

Power of Yoga

Swami Tripuraharananda

SRI KRISHNA SAYS in the Bhagavadgita: 'Among thousands of persons a rare one endeavours for perfection. Even among the perfected ones, who are diligent, one perchance knows me in truth.'¹ Most of us begin our spiritual life with great enthusiasm, but after a few years or even a few months we are unable to maintain it and slowly slacken our sadhana. As things become tepid, and then cold, we dangle between a spiritual ideal and the heavy tug of worldliness. We all know what has to be done, what the guru has taught and the scriptures have declared, but we find it very difficult to pick ourselves up and restart the long journey to perfection. It is during this time of helplessness that we come face to face with our weaknesses. The many obstructions we face are principally due to our samskaras, impressions in the mind, which forcibly drag us down. Even after repeated prayers nothing much is achieved and, gradually, the intensity of our prayers also decreases. The rule in spiritual life is that, as Sri Ramakrishna teaches, unless one has exhausted one's efforts, *purushakara*, divine grace does not arrive.

The Necessity of Strength

One of the systematic methods of sadhana is yoga. Certain practices of yoga counter the *vyutthana*, disturbing, samskaras so that one can gain strength. Swami Vivekananda says:

The science of Yoga claims that it has discovered the laws which develop this personality, and by proper attention to those laws and methods, each one can grow and strengthen his personality. This is one of the great practical things, and

this is the secret of all education. This has a universal application. In the life of a householder, in the life of the poor, the rich, the man of business, the spiritual man, in every one's life, it is a great thing, the strengthening of this personality. There are laws, very fine, which are behind the physical laws, as we know. That is to say, there are no such realities as a physical world, a mental world, a spiritual world. Whatever is, is one. Let us say, it is a sort of tapering existence; the thickest part is here, it tapers and becomes finer and finer. The finest is what we call spirit; the grossest, the body.²

A sadhaka has to understand these subtle laws in order to adjust to them. Many of us, in the beginning of our sadhana, keep pushing back the obstacles that appear in the way, but if this pushing is done intelligently, we can counter those obstacles easily and progress quicker. **Yoga gives great mental strength to overcome all obstacles.** Swamiji also says: 'This is the great fact: strength is life, weakness is death. Strength is felicity, life eternal, immortal; weakness is constant strain and misery: weakness is death' (2.3).

The *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali has a chapter called 'Vibhuti Pada'. Many have the impression that the power of yoga means these *vibhutis*, supernatural powers. These *vibhutis* are, in fact, obstacles to the culmination of yoga. Patanjali delineates them in order that they may not mislead the sadhaka. The goal of yoga is perfection, realization, or liberation. Through yoga one is able to resist temptations, old samskaras, and other weaknesses, which seem to appear adamant obstacles. However, there is a caveat, the practice of yoga itself has obstacles that Patanjali

warns us about, by saying: ‘The obstructions to yoga are killing, falsehood, and so on, whether committed, caused, or approved; either through avarice, anger, or ignorance; whether slight, middling, or great; and they result in infinite ignorance and misery.’³

One cannot achieve anything great in life without strength, what to speak of realization, which is the highest goal of human life. Swamiji also says: ‘The best guide in life is strength. In religion, as in all other matters, discard everything that weakens you, have nothing to do with it. Mystery-mongering weakens the human brain.’⁴ The *Mundaka Upanishad* declares: ‘*Nayam-atma bala-hinena labhyo*; this Atman cannot be attained by one devoid of strength.’⁵ Acharya Shankara comments on the compound *bala-hinena* thus: ‘Bereft of the vigour generated by constant adherence to the Atman.’⁶ This is the clearest explanation regarding strength and power. Through this power the sadhaka cannot be dragged by the objects of the senses, which depletes one’s strength and knowledge.

Different Types of Powers

Different types of strengths in the world can be categorized as:

(i) *Jagat-bala*, worldly strength, which includes *bahu-bala*, physical power; *artha-bala*, money power; *buddhi-bala*, power of the intellect; holding powerful posts, and so on. But we can see that these powers are fleeting. The famous saying of Lord Acton is true: ‘Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.’⁷ All these powers are worldly powers, and all worldly powers are corruptible and temporary.

(ii) *Dharma-bala*, the power of dharma. The Mahabharata states: ‘Dharma protects one who protects dharma.’⁸ The power acquired by following dharma is more stable than worldly power, and history is full of such examples. The

Pandavas were victorious in the Mahabharata War. Arjuna, the greatest hero, defeated the Kauravas, including such excellent warriors as Bhishma, Drona, Kripacharya, Karna, and others. The cause of his strength, it is known, was dharma.

(iii) *Samyama bala*, the power of self-control. By controlling the senses and the mind one becomes stronger; letting them go about seeking enjoyment makes them weak. It is said in one Upanishad: ‘O Death, ephemeral are these [enjoyments], and they waste away the vigour of all the organs that a person has.’⁹ This power is also spoken of as *tapo-bala*, power of tapasya. In this category is also included *upasana*, which literally means sitting near an object, usually a deity. The deity provides the aspirant sufficient strength for controlling the senses and removing obstacles. It is mentioned in the Upanishad: ‘By the power of tapasya and the grace of God the (rishi) Shveta-shvatara realized Brahman.’¹⁰

(iv) *Yoga-bala*, the strength that comes from yoga. This is yoga proper. It makes practitioners almost invincible. Mahabharata declares ‘*Nasti yoga samam balam*; No power in the world is as strong as yoga,’¹¹ as it is based on purity, unselfishness, love, and compassion.

(v) *Atma-bala*, the strength of the Atman. ‘*Atmana vindate viryam vidyaya vindate mritam*; through the Atman is acquired strength, and through knowledge is gained immortality.’¹² When one thinks of oneself as finite, finite will be one’s personality and strength. When one thinks of oneself as the infinite Atman, one’s strength and power will be infinite. This is *mukti*, freedom, which makes one fearless. The Upanishads declare that nothing in the universe can harm such a free person, not even the gods, as such a person becomes the Self of everything.¹³ One may read the

scriptures and somehow understand them too, but it is almost impossible to digest them or make them practical without spiritual strength. We can become *adhikaris*, fit, for spiritual life only after practising dharma, *samyama*, *tapasya*, *upasana*, and yoga, which lead us to *Atma-bala*. We become hypocrites when we do not have the strength to carry forwards our convictions. And a religious hypocrite is the worst type of all.

Once a monk came to live in the Panchavati of Dakshineswar. He would talk about Vedanta extensively with people. Then one day I [Sri Ramakrishna] heard that he was having an illicit love affair with a woman. I went in that direction to answer the call of nature and found him seated in the Panchavati. I said to him, 'You talk so much about Vedanta—now, what is this?' He replied: 'What does it matter? Let me explain to you that I have done nothing wrong. When everything in this world is unreal in the past, present, and future, how can my slips of character be real? They are also unreal.' Disgusted, I said to him, 'I spit upon such Vedantic knowledge as yours!' Worldly people have that kind of knowledge about Vedanta. That knowledge is no knowledge at all.¹⁴

Worldly power incurs sin and leads to immorality. But when coupled with the power of dharma, it can do great good in the world. For unless the *papa*, sins, are exhausted by *punya*, merit, one does not see the futility of the world and the need to realize something higher in life. The Mahabharata declares: 'Knowledge arises for a person on the exhaustion of sins.'¹⁵

The Cause of Loss of Strength

A frog tries to flee from a snake, which is chased by a peacock; the peacock is tracked by a leopard, which is being stalked by a hunter. Everybody is running towards one's food, but behind everyone stands death unnoticed. The power of yoga gives one a wider perspective of life as well as a microscopic vision to see deep inside the workings of the mind and the world. It makes

us understand that the *tapa-traya*, three miseries—*adhidaiva*, celestial, *adhibhuta*, earthly, and *adhyatma*, physical—are common to all beings. The *Yoga Sutra* also speaks of four types of miseries (As shown in Figure-A) to be avoided by the yogi: '*Parinama- tapa-samskara-duhkha* *airguna-vritti-virodhaccha dukham eva sarvan vivekinah*'; to the discerning person all is, as it were, painful on account of everything bringing pain, either in the consequences, or in apprehension, or in the attitude caused by impressions, also on account of the counter action of qualities.'¹⁶

Parinama-duhkha, pain as a consequence. In his commentary on this sutra, Vyasa says that it is not possible to satisfy the senses by enjoyments due to two reasons: one, attachment towards enjoyments becomes stronger and we then need still more enjoyments; two, the sense organs become more dexterous. Repeated sense enjoyments will only increase the attachment and skill of the sense organs. The condition of such a person becomes like the one who fearing the sting of a scorpion gets bitten by cobra.¹⁷ An unenlightened person who tries to come out of this mesh, only goes deeper. The more one tries, the more one is held fast. Desires are insatiable. 'The desires are not calmed down by their enjoyments, rather they gain strength like fire into which butter is poured.'¹⁸ The awareness of this fact comes to an ordinary person only when pleasure has been transmuted into pain; a yogi sees the pain even before enjoying a pleasure, because the yogi can clearly see the consequences at the first appearance of desire. Commentators say that the tastiest food that is poisoned is avoided by everyone. Poison can kill only once, but enjoyments kill one again and again. Therefore, all enjoyments should be kept under control. Attachment towards sense objects create fresh *karmashaya*, receptacle of karma, leading to more cycles of births and deaths.

Tapa-duhkha, pain from apprehension. When one is engaged in enjoyments some persons are favourable to us and others oppose us. Hence we end up favouring the former and disfavouring the latter. This attitude creates dharma and *adharmā* respectively. *Adharma* creates *karmashaya*, which fructifies as more births and deaths. Generally, when one is obstructed from enjoying things, resentment towards the obstructions grows. Moreover, enjoyment brings in diseases, and the fear of losing enjoyments also causes suffering. This *tapa-duhkha* is avoidable.

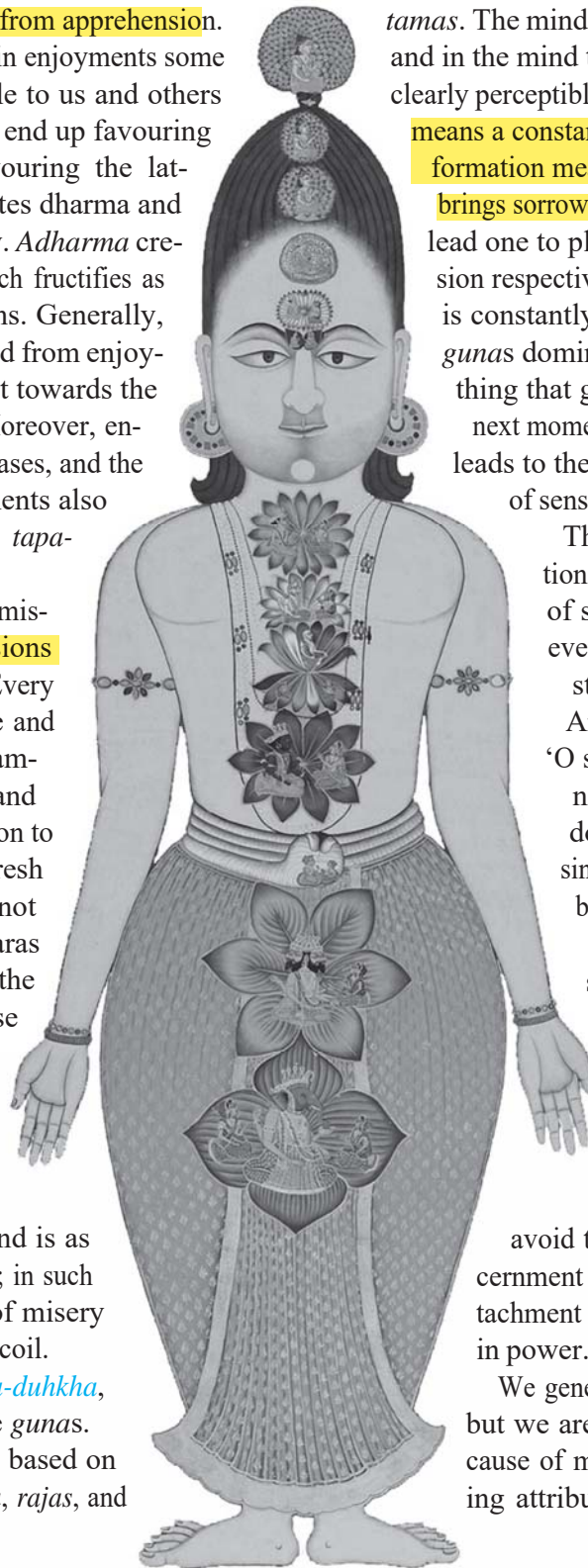
Samskara-duhkha, misery from the impressions of past experiences. Every experience of pleasure and pain leaves behind *samskaras*. These seeds and memories force a person to act, thereby adding fresh *karmashaya*. It does not give one rest. *Samskaras* are always arising in the mind. All *bhoga*, sense experience, brings pleasure and pain, either now or later. In yoga this is called ‘an eternal stream of misery’. A yogi’s mind is as sensitive as the eyeball; in such a mind even a mote of misery brings about violent recoil.

Guna-vritti-virodha-duhkha, counter actions of the *gunas*. The entire creation is based on the three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and

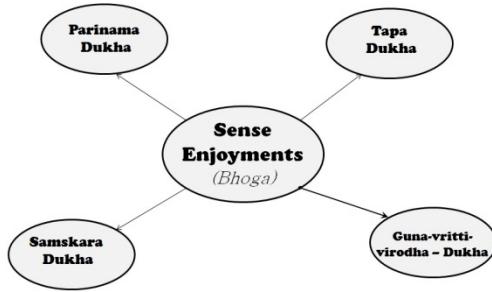
tamas. The mind is also a part of nature, and in the mind the play of the *gunas* is clearly perceptible. The play of the *gunas* means a constant transformation; transformation means friction, and friction brings sorrow. *Sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* lead one to pleasure, pain, and delusion respectively. This internal tussle is constantly going on—one of the *gunas* dominating the other two. A thing that gives pleasure now, the next moment becomes painful. This leads to the insight that all objects of sense enjoyment are painful.

The four miseries mentioned above rob the person of strength. They push us, even unwillingly, into constant misery. In the Gita Arjuna asks Sri Krishna: ‘O scion of the Vrishni Dynasty, impelled by what does this person commit sin even against one’s wish, being engaged by force, as it were?’¹⁹ Bhagavan answers that this is due to desire and anger. We should understand which of the four miseries is impelling the mind and the body and learn to avoid them. This is called discernment and detachment. Detachment or renunciation brings in power.

We generally know what ails us, but we are unable to give up the cause of misery. The famous saying attributed to Duryodhana in



‘THE CHAKRAS OF THE SUBTLE BODY’, FOLIO 4 FROM THE SIDDHA SIDDHANTA PADDHATI, JODHPUR (1824)
OPAQUE WATERCOLOR AND GOLD ON PAPER / MEHRANGARH MUSEUM TRUST, RAJASTHAN



परिणाम-ताप-संस्कारदुःखैर्गुणवृत्तिविरोधाच्च दुःखमेव सर्वं विवेकिनः

Figure (A) Sense enjoyments lead to four fold misery based on Patanjali Yoga sutra (2/15)

the *Pandava Gita*—or *Prapanna Gita*—says: ‘I know what dharma is, I am unable to follow it; I know what *adharm*a is, but am unable to leave it.’²⁰ In his case renunciation is weaker than discernment, which is the common experience of every sadhaka. If renunciation and discernment are not equally strong, the result is suffering and frustration. How strong the attachment towards sense enjoyments is can be experienced only by one who is trying to detach from them, not by those who are willingly engrossed in them. Vyasa discusses this point: ‘No enjoyment is possible without injury to another. ... Thus malevolence is also formed. The enjoyment of objects has, therefore, been called nescience.’²¹ Real happiness comes through control of the senses. Vyasa also says: ‘The happiness gained on this earth through the enjoyment of desired objects, or supreme heavenly joy, is not even one-sixteenth part of the happiness caused by cessation of desires’ (225).

How can this renunciation be increased? Vedanta answers this by asking one to examine the world. The more minutely we observe the world, the greater will be our renunciation. The Upanishads say: ‘A brahmana should resort to renunciation after examining the worlds, acquired through karma, with the help of this maxim: “There is nothing (here) that is not the result of karma; so what is the need of performing karma?” For knowing that Reality he should go with a sacrificial faggot in hand, only to a teacher

versed in the Vedas and absorbed in Brahman.’²² External obstacles can be avoided to a great extent, but we must know that internal obstacles cannot be avoided; one has to face and counter them. While proceeding on the path towards realization, a time comes when aspirants lack energy and enthusiasm and feel miserable and helpless. At this time one can derive internal strength and power by intelligently following yogic practices, which are a wonderful and an unending source of power. It is only to such people that the grace of God comes in full measure. The *Yoga Sutra* teaches: ‘The result of tapasya is bringing power to the organs and the body by destroying the impurity.’²³ Finally, the essence of yoga and its greatness can only be obtained by one diligent in it, as Vyasa says: ‘Yoga is to be known by yoga, and yoga itself leads to yoga, he who remains steadfast in yoga always delights in it.’²⁴

Reference

1. Bhagavadgita, 7.3.
2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 2.16.
3. Patanjali, *Yoga Sutra*, 2.34.
4. *Complete Works*, 1.134.
5. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3.2.4.
6. See Acharya Shankara’s commentary on the *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3.2.4.
7. See <<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/l/lordacton109401.html>> accessed 8 April 2014.
8. Mahabharata, ‘Vana Parva’, 300.7.
9. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.1.27.
10. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 6.21.
11. Mahabharata, ‘Shanti Parva’, 316.2
12. *Kena Upanishad*, 2.4.
13. See *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.7.
14. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St Louis: Vedanta Society of St Louis, 2003), 428.
15. Mahabharata, ‘Shanti Parva’, 203.8.
16. *Yoga Sutra*, 2.15.
17. See Swami Hariharananda Aranya, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali with Bhasvati*, trans. P N

Mukherji (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 2000), 145.

18. Bhagavata, 9.19.14.
19. Bhagavadgita, 3.36.
20. *Pandava Gita*, 48.
21. *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali with Bhasvati*, 145.
22. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 1.2.13.
23. *Yoga Sutra*, 3.43.
24. *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali with Bhasvati*, 255.