

Yoga Explained



In the introduction to "Light on Yoga", BKS Iyengar writes:

The word Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root yuj meaning to bind, join, attach and yoke, to direct and concentrate one's attention on, to use and apply. It also means union or communion. It is the true union of our will with the will of God. 'It thus means,' says Mahadev Desai in his introduction to the Gita according to Gandhi, 'the yoking of all the powers of body, mind and soul to God; it means the disciplining of the intellect, the mind, the emotions, the will, which that Yoga presupposes; it means a poise of the soul which enables one to look at life in all its aspects evenly.'

Yoga is one of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy. It was collated, co-ordinated and systematised by Patanjali in his classical work, the Yoga Sutras, which consists of 185 terse aphorisms. In Indian thought, everything is permeated by the Supreme Universal Spirit (Paramatma or God) of which the individual human spirit (jivatma) is a part. The system of yoga is so called because it teaches the means by which the jivatma can be united to, or be in communion with the Paramatma, and so secure liberation (moksa).

One who follows the path of Yoga is a yogi or yogin.

In the sixth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita which is the most important authority on Yoga philosophy, Sri Krishna explains to Arjuna the meaning of Yoga as a deliverance from contact with pain and sorrow. It is said:

'When his mind, intellect and self (ahamkara) are under control, freed from restless desire, so that they rest in the spirit within, a man becomes a Yukta – one in communion with God. A lamp does not flicker in a place where no winds blow; so it is with a yogi, who controls his mind, intellect and self, being absorbed in the spirit within him. When the restlessness of the mind, intellect and self is stilled through the practice of Yoga, the yogi by the grace of the Spirit within himself finds fulfilment. Then he knows the joy eternal which is beyond the pale of the senses which his reason cannot grasp. He abides in this reality

and moves not therefrom. He has found the treasure above all others. There is nothing higher than this. He who has achieved it, shall not be moved by the greatest sorrow. This is the real meaning of Yoga – a deliverance from contact with pain and sorrow.'

As a well cut diamond has many facets, each reflecting a different colour of light, so does the word yoga, each facet reflecting a different shade of meaning and revealing different aspects of the entire range of human endeavour to win inner peace and happiness.

The Bhagavad Gita also gives other explanations of the term yoga and lays stress upon Karma Yoga (Yoga by action). It is said: 'Work alone is your privilege, never the fruits thereof. Never let the fruits of action be your motive; and never cease to work. Work in the name of the Lord, abandoning selfish desires. Be not affected by success or failure. This equipoise is called Yoga.'

Yoga has also been described as wisdom in work or skilful living amongst activities, harmony and moderation.

'Yoga is not for him who gorges too much, nor for him who starves himself. It is not for him who sleeps too much, nor for him who stays awake. By moderation in eating and in resting, by regulation in working and by concordance in sleeping and waking, Yoga destroys all pain and sorrow.'

The Kathopanishad describes Yoga thus: 'When the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not – then, say the wise, is reached the highest stage. This steady control of the senses and mind has been defined as Yoga. He who attains it is free from delusion.'

In the second aphorism of the first chapter of the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali describes Yoga as 'chitta vrtti nirodhah'. This may be translated as the restraint (nirodhah) of mental (chitta) modifications (vrtti) or as suppression (nirodhah) of the fluctuations (vrtti) of consciousness (chitta). The word chitta denotes the mind in its total or collective sense as being composed of three categories: (a) mind (manas, that is, the individual mind having the power and faculty of attention, selection and rejection; it is the oscillating indecisive faculty of the mind); (b) intelligence or reason (buddhi, that is, the decisive state which determines the distinction between things); and (c) ego (ahamkara, literally the I-maker, the state which ascertains that 'I know').

The word vrtti is derived from the Sanskrit root vrt meaning to turn, to revolve, to roll on. It thus means course of action, behaviour, mode of being, condition or mental state. Yoga is the method by which the restless mind is calmed and the energy directed into constructive channels. As a mighty river which when properly harnessed by dams and canals, creates a vast reservoir of water, prevents famine and provides abundant power for industry; so also the mind, when controlled, provides a reservoir of peace and generates abundant energy for human uplift.

The problem of controlling the mind is not capable of easy solution, as borne out by the following dialogue in the

sixth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna asks Sri Krishna:

'Krishna, you have told me of Yoga as a communion with Brahman (the Universal Spirit), which is ever one. But how can this be permanent, since the mind is so restless and inconsistent? The mind is impetuous and stubborn, strong and wilful, as difficult to harness as the wind.' Sri Krishna replies 'Undoubtedly, the mind is restless and hard to control. But it can be trained by constant practice (abhyasa) and by freedom from desire (vairagya). A man who cannot control his mind will find it difficult to attain this divine communion; but the self-controlled man can attain it if he tries hard and directs his energy by the right means.'

The right means are just as important as the end in view. Patanjali enumerates these means as the eight limbs or stages of Yoga for the quest of the soul. They are:

1. Yama (universal moral commandments); **2. Niyama** (self purification by discipline); **3. Asana** (posture); **4. Pranayama** (rhythmic control of the breath); **5. Pratyahara** (withdrawal and emancipation of the mind from the domination of the senses and exterior objects); **6. Dharana** (concentration); **7. Dhyana** (meditation) and **8. Samadhi** (a state of superconsciousness brought about by profound meditation, in which the individual aspirant (sadhaka) becomes one with the object of his meditation - Paramatma or the Universal Spirit).

Yama and *Niyama* control the yogi's passions and emotions and keep him in harmony with his fellow man. *Asanas* keep the body healthy and strong and in harmony with nature. Finally, the yogi becomes free of body consciousness. He conquers the body and renders it a fit vehicle for the soul. The first three stages are the outward quests (bahiranga sadhana).

The next two stages, *Pranayama* and *Pratyahara*, teach the aspirant to regulate the breathing, and thereby control the mind. This helps to free the senses from the thralldom of the objects of desire. These two stages of Yoga are known as the inner quests (antaranga sadhana).

Dharana, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi* take the yogi into the innermost recesses of his soul. The yogi does not look heavenward to find God. He knows that HE is within, being known as the Antaratma (the Inner Self). The last three stages keep him in harmony with himself and his Maker. These stages are called antaratma sadhana, the quest of the soul.

By profound meditation, the knower, the knowledge and the known become one. The seer, the sight and the seen have no separate existence from each other. It is like a great musician becoming one with his instrument and the music that comes from it. Then, the yogi stands in his own nature and realises his self (Atman), the part of the Supreme Soul within himself.

There are different paths (margas) by which a man travels to his Maker. The active man finds realisation through

Karma Marga, in which a man realises his own divinity through work and duty. The emotional man finds it through Bhakti Marga, where there is realisation through devotion to and love of a personal God. The intellectual man pursues Jilana Marga, where realisation comes through knowledge. The meditative or reflective man follows Yoga Marga, and realises his own divinity through control of the mind.

Happy is the man who knows how to distinguish the real from the unreal, the eternal from the transient and the good from the pleasant by his discrimination and wisdom. Twice blessed is he who knows true love and can love all God's creatures. He who works selflessly for the welfare of others with love in his heart is thrice blessed. But the man who combines within his mortal frame knowledge, love and selfless service is holy and becomes a place of pilgrimage, like the confluence of the rivers Ganga, Saraswati and Jamuna. Those who meet him become calm and purified.

Mind is the king of the senses. One who has conquered his mind, senses, passions, thought and reason is a king among men. He is fit for Raja Yoga, the royal union with the Universal Spirit. He has Inner Light.

He who has conquered his mind is a Raja Yogi. The word raja means a king. The expression Raja Yoga implies a complete mastery of the Self. Though Patanjali explains the ways to control the mind, he nowhere states in his aphorisms that this science is Raja Yoga, but calls it Astanga Yoga or the eight stages (limbs) of Yoga. As it implies complete mastery of the self one may call it the science of Raja Yoga.

Swatmarama, the author of the Hatha Yoga Pradipika (hatha = force or determined effort) called the same path Hatha Yoga because it demanded rigorous discipline.

It is generally believed that Raja Yoga and Hatha Yoga are entirely distinct, different and opposed to each other, that the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali deal with spiritual discipline and that the Hatha Yoga Pradipika of Swatmarama deals solely with physical discipline. It is not so, for Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga complement each other and form a single approach towards Liberation. As a mountaineer needs ladders, ropes and crampons as well as physical fitness and discipline to climb the icy peaks of the Himalayas, so does the Yoga aspirant need the knowledge and discipline of the Hatha Yoga of Swatmarama to reach the heights of Raja Yoga dealt with by Patanjali.

This path of Yoga is the fountain for the other three paths. It brings calmness and tranquillity and prepares the mind for absolute unqualified self-surrender to God, in which all these four paths merge into one.