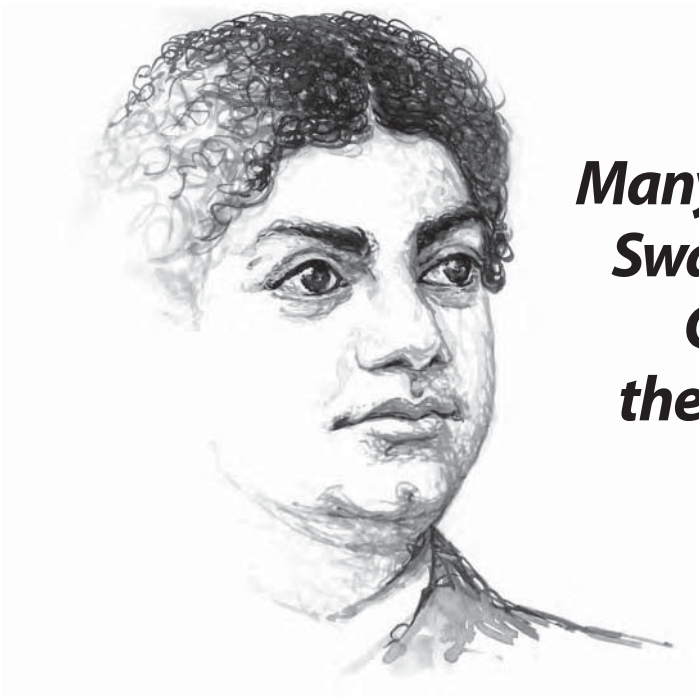

Many Paths to One Goal: Swami Vivekananda's Contributions to the Discourse of Yoga

Jeffery D Long

Swamiji's Distinctive Perspective on Yoga

Among Swamiji's many contributions to global spirituality, some of the most important, and also the least understood, are his contributions to the discourse of yoga: that is, to the understanding of what, precisely, yoga is, its aim and purpose, and the methods that it involves.

There are, of course, many interpretations of yoga, as well as many types of yoga. Indeed, the same thing can be said of yoga that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi once said of religion: 'In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals.'[1] Similarly, there are as many yogas as there are individuals. The intent of this essay is not to claim that Swamiji's approach to the nature of yoga is the only correct approach; nor, in claiming that his approach is distinctive; the intent is to state that this approach is entirely unique, and that important aspects of it are not also shared by other major thinkers on yoga.

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Indeed, precisely because his approach has been so influential, many of Swamiji's ideas on yoga are now widely shared around the world. This can lead to a situation, though, in which certain ideas come to be taken for granted, as if that is simply the way everyone has always thought. Credit needs to be given to Swamiji both for introducing yoga to the wider world beyond India in the modern period and for presenting the particular synthesis of practices now commonly known as 'the four yogas' in the particular way that he did.

It is also, true, though, that certain important ideas introduced by Swamiji to the West have been largely forgotten. There is thus a need to remind people that yoga is not *only* what most now see it to be. In the minds of most Westerners, the word 'yoga' refers specifically, often exclusively, to what scholars have come to call 'postural yoga'.[2] In more traditional terms, postural yoga refers to asanas, the postures one utilises while practising meditation; although, in modern postural yoga, meditation may or may not be involved at all, the postures themselves being utilised solely because of their benefits to physical health and their contributions to an overall sense of well-being for their practitioners. yoga has thus come to be seen and practised as part

SKETCH: RAMAKRISHNA MATH, HYDERABAD

of a physical health and exercise regimen. Certainly, in this regard, it is a deeply beneficial practice for many, many people, and is one of India's numerous gifts to global civilisation. If one takes the perspective on yoga, though, developed and promoted by Swamiji, this emphasis on physical postures comes to be seen as barely scratching the surface of the depths of yoga as a practice and as a way of life: and potentially, as a distraction from the experience of these depths, which are, according to Swamiji and the tradition he inherits and advances, the whole point of this practice. Indeed, while the care of the physical body is certainly important, an obsession with it can carry many spiritual dangers.

What are the features of Swamiji's approach to yoga? In terms of the modern conversation about the nature of yoga as being far more than postural practice, the first feature to mention is one that Swamiji's thought shares with yoga masters going back centuries: the aim of yoga as, to cite Patanjali, the author of the *Yoga Sutra*, '*chitta-vritti-nirodhah*', or the calming of the modifications of the mind—the thoughts, which can be likened to waves on the surface of a body of water.[3] Picking up on a theme pursued by earlier masters in the tradition of Vedanta, Swamiji identifies the aim of yoga with the aim of Vedanta: namely, the attainment of God-realisation, the manifestation of the potential divinity within us and within all beings, a realisation which leads to liberation—moksha or mukti—from the cycle of rebirth, samsara, to which we have been subject for countless lifetimes. Physical health, from this perspective, is important as a condition which makes it possible for one to observe spiritual practice and attain this ultimate realisation. It is certainly not, however, an end in itself; for indeed, an excessive identification of self with the physical body is precisely the delusion which one must overcome in order to be free from the cycle of rebirth. In fact, rebirth itself can be seen as simply the repeated identification of the self with a physical body: in this case, a series of physical bodies, given that such identification is no longer viable when a particular body ceases to function—when it experiences death. We will see that this, too—the central importance of non-identification with the physical body—is a major theme of Swamiji's teachings about yoga. Yoga is about God-realisation. Physical health, although important, is secondary.

Another major feature of Swamiji's approach to yoga is his emphasis on the diversity of the methods that yoga involves. While yoga, for Swamiji, is not only postural practice, it is also not only the practice of meditation prescribed in the *Yoga Sutra*. While this practice does hold, as we shall see, a special place in Swamiji's understanding of yoga as a whole, yoga also includes, for Swamiji, practices which the average Westerner would likely not think of at all in connection with yoga: namely, service to alleviate the sufferings of living beings, the practice of studying and learning to discern the difference between what is real and what is unreal in one's life, and loving devotion towards a personal form of divinity—the yoga practice which comes the closest to the idea of 'religion', at least in the Western world. yoga, in short, is, for Swamiji, a complete, comprehensive, and holistic way of life, encompassing every aspect of the human personality.

A common misunderstanding of Swamiji's approach to yoga involves setting it against an interpretation of Vedanta—particularly Advaita Vedanta—as involving only one way to the ultimate realisation: namely, jnana or Self-knowledge. As we shall see, though, this is a misreading of Swamiji's teachings. He does not teach that there are many ways to realisation, and that

Self-knowledge is just one of these. He teaches, rather, that there are many ways to the Self-knowledge that is the one way to—or rather, that *constitutes*—the ultimate realisation. Another way to say this is that the critics of Swamiji, who say that he deviates from traditional Advaita Vedanta in affirming many ways to realisation are confusing jnana or Self-knowledge, with jnana yoga, as a practice aimed at *cultivating* jnana through the purification of the mind. Swamiji's contribution is to emphasise other yogas, other practices, as well. But in his view that jnana, Self-knowledge, is the essential prerequisite for realisation, indeed, that Self-knowledge *is* realisation, Swamiji is no different than any other teacher of Advaita Vedanta. Acharya Shankara and other teachers have also said that many practices can purify the mind and prepare it for realisation.

Other important features of Swamiji's approach to yoga include an emphasis on renunciation as an essential condition for the practice of yoga. In keeping with the spirit of the Bhagavadgita, though, he emphasises that by 'renunciation' he is referring not so much to formal *sannyasa*, in which one takes up the life of a monk or a nun, though this is of course recommended for those who are called to it. 'Renunciation', for Swamiji, means the inner attitude of detachment or *vairagya*, which can be either present or absent regardless of the outward appearance of a person. A monk can be deeply attached to the world and a king detached from it. The detached king, like King Janaka in ancient times, is closer to realisation than a monk, who is greedy for fame or recognition, or who is inwardly attached to the things he has outwardly renounced. Such renunciation is rejected by Swamiji as hypocrisy.

Swamiji also emphasises the importance of actually practising the yogas and not merely theorising about them. He insists that the yogas are not for the weak, but require firmness of mind and self-discipline in order to be effective in advancing us towards the goal that we seek. In regard to our modern period in particular, two distinctive features of Swamiji's approach to yoga include an emphasis on the rationality of yoga and on generosity as an essential virtue to cultivate in our current age. Yoga, and Vedanta more broadly, has been appealing especially to Westerners, but also to people around the world who are educated in the scientific

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method and in scepticism towards unverified claims, for the fact that it does not ask its practitioners to accept things on blind faith, but rather, to paraphrase Gandhi, to 'experiment with truth', to test the claims of tradition through practice, and by verifying the truths of Vedanta for oneself by seeing the results of this practice in one's life. In regard to generosity, and to service more broadly, a major contribution of Swamiji to the discourse of yoga is his emphasis on karma yoga not simply as ritualistic practice, but as service to suffering beings. Generosity, he says, is the chief virtue to cultivate in this era of history, the Kali Yuga, in which the kinds of heroic practice described in the scriptures are not possible for most spiritual aspirants. An act of kindness to a suffering person is of far greater value, according to Swamiji, for one's spiritual advancement than standing on one leg in a cave in the Himalayas.

Let us then look at each of these features of Swamiji's approach to yoga as they are found in his *Complete Works*.

Many Paths to One Goal

'You must remember', Swamiji states, 'that freedom of the soul is the goal of all Yogas, and each one equally leads to the same result'.[4] Elsewhere, he says:

> Our various Yogas do not conflict with each other; each of them leads us to the same goal and makes us perfect. ... Each one of our Yogas is fitted to make man perfect even without the help of the others, because they have all the same goal in view. The Yogas of work, of wisdom, and of devotion are all capable of serving as direct and independent means for the attainment of Moksha. 'Fools alone say that work and philosophy are different, not the learned.' The learned know that, though apparently different from each other, they at last lead to the same goal of human perfection (1.92–3).

Although yoga involves many different methods, many forms of practice, the goal of all of these is one and the same.

According to Swamiji:

> The ultimate goal of all mankind, the aim and end of all religions, is but one–re-union with God, or, what amounts to the same, with the divinity which is every man's true nature. But while the aim is one, the method of attaining may vary with the different temperaments of men ... Both the goal and the methods employed for reaching it are called Yoga, a word derived from the same Sanskrit root as the English 'yoke', meaning 'to join', to join us to our reality, God. There are various such Yogas or methods of union—but the chief ones are—Karma-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Raja-Yoga, and Jnana-Yoga (5.292).

It is significant that Swamiji here connects the concepts of religion and yoga. Both 'religion' and 'yoga' are, in their etymological roots, connected with the idea of 'union' or 're-union'. The Latin root of 'religion', *religare*, literally means 'to bind, to tie'. Similarly, the Sanskrit root of the word 'yoga', *yuj*, also means 'yoke, unite'. In their initial meanings, both words refer to the literal act of tying, binding, or yoking—such as yoking an ox to a cart or tying a cow to a post. But both words have gradually come to mean a 'binding' or 'yoking' of a more profound kind: the binding or yoking of the individual self to its divine source. Though it has become popular to translate the English word 'religion' as 'dharma' or *dharm* in the Indic languages such as Hindi, it is more true to the original meanings of both 'religion' and 'yoga' to translate 'religion' as 'yoga'. Both words refer to the practices and total way of life employed in taking one to one's ultimate goal: to God-realisation. Both vary in practice because, as Swamiji says, 'while the aim is one, the method of attaining it may vary with the different temperaments of men.' Again, 'In reality,

there are as many religions as there are individuals'.[5] This emphasis on religious pluralism, the idea of many true and effective paths to the realisation of our inherent, potential divinity, shows Swamiji's debt to his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, whose central message was '*Yato mat, tato path*; as many faiths, so many paths' or each religion is a path to the realisation of God.

Again, the reason for the great variety of practices is the variety in human beings:

> Every man must develop according to his own nature. As every science has its methods, so has every religion. The methods of attaining the end of religion are called Yoga by us, and the different forms of Yoga that we teach, are adapted to the different natures and temperaments of men. We classify them in the following way, under four heads:
>
> (1) Karma-Yoga—The manner in which a man realizes his own divinity through works and duty.
>
> (2) Bhakti-Yoga—The realization of the divinity through devotion to, and love of, a Personal God.
>
> (3) Raja-Yoga—The realization of the divinity through the control of mind.
>
> (4) Jnana-Yoga—The realization of a man's own divinity through knowledge.[6]

Swamiji again connects the diversity of yogas with the diversity of religions: 'These are all different roads leading to the same centre—God. Indeed, the varieties of religious belief are an advantage, since all faiths are good, so far as they encourage man to lead a religious life. The more sects there are, the more opportunities there are for making successful appeals to the divine instinct in all men' (ibid.). The diversity of yogas and the diversity of religions arise from the same source: the diversity of human natures and temperaments as we each strive for the realisation of our divinity.

'Yoga means the method of joining man and God. When you understand this, you can go on with your own definitions of man and God, and you will find the term Yoga fits in with every definition. Remember always, there are different yogas for different minds, and that if one does not suit you, another may' (6.41). Swamiji is here enjoining a non-dogmatic attitude in our approach to this question of yoga and its ultimate purpose. If one finds that a particular method for realising one's divinity does not work, perhaps due to one's specific life circumstances, or perhaps due to other factors, such as culture, or one's previous experiences with religion, then other methods are available. It is not the quest for God-realisation itself that is to be abandoned; but rather, one might need to adopt another method for achieving this realisation. Even terms like 'God' or 'realisation' may not be suitable for some people. For many, the word 'God' implies a personal being who is in charge of the universe, and they find this concept incoherent with their understanding of science or on the basis of their own life experiences. For others, 'realisation' may sound too impersonal or isolated. They may prefer terms like 'loving union', 'receiving divine grace', or 'salvation'. It does not matter, ultimately, how one speaks of or conceptualises these things, according to Swamiji, so long as the method one uses is effective in drawing one nearer to the goal.

An example that Swamiji gives of the diversity of yogas being rooted in the diversity of human characteristics is jnana yoga, which we already seen him define: 'The realization of a man's own divinity through knowledge' (ibid.). 'The object of Jnana-Yoga', he says, 'is the same as that of Bhakti and Raja Yogas, but the method is different. This is the Yoga for the strong, for those who are neither mystical nor devotional, but rational' (8.3). By 'the strong', Swamiji does not here mean

that the practitioners of either bhakti yoga or raja yoga—the disciplines, respectively, of devotion and meditation—are, in some sense, weak. But this yoga is for those who are confident in their own ability to reason through and to discern the reality of God through the powers of the intellect.

In bhakti yoga, one relies, instead, upon the grace of God, conceived as a being outside of oneself—though God is, on a Vedantic understanding, the Self beyond, or at the deepest level within, the empirical personality or ego that we normally think of as our 'self'. Certainly one may distinguish, even in Advaita Vedanta, with its non-dualistic perspective, between the true Self and the false; for indeed, the practice of non-duality rests on this very distinction. In bhakti, the lower or false self is not so much unreal as it is derivative from and dependent upon the divine Self—that is, God—who is conceived as the loving saviour who rescues one from the sufferings of this world. And in raja yoga, one sets aside the lower self entirely, focusing solely on the divinity within, to the exclusion of all else. In jnana yoga, the ego and intellect remain intact, but they deconstruct themselves through a rational process that leads, in the end, to the same realisation as the methods of devotion and meditation. Each of these paths is for a different personality type. Some are more intellectually inclined and confident in their ability to reason things through. Others are of a more emotional disposition, and need to rely on a personal saviour. And others are mystically inclined, wanting to set aside everything and have the direct experience of inwardness. And we can mention here as well the workers—the karma yogis—whose motivation is to get something done. Even this inclination can be channelled towards the highest goal, through the practice of *seva*: selfless service.

As mentioned previously, a common misunderstanding of Swamiji is that, in affirming the diversity of the yogas, he is departing from earlier Advaitic thinkers, like Acharya Shankara—who see moksha as arising from jnana or Self-knowledge alone—and claiming that it can arise from other sources, such as work, devotion, or meditation. This, however, is not correct; for, as Swamiji has clearly said: 'It is evident … that until we realize ourselves as the Absolute, we cannot attain to deliverance' (8.152). Realising ourselves as the Absolute—that is, jnana—is the essential prerequisite for liberation from the cycle of rebirth. But jnana is not the same as jnana *yoga*. As Swamiji continues, 'Yet there

SCULPTURE: SUNIL PAUL

are various ways of attaining to this realization. These methods have the generic name of yoga (to join, to join ourselves to our reality). These yogas, though divided into various groups, can principally be classed into four; and as each is only a method leading indirectly to the realization of the Absolute, they are suited to different temperaments' (ibid.).

Swamiji is also at one with earlier traditions—not only Vedanta, but also the philosophies of Sankhya and yoga, as well as Jainism and Buddhism—in affirming that nothing is really, in any literal sense, 'attained' in God-realisation. It is conventional to speak of 'attaining' or 'achieving' liberation, and also of 'merging', attaining 'union with', or 'becoming one with' the divine reality. But Swamiji clarifies this issue: 'Now it must be remembered that it is not that the assumed man becomes the real man or Absolute. There is no becoming with the Absolute. It is ever free, ever perfect; but the ignorance that has covered its nature for a time is to be removed. Therefore the whole scope of all systems of yoga (and each religion represents one) is to clear up this ignorance and allow the Atman to restore its own nature' (ibid.). One does not so much 'become one' with the Absolute as realise that one was already the Absolute all along. The perception of 'becoming' is only relative. One could compare it to the perception that the sun is rising above the horizon, when the reality is that the earth is rotating. What is experienced or explained as a 'becoming one' with the Absolute is the realisation of the unity that was already always present. This is also why Swamiji frequently speaks of the 'potential divinity' of all living beings. Divinity is already present, and is indeed the true reality. But it needs to be 'realised' or 'actualised' in the sense of being made fully manifest in our waking consciousness.

The Meaning and Necessity of Renunciation

In order to manifest our divinity, it is necessary to get rid of that which impedes its being fully manifested to us. This is our ego and many attachments that maintain its grip upon us. So we need to relinquish the ego in order to become liberated. As Swamiji says, 'The chief help in this liberation are Abhyasa and Vairagya. Vairagya is non-attachment to life, because it is the will to enjoy that brings all this bondage in its train; and Abhyasa is constant practice of any one of the yogas' (ibid.). Both of these—*vairagya* and *abhyasa*—are major emphases of Swamiji's approach to yoga. We shall speak first of *vairagya*: renunciation. What does Swamiji mean when he refers to renunciation? Does this mean we must all become sannyasis in order to be liberated? This is often how the classical Vedanta tradition has been interpreted.

The centrality of *vairagya* to Swamiji's approach to yoga cannot be overstated. 'Vairagya or renunciation is the turning point in all the various yogas' (3.19). 'In all our Yogas this renunciation is necessary. This is the stepping-stone and the real centre and the real heart of all spiritual culture—renunciation. This is religion—renunciation' (3.71).

It is significant, though, that the term which Swamiji translates as 'renunciation', *vairagya*, is more often translated as 'detachment', such as when the Gita refers to karma-*phala-vairagya* or 'detachment from the fruits of action'.[7] The matter becomes clarified if we realise that Swamiji is referring to this attitude of non-attachment—to *vairagya*—when he speaks about the need for renunciation in relation to the yogas. This becomes particularly clear in the following passage from his *Complete Works*:

> Non-attachment is the basis of all the yogas. The man who gives up living in houses, wearing

> fine clothes, and eating food, and goes into the desert, may be a most attached person. His only possession, his own body, may become everything to him; and as he lives he will simply be struggling for the sake of his body. Non-attachment does not mean anything that we may do in relation to our external body, it is all in the mind. The binding link of 'I and mine' is in the mind. If we have not this link with the body and with the things of the senses, we are non-attached, wherever and whatever we may be. A man may be on a throne and perfectly non-attached; another man may be in rags and still very much attached.[8]

The necessary foundation for the practice of any of the yogas is thus a detached attitude and not the formal practice of renunciation in which one becomes a monk or a nun, though such a formal renunciation is of course available and recommended to those who are drawn to it. But even a person who is, to all appearances, deeply involved in the affairs of this world may be an advanced yogi according to Swamiji. This is of course consistent with the Hindu scriptures, in which a figure such as King Janaka is described as *jivanmukta*, liberated while still embodied. Such a goal is, of course, difficult to achieve. The point is that one cannot judge from the outward appearance of a person's mode of living whether they are on the spiritual path or not.

The Special Role of Raja Yoga

Why does Swamiji speak of the yoga of meditation as the 'raja yoga', the royal path? Is there something special about this particular yoga?

It would be incorrect to say that Swamiji views any one of the four yogas as the only way to God-realisation. As we have already seen him state, 'The Yogas of work, of wisdom, and of devotion [karma yoga, jnana yoga, and bhakti yoga] are all capable of serving as direct and independent means for the attainment of Moksha' (1.92–3). The other three yogas, apart from meditation, can each lead, on its own, to the Self-knowledge, jnana, which gives rise to liberation. Each of these yogas serves, in its own way, to

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purify the minds of those who practise it. Each leads to the transformation of the ego, clearing away its obscuring qualities and rendering it a transparent medium through which the light of the infinite divinity within each of us might shine through.

Swamiji does, however, seem to have special partiality towards the yoga of meditation. At one point, he even says of meditation that, 'The other Yogas that we read and hear of, do not deserve to be ranked with the excellent Mahayoga in which the Yogi finds himself and the whole universe as God. This is the highest of all Yogas' (1.189).

What is the reason for Swamiji's apparent partiality to the raja yoga? It is because the raja yoga has a particular ability to support all of the other yogas and is, in a sense, foundational to them all. 'This yoga [raja yoga] fits in with every one of these yogas. It fits inquirers of all classes with or without any belief, and it is the real instrument of religious inquiry. As each science has its particular method of investigation, so is this Raja-Yoga the method of religion' (8.154).

Whichever yoga is predominant in one's spiritual practice, the raja yoga can support one in that practice. The practice of meditation energises and steadies the mind, giving it greater focus and thus making it firmer and more able to support any activity in which one is engaged, whether that be work, devotional activity, or study.

Harmonising the Yogas

This also brings us to yet another important feature of Swamiji's approach to yoga, which is the fact that the various yogas need not be practised in isolation. Indeed, Swamiji recommends that one draw upon and harmonise all of the yogas, to some extent, in one's practice. Each of these practices supports the others, enabling one to move more effectively towards the goal of God-realisation. Indeed, Swamiji says:

> Would to God that all men were so constituted that in their minds all these elements of philosophy, mysticism, emotion, and of work were equally present in full! That is the ideal, my ideal of a perfect man. Everyone who has only one or two of these elements of character, I consider 'one-sided'; and this world is almost full of such 'one-sided' men, with knowledge of that one road only in which they move; and anything else is dangerous and horrible to them. To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions is my ideal of religion. And this religion is attained by what we, in India, call Yoga—union. To the worker, it is union between men and the whole of humanity; to the mystic, between his lower and Higher Self; to the lover, union between himself and the God of Love; and to the philosopher, it is the union of all existence. This is what is meant by Yoga (2.388).

Elsewhere, when Swamiji says, 'A harmony of the four kinds of Yogas must be practiced', a questioner asks, 'What do you mean by the harmony of the four yogas?' Swamiji replies: 'Discrimination between the real and the unreal, dispassion and devotion, work and practices in concentration' (7.277). Regarding the fact that each of these yogas supports the others, to one disciple, Swamiji says of karma yoga that, 'Without spiritual practices you will never be able to do this Karma-Yoga. You must harmonize the four different yogas; otherwise how can you always keep your mind and heart wholly on the Lord?' (7.274). Devotion, study, and work support one another, and meditation supports them all. One may predominate, but all are helpful to the spiritual life.

Work Is Worship: Karma Yoga as Selfless Service

One particularly well-known contribution of Swamiji to the discourse of yoga is his emphasis

on selfless service—working for the good of all beings—as a type of spiritual practice under the rubric of karma yoga.

This was somewhat controversial in Swamiji's lifetime. It marked a departure from a long-held view that the 'work' described in the Gita referred exclusively to ritual activity, rather than to actions aimed at alleviating the sufferings of others. In the *Complete Works*, there is a dialogue in which a questioner asks Swamiji specifically about this issue:

> Q.—It is generally said that work according to the Gita means the performance of Vedic sacrifices and religious exercises; any other kind of work is futile.
>
> Swamiji: All right; but you must make it more comprehensive. Who is responsible for every action you do, every breath you take, and every thought you think? Isn't it you yourself?
>
> The friend: Yes and no. I cannot solve this clearly. The truth about it is that man is the instrument and the Lord is the agent. So when I am directed by His will, I am not at all responsible for my actions.
>
> Swamiji: Well, that can be said only in the highest state of realization. When the mind will be purified by work and you will *see* that it is He who is causing all to work, then only you will have a right to speak like that (7.274).

Swamiji here adds an important corrective to a popular interpretation of the Gita, according to which one essentially surrenders all responsibility for one's actions to the divine. As Swamiji says here, one can truly perceive oneself as solely the instrument of the divine when one has reached the highest state of realisation.

Until then, though, it requires a constant effort to rein in one's ego and take responsibility for one's actions, living in a way that is worthy of the divine reality within. This involves the cultivation of the moral virtues, as well as showing compassion to others. Indeed, according to Swamiji, compassion and generosity are the virtues most appropriate to the period of history through which humanity is currently passing. He says: 'The Tapas and the other hard Yogas that were practiced in other Yugas [historical epochs] do not work now. What is needed in this Yuga is giving, helping others. What is meant by Dana? The highest of gifts is the giving of spiritual knowledge, the next is the giving of secular knowledge, and the last is giving food and drink' (3.134). These are the activities that Swamiji made central for the Ramakrishna Mission, which he established in India in 1897, upon his return from his first journey to the West. The giving of spiritual knowledge—the teaching of Vedanta and yoga, as well as other philosophies, in the spirit of pluralism—is its highest duty. This is done when monks, nuns, and even some laypersons, give spiritual talks in Vedanta centres throughout the world. Secular knowledge is given in the schools and universities that have been established by the Ramakrishna Mission throughout India. Finally, food and drink, and, we might add, medicine, are given in the Mission's outreach to the poor.

Yoga and Rationality

In an era when religion is frequently—and often, quite rightly—criticised for being irrational, Swamiji emphasises that the true practice of yoga is *not* of this kind, suggesting that we should be wary of those who would present it as such. 'No one of these Yogas gives up reason, no one of them asks you to be hoodwinked, or to deliver your reason into the hands of priests of any type whatsoever. No one of them asks you that you should give your allegiance to any superhuman messenger. Each one of them tells you to cling to your reason, to hold fast to it' (2.388–9). 'The first test of true teaching must be, that the teaching should not contradict reason. And you may see that such is the basis of all these yogas' (2.390). One can see this philosophy at work in the non-dogmatic approach of the Ramakrishna tradition in theological matters. There is no orthodoxy to which one must give assent in order to take up this practice. It is a matter of one's own reason and experience.

One must, however, practice in order to have the experiences that give one the basis for making assertions about the nature of spiritual life. This brings us to another important feature of Swamiji's approach to yoga.

Being and Becoming: The Necessity of Practice for Realisation

> Lastly, it is imperative that all these various yogas should be carried out in practice; mere theories about them will not do any good. First we have to hear about them, then we have to think about them. We have to reason the thoughts out, impress them on our minds, and we have to meditate on them, realize them, until at last they become our whole life. No longer will religion remain a bundle of ideas or theories, nor an intellectual assent; it will enter into our very self. By means of intellectual assent we may today subscribe to many foolish things and change our minds altogether tomorrow. But true religion never changes. Religion is realization; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion (2.396).

In his recommendation that we must first hear about the yogas, then think about them,

and finally, meditate on them and realise them, Swamiji is echoing the ancient practice of jnana yoga in the Advaita Vedanta tradition: the succession of *shravana*, hearing and assimilation; *manana*, contemplation; and *nididhyasana*, meditative realisation. We hear these teachings, we reflect upon them rationally, and then we practise them in order to realise them directly.

Not for the Weak!

Finally, to return to the modern identification of yoga with postural practice, Swamiji notes that physical health does, indeed, play an important role in spiritual life, as a condition for the practice of any of the yogas. 'When the miserably weak attempt any of the Yogas, they are likely to get some incurable malady, or they weaken their minds. Voluntarily weakening the body is really no prescription for spiritual enlightenment' (3.70). One must not be obsessed with the body; but it is the vehicle for one's spiritual realisation and must be cared for accordingly. Modern postural practice can thus be seen, from the perspective of Swamiji, as marking the *beginning* of spiritual life: as preparation for practices aimed at the realisation of our divine potential.

Conclusion

Swamiji's contributions to the discourse of yoga are many. Some of the points that he makes reiterate ancient views of the Vedanta and yoga traditions, such as the necessity of non-attachment, and the character and unity of the ultimate goal. Others are his innovations or are new ways of articulating ancient truths implicit in the work of earlier thinkers, such as the variety of the paths to the infinite, and the importance of service. Swamiji articulates a view of yoga that is comprehensive: a holistic way of life leading to fulfilment and peace of mind, and the realisation of our highest potential.

SKETCH: RAMAKRISHNA MATH, HYDERABAD

Notes and References

1. Cited from *A Sourcebook of Modern Hinduism*, ed. Glyn Richards (Richmond: Curzon, 1985), 156.
2. This terminology has been promoted in particular by scholar Mark Singleton. See Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010).
3. Patanjali, *Yoga Sutra*, 1.2.
4. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 1.55. It should be noted that Swamiji, characteristically of the authors of his time, uses the terms 'man' and 'men' to speak of humanity and human beings. Though this is jarring to contemporary sensibilities, he should not be taken as referring exclusively to males. There is abundant evidence from his life and writings that he viewed women and men as equally capable of achieving God-realisation. Interestingly, his native Bengali language is genderless, and thus better suited than the English of his time for conveying the expansive perspective of his thought.
5. *A Sourcebook of Modern Hinduism*, 156.
6. *Complete Works*, 5.292.
7. Gita, 2.47.
8. *Complete Works*, 1.101.