

Integrating Yoga into Our Daily Lives

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OF ALL THE TERMS that Indian philosophy has given to the Western world, 'yoga', by all standards, is the most popular and is generally understood as some techniques for a healthier living. After all, humans have always endeavoured to make themselves happier and every bit of knowledge has been used and is being used to prolong human existence and happiness. Human beings are the focus of all sciences and its various applications. Dr Alexis Carrel, in his famous book, *Man, the Unknown* says: 'Man in his entirety is located within the jurisdiction of the scientific

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techniques. ... Man must turn his attention to himself ... The science of man makes use of all other sciences.'¹

Yoga is one science that has been able to touch all aspects of the human personality and therefore is the most widely practised. Practitioners of yoga in its various aspects are to be found in all parts of the globe today and interestingly some precepts of yoga can be seen in various cultures from ancient times. Subcultures of Africa, South America, and Australia had various rituals that were nothing short of meditations on the forces of nature with the intention to harness energy and to connect with Mother Earth. We are reminded of the various *upasanas* that are discussed in the *Chhandogya Upanishad* when

we look at these nature worshipping cultures. The invading Westerners had little respect for indigenous cultures and most of the aboriginal practices have been decimated. Vipassana, Zen meditation practices, mindfulness of the Buddhists, and similar practices that are found in Taoism are all certainly influenced by ancient Indian yoga techniques, and in the modern times there have been so many schools of yoga with fan following too, to say the least. Yoga has also been misunderstood as an esoteric method to get a 'high' and was quite popularly associated with the hippie culture of the 1960s. However, after the initial enthusiasm subsided, a more balanced approach to yoga as a means to a holistic and integrated personality is seen today.

The Innate Urge for Integrating Our Personality

There has always been a 'discontent' among the human beings and the methods to assuage this feeling of loss—an unknown want that keeps us dissatisfied with all material things and pursuits, has been the single purpose of all religions. The irony is that the more we try to be happy, happiness eludes us. It is like the proverbial dog trying to catch its own tail! Swami Vivekananda puts it succinctly:

What makes men miserable? Because they are slaves, bound by laws, puppets in the hand of nature, tumbled about like playthings. We are continually taking care of this body that anything can knock down; and so we are living in a constant state of fear. ... we are always multiplying our wants. It is a morbid desire with us to multiply our wants. We have become so unhinged and unnatural that nothing natural will satisfy us. We are always grasping after morbid things, must have unnatural excitement—unnatural food, drink, surroundings, and life. As to fear, what are our lives but bundles of fear? The deer has only one class of fear, such as that

from tigers, wolves, etc. Man has the whole universe to fear.²

Science has been providing so many ways and means to keep us entertained but everything loses its sheen after the initial enthusiasm ends and we are back to square one. A mad rat race has begun and the human is not aware as to why he does what he does! We laugh at others' mistakes and see their lives as ruined, little realising that we are also in the same boat!

The *Mundaka Upanishad* uses a beautiful allegory to depict this conflict in the human being: "Two birds that are ever associated and have similar names, cling to the same tree. Of these, one eats the fruit of divergent tastes, and the other looks on without eating. On the same tree, the individual soul remains drowned or stuck, as it were; and so it moans, being worried by its impotence. When it sees thus the other, the adored Lord, and Lord's glory, then it becomes liberated from sorrow."³ Here, the two birds are the two natures that we see in every human being: one worldly and the other spiritual. In other words, it is the conflict between the outgoing mind and senses on the one hand and the inner self that is the source of all our higher faculties on the other. Yoga can be defined as the method that leads to channelling the human faculties to higher purposes and thereby achieving a state of calm and rest that is associated with meditateness. Meditation is not possible without integration of personality. Swami Yatiswarananda defines human personality as, "The unconscious part of us and the conscious part together make up what is called personality, which reaches out into its environment and in turn is affected by it."⁴

Minding the Mind

All conflicts are in the mind; between its two parts: the higher and the lower. The *Amritabindu*

Upanishad says: 'Mind alone is the cause for bondage as well as liberation in the human being.'⁵ Resolution of conflicts in the mind that affect our personality can be done by integrating yoga into our life. Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavadgita*: 'The yogi must constantly integrate the faculties of body, mind, and soul so that one can be free from all distractions that bind the yogi.'⁶ Yoga is more about aligning our inner being than postures or breath control.

While Semitic religions view the human being as a fallen angel, who has to get back to heaven by being true to God, the Oriental religions have held that the human can raise itself to the divine by controlling nature, external and internal. The science of culturing our body, senses, and mind by trying to go within, became yoga and the science of controlling and using external nature became the various branches of science. Both have helped humanity immensely and have provided answers to the puzzle of human existence. While science has also made way for

destructive technology and weapons, and the like, the path of yoga has benefited the human beings, individually and also made them more universal in their outlook, thereby fostering better understanding and peace.

However, the present-day world has become more obsessed with the external and consequently there are atypical conflicts that rage within the human mind. For example, selfie culture has started taking its toll on a smartphone-obsessed generation with accidents involving mobiles being reported on a daily basis. Getting killed while taking selfies on train tracks and being oblivious of the approaching train or being hit on roads while driving vehicles and taking selfies at the same time, make us think, 'Is life so unimportant, so worthless that you do not care to protect yourself?'

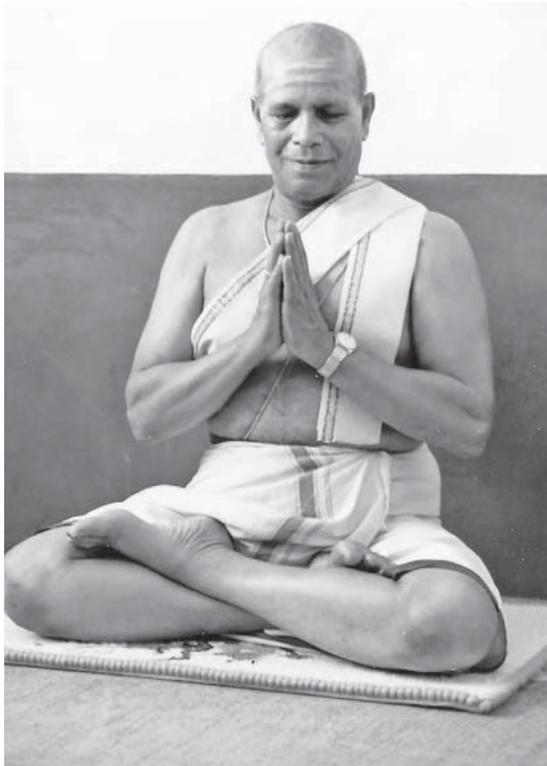
The seriousness of the problem is better understood when one sees the mobile de-addiction counselling unit that has been set up at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro



IMAGE: WWW.READERSDIGEST.CA

Sciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru, where youngsters who are hooked to the Internet and their smartphones are provided treatment! There, one can very well see aggressive behaviour and withdrawal symptoms just as in those addicted to drugs. What a sheer waste of human life when there are such wonderful opportunities with the advancement of science and technology? We have begun to invest smartness in machines and given it intelligence too, whereby the fear of artificial intelligence taking over the human race has started. Whither is our destiny? The modern generation is passing through turbulent times, be it with reference to politics, economics, or human conflicts. Various 'isms' and 'ideologies' have stolen the limelight and everything seems to end in violence and altercation. So, yoga as a path to integral personality is becoming popular with good reason.

K Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009)



The Age of Yoga

Swamiji's participation in the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 turned the attention of the so-called progressive West towards the brooding East and just as Swamiji said in his response to the welcome on 11 September 1893, acceptance and assimilation of other religions and cultures has entered the minds of the present-day thinkers.⁷ There were times when famous people like Rudyard Kipling held opinions like, 'East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.'⁸ James S Ross, an educationist, writes: 'The Western mind, absorbed as it has been in the advancement of physical sciences, finds it difficult to understand the more contemplative Eastern mind and to appreciate its values.'⁹

However, great thinkers like Arthur Schopenhauer and William James have acknowledged the influence of Upanishads and yoga in their learning. 'In the whole world there is no study, except that of the originals, so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Oupnekhat [Upanishads]. It has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death,'¹⁰ says Schopenhauer while James acknowledged that 'the most venerable ascetic system, and the one whose results have the most voluminous experimental corroboration is undoubtedly the Yoga system in Hindustan.'¹¹ Exclusivity is fast disappearing and a truly global culture is emanating. Yoga has a great role to play in integrating the nations of the world. Yogic practitioners are coming from all over the world to experts who can teach the philosophy of yoga and the names of B K S Iyengar and K Pattabhi Jois have become synonymous with yoga.

Yoga Properly Understood

Yoga was conceived essentially as a synthesis, as a method to achieve individual harmony by channelling all human faculties to attain higher ends, which in turn would result in the happiness of the

masses and good of the many, *bahujana sukhaya*, *bahujana hitaya*, for the happiness of many, for the good of many. Unfortunately, many are under the wrong notion that yoga, the science of integral development of the human being, is merely a physical discipline or a kind of gymnastics. The effects of yoga on the mind, the healing aspects that it has by soothing our strained nerves through the direction of our internal forces to nobler pursuits are sidelined by those who practise it for physical well-being or for prolonging their youthfulness. Interestingly, yoga attracted the attention of Western psychologists like William James who tried to unravel the mysteries of intuition and spiritual states and Dr Roberto Assagioli of Italy, who studied yoga extensively and introduced its methods in psychotherapy. Dr Alfonso Caycedo, former President of the International Society of Sophrology and Psycho-somatic Medicine, is of the opinion that the scientific methodology of Western psychotherapy and yoga must be combined to help ease the human mind from modern-day tensions. He says that yoga is more exhaustive, more thorough, and better structured.

Yoga starts with correcting ailments that affect the body; liberating the practitioner from limitations and disabilities, frustration and anxiety through relaxation and control of restlessness. The preparatory stages of *yama* and *niyama* train the mind to become alert and fully aware of the workings of the body and also to study itself. The outgoing senses are withdrawn and focussed on the inner beauty of the person, the spiritual core of human nature. It is like the teacher showing the disciple that there is a hidden mine of precious diamonds within and so why bother about cheap glitter of the outside world. This turning within requires tremendous will power and strength of conviction. Therefore, the Upanishads proclaim that the path of yoga is not for the faint-hearted. All strengths available at our disposal must be

harnessed and only then can the door to immortality be opened. Yoga prepares the aspirant by fine tuning her or his system, so that the person can receive the powerful surge of energy when the flood gates of realisation are opened. The conduit must be capable of withstanding intense pressure and yield not to alluring powers that can come when the mind is focussed and when prana is controlled.

Bringing Yoga to Our Rescue

There is harmony within the individual when the body, mind, and soul are integrated. Only when one realises that there is an eternal principle within the finite human and this spiritual quotient is in each person, irrespective of caste, creed, race, or sex, she or he would have attained the true purpose of yoga—the removal of all distinctions and differences and reaching the point of union of the individual spirit with the universal Spirit.

In our daily life we are not aware of the different dimensions of the human system. When we are busy working, we do not take care of our mind or the emotions and are often obsessed with the desire to be successful at every level. We seek constant praise and approbation indicating the hollow within our personality. We fragment our human system and use parts of it disconnectedly and this is the cause for all the strain and stress. We are unable to quench our thirst for fame and power and miserably fail on the material front. The resulting dissatisfaction enhances our mental struggles and we end up bankrupt of all strength and enthusiasm in life. We look upon ourselves as not 'whole' but as loosely connected faculties.

With all the advancement in science, medicine, and the science of psychology, we have not been able to point out the demarcations between the body and the mind or the intellect and the emotions. In and through all these faculties, the Atman or the individual soul functions, and

when we achieve a harmonious blending of all these faculties, we could be integrated. Conflicts between the desires of the body and the aspirations for a higher life that result in guilt or suppression lead to serious psychological problems and similarly conflicts between the head and the heart can make a person too dry and harsh or namby-pamby. In the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali, defects that afflict all individuals are mentioned: *avidya*, ignorance and *asmita*, sense of pride. Wrong understanding and ego are born in the mind while *raga*, attachment born of desires and *dvesha*, hatred due to unfulfilled desires are emotional issues. Above all, there is *abhinivesha*, or wrong identification with the body that results in anxiety and fear when old age grips us.¹² The fear of death is an existential crisis that torments all those, who have not had a glimpse of the higher dimensions of the human life. Yoga teaches us about the spiritual dimension of the human personality; about how to get over all anxieties and worries by delinking ourselves from all that makes us confined to the psycho-physical system and linking us to the eternal existence within.

Sri Krishna exhorts Arjuna to be a yogi,¹³ because the path of yoga is superior to the control of body functions through asceticism, it is also superior to mere intellectual understanding and is higher than efficiency in work or diligent performance of one's duties. Here, there is a beautiful insight into what essentially is yoga. It is much more than the constituent parts of the discipline and the results that accrue from such practices. Yoga is essentially a union of all our strengths with the core of our existence and therefore Sri Krishna says in the very next verse that 'he whose inner being is united with me, the conscious principle, is best integrated' (6.47).

The paths that are prescribed to forge this union can be grouped under the four yogas, namely: jnana yoga—the path of discrimination

to disassociate the mind from nonessentials and assertion of the Self through intellectual understanding, resulting in the experience of the Truth within and without. **Bhakti yoga**—the path of devotion to the Lord of the universe, who is also the indwelling divine principle, with loving worship and bonding like that of a child to its mother or as a lover to his beloved or as the loyalty of the servant to his master or as the singular attraction that the money lender has towards money as the main tools.

Karma yoga—the path of dedicating all the fruits of action to God and thereby effacing the idea of 'I', the doer and enjoyer of actions, also described as 'work for work's sake' wherein the individual is deeply attached to the work but also equally unattached to the results of action. Such a karma yogi is able to accept success and failures with equipoise and does not work like a slave as Swamiji puts it. Even without believing in a God, the karma yogi can attain to the highest by training the mind and emotions through unattached work says Swamiji. The traditional view is that work leads to purification of the mind and in such a pure mind, knowledge dawns. Swamiji emphatically says that work itself can bring about realisation of the highest and is not a via media.

Raja yoga—the path of psychic control and directing the latent spiritual force towards higher centres of consciousness till the individual merges with the supreme in samadhi. **Samadhi is of two main categories, savikalpa and nirvikalpa.** Samadhi is the last stage of ashtanga yoga as enunciated by Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutra*. *Dhara*na or fixing the mind on a particular centre of consciousness leads to dhyana or unwavering concentration. In this stage the person is still aware of oneself as the meditator, of the object of meditation, and also of the process by which one has reached that state. When dhyana reaches the higher stage of samadhi, there is no awareness

of self or the process and only the object remains resplendent. There is only awareness of the One and all ideas of separateness or distinction are lost. It is a smooth merger or integration of all the human faculties and the yogi is lost in the bliss of self-awareness called *atmarati* and *atmani avasthita* in the Upanishads and the Gita.

Patanjali mentions two types of samadhi, *samprajnata* and *asamprajnata*. In the former, there is awareness of the object of meditation although in a very reduced form, while in the latter all distinctions are effaced. These states are similar to the *savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa* states. As these are intuitive experiences, they cannot be verbally explained to the satisfaction of the listener. Sri Ramakrishna would say that he had to come down a great deal to couch his transcendental experiences in language, however much he wanted to explain these higher states to the disciples and devotees. He would also say that it is as if the Mother is pressing his throat, making him incapable of expressing the higher states of samadhi.

Sri Ramakrishna, the Completely Integrated Person

Where shall we find someone who has used yoga in all its shades and aspects to reach the pinnacle of human experience consistently, in whom there is no dichotomy, no pretensions but a manifestation of the most exalted character? Look no further, for we have in the life of Sri Ramakrishna all that yoga truly represents. He can be the yardstick to measure yogic realisation in other individuals. He has set the standards and made yoga popular silently through his great life. Take for instance, the wonderful integrity of his intuitive experiences with his entire thinking and actions. Never was there any harsh note in his personality and every aspect of his was charming to say the least. His frequent samadhis, the divine absorption that bordered on madness, but yet intensely caring and

respectful even to those who were despised by society; not possessing anything to call his own; his high regard for women, and many more that truly describe the ways of a yogi, who has united with the highest. In spite of themselves, people got attracted by the clarity with which he expressed his unifying message that embraced all religious practices that humans profess. His pristine life shone like the light of the lighthouse that directs many a ship in the vast and turbulent oceans. He is the best example of the yogi who has achieved integral vision. He would often say that he has come to build and never destroy. This unprecedented catholicity is indicative of the *yoga-arudha* state, of one who is firmly established in yoga, which is described in the Gita. (6.4).

Yoga for All

By studying Sri Ramakrishna, we realise that yoga is meant for all. If there be an intense longing to attain to the highest state that is also called God



realisation, then any method will be sufficient. It is never too late to practise yoga and train the human faculties. Sri Ramakrishna had his first disciple in his wife, the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. He had instructed her thoroughly in all the intricacies of yoga. Holy Mother says that Sri Ramakrishna had drawn the picture of the kundalini and the six yogic centres for her. However, Holy Mother did not realise the importance of retaining that picture for future use. That was but natural as she was more keen on attaining the yogic states as taught by her adept husband rather than hold on to a piece of paper. This is a clear demonstration that yoga is an internal discipline and not mere external observances.¹⁴

Just as youngsters came to Sri Ramakrishna, there was Elder Gopal, later Swami Advaitananda, and many devotees like Girish Chandra Ghosh, Ramachandra Datta, and Surendra Mitra, who were householders and who took to spiritual life when they were in their forties and soon achieved remarkable results. Again, Sri Ramakrishna shaped the illiterate Latu, who later became Swami Adbhutananda, to such an extent that he could grasp the most intricate aspects of spiritual experiences. So, one need not put off taking to spiritual life or yoga citing problems with age or educational background.

In conclusion, when one becomes completely integrated, that is true spiritual life or the yogic state. In that state there is absolute harmony within and without. Such a yogi is able to get into another's mind and resolve the problems of others and help humanity in unprecedented ways. Using these yogic powers or siddhis can result in the yogi forgetting the true purpose of yoga, which is the union of the individual soul with the supreme soul. True yogis or spiritual masters are the greatest blessings that we have. They infuse in us the confidence to move ahead by following their footsteps and holding on to

the eternal dimension within each one of us for support in trying circumstances. Our whole life must be one of yoga, wherein we become masters of our inner selves and radiate peace and harmony without. Yoga is one way through which we can bring nations and individuals together without encroaching on their personal beliefs and faiths. There is a dire need for the assimilation of the wonderful principles of yoga in the educational system so that students learn to train their mind and also in the health sector to promote holistic treatment. Having stood the test of time for thousands of years, the principles of yoga are more relevant today. Hence, 'let's yoga' is catching up with the younger generation too. 

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