


# The Sound of Yoga Demystifying the Basics of Yoga

YOGACHARINI MEENAKSHI DEVI BHAVANANI



from the radio, from DVD's, from cinema, from television. One sees the word (dressed up in the English alphabet) everywhere: in advertisements, newspaper columns, book shops, magazines. What in the world does Yoga mean? Can its essence be captured in a word, a sound? Can it be explained? Can it be described? This simple, two syllable Sanskrit word, as old as the hills, has captured the imagination of the world from Timbuktu to the Artic igloo! Is there a magic in the sound itself? Does it somehow strike a deep chord in the human heart and stir up an unnameable longing for an unfathomable experience?

Can 'Yoga' be explained in words! No! It must be 'felt' and 'experienced'. Even Buddhas can only 'point the way'. All explanations can only be 'pointers' in the right direction. The fault, dear seeker, lies not in the stars, but in oneself, who, when the Guru points to the skies, in egotistic myopia sees only the Guru's finger!

## The Popular Use of 'Yoga'

The older one grows, the greater the temptation to remain utterly silent, like the serene Dakshinamurthy—sitting still, facing south, with four devoted disciples listening attentively at his feet to his silence. Words have become so cheap, like supermarket stock, flying off the rack, mostly packaged, containing nothing. Talk, talk and again more talk. Shakespeare's elegant phrase describes it well—'All sound and fury, signifying nothing.'

One hears the sound of the word 'Yoga' reverberating from every corner of the globe:

## The Real Meaning of Yoga

When Alice complained to the Mad Hatter in Lewis Carroll's classic tale *Alice in Wonderland* that he was not using words correctly, that quaint character replied quite peevishly, 'When I use a word, it means exactly what I choose it to mean, neither more



Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani is the Director, International Centre for Yoga Education and Research, Kottakuppam, Tamil Nadu. □

nor less'. This captures the state of the word 'Yoga' today. It has come to mean whatever the user chooses it to mean!

We are taught by our Rishis that every sound has an inherent correspondence in Reality (called *sat*). The word cannot be 'used to mean whatever the speaker wishes it to mean'. It must be used in a manner which reflects the essential vibratory meaning of the sound as faithfully as the moon reflects the light of the sun!

The sound of Yoga is silence. Stillness. Did not the great Maharishi Patanjali capture its essence forever in a single, simple phrase: 'Yoga is stilling the whirlpools of the mind'. The Chitta, the mind-stuff, must cease to 'Chatter'. Then Yoga becomes an experience and not a word. The message, clear and simple, has been delivered down through the ages, 'Be still and know that I am God', the Jewish Jehovah told his unruly disciple Moses. The great sages have said, 'Sit still, be quiet. That is all ye know and all ye need to know'.

The essence of Yoga can be summed up in three short phrases: Sit Straight! Be Quiet! Listen! But! These three injunctions are the most difficult things for modern man to do! The human must become a 'being'. The soul must evolve out of the 'doing' stage of the animal nature. Only then can one 'be still and know God'. The animal cannot be consciously still. It is programmed to move for survival's sake! In a sense, 'being still' goes against the very core of the survival instinct—*abhinivesha*, clinging to life! Hence, the difficulty in cultivating stillness and silence.

Why should one sit straight? (Walk straight, talk straight? Think straight? Speak straight?) Why should one be quiet? Physically, emotionally, mentally? Why should one listen? Both to the external sounds as well as internal sounds?

Maharishi Patanjali, the teacher of Yoga, gives the answer, in the very first Sutra of his celebrated *Yoga Sutras: atha yoganushasanam*—'We now commence the discipline of seeking the essence of ourselves'. Now! Not tomorrow! Not yesterday! Now! The Yogic aspirant seeks to know 'That Which Once Known One Knows All'. *Atha* implies 'now', the present moment. This change, this transformation, this silence must begin now!

The second Sutra of the first chapter (Samadhi Pada) of *Patanjali Yoga Sutra*, of course, is the most well-known:

*yogah chitta vritti nirodhaha.*

Yoga is the cessation of the whirlpools of the subconscious mind.

The conscious mind, the human mind, can be quiet. But the subconscious mind, the animal mind, the great residue of all experiences of millions of past incarnations, is a boiling cauldron of wild, turbulent, conflicting thoughts, desires, impulses. This sub-consciousness must be brought to consciousness. It must be dealt with and conquered, much as Rishi Agastya drank the ocean to expose the demons hiding in its depths. Once the demons were seen, they could be destroyed. Yoga is the process of 'seeing the demons' and thus, freeing the spirit from their vicious control.

The third Sutra of the first Pada tells what the result of this endeavour will be.

*tada drastuh swarupe vastanam*

Then the seeker is established in the form of its real Being.

In other words, the *sadhaka* (seeker) becomes what he truly is. One becomes established in one's essential form, which is Atman, Brahman, Shivam, the Purusha—the Great Person, the Oversoul. What are the characteristics of this essential form? *Sat-Chit-*

*Ananda*. Sat means Reality, or Truth, ('that which is'), *chit* is consciousness, and *ananda* is eternal bliss. What are the means or discipline, sadhana? *Abhyasa*, continued effort, in the now. It is stated in the second Sutra: 'making the subconscious mind quiet.' To know one's true self one must quiet the mind. In these first three Sutras, the whole of the Yoga science is expounded. Begin now, quiet the mind. Then, dwell in and realize your own self, which is the Highest Bliss.

The rest of the 196 Sutras build on this idea. It is said, Yoga is a way of life. That way of life is to conduct oneself moment by moment with conscious discipline and restraint. This will lead to realization of the Goal. Hence, Yoga is 'every moment conscious striving towards higher levels of consciousness'. The Rishis called out in the past and Swami Vivekananda in his booming, charismatic voice shouted at the turn of the twentieth century: 'Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!'

### First Step to Yoga

The first step in Yoga is the awakening to consciousness from the deep slumber of animal unconsciousness. (Unfortunately deep slumber is quite pleasant!) Once awakened, one must then arise, and act, as Arjuna acted, to fulfill the Svadhrama, one's own purpose, to which one was born! Most important of all—one must not stop striving, working, till the goal is reached.

Patanjali lays out the eight necessary steps one must take once the awakening has occurred. In eight words, he shows us how to live: Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, Samadhi

First works first. One must not build one's house on shifting sand. An elegant workable system of morality and ethics is laid out by the Rishi. This is the foundation of Sadhana. Without this, Yama and Niyama, there can be no Sadhana. Yama means control, restraining of the animal nature with all its self-seeking, survival, instinctive, behavioral patterns. One must curb all the vicious animal traits. The animal sustains its life through violence. It must kill in order to live.



So Patanjali tells us, the first step one must take to rise out of the animal nature and to begin constructing a truly human nature is to consciously reject all violence—Ahimsa, the Great Vow, which distinguishes man from beast. This is the first Yama, the *mahavrata* (Great Vow), which must be taken if one wishes to walk the Yogic path. It is the conscious decision to step out of the animal realm of the survival instinct, sensory pursuits, competition on all levels, and conditioned reflexes and sub-conscious instincts. It is the threshold of the door passing from sub-conscious Chitta dominated animal life to human existence in the realms of *manas*, consciousness. This is why the ancients proclaimed: *ahimsa paramo dharma*, non-violence is the highest dharma.

The remaining four Yamas follow in its wake. *Satya*, truth or truthfulness is the ability to see the Reality, *sat*, ('That which is') clearly, and to align one's thoughts, words and deeds to that reality. The third step is *Brahmacharya*, the conscious lifting of one's thoughts, words and deeds out of the animal need for self-propagation. This makes one's life sublime by focusing that vital sexual energy into creative living. *Asteya* restrains the animal impulse which instinctively feels 'anything that is not watched or is left unguarded or can be taken by stealth or force belongs to me'. *Aparigraha* is restraining of the animal need to grab, to clasp, to hold, to keep.

Thus the Yamas are a kind of *pratipaksha bhavana*—mental attitudes that are consciously constructed as the direct opposite to bestial animal instincts. As the Yamas take root in the striving soul, the quietude of being, the stillness necessary for transcendence, slowly begins to manifest itself.

The animal restlessness subsides of its own accord as one starts to master the Yamas.

One must then cultivate the strength and will power to hold to these vows, if one wishes to proceed any further on the Yoga path. This may be done step by step in the remaining seven steps of Ashtanga Yoga.

### The Second Step is Niyama

The Niyamas are cultivation of consciousness, *manas*, that quality of existence which differentiates man from beast. The Yamas say no to the animal nature. The Niyamas say yes to higher, aware, choice-ful living.

*Saucham*, the first, is purity, cleanliness, a purity of character from which all animal traits or instincts have been eradicated: physically mentally, emotionally. *Saucham* implies a purity of motivation: one is no longer propelled by sub-conscious like animal instincts: lust for sexual gratification, power, dominance, territorial supremacy or material possession. The motive is purely the desire to evolve towards higher states of being.

*Santosham* is contentment with what one is, with what one has, with where one exists. It is not dull complacency or laziness or the relaxation-collapse which occurs when desires are satiated. No! It is a deep, profound understanding that every situation in which one finds oneself is exactly what one needs to progress on the spiritual path.

*Tapas* or *Tapasya* is the fire of discipline which burns out impurities and strengthens the will. *Tapasya* is the power to persist, to push through all obstacles with great cheerfulness. It is the ability to carry on the work when one wishes to give up. It is the ability to face horrendous challenges with skillful hands and a happy heart.

*Swadhyaya* is constant, every moment self-examination, an awareness that knows down to every nano second, exactly what

one is doing, thinking, saying . . .and... why! 'Man! Know thyself and thou shall know the universe' is what Niyama wants us to do.

Patanjali has saved the best Niyama for last, serving us a 'spiritual dessert'. A spoonful of sugar to make the medicine of the preceding four Niyamas and five Yamas 'go down and become digested'. The fifth Niyama is *Iswara Pranidhana* or submission to the will of God. Islam is based on this Niyama. It says '*Inshallah*, 'If Allah wills it'. 'Let It Be!' In fact, Islam means: one who submits to the Great God (Allah). Jesus Christ was a master of this Niyama. Did he not say: 'Not my will, but Thine be done'. The Greek and Roman Stoics, more than 2000 years ago, built their whole philosophy on accepting 'what is' with equal-mindedness.

Now, here is the most peculiar thing about Patanjali's wonderful codification. After presenting us with a rather complex system of rigorous spiritual disciplines, he says of this fifth Niyama: (II: 45)

*samadhisiddhi iswarapranidhanat*

Samadhi is the fruit of total perfect surrender to Divine Will.

In other words, the goal of Yoga may be obtained if one can perfectly cultivate the attitude of surrender to Divine Will. It is here that Yoga becomes Bhakti. *Iswara Pranidhana* is perfect Bhakti and explains how great souls of all cultures, times and climes attained the Godhead without even hearing the word Yoga—such as the Christian mystics like St. Francis and St. Theresa; the Sufi masters like Rumi; the universalists like Kabir and Shirdi Sai Baba, and the great giants like Sri Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharishi who never performed Pranayama or an Asana in their lives. And yet scaled the heights of exuberant Bhakti and reaped the beatitude of highest bliss-union with the beloved—called

by various names such as Samadhi, Nirvana, Moksha!

If the Yamas and Niyamas are perfected, the mind enters into a deeply still, peaceful state. The *chitta vritti*, the waves of the subconscious mind subside. That peace which passes understanding emerges. One becomes 'established in the state of one's true being'. The goal of Yoga is reached. This is called 'Kriya Yoga', the Yoga of living human life perfectly within the framework of Cosmic Law, codified by Patanjali as the Pancha Yama and Pancha Niyamas, Five Restraints and Five Observances, the first two steps on the path of Ashtanga Yoga. What Patanjali implies is that if one lives a perfect moral and ethical life, one will naturally achieve Moksha, or enter Samadhi.

### The Next Six Steps

However, few can reach or sustain that state. Few can perfect Yama and Niyama. The rest of the Sadhakas must go further. They must employ additional tools to construct that perfect silence, that perfect stillness.

The third step then becomes *Asana*. The word *asana* derives from the root *asi* which means 'to be'. Thus Asana means to 'enter into one's true being'. *Sthiram sukham asanam*—'a body position held still and steady with ease is Asana'. Asana is thus cultivation of silence of body.

The fourth step is *Pranayama*, controlling of vital energy by means of breath. The ultimate aim of Pranayama is 'to stop the breath', literally, 'to silence the breath'.

*Pratyahara*, the fifth step, is transcendence of and silencing of sensual impression, detaching consciousness from sensual stimulus. This is silence of the senses.

By the time the sixth step, *Dharana*, is reached, the body, breath and senses will be

silenced, made quiet and still. Consciousness may then be one-pointed and focused on a single point, a *bindu*. The mind is literally 'tied to one spot, one point'. The quietude, which has been cultivated in the preceding five steps, becomes deeper and more profound as the mind settles into a steady, one pointed

discrimination and knowledge (*jnana shakti*) and the power of action (*kriya shakti*) to cultivate silence and stillness. There is a 'push' towards the goal: a striving, an effort of will.

As that effort bears fruit, in the seventh step (Dhyana) and eighth step (Samadhi) the push turns into a pull and the Jiva is now pulled into the state of Highest Silence and Stillness. After intensive effort in the first six steps—restraint of emotional, animal impulses in Yama; the conscious cultivation of humane virtues in Niyama, control and deep awareness of body in Asana, stilling the body's natural restlessness; slowing, restraining, stopping the breath in Pranayama; shutting down, closing, detaching from sensory stimulus in Pratyahara; Intense focus on one point which is worthy of worship in Dharana, after which there is nothing left 'to do'.

From the seventh step onward, one 'must let go and be'. The 'push' of individual effort becomes 'surrender of the pull to the Lord' from Dhyana onwards. Effort is of no use now. Now, the 'letting go of effort' must occur. This happens through the grace of Guru, past Karma and previous effort. All the work has been done. Now begins 'the waiting, the watching, the silence'. Dhyana is the beginning of the establishment in the state of mystic absorption.

What happens then? It is best to put it in the words of Sri Ramakrishna, 'The salt doll enters into the ocean. Who is left to describe the experience?'

The Great Silence has been entered. When we seek to express it, words suddenly fail us.

In the highest realms, silence alone speaks.

The ultimate sound of Yoga is. . . .That Silence! □



focus. Up to this point, the individual Jiva is utilizing will power (*iccha shakti*); power of

