

Yoga is not moral philosophy, existential enhancement or behavioural correction. It is a doorway into the vibrant wisdom of life itself that takes place through the agency of internal enquiry (svadhyaya). The eight limbs of yoga are not techniques. They are dimensions of human experience and awareness, accessed by deep self enquiry. The portals of effective self enquiry are the first two limbs of yoga, Yama and Niyama. Sensitivity, honesty, openness, intimacy, acceptance, integrity, trust, passion, enquiry and total-absorption¹ are not behavioural imperatives, nor moral injunctions. They are lenses to focus our attention on that which is actually happening in and as body and mind.

We cannot make ourselves be sensitive, honest, open, intimate and accepting. All we can do is enquire into whether or not we are being so. If we recognise we are being insensitive or dishonest these recognitions are expressions of our now being honest and sensitive. So rather than being caught in the moral masochism of judging ourselves for their absence, when used as lenses they spontaneously reinforce themselves without any effort on our part, simply because, as natural expressions of human intelligence, they contain an irresistible impulse to express themselves. This natural expression is deeply satisfying, even though we cannot demand or command it. It comes and goes as if with a mind of its own. Yet the delight of its coming and the discomfort of its going naturally draw it back more and more often.

This can not happen if we use yama as imposed moral imperatives, whereby they drive us deeper into isolation and denial. Yet it is not

¹ *ahimsa, satya, asteya, brahmacharya, aparigraha, sauca, samtosa, tapas, svadhyaya, ixvarapranidana*

so hard to see the value of committing to sensitivity, honesty, openness, intimacy and acceptance. Nevertheless the fact remains that they are not continuously available. That they sometimes are available when we want them to be gives us the false impression that they are at our command. Yet we cannot make them stay forever. Seeing this helplessness can give us the uneasy impression that our inner life, and even its outer expression, are completely out of control. Yet when we see beyond any doubt through our self enquiry why our orientation, attitudes, feelings, and thoughts are not ours to command or control we are seeing also that they are not actually out of control either. We recognise that there is something, deep and reassuring, behind them. We see that they are coming and going within an exquisitely detailed matrix² of action and reaction, within which they are necessitated by the indivisible wholeness of totality.

As yama and niyama become spontaneously more present we pass through the door of yoga into the indivisible wholeness of our own body. In doing so we encounter the third limb of yoga: Asana. Asana is not a technique: though it can perhaps most easily be accessed through the practice of yoga postures. It is an awareness state in which we experience ourselves as an undefined and unfragmented presence with neither limit nor boundary. This experiential possibility depends on our body becoming so stable and comfortable³ that we lose our sense of restricted solidity. The finite and fragmenting coordinates of left and right, front and back, top and bottom, inside and outside that generate our sense of defined physicality dissolve into a light, formless spaciousness. This is well

² Indra's net

³ *Shtiram sukham* **Yogasutras ii. 46**

known to all yoga posture practitioners, even if its implications have not been recognised. It is the sheer, satisfying delight of this above anything else that brings us happily back to our mat over and over again without any need to discipline ourselves.

Within the awareness state of Asana, Pranayama naturally arises. No longer distracted by the structural coordinates and motor activity of the body, we become absorbed in its deeper activity. This is most obviously and consistently the presence of respiration. As we become absorbed by the rhythm of the breath we lose concern with the particular aspects and qualities of its presence. Distinctions of speed, depth and smoothness and between inbreath and outbreath, between flow and pause, between breath and breather dissolve. The depth of our absorption in that which is actually happening in our body then takes us away from all sensory input and physical experience.

This is Pratyahara, or sensory withdrawal, which, again, is not a technique. No longer noticing our body, even our breathing, we are taken by the unconscious becoming conscious. Buried impressions rise into awareness, as memories, insights, ideas, or images. This is not an active thinking process, but one in which thoughts arise spontaneously from the unconscious, and are not responded to.

As we relax into this flow of internal perceptions it slows down, and a single impression becomes suspended in awareness. This is Dharana, or meditative focus. If we are relaxed enough to settle into this one impression it opens into Dhyana. This is the state of meditative illumination. Here we are provided with clear, unprejudiced insights

into the dynamics of our mental and behavioural activity⁴, and begin to realise the nonlocal nature of both mind and body.

This awareness state can infold further into meditative absorption, or Samadhi, within which the perceiver (the self) and its apparent perceptions (the other) merge into each other as the subtle dynamics and nature of cognition and perception are revealed. Here we realise beyond any doubt what we most deeply are in our unconditioned and unconditional nature. These last three limbs, Dharana to Samadhi are meditation.

The infolding of awareness through the eight limbs of yoga is an inner event. It has nothing at all to do with external qualities: least of all physical prowess. Being more or less flexible, more or less strong, has nothing to do with it. It is not a journey into the capacity of the body, though we use it to make the journey. It is a conscious journey into the nature of the body and its source.

This is a journey that can only be taken by a deep internalisation of awareness, and cannot be effectively imagined by anyone who has not made it. We are taken from the divisive fragmentations of the particular, whereby we navigate and learn, to the indivisibility of wholeness, whereby and as which we are nourished and exist. This is an experiential descent through the divisions and fragmentations of body and mind into the indivisible wholeness of their intrinsic nature as consciousness. Only when we no longer take the limited and limiting form or capacity of body or mind to be the limit of what we are can we discover the depths, subtelties and satisfaction of what we fully are.

⁴ *cittavrtti*

extract from: THE LITTLE BOOK OF THE BANDHAS

by Godfrey Devereux