

Entering the Path of Yoga

by Swami Durgananda

When one begins to practice Yoga, often the question arises: Is Yoga really suited for the West ? The answer is a definite Yes. Yoga relates to aspects which are common to all human beings.

From the wide spectrum of yoga practices, Swami Vishnu-Devananda choose *asanas* and *pranayama*, postures and breathing exercises as the first practice. This practice by itself provides already a feeling of inner peace. It includes stretching, breathing and mental relaxation. *Asanas* and *pranayama* need to be practiced thoroughly under the guidance of an experienced teacher. If you just practice by yourself it is difficult to overcome the resistance of your own thoughts. Thinking is a habit and countless thoughts arise automatically without our awareness.

It may take 7 to 8 years to purify the gigantic accumulation of habitual thoughts. This may seem like a long time but it actually is not. One should beware of false promises for quick success from other systems. Everybody has the same collective thought consciousness and for this there is only one sure solution: relaxation, concentration and developing new habits. We have accumulated thoughts not only from the present life but from many previous lives. They do manifest more drastically in this life, because our experience of time is more intense. At this point in history our thoughts are spinning faster and faster. This itself can lead to diseases unless we learn how to cope with time as such in a courageous and humble way.

Computers, fax machines, telephones and airplanes have greatly influenced our experience of time. Some years ago it would take a week to send a letter from America to Europe and another week to receive a reply. Today we have fax machines and email and the reply is immediate. We are caught in a time machine. In this situation Yoga is even more important for the West. We learn to shut out everything and lie down on the floor for inward reflection in a space free of faxes, phones and computers. Yoga retreats are ideal for this purpose, but we should try to create similar conditions in our own homes.

Begin your practice with a lot of patience. Do not think: 'I am not flexible, I have undergone several operations. My doctor has advised me not to do any physical exercises except physiotherapy.' Or: 'I already practice ballet, aerobics and jogging. Yoga is much too static and boring.' Begin practicing Yoga, it is the only system which combines physical and mental exercises in a complete way. There is no other system that is as simple as the *yoga asanas*. All you need to begin the practice is a mat and a timeless space devoid of the all the above machines. Practice with tranquility, humility and detachment without pursuing a specific goal. This is not easy, because we look for quick results and success in the posture. Accept your body as it is each day and enter into the *asana* as well as you can. This in itself is the perfection of the *asana*. We must learn to relax and to let go. The exercises

stimulate the astral nerves and acupuncture points. This effect can be experienced by all, regardless of the level of flexibility. Flexibility will improve with practice.

I knew a 75 year old man who could barely walk. For the first Yoga class he came by taxi with a walking stick. After 6 months he was already using the public transport. Finally he even learnt the headstand which became his favorite posture. He was very happy with his success and improved life quality. Due to his advanced age he had a certain inner tranquility and was open to the guidance of Yoga.

Proper diet

Asanas, pranayama and proper relaxation lead to increased body awareness and inner contemplation, which are incompatible with heavy meals. Naturally one starts looking for new diet patterns. It may take 2 or 3 years to find a middle path in nutrition. In the beginning, Yoga practice does not require an immediate and complete change to vegetarianism. It is better to introduce changes gradually, otherwise one may end up being treated as a social recluse. Everybody has to gradually determine the most suitable diet without going into extremes. The aim for any Yoga practitioners is to follow a vegetarian diet, a diet that is most suitable for the lifestyle of *asanas, pranayama* and contemplation.

Vegetarianism includes many systems. Swami Sivananda and Swami Vishnu-Devananda referred frequently to the science of *ayurveda*. There are also several western systems of vegetarianism, which are conducive to purification.

Should I purify ? Will I be able to fast ? Should I fast ? Is it necessary to fast ? A strong body odor during *asana* practice or while in the sauna is a clear indication that fasting is needed. However any radical fast should be avoided. Without a doctor's consultation it is difficult to determine how the liver, stomach and blood pressure will be affected by fasting and how the body will respond. A fast for 5 days just on water should definitely be avoided as it can be quite harmful to your health. The safest solution is to fast once a week on warm water or mild herb teas like chamomile, fennel or lemongrass. Black tea and acid herb teas should be avoided .

Swami Sivananda advised fasting once a week. This yogic discipline of not eating for a day is specially advisable when one is accustomed to eating a lot. A good day for fasting is Saturday, a day when one is not busy driving long distances inhaling exhaust or working long hours. When fasting on a Sunday one might be inclined to feel bored or lonely.

The necessary self discipline required for fasting is found in the daily Yoga practice. Gradually one can extend the fasting period to 2 or 3 days, but not longer, as symptoms such as headaches, nausea or cramps may set in, which require medical advice. Longer fasts may be undertaken in *ashrams*. One can seek guidance from more experienced yoga teachers for longer fasts on juices and herbal

teas. The tongue cleaner and *neti* catheter should be used every morning and evening to help expel the accumulated toxins and phlegm from the tongue and nasal passages.

Regular practice of Yoga, fasting and dietary changes make one more aware of the hidden weaknesses in the body such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol, poor eating habits, drinking too little water, dry skin – which went unnoticed before. Doctors specialized in naturopathy or homeopathy can give further valuable advise.

Inner detachment and meditation

On continuing the practice of Yoga one experiences an inner spiritual awakening. About 90% of people practicing Yoga do not practice for spiritual reasons. They may have had a religious education during childhood, but very few people are practicing spirituality in daily life. Spirituality in Yoga is not indian by nature, but rather a universal spirituality of man, realizing the truth within through the mental poise of meditation. It is a direct experience which goes beyond the intellect.

These mental aspects of Yoga are highly interesting, it may however take several years to integrate them into daily life. We may feel some conflict with christian, jewish or other philosophical views in which we were brought up and educated. Yoga techniques do have eastern names, but there is no such thing as an eastern aim or a western aim, there is only one aim, the union of body , mind and spirit – a goal which we gradually begin to understand through personal practice. Yoga accepts all religions and at the same times offers many techniques to allow the actual *religio* to happen, the union of body, mind and spirit. The word Yoga means union, union of what we think we are with what we really are.

Thus we embark on a long inner path with innumerable questions, doubts, a spirit of adventure, inner restlessness, hopes and much more. During the first one or two years, most people do not actively pursue any of the mental practices of Yoga. Along with the awakening of inner questions, one begins to open up to the path. Only when we are ready for something new, we are able to really listen. We may listen to many things, but it is not being absorbed, there is no real interest for it, because our awareness is not yet open to it.

Raja Yoga

In the 5000 years old tradition of Yoga, it is the path of *raja yoga* that best describes the psychology of the human mind. *Raja yoga* explains the different functions of the mind, states of consciousness, concepts of *prana* or life force, *chakras* and *kundalini*, as well as the various levels of meditation. The study of *raja yoga* is useful to understand the functioning of our own mind, how we constantly identify with the mind, thus developing the erroneous idea that our

mental awareness cannot be changed. We say: 'I was born in this situation, these are my family members and relatives and that is all.'

The practice of *raja yoga* can lift you out of any state of consciousness which you want to overcome. Courses on *raja yoga* are conducted in the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres and Ashrams based on a detailed study of the *sutras* by Patanjali Maharishi who has compiled *raja yoga* in its present form. A study of these verses reveals our tendency to repeat certain actions which strengthen old deep rooted habits. At the time we are shown the possibility to change. In *raja yoga* this process is called sublimation, we can sublimate our thoughts and actions into a new form. We do not become idle but rather achieve a better and more peaceful life through new thoughts and actions. If we feel caught mentally in a dark corner, we do not have to accept this. *Raja yoga* gives us great hope. The *sutras* comprise 4 chapters containing 196 verses and even if one is able to learn it by heart one tends to forget its real essence. Real study of *raja yoga* takes a long time.

Raja yoga is a psychological self study. We do not consult another person to tell us who we are. Instead we look at ourselves and take the opportunity to purify ourselves without becoming ashamed. When someone points out something to us we may feel ashamed because we feel exposed. *Raja yoga* involves an inner purification which goes unnoticed by others. Fellow practitioners may be aware of our purification but will not comment on it.

The 8 steps in *raja yoga* begin with the *yamas* and *niyamas*, ethics and morals, then *asanas* and *pranayama* and followed by concentration and meditation exercises and lastly transcending thoughts, the actual mental substance, which results in the eighth step of self knowledge, the real human happy end. This is *samadhi* or Self realization.

Patanjali Maharishi has documented all this in a systematic way to enable everyone to practice it. The Book „Meditation and Mantras“ by Swami Vishnu-devananda contains an excellent commentary on the *raja yoga sutras* specially suited for the western mind. The commentaries by Swami Vivekananda are also highly recommendable.

Choosing the meditation object

Parallely to this psychological study one should establish a connection to pure spirituality, to divinity. This is a more personal issue, allowing for a large range of choices to establish and practice one's own inner spirituality. A person with a christian background may choose a point of mental focus and concentrate either on Jesus, the cross, holy Mother Mary or child Jesus, or praying the rosary. It is important to have a point on which the mind can rest. Like a bird resting on a branch, the human mind also needs a focal point during meditation, otherwise it will fall back into old thoughts. One may also choose a buddhist, jewish or islamic picture.

If for some reasons you do not feel comfortable with any traditional religious form, you may choose a vedantic picture. Understanding these spiritual images for meditation requires an introduction to *vedanta philosophy*. *Vedanta* is the highest philosophy known to man, because it states that there is only one reality. Rather than using the name God, it speaks about a reality, which is unchanging, present in all visible and invisible manifestations of nature as well as within each one of us. It is eternal and penetrates everything.

OM, A-U-M, is the word which expresses all levels of this reality through sound. Music is an important vehicle in Yoga. It tunes us to a loving harmonious energy and finally into the energy of the *chakras*, the inner *anahata* sounds, which can be heard when we go deeply within turning away from all extravert sense stimulation. Each energy center has its own sound. The *ajna chakra*, the energy center of thought and knowledge has the sound *OM*. *OM* is an energy sound unrelated to any name or form. It is the most universal expression of sound which the human vocal cords can produce. This AUM-sound resonates in the mmmm, the primordial vibration of the universe, on which we concentrate during meditation. The study of comparative religion asserts that words such as *amen* and *shalom* have been derived from *OM*.

These *mantras* or meditative sounds are very conducive to contemplation, whereas the sounds of our own language tend to divert our attention back to worries and desires of everyday life. Again and again the practitioner has to bring the mind back to the focus on the primordial vibration of mmmmm in the universal *mantra* AUM.

The question arises: How do we know that *OM* is the primordial sound ? This knowledge has been revealed by the self realized seers. It seems that our only option is to believe this. For all learning there is a teacher. Even when studying medicine there are certain things which we can only believe for the time being, until we really come to know them first hand as a doctor. This applies equally to a driving teacher, a carpenter as well as to a Yogi. From where did Jesus and Buddha receive their knowledge ? They obtained it through their own experience. In the yogic tradition these beings are called seers. They tuned to these subtle sound levels and wrote them down in the *vedas*, the oldest scriptures known on earth.

Doubts come to those who do not practice. Practice leads to experience which becomes the base of faith. This faith guides us further leading finally to the ultimate experience.

Silence is not silent. We dive within and unite with the sound which has always been vibrating in the *ajna chakra*. It is the easiest, quickest, most practical and logical way to detach from the sound vibrations of our own language. The contents of our language may be very elevating, but the consciousness is still limited. We want to go beyond that consciousness to realize our true Self.

If you are still unsure or afraid of your own spirituality, you should begin with *OM*, the simplest way to tune into a classical Yoga meditation. If you are already rooted in your own spirituality, in the spiritual forms of your own religion, you may guide your concentration to this religious object and at the same time continue using *OM*. *OM* is neutral.

If you choose the spiritual meditative images of *vedanta*, you can connect to various energy levels which finally merge in the absolute, unchanging Self. *Vedanta* explains these energy levels with the principles of creation, preservation and destruction.

Creation is that which constantly renews itself. Now everything is full of colors, in winter nature moves into apparent still stand, during springtime everything is apparently new. Yoga considers creation, preservation and destruction as divinity because it extends to the whole universe. These are not gods which only speak one specific language or look a certain way, but rather energy levels which include divine sounds.

Thus there are specific energy sounds of creation, preservation and destruction. The yogis or seers perceived these sounds in their superconscious states of meditation and handed them down to us. The classical *mantras* are very old and we should make use of them. The *mantras* really exist, they have been preserved, and this is a unique aspect of Yoga. Very few systems remain which still conserve and practice *mantras*.

By repeating the *mantras*, we can tune to the sounds of the three different levels, just like to a radio station. The sound envelops us and penetrates into our being like a golden shower, which in turn is sent out all around us through continued repetition of the *mantra*. The more we tune to the *mantra*, the more we melt into the cosmic energy.

Universal spirituality

It is a high level of spirituality in which we feel that body and mind are not the most important thing in the world. Yoga explains this mental level beyond body hygiene and physical exercise, which the beginner student finds hard to understand. It needs a certain purification to slowly rise up to this level.

It is a cosmic spirituality, which cannot be limited to a single religion, but rather comprises the religions of the future, in which there will be no more fighting like: „My God is better than your God.“ Gradually we are discovering that this attitude does not correspond anymore to our times. Still there are many people who do not agree with this, but there is a strong increase of inner religious freedom and true cosmic spirituality.

Purifying the mind

In order to approach these energies through the repetition of the sound, we put our body in a perfectly quiet state. In addition to the aforementioned physical purification, we will now also experience a mental purification. It is amazing to see what comes out of our mind: newspapers, tv, professional training, personal relationships, our job, worries and sorrows about the future. We are supercharged and cannot find any peace in this computer which we carry in our head. We have to constantly delete the contents, in order to be able to absorb new things.

Deletion takes place during meditation. We do not make any specific choice, it happens on the basis of realization. In *sanskrit* this is termed *vidya*, and its opposite is *avidya* or ignorance. Realization is not the type of knowledge which we commonly acquire, but rather the knowledge resulting from inner experience. The experience manifests when we come in touch inside of us with something greater than the usual experience of body and mind. A certain detachment arises, which instead of being based on indolence, laziness or intolerance comes out of selfless love. The practitioner becomes aware that he is being carried by a greater force, and this is what brings about the detachment.

Up to here everything can also be attained in modern institutions for fitness and weight control. But now starts the authentic path of Yoga, the actual practice, such as a yoga retreat: deep meditations, *mantra* chanting, opening ourselves up to the positivity of Yoga during the lectures, elevating ourselves beyond obstacles such as: „I am not sure whether this is really possible for me.“ *Satsang* literally means Being with the Truth. After sharing *Satsang* in a Yoga retreat, the personal practice is flowing again with ease, with new positivity and confidence to continue practicing in daily life.

Building up personal discipline

The main obstacle on the inner path is lack of discipline. Once we are aware of this, we gradually try to build up our personal discipline. Swami Sivananda explains in many examples how to do this in a simple way, for instance through *Mouna*, silence or discipline of speech. This does not mean to be silent while you are alone anyway. *Mouna* is to be practiced in the middle of a busy schedule, without making it a personal show with a sign on our chest „I am in *mouna*“. It consists in letting things develop. This is really a great discipline and time proven way to develop real self discipline.

What we know as discipline is self-motivated discipline like getting up in the early morning, because otherwise I might lose my job. Proper maintenance of my car, otherwise I will not be able to drive it. Maintaining proper body weight through moderate eating, so I am looking good and will find a partner. These are all self-motivated disciplines and do not count for spiritual growth. Everybody does this. Studying for many hours to obtain a degree which allows a superior job position, this does not constitute self-discipline. Self-discipline means giving up something

inside, real renunciation, without any tangible result, except a higher level of mind control. This a completely different motivation and much more difficult than the type of discipline which leads to a direct result. Thus we can clearly see the difficulty and obstacles related to self-discipline.

As a matter of fact, life can be lived without yoga postures, meditation, *mouna*, etc. We were able to live and undergo the average burden of life without them before. Only if we seriously ask ourselves how to overcome these difficulties, we will be motivated for real self-discipline. Gradually we are convinced by the results and things become much easier. *Mouna* is a simple and efficient remedy, even if we just practice it for 1 hour at a time. Swami Sivananda suggests to practice it on either Saturday or Sunday when we are not working. Otherwise we might lose our job very quickly.

There are other small exercises for self-discipline. If you are used to take sugar in your tea, give it up for a while, without substituting it with honey or artificial sweetener. It really does not taste good, and we can see how much the mind is used to sugar. It is only happy if it gets the usual sugar. Our happiness depends of a small spoon full of sugar. If you never eat sugar anyway, this will be no problem for you: „I am already self-realized, I do not need any sugar.“ Then give up tv, music, newspaper or simply do not make any phone calls at night. Any of these exercises constitute *tapas* or austerity nowadays. Substitute it with some yoga practice or meditation and end the day like this. Giving up excessive planing, this special type of free time stress, which does not allow us to spend some time just by ourselves and to always keep us engaged in activities. Whatever self-discipline you choose, after some time the mind realizes that somebody is checking its movements, and it does not like this at all.

Reactions in the mind

Then the mind starts to act up in apparently intelligent ways, which in reality are purely instinctive: smart like a dog, a cat, a bird or a chicken, which instinctively knows how to find food and to secure its space. We tend to say: „Oh see how intelligent this animal is.“ But really it is mere instinct, the same instinct which is also within us, and which manifests with all its tricks once we consciously restrain our own mind.

Recognizing our own instincts is part of self-knowledge and allows to slowly sublimate them without going to the extreme of repression, maintaining our inner calm and avoiding any revolutionary state. Once we go to any extreme, it creates a revolution inside, and we will have to start all over again. It happens easily if we are not properly informed and try to proceed too fast, due to lack of guidance. A counter-reaction occurs which manifests in some type of addiction.

Tapas or self-discipline has to be dealt with carefully, gradually, according to our capacity. It is like running a warm bath, we must check the temperature before

entering the water. You cannot just go into the water and then find out it is too hot. After checking you may add some more warm or cold water, and then easily slide into the bath tub. This applies for all exercises in renunciation. Do not give up everything all at once: no more alcohol, meat, fish, eating only salads, practicing *asanas* 2-3 hours daily, getting up at 5:00 a.m., meditating at 6:00 a.m. and then going to work. Soon your colleague will look at you and ask: „What is the matter with you ? You eyes are so vague, you are very pale, you have a bad breath, what are you doing ?“ – „Oh, I am practicing Yoga.“ He'll turn away, thinking, „here goes another fanatic. He must have fallen into some sect.“ Then he goes to see the boss and one month later you receive a friendly letter announcing that due to streamlining of the office structure your post cannot be maintained. And there goes your job.

Please be very careful. Self-discipline must be practiced through any one of the five senses, like hearing, seeing, tasting, touching or smelling. Fortunately this is all we have, otherwise we would be having more problems. But avoid any extremes.

A well-balanced practice

Swami Vishnu-devananda laid the proper foundation for our practice with the famous 5 points of Yoga:

„Health is wealth. Peace of mind is happiness. Yoga shows the way.

Through:

1. Proper exercise (*asanas*)
2. Proper breathing (*pranayama*)
3. Proper relaxation (*savasana*)
4. Proper diet (vegetarian)
5. Positive thinking and meditation (*vedanta* and *dhyana*)“

Practice *asanas* and *pranayama*. Learn to relax amidst all stress through proper detachment. Take time to adjust your diet, specially if you are just beginning your practice. Finally positive thinking will lead to meditation. *Mantra* repetition is a wonderful tool for meditation, using sound vibrations which create, preserve and destroy everything in the universe. These sounds exist inside of us, our body and mind are part of the ever changing nature. We connect to the unchanging spirituality by leaving all changing phenomena behind during our practice. At this moment we transcend the plane of nature and dive into pure existence.

This is our birth right and the aim for any Yogi or spiritual person. During retreats or in an *ashram* we find the best conditions: nature, yoga exercises, good food, fresh air. It was Swami Vishnu-devananda's wish to hold retreats regularly, as fountains of strength for a continued practice in daily life.

Once we understand our own spiritual needs, we understand that it has nothing to do with East or West. For this reason, Yoga has become very popular in the West. Many physicians have adopted Yoga, though mostly its physical aspects due to lack

of training. For the mental and spiritual aspects they refer to fully trained yoga teachers. Many physicians, hospitals and spas are working with Yoga. Also within the church circles Yoga is more and more expanded.

Practice, learn and deepen your yoga exercises, they are your companion until the end of your life, even if due to disease at one point the body may not be able to practice yoga exercises. Destiny has its own ways and due to karmic tendencies anyone may meet with a disease. But nobody can take away the inner values through which you can tune to the cosmic reality. Even if things are braking down left and right, just sit and connect to the cosmic Self, the immutable energy of nature which is always within you. It is only veiled through the constant abuse of the senses in daily life, which leads us away from this experience. Thus Yoga is an important companion until the end.

Unity in Diversity

Yoga is the path, whereas the actual experience cannot be called Yoga anymore, everything ends there. There are many paths, but only one Reality. Yoga is one path to the goal, and we should understand it as such. Whoever reaches the goal does not consider himself a Yogi, a christian, a jew, a hindu or a moslem; cosmic reality is being experienced. All sages who have reached this realization can hold hands. There is no need for any fight. Those who keep fighting over this, have not reached the reality, and due to their attachment to a name and a form, they are still fighting. It was the aim of Swami Vishnu-devananda's work in the West to reach Unity in Diversity through the practice of Yoga.