

The Meaning of Yoga

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Yoga hardly needs any introduction. By yoga we generally mean some kinds of physical exercises and with it sometimes a few types of Pranayama and, in some cases, some styles of concentration called meditation. Again, according to some, these three together form the whole system of yoga. Unfortunately, though yoga is so popular throughout the world, many of us understand yoga in this way. But those who are somewhat familiar with the main Yoga-sutras know that it has a higher dimension and there is a very systematic approach to the “goal” of yoga. Swami Vivekananda says: Raja-Yoga is the *science of religion*, the rationale of all worship, all prayers, forms, ceremonies, and miracles.

It is true that many of us are familiar with the ways of yoga-ASANAS and are regular practitioners. Yet, sometimes in between, we need to check with the source to see if our understanding is going on correctly—if the needle of the compass is still pointing to the right direction.

In fact, it will not be possible to give a clear picture of this profound spiritual science in the scope of a short article. My humble effort will be limited to presenting an idea about how one should study yoga properly, if not traditionally, to achieve practical benefit out of it.

The commentator Vyasa says that yoga is universal (*sarvabhauma*). It is meant for everyone irrespective of his/her colour, sex, nationality or religious affiliation. Like, for example, the yoga exercises—the teachers do not demand any other qualification apart from a somewhat fit body. This makes yoga unprejudiced and widespread.

We have not come across any suggestion by the commentators on the Yoga-sutras that yoga means a “connection” or “union”. Contrarily, it means a “disconnection” between the object/the seen (*drishya* or

Prakriti) and the subject/the seer (*drashta* or Purusha. Cf. Yoga-sutras, 1/3). The text says: “Liberation of the seer (*kaivalyam*) is the result of the disassociation (*samyogabhavah*) of the seer and the seen, with the disappearance of ignorance” (YS, 2/25). So, before we start with the study of the Yoga-sutras, we have to unlearn this particular meaning of yoga as “union”. This is very hard for many of us given the deep-rooted impression that we bear in our mind for a long time. In Sanskrit, the word may also mean “union”, but not in this context.

However, according to the Yoga-sutras, the *true* meaning of the word “yoga” is Samadhi (complete absorption of the individual into his/her real nature). Samadhi is the *ultimate aim* of this scripture. One has to get oneself detached from the scope of this material world and then discover one’s real nature in realizing this goal. A wrong connection that has come upon us owing to ignorance has to be cut off to find us in our pure Being. Sri Krishna says in the Gita (6/23): “That Samadhi which is known as Yoga and also which is arrived at after disconnecting (*viyogam*) oneself from the contact of sorrow (*duhkha-samyoga*), should be known.”

Well, it will be an uphill task to tell theoretically what Samadhi really is. Here lies the difficulty: like, we may call a thing sweet; but it will be difficult for comprehension by a person who has never before tasted anything sweet. That is why in one of the Upanishads the teacher asks the student to bring a

chunk of salt and mix it in a bowl of water. After some time salt melts into water. Then the teacher asks: Where is the salt? The student answers: Sir, I do not find it. The teacher asks the student to taste the water; and he obeys. Now the teacher says: My dear boy, in the similar way, your true nature can be known by experience, and not by theoretical knowledge.

The process of attaining Samadhi actually happens through the agency of the mind. Mind is referred to as *chitta* in the Yoga-sutras (YS, 1/2). This is called the inner organ or *antahkaranam*. In common parlance, it is known as mind-stuff.

As we know, mind has three levels—unconscious (We will call it sub-conscious.), conscious and super-conscious. Some teachers vaguely refer to the sub-conscious mind as “pain body” or “pleasure body”, because it is the repository of all impressions. If we want to achieve success in meditation, we have to work hard at the sub-conscious level. When the mind remains scattered, we should know that it is very much under the influence of the same kind of impressions (*samskaras*). To attain success in meditation, therefore one needs to work hard at the sub-conscious level. Then it will become easy to meditate. This is an important matter to deal with in the initial stage of yoga-practices.

The next step is to raise our consciousness from the sub-conscious to the conscious level. This is referred to as “waking up”. To come back to the conscious level one has to wake up from the dream state or deep sleep state. Once at the conscious level, we have immediate experience of the transience of the dream. Suppose a man dreamt that he became a monkey. But when he wakes up to the conscious level, he will wake up to his “human” status. It is at the conscious level that meditation and spiritual life is possible, and successively Samadhi is possible in course of our journey.

Still there is another step: it is to lift the mind from the conscious to the super-conscious level. This is not called a “waking up”, but an “awakening” or enlightenment. And this is known as Samadhi. I have heard people claiming that they have attained enlightenment. But in course of their intimate talks they confess that they feel very lonely. This is not attaining Yoga. Ramana Maharshi has said, “One does not need another to enjoy company.” A realized person is *atmaratih*, *atmakridah* – is contented with enjoying the company of his/her own Self and playing with his/her own Self – so says the Upanishads. How true!

