

# THE UNIVERSAL YOGA TRADITION <sup>1</sup>

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With the advance of science and technology, religious belief has lost its hold over the minds of vast numbers of people. The generations reared on science find little meaning in formal religion with its church-going, ceremonies, unquestioning attitudes of belief, acceptance of priestly hierarchies and their interference in personal life. At the same time, the pleasures and excitements available in an affluent society do not fill the void left by their lost religion in the hearts of men; nor do they offer an avenue for the deep aspirations and yearning towards transcendence, which made religion a universal human concern. A growing number of people in the present day are beginning to recognize that inner happiness and a real sense of fulfillment cannot come through organizing outer circumstances; they must well up from within the depths of consciousness itself.

Conventional religion with its rituals and beliefs, its *do's* and *don'ts*, has not only failed to answer the deep-seated human need for spiritual realization, it has done positive harm. Religions have divided humanity and provided means for churches and ecclesiastical authorities to exploit others, both materially and morally. The conflict and tension created by religious differences have added considerably to the sum of human suffering.

But there have been the few in every age and culture who have searched within themselves for the source of light and goodness, not lured by the empty outer forms of religion or by sterile theological speculation. Their quest, in relation to which neither conventional codes of good behavior, nor religious dogmas have relevance, found its most lucid expression in the discipline called *Yoga*. The tradition of yoga, contrary to common belief, is not confined to India, and it is not an esoteric activity into which only a few can gain entry. It is related to a universal stream of enquiry and understanding, which flows across the ages in the diverse schools concerned with the transcendence of man. In ancient Egypt and Greece, in Sufi lore, in the teachings of the Buddhists and Taoists, in the Christian tradition, in the Tantra and Vedanta, at the heart of the outer

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<sup>1</sup> Slightly edited for modern sensibilities—David Bruce, Department of Education.

teachings there is a way of life and a training appropriate to the inner quest and direction signified by the word *yoga*.

*Yoga* is a word, which has been variously defined because it is too rich a term to yield easily to translation. Essentially it is concerned with the ending of the independent self, the self which speaks with the many voices of thought and desire. When the discord produced by the separative activities of this self ceases completely there is the realization of the essential nature of consciousness. The culmination of *yoga* is said to be a state of non-duality and natural harmony.

A great Teacher wrote:

There is a road steep and thorny, beset with perils of every kind, but yet a road and it leads to the heart of the universe. I can tell you how to find those who will show you the Secret Gateway that leads inwards only, and closes fast behind the neophyte for evermore.

There is no danger that dauntless courage cannot conquer; no trial spotless purity cannot pass through; no difficulty that strong intellect cannot surmount.

For those who win onward, there is reward past all telling—the power to bless and save humanity. For those who fail, there are other lives in which success may come.

—Blavatsky, H.P. *Collected Writings*, Vol. XIII, Pg. 219

Among those who choose this road, which is said to be sharp as the razor's edge, only the few have the perseverance and the dauntless courage to go through to the end. "Many are called, but few are chosen," it is said.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* confirms this:

Among thousands of men scarce one striveth for perfection; of the successful strivers scarce one knoweth Me [the divine] in essence. (VII:3)

Most people want quick rewards. They are impatient to achieve the benefits of a spiritual nature while at the same time refusing to let go of worldly advantages. Disappointment comes to them quickly, for the two directions are incompatible.

As *The Voice of the Silence* declares:

Eternal life's pure waters, clear and crystal, with the monsoon tempest's muddy torrents cannot mingle.

Heaven's dew-drop glittering in the morn's first sunbeam within the bosom of the lotus, when dropped on earth becomes a piece of clay; behold, the pearl is now a speck of mire.

By seeking, even though unconsciously, to make things secure and agreeable for the corporeal self, ignorant aspirants ensure failure. The feeling of stagnation leads to doubts about the possibility of progress along spiritual lines and effort is given up. Therefore from the beginning it must be clear that the discipline entailed in *yoga* cannot

be treated as less arduous than the training necessary to become a superior musician or an outstanding mathematician. In fact, it is more rigorous in its call to set aside ordinary interests, comforts and values. Yoga implies a radical transmutation of the mind, at the basis of which must be a readiness to change one's mode of life completely. "Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind," advised St Paul in his letter to the Romans (XII, 2). HPB also instructed:

Meditation, abstinence, the observation of moral duties, gentle thoughts, good deeds and kind words, as good will to all and entire oblivion of self, are the most efficacious means of obtaining knowledge and preparing for the reception of higher wisdom.

—Blavatsky, *Practical Occultism*

The transmutation of mind accomplished by yoga is described in various traditions as a *new birth*, which takes place after the death of the old self. The Katha Upanishad says that yoga is birth and death. The legendary phoenix which regenerates itself after being burnt to ashes, the creative dance performed on the burning-ground, the rose blooming from the cross of sacrifice, and other symbolic representations refer to the ending of the old so that a new consciousness may shine forth. In the classical text of Patanjali, yoga is the stilling of the processes of the profane mind, and the new birth is the awakening to the true nature of consciousness.

HPB writes that the pupils of Menander, after receiving baptism (*i.e.* initiation) were said to "resurrect from the dead." The resurrection, she adds, meant simply "the passage from the darkness of ignorance into the light of truth, the awakening of man's immortal spirit to inner and eternal life. This is the science of the Râja-yogis." Both death and rebirth in this sense can take place even while the body continues to exist. J. Krishnamurti explains:

Death is not the end of life ... Death is something that you live with every day, because you are dying every day to everything that you know ... Death means a renewal, a total mutation, in which thought does not function at all, because thought is the old. But when there is death, there is something totally new.

When, in daily life, there is a dying through the negation of memory and attachment, the consciousness is fresh and perceptive. Hence, Angelus Silesius could say: "Die now before thou diest, that thou mayst not die." A true philosopher (one who loves wisdom) like Socrates rehearses death at every moment of his life. The great Sufi, Jalaluddin Rumi knew this truth, for he too counseled:

Oh, man, go die before thou diest ...  
Such a death that thou wilt enter unto light,  
Not a death through which thou wilt enter unto the grave.

It must be noted that yoga is not occultism as commonly understood; it is not concerned with the practice of magic, the cultivation of psychic powers or research into the secret operations of nature. Neither is yoga a sort of devotionism, with sentimental ecstasies and emotional rewards. Nor is it the enjoyment of occasional expansion of consciousness. It involves a definite training, which brings about freedom from the compulsions of the body and from an uncontrolled mind. This freedom cannot be bought by either good works or the accumulation of knowledge. Advancement in the direction of inner transformation comes only by giving up accustomed pursuits and self-centered aims. Renunciation is not merely the giving up of material possessions and attachments, nor is it the prerogative of monks and hermits. Even the mind seeking knowledge, virtue, and other seemingly desirable things may be basically concerned with itself, and therefore selfish.

Thomas à Kempis wrote:

The wearing of a [religious] habit and shaving of the crown do little profit; but change of manners and perfect mortification of passions make a true religious man.

— *The Imitation of Christ*

Vedanta teaching lays stress on renunciation by the mind, and not physical distance from temptation, as crucial to yogic realization. The well-known Ashtâvakra-Samhitâ categorically says:

Liberation is attained when the mind does not desire or grieve or reject or accept or feel happy or angry. (VIII-2)

The basic difference between Râja-yoga and Hatha-yoga lies here. Hatha-yoga is a system for controlling the body and breath in order to discipline the mind and achieve *siddhis* or psychic powers. Râja-yoga recognizes the value of a healthy, balanced and orderly use of the body, and therefore includes a number of suitable breathing and bodily exercises in its training. But this is only incidental and peripheral, the main task being to bring about the transmutation of consciousness we have already mentioned.

Madame Blavatsky says:

He who has studied both systems, the Hatha Yoga and the Râja Yoga, finds an enormous difference between the two: one is purely psycho-physiological, the other psycho-spiritual.

—Blavatsky, H.P. *Collected Writings*, Vol. XII, Pg. 616

Here I must digress to mention that the term Hatha-yoga is now widely used outside India to describe the practice of the kind of exercises and postures which are admissible in Râja-yoga also, but in Indian tradition Hatha-yoga refers to the system of psycho-physiological training that HPB mentions and which included extreme mortification of

the body and the use of bizarre methods to obtain psychic powers. The warnings, which have been given at various times against Hatha-yoga, refer to such a system and its methods.

It should be realized that there is no causal relation between body and mind, so that, by taking steps to train and control the body, a person can automatically have a well-tuned mind. A healthy body is only an aid to keep the mind in a state of alertness. On the other hand, a mind which is clear, observant and thoughtful brings order into the physical and psychic sheaths, for the impulses which come from within are always stronger than outside circumstances. Democritus is reputed to have said: "The perfection of the soul will correct the depravity of body, but the strength of the body without reasoning does not render the soul better."

Even the quieting of the mind essential to yoga is not achieved by suppression and will power, but by mindfulness and understanding, by "looking at the lower self in the light of the higher." The reflective mind is quiet, not affected by wealth or poverty, fasting or feasting. Among the important requirements of yogic training is the serenity, which is a major theme in the teaching of the Bhagavad-Gitâ. The sage of stable mind is not shaken by the ups and downs of fortune. "Equilibrium is yoga" (B.G. II: 48) is one of the several striking definitions of yoga given in the Gitâ, which enjoins:

Perform action, ever dwelling in the harmony which is yoga, renouncing attachment,  
balanced in success and failure.

The yogi experiences a state of calm contentment at all times (which is not to be mistaken for self-satisfaction). The man of the world is only happy when he gets what he desires, unlike the yogi who asks for nothing and is happy with whatever comes to him, equal in praise and reproach, free from envy, anxiety and other problems. The Dhammapada, said to be a compilation of the Buddha's own words, says likewise:

Like a rock that's of one mass  
And by the wind unshook,  
E'en so, by praise or blame,  
Unmoved are the wise.

—Mrs. Rhys David's translation

The steady mind is aware of the impermanent nature of all that passes in the phenomenal world and of the unchanging Reality behind the phenomena. Everywhere it sees only that Reality and is therefore unaffected by the changes. This is brought out in the Isha Upanishad which describes the yogi as one who sees himself in the heart of all beings and all beings in his own heart. In the words of Plotinus: "Each being contains in itself the whole intelligible world. Therefore All is everywhere. Each is All and All is each."

Communion with nature is recommended in the practice of yoga. A Mahatma includes among the age-old conditions necessary for illumination “silence for certain periods of time to enable Nature herself to speak to him who comes to her for information.” The stillness of water, the silence of mountains or the seclusion of forests help to develop quietude. Nature expresses divine principles such as beauty and order to which the consciousness becomes alive through communion. Hence many religious and contemplative communities are established among natural surroundings. But a growth in sensitivity, which is a mark of inner development, involves not only response to the beauties of nature, but an increasingly sympathetic relationship with all creatures.

J. Krishnamurti muses:

It is odd that we have so little relationship with nature, with the insects and the leaping frog and the owl that hoots among the hills calling for its mate. We never seem to have a feeling for all living things on the earth. If we could establish a deep abiding relationship with nature we would never kill an animal for our appetite, we would never harm, vivisect, a monkey, a dog, a guinea pig for our benefit. ... This is not sentiment or romantic imagination, but a reality of a relationship with everything that lives and moves on the earth.

—*Krishnamurti to Himself*

Receptive minds discovered in their closeness to nature an insight into other worlds of greater reality. Thus, William Wordsworth wrote:

Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
Of the eternal Silence; truth that wake,  
    To perish never;  
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,  
    Nor Man nor Boy,  
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,  
Can utterly abolish or destroy!  
  
Hence in a season of calm weather  
    Though inland far we be,  
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea  
    Which brought us hither. ...

—*Intimations of Immortality*

The Taoist way of non-resistance also leads to greater sensitivity. Resistance makes the mind impervious to anything new, subtle or deep. When Jesus exhorted his hearers to become as little children he called upon them to be vulnerable, not with the vulnerability of a mind which is apt to be hurt, but to be open and innocent as a child. Lao Tzu said that the gentle reed which bends before rushing waters has greater

strength than the inflexible trunk of a tree which resists the flood. "Rigidity and strength are the way to death; pliability and gentleness the way to life."

Sensitivity grows through willingness to learn. Life is meant for learning. In reply to the question how the One Spirit (âtman) can be discovered, the Brihadâranyaka Upanishad answers: "The âtman is known through seeing, listening, pondering and meditating," all of which are ways of learning. An Adept wrote: "Learn to catch a hint from whatever agency it may be given. "Sermons may be preached even through stones." If we take the holographic model as an indication of how nature works, we see that through observing the part we can obtain an insight into the nature of the whole. William Blake realized this intuitively when he wrote:

To see a World in a grain of sand,  
And Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And Eternity in an hour.

—Auguries of Innocence

Every microcosm mirrors the macrocosm; therefore the quality of non-resistance and receptivity are essential to knowing. "If thy heart be right, then every creature would be a mirror of life and a book of holy doctrine" (Thomas à Kempis). It is generally believed that the wise can impart teaching of profound value. But if the mind is unreceptive and incapable of learning, it fails to grasp the purport of what they say. The sensitive mind, on the other hand, not only responds to the deeper meaning of the words but also perceives the truth, which comes through all of life. So Krishnamurti says:

We never listen to the birds, to the sound of the sea, or to the beggar. So we miss what the beggar is saying—and there may be truth in what the beggar is saying, and none at all in what is said by the rich man or the man in authority.

—*Life Ahead*

There are other requirements which are as important as serenity of mind and sensitivity. One of these is a sense of detachment in daily life. The spiritual aspirant must live in this world like a pilgrim who carries on the way only for a while. In Fitzgerald's poem *Omar Khayyam* we have:

With them the seed of Wisdom did I sow  
And with my own hand laboured it to grow  
And this was all the Harvest that I reaped  
'I came like Water, and like Wind I go.

The medieval saint-poet of western India, Eknath sang:

The bird alights in the courtyard,  
but would he stay there long?  
Thus should a man live his life  
while the bonds of karma hold him here.

The Dhammapada gives another beautiful analogy:

Just as bee, not harming flower,  
In hue or fragrance, flies away,  
The nectar taking, even so  
The sage should through the village go.

But the yogic life does not consist in mechanically cultivating a given set of virtues. Virtue must arise from the negation of unreal things through the use of discrimination, or *viveka*. Both the Yoga-Sûtras of Patanjali and the Bhagavad-Gitâ refer to *abhyâsa*, which is the constant examination in daily life of one's thoughts, emotions and actions to discover how far and in what manner they spring from false perception. All is transitory, even the earth and the mountains; the stars and the universes are only relatively real, the only reality being Life which knows no diminution or end. But the transitory and the unreal appear to the unawakened consciousness as absolutely real.

As a result of this mistaken perception the mind is attached to many things and people, and lives in conflict and sorrow. The practice of discrimination leads to detachment. Then to the eye of the observer, "All the world is a stage." He realizes that his own personality is a mask, and that self-identity is based on the superficial features of this personality such as station in life, looks and achievements. With growing awareness, mental detachment from the superficial, accidental and transitory takes place and there is a new kind of seeing which is no longer through the screen of the ego, with its desires, pleasures and frustrations. It is from this that virtue grows.

The Buddhist discipline of *vipassana*, which consists in observing every aspect of the personality, even the way one walks and talks, apart from the emotions and reactions, is a foundation for submerging the personality and growing in goodness. Through a growing awareness, there is a negation of every thought, feeling and motive, which asserts and sustains selfhood. In addition, the aspirant must do everything to lead the mind to universal harmony. In *Practical Occultism* HPB advises: "The mind must remain blunt to all but the universal truths in nature." The mind becomes what it meditates upon. So, the more it dwells upon the nature of the universal Life, on Wisdom, Love and Goodness in the absolute sense, the more it assimilates itself to immortal nature.

Meditation is the core of yogic practice. It is not like any ordinary occupation. "If there is no meditation, then you are like a blind man in a world of great beauty, light and color" (Krishnamurti). It is as necessary for the unfoldment of the spiritual nature as food is for the growth of the body. But meditation does not fill the consciousness or

mark the brain with more impressions and memories. It empties it of its contents. Much of what we have considered till now prepares the mind for this inner freedom.

In the school of Pythagoras every new entrant had to learn to listen. Listening was held to be the first step in a threefold process of meditation according to the ancient Indian tradition, which said that listening (*śravaṇa*) and pondering (*manana*) were preludes to the direct perception of truth in meditation (*nīdīdhyāsana*). In the act of listening, the focus of consciousness is in the heart, the blending of heart and mind being an important aspect of yoga. HPB in *Practical Occultism* says that the student's "thought must be predominantly fixed upon his heart, chasing therefrom every hostile thought to any living being. It [the heart] must be full of the feeling of its non-separateness from the rest of beings as from all in Nature; otherwise no success can follow." In the yogic texts, too, mention is made of letting the mind rest in the heart.

If listening merely consists of hearing with the external ear, a person only hears sound. If he listens with the mind and ears only, he hears words and concepts. But when he learns to listen with his consciousness centered in the heart all thought and distractions disappear and there is a state of still receptivity. This is itself the beginning of meditation.

Attention takes many forms. Listening is attention, but attention also consists of quiet observation. The Tattvārthādhigama Sūtra, an important text of the Jain religion, declares: "The distinctive characteristic of the soul (*jīva*) is attention." In a state of non-attention awareness of one's own true nature is lost. Therefore to discover true being it is necessary to live in a state of attention. In the training of yoga, aspirants are advised to do everything attentively, to be observant of their manner of eating, laughing, acting and so on. Normally, most actions are performed in a state of distraction. The ordinary task of everyday life become such a matter of routine that it is possible to do them using only a corner of the mind while another part is occupied with other things. So the mind is much of the time divided and distracted. As one speaks one may be planning something which has no relevance to the conversation.

Reflex action has undoubted value in a limited field. It would be a waste of energy if attention had to be given to all things including breathing, but when reflexes are extended, habit takes over and becomes so strong that inattention becomes a way of life. We do not ask ourselves why we hold certain opinions, what is the quality we bring to a relationship, what motive impels us, and so on. Speaking, acting, reacting, all go on mechanically according to the conditioning which has taken place. Conditioning is the unconscious absorption of thoughts and attitudes which come from the environment, from parents, teachers, companions and other sources. Attention involves observation of these psychological pitfalls, and acting with awareness and intelligence and not simply by habit. According to the Dhammapada inattention is the path of death.

Vigilance saves a person from psychological blindness and bondage to compulsions which come from within.

We have said attentive living reduces the tendency of the mind to distraction and fragmentation, and enables it to see and act wholly. *Samâdhi* means a gathering together of the energies of consciousness so completely that there is a direct awareness of the One Truth. Before reaching that high state of realization, mindfulness must be practiced. As *At the Feet of the Master* says in teaching one-pointedness, "You must give all your attention to each piece of work as you do it." This means that great care must be given to the quality of the action in the present, undistracted by thoughts and expectations about future results.

Another important factor of attention is recollectedness. In the worldly life there is either forgetfulness or ignorance of the direction in which one is going. Most people are selfish; some want to be unselfish, but except for occasional thoughts about this, they are lost. Recollectedness begins when the mind is brought back frequently to realize what kind of life is true and worthwhile. Sometimes it is said that recollection is remembering to act in accordance with the will of God. The "submission" of Islam and the surrender taught by certain cults of devotion are this. Remembrance can be in the background of the mind even while doing ordinary duties. Brother Lawrence, whose conversations are recorded as *The Practice of the Presence of God*, said:

That with him the time of prayer was not different from any other; he had set times for it, which the Father Prior had appointed, but he neither wanted nor asked for them, for the most absorbing work did not divert him from God.... That our sanctification does not depend upon certain works, but upon doing for God that which we ordinarily do for ourselves. It is sad to see that so many people mistake the means for the end, who for reasons of human respect attach great importance to works which they do very imperfectly.

Similarly, Eckhart taught;

A pure heart is one that is unencumbered, unworried, uncommitted, and which does not want its own way about anything but which, rather, is submerged in the loving will of God, having denied self. Let a job be ever so inconsiderable, it will be raised in effectiveness and dimension by a pure heart.

In the *Jivanmukti-viveka*, a Vedântic text, comparison is made to a person who is in love. In such a person there is a sense of joy, a song in the heart, which remains all the time even when he is doing mundane work such as cooking or washing clothes. Similarly in the state of recollectedness there is a background awareness of the sacred even when one is occupied with ordinary things.

This state of mind drives out images which arise in the mind of oneself, enjoying, accomplishing, or acquiring. Normally, when action is performed, at the subconscious

level if not at the conscious, there is the thought "I did it." *Ahamkâra* or the "I"-making function of the mind attributes actions to a center, which is named as "I." Therefore when a person learns something, associated with it is the thought "I know." When he does something, the subconscious or the conscious mind says "I am the doer." When there is an experience of pleasure or beauty, an image is instantly created "I am the enjoyer." Thus continuously the "I" is built up and sustained. But in recollectedness, the attitude is more in the nature of "Thy will be done." The Gita says all action emanates from the three *gunas* (or tendencies in nature) and it is only the ignorant who imagine that they are the source of action.

Virtue ceases to have merit when there is self-consciousness. When someone thinks "I am humble," he is not. Real humility cannot identify itself. In the Buddhist Sutta-nipâta we are told, "The best men do not reckon themselves as distinguished, nor plain, nor low." Quoting something similar HPB wrote: "Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes." Râja Yoga powers are not pompously boasted." All tendency to self-esteem and the habit of giving identity to oneself by saying "I am this or that" is brought to an end with sustained self-observation and attention.

The yogi is said to be no more a child to his parents, a father to his children, or a citizen of a State except in a physical sense. Hugh of Saint Victor wrote: "He is still weak for whom his native land is sweet, but he is strong for whom every country is a fatherland, and he is perfect for whom the whole world is a place of exile."

When there is absence of a self-image, there is true silence. Silence exists at different levels. There is the silence of the tongue, which is useful. Continual chattering creates restlessness of mind and is a symptom of inner agitation. Religious communities all over the world insist on the observance of silence at stated periods. But even when the lips are silent, the mind may not be so. With the practice of serenity and the various forms of attention, the mind becomes quieter, but deeper in the consciousness there is still an image of the "I," whether it is spelt out in detail or remains as a vague thought in the subconscious. This is clinging to existence (*abhinivesa*) as a separate, identifiable entity, which is mentioned as the last of the *klesas* or disabilities of the mind. As long as it exists, there is desire for the future, in heaven, in a reincarnation or in an improved spiritual condition. Only when there is total freedom from the desire for existence with identity is there silence and emptiness at a profound level. This is the fundamental aim set before Buddhists: the realization that the self has no independent existence.

The ultimate realization is non-duality. That cannot be experienced as long as there is self-existence; when there is the feeling of being the self, there is also the non-self and therefore duality. In the deep silence of no-self alone there is knowledge of the universal essence. The Sufis teach that gnosis is nearer to silence, than to self. Sankarâchârya tells us that when a sage was asked three times about the nature of Brahman (the ultimate

reality), he remained silent all the time, but finally replied; "I teach you but you do not understand; silence is the *âtman*." It is to that that meditation leads.

The following conversation from the Chinese writing makes the truth clear:

TEACHER: What is the use of looking outside? All you will see is objects! Turn round and look within.

DISCIPLE: Shall I then see the subject instead?

TEACHER: If you did, you would be looking at an object. An object is such in whatever direction you look.

DISCIPLE: So I cannot see myself?

TEACHER: You cannot see what is not there.

DISCIPLE: What then shall I see?

TEACHER: Perhaps you may see the absence of yourself. It is what is looking. It has been called the "Void."

The void is Nirvâna. But it is not void. It is fullness, the fullness which is love, blessedness, the peace that passeth understanding. "Utter knowledge is but utter love."

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