



Yoga: A Scientific Method for God-Realization

YOGA, THE SCIENTIFIC PRACTICE that leads to the exalted state of cosmic consciousness, has often been reduced here in the West to learning a set of physical postures. All too often the term yoga is understood only to be the practice of *asana*, or *hatha yoga*, the physical exercises that are a part of the greater system of *raja yoga* as taught by the sage Patanjali.⁹

A complete discussion regarding yoga and its philosophical roots and practices is well beyond the scope of this book. The most definitive source on the science of yoga can be found elsewhere in other texts.¹⁰ However, I do want to address those aspects of yoga that are essential to the psychotherapy process. First of all, the *asanas* or exercises taught in *hatha yoga* are in fact designed to prepare the body for meditation. One is considered to be a master of *asana* if one can sit for three hours without moving a muscle. But let us consider the entire system of yoga as developed by the sage Patanjali. It consists of eight steps that lead to Self-realization. They are as follows:

Yama and *Niyama* (right behavior and action)

Asana (physical postures)

Pranayama (life force energy control through the breath)

Pratyahara (internalization of the mind and the senses)

Dharana (concentration)

Dhyana (contemplation)

Samadhi (immersion into the object of contemplation).

Yama* and *Niyama

First there are the *yamas* and *niyamas*, the dos and don'ts of behavior, something like the Ten Commandments. Their basic underlying belief is that one has to learn to behave correctly as an initial step on the path towards Self-realization. The *yamas* and *niyamas* set the foundation for our spiritual life. The *yamas* are: nonviolence, nonlying, nonstealing, nonsensuality, and nonattachment. The *niyamas* are: cleanliness, contentment, austerity, self-study, and devotion to the Supreme Lord.

It makes good sense to teach basic moral values as part of a system that is designed to awaken the reality that we are all part of the same cosmic source. If we are all the same, then it makes little sense to steal from yourself, to kill yourself, or to lie to yourself. Integrity and right action become important qualities in any system of personal development, and to progress spiritually it becomes essential to align oneself with the highest of values and principles so that one's actions become a reflection and expression of that great truth. We become hypocrites when we talk about a level of awareness and a level of spiritual attainment but do not live it from day to day.

The world has seen many examples of such hypocrisy. A great soul has said that "one's true spirituality is tested in the light of day."¹¹ The foundation of yoga begins with the teaching that it is important to behave correctly. A deep esoteric necessity lies in the reality that as one meditates on a regular basis, one develops great spiritual power and energy. This energy flows according to the consciousness of the individual, and if the individual has not developed a sound basis of

right action and moral behavior, then great misuse and harm can result from this power, so inner transformation is necessary.

Psychotherapy actually plays a very important part in this first step. It is impossible for a yogi to fake a level of development. Whatever unresolved issues that exist in one's personal psychology will rise to the surface like a skin diver who is out of air. Typically, issues of sexuality and power are the most common forms of abuse in America, and "great swamis" who have acquired large followings are found to be less than immune to these temptations and less than perfected in their actions regarding sex, money, and power. Consciousness wants to perfect itself, and it will necessarily bring forward all of one's shadow aspects on the path towards Self-realization. We need mirrors to see ourselves clearly, and if we rise to a level where we perceive that we have no equal or more advanced soul to function in that capacity, then life itself will become the mirror, and in a public arena. Several well-known swamis in America during the 1980s lost some or all degree of respect as their shadow material was played out across the mass media channels in this country. Even today, in 1997, some dramas are still being played out in the courts, as hurt and outraged devotees sue over their perceived damages. We in America have been very naive in our ability to discriminate between enlightened beings and nonenlightened beings. We have frequently assumed that a man of renunciation and apparent spiritual power was perfectly safe as a teacher, and many of us entered blindly into a *guru*-disciple relationship. We gave our trust and matured through the process of deception, and in the process we have learned a great many painful lessons. The *guru*-disciple relationship is a sacred one and does serve the spiritual seeker, but the *guru* must be a perfected being, and these great souls are naturally extremely rare.

The *guru* is a teacher, a spiritual preceptor, and functions as a mirror to help us see ourselves. If one has the good karma, the accumulated merit from past goodness, to have a fully enlightened being as one's *guru*, then the *guru* also serves to speed up one's evolution by lifting some of one's karma and helping with one's attunement to God. Subtle, vibratory forces are at work that help and

hinder each person's spiritual progress. The true *guru* is a Divinely sent messenger to speed one's journey homeward. While the *guru* can help our progress, we still must make an enormous personal effort, and our desire, actions, and the use of our free will determines our progress.

Asana

Asana becomes the next step in the yogic process. The physical postures or *asanas* allow one to stretch the spine, which allows for the subtle currents of energy to flow freely during *pranayama* and meditation practice. The postures also allow for tension that has been stored in the body to be released, which explains why this practice has become so popular and useful in stress-reduction programs. When *asanas* are taught correctly, in combination with the breath, the student begins to experience how breath affects the physical body: tension and chronic muscle contractions begin to dissolve as one consciously breathes into the source of discomfort. The student begins to experience that there is something beyond the mind and the body, which he can access through this practice. *Asana* practice prepares the student for meditation, both mentally and physically. The mind begins to be drawn within as the focus of the breath is placed upon the body and the flow of energy within the body. The body becomes relaxed, and the flow of subtle energy is enhanced.

The *asana* system also relates to recent findings in mind-body medicine. Clinical observation with those patients receiving bodywork reveals that repressed memories and strong emotions are released when physical blocks in deep tissue are released. The unconscious also resides in the body. Specific systems of modified *hatha yoga* practice such as Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy,¹² use the power of *asana* to help release deep emotional conflicts. The body often provides a quicker path for emotional release and personal transformation than traditional psychotherapy techniques that focus mainly upon emotional and conceptual levels.

Pranayama

Pranayama is the scientific practice of controlling the life-force energy through the direction and use of the breath. Advanced forms of *pranayama*, such as *kriya yoga*, work to cleanse the body of venous blood, so that the heart and lungs do not have to work so hard. Breath controls the flow of energy. Three subtle currents run along the astral spine: the *ida*, on the left, comes upward as one inhales, the *pingala*, on the right side of the astral spine, goes downward upon the exhale, and the *sushumna* is in the center of the spine. Advanced *pranayama* practice focuses the breath in the center of the spine in order to draw life force energy away from the outer senses into the higher centers of the spine and brain. Simply holding the breath will not achieve these results.

In deep states of meditation, once the heart has been stopped, it is possible to stop breathing for extended periods of time and cause no harm to the brain or any organs of the physical body. The body can be sustained on subtle energy during these altered states of consciousness.

Pratyahara

Pratyahara, or internalization, is reached when the consciousness has been successfully redirected inward, away from the linear, rational mind and the senses. The previous techniques help to achieve this state, wherein the life-force energy has been withdrawn away from the outer senses of awareness into the deeper regions of the spine and brain. As the life-force energy is redirected inward, consciousness can move into the superconscious realms.

Dharana

Next comes *dharana*, or concentration. *Mantra* (repetition of sacred formulae, names of God, or prayers) becomes useful in this process because it allows one to focus upon a single-pointed object, in

this case a sacred sound that carries a vibration of holiness. Various Sanskrit *mantras* hold this power to fix the awareness on the sound and thought of the Divine. As one develops the capacity to stay focused upon the breath and the *mantra*, then the distracting thoughts of the mind recede into the background of consciousness. This process allows one to observe the contents of the mind and the field of emotions that come and go across the screen of awareness. This practice deepens the awareness that one is not the body, mind, or emotions. One becomes more stabilized as the observer of pure consciousness.

This practice develops an inner strength that is laser-like in its focus. Deep concentration allows one to stay focused on the subtle aspects of consciousness and to avoid the pull of passing creations of mind and emotions. Then, the reality that we exist within a dream becomes clearer and clearer.

The great scriptures say that we are the product of God's dream, yet we tend to take our own reality so seriously and regard the contents of our mind as the living Truth. We have evolved to the extent that we do not take our nightly dreams as absolute reality, yet we take our daily dreams so much more so. Once the student moves into *dharana*, the reality of the mind's creation becomes as tangible as the movies on the big screen. We observe our mind creating the images and realities that we hold so dear. We watch the dramas and stories emerging and dissolving into the void from which they come. Thus, the student's ability to concentrate becomes the tool for emerging more deeply into true consciousness and exploring the illusion of reality. The process of perfected concentration leaves us clear to identify with the Being that is observing the inner movie. The macro melts into the micro, and the micro expands into the macro. Reality begins to emerge and collapse, and we watch as we become identified and lost in the illusion and then re-emerge to the Truth of our awareness, which is pure and eternal.

Dhyana

Dhyana, the process of contemplation, takes us even more deeply into the Divine, for we become That which we contemplate. There is an old story of a disciple who was sent into a room and instructed by his master to meditate on a water buffalo. Three days later, his master came to him and asked the disciple to follow him out of the room. The student protested that he could not get through the doors because his horns were too big!

Once we have developed the capacity to concentrate and focus, then we choose the object of desire: the Divine. Some individuals need a personification of the Divine and therefore choose to focus upon a *guru*, such as Jesus, Buddha, or some other holy figure. Others relate to the impersonal and experience God as Light, Love, Bliss, or Peace. The adept student keeps a steady bead on the Divine. God becomes the polestar of the mind. The attention does not waver and the focus remains clear: God, God, God. These inner callings tug at the Divine heartstrings to capture a Divine response. Peace, Love, Joy, and Bliss open to the quiet and stillness within that is saturated with the individual's sincere devotion.

Samadhi

The ultimate purpose for the spiritual aspirant is to obtain final liberation from the limitations of delusion. As the student experiences deeper meditative states, he or she can encounter different degrees of Divine perception. Just as the dreaming person believes the dream material to be real, the spiritually ignorant individual beholds the cosmic dream, the physical/material world, as the ultimate reality, whereas the spiritually awakened individual begins to behold the levels of creation behind the outer apparent reality. Paramahansa Yogananda describes the various states of this ecstasy, *samadhi*, in his interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

The first stage of Divine ecstasy (*savikalpa samadhi*) gives the yogi the experience of God-union, in which no memory is present of

the phenomenal universe. When he returns to mortal consciousness, he finds it hard to retain his Divine realization. By further practice of *kriya yoga*, the devotee is able to experience God-union even during the wakeful state of activities in the world. He has then achieved the “half-awake” ecstatic state, in which with open eyes he consciously sees the world around him as the Divine dream.

By development, however, the devotee is able to remain in continuous ecstasy with open or closed eyes (*nirvikalpa samadhi*); he learns to commingle his consciousness fully in the Lord and also to produce from that consciousness the dream of the cosmos. In this state he can choose to remain awake in God, without viewing the dream of creation, or he can remain in the “half-awake” blissful state, realizing the cosmos as a varied dream. When *nirvikalpa samadhi* is attained, the yogi no longer perceives the “actuality” of the world as does the ordinary man.

Modern science has discovered that the various material elements are nothing more than differently vibrating atoms. The universe is a cosmic motion picture of dancing atoms, which in turn are energy-sparks—not matter at all, but vibratory waves.¹³

The ultimate value of yogic practices and meditation are to achieve this true perception of reality and to stabilize one’s consciousness within the Divine vibrations. This shift in the basic “ground of being” provides a dramatic change in one’s life and one’s relationships with others. All of life becomes an extension of the Divine and sacred for that reason. And while the deeper states of meditation do result in profound degrees of Peace, Love, and Joy, the ultimate purpose is far deeper than just the attainment of these heightened states of consciousness: the *samadhi* experience transforms the individual’s consciousness and nature of Being beyond the limitations of the dualistic worldly delusion.

The aim of this brief introduction into the path of yoga is to clarify that meditation is more than riding a bike and running for a mile or two. Meditation appears to be so misunderstood here in the West. It is a common occurrence to hear someone say, “Oh, yes, I meditate—every morning with my morning coffee or while I am

jogging.” The great liberating benefits from spiritual practice, including avoidance of tremendous suffering, are lost in this superficial understanding, which ignores the splendors of the interior spiritual life.

Kriya Yoga

Paramahansa Yogananda explained that it is eventually possible for an individual to obtain final liberation in the normal course of development if that person continues to live a good life, serve others, and love God—but that in the normal course of evolution, it will take one million years to achieve this spiritual freedom. *Kriya yoga*, an advanced *pranayama* technique, provides a way to dramatically accelerate the slower, normal process of evolution. *Kriya yoga* has been handed down over the last one hundred years through a lineage of fully realized spiritual Masters. This technique, which activates the subtle life-force energy in the spine, is explained by Swami Sri Yukteswar, Paramahansa Yogananda’s *guru*, in the following way:

One year of life spent on earth is determined by the twelve-month cycle and the revolution of the earth around the sun. The *kriya* technique, which uses the breath and the flow of energy within the spine, is said to be equivalent to one year of spiritual development for each *kriya* that is properly performed. Thus, one complete breath which moves up and down the spine is equal to one year of time spent on earth. Therefore, by *kriya yoga* practice, the devotee can speed up spiritual progress immensely. With the help of this process, it may be possible for one to achieve final liberation within one to three lifetimes. Once again, we can see the difference between the notion that meditation is only a practice that promotes relaxation and stress reduction, and the understanding that yogic meditation is a way to obtain spiritual liberation and freedom from the cycle of birth and death. The true roots and functions of yoga and meditation are much greater and the results much more far-reaching than most individuals understand.