence, and other weaknesses, you will not be able to serve humanity from a healthy point of view. You will be spreading the contagion of these mental maladies.

But, as you advance on the path of Yoga, you begin to emanate from yourself the fragrance of divine qualities -- courage, understanding, tolerance, endurance, sincerity, truthfulness, and universal love. The world would be a wonderful world to live in. If this understanding is propagated, you will be laying a foundation for a very advanced culture.

Consider the attention that is given to fight the external enemies in the political fields, if the same is directed to knock down the enemies of the soul in the form of ignorance, egoism, pride and greed, the world will be adorned with a very advanced culture and civilization. However, this does not mean that external forms of wars and political conflicts can be denounced radically. Yoga presents the perspective of unfolding the divine nature of the soul in every human being, and if this movement is promoted, it provides for a most effective solution to all problems of humanity.

In the perspective of Yoga virtuous qualities must unfold in a personality, they cannot be

imposed. The basis of war lies in human heart in the form of ignorance, egoism, selfishness and greed. This basis must be removed by knowledge.

Mahatma Gandhi presented the ideals of Yoga in the field of politics. He demonstrated how the principles of non-violence, truthfulness and purity can enable a nation to enrich itself. He showed how by upholding the spiritual values of life all problems in the individual or in the society can be solved more effectively and completely.

May the Divine Self bless you all with strength, wisdom, peace, prosperity and a life of spiritual illumination!