

## The Eightfold path of yoga

**Y**oga (devotional practice) is also of two varieties: royal *yoga* (*raja-yoga*) and the *yoga* of inner contemplation (*jnana-yoga*). The royal *yoga* has eight stages, which have to be well cultivated and realized. Of these, some are external and some internal. This is the *Aryan* path. In the *yoga* of contemplation, there is no “external” at all. Both these *yogas* have as their goal the stilling of the agitations of all levels of consciousness. For those who have calmed all these agitations, everything is *Brahman*. Primary for this purpose is the *yoga* of contemplation more than the *yoga* of activity—at least that is the opinion of the knowers of *Brahman*. They say “that is the thing to be known, to be reached.”

But, according to the wisdom of the *Upanishads*, direct knowledge of the *Brahman* can be obtained by the eightfold *yoga* of

- (1) Control of the inner senses (*yama*),
- (2) Control of the outer senses (*niyama*),
- (3) Regulation of the sitting posture (*asana*),
- (4) Regulation of the breath (*pranayama*),
- (5) Control of the mind (*prathyahara*),
- (6) Concentration or single-mindedness (*dharana*),
- (7) Meditation on the Divine (*dhyana*), and
- (8) Complete absorption into the reality (*samadhi*).

### (1) Control of the inner senses (*yama*)

This includes nonviolence, truth, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-acceptance (*ahimsa, sathya, a-stheya, brahma-charya, a-parigraha*).

This is the usual meaning given to the control of the inner senses, but I would say instead that it means the giving up of attachment to the body and to the senses. The *Brahman* entity is devoid of name, form, and qualities; is without end, joy, sorrow, and modification; is eternal and of the nature of being-awareness-bliss (*satchidan-anda*). Creation, on the other hand, is endowed with all qualities and modifications, viz. name, form, transformation, of rise and decline, joy and sorrow. Nevertheless, as a result of delusion, this *Brahman* entity appears as all this creation. This appearance has an end; it has various other limitations; it appears to be ever moving, so it is called ocean of life (*samsara*). Thus, this *Brahman* entity appears in both the individual form of a whole, viewed as made up of parts, and the collective form of the individual parts, viewed as an aggregate. It deludes even great scholars and pandits.

One single consciousness (*chaithanya*) becomes manifest in different ways as all this multiplicity. Therefore, we speak of the particular and of the collective, i.e. a collection of particulars. Of course, the particular is a super-imposition on the *Brahman*, like seeing the snake in the rope, the lake in the mirage. For the knower of *Brahman*, each of the three bodies—the gross (*sthula*), subtle (*sukshma*), and causal (*karana*)—is itself a super-imposition. To say that one of the bodies is real or unreal is not correct; it is neither real nor unreal, it is something between truth and untruth (*mithya*). The ignorant person, caught in the meshes of this delusion, believes that the objective world is everlasting and a source of happiness.

Falsely identifying themselves with the body, people suffer in the coils of attachment to their mother, father,

spouse, children, relatives, and friends. They do not realize that they have neither body nor senses and that they are *Brahman* (the sustenance and support of the three-fold body and everything else). This can be realized through the constant contemplation of the *Brahman* having the characteristics of being-awareness-bliss (*satchidananda*), through the never-ceasing discrimination between the changeless and the changing, through association with the good, service of the wise, and through acquisition of purity of intelligence. The establishment of one's intellect in this consciousness is the real renunciation of the body and the senses, which is implied in the word *yama* as defined earlier. This is what is called control of the inner senses (*yama*) in the practice of inner contemplation (*jnana-yoga*).

Joy in times of good fortune and sorrow in times of bad, mistaking the pain of the body and the senses as one's own, such dual attitude and feeling must be overcome. Step by step, identification with the body and the senses has to be given up. This is the sign of acquiring the "limb" (*anga*) of self-control (*yama*). This limb is the very foundation of the practice of inner contemplation.

## **(2) Control of the outer senses (*niyama*).**

*Niyama* means purity, being full of joy, engaged in spiritual exercises or repetition of the name of the Lord. This is what is mentioned in the king of *yogas* (*raja-yoga*): purity, joy, asceticism, Self-study, and surrender to the Lord (*soucha, santhosha, tapas, swadhyaya, Iswara-pranidhana*). These are the components of control of the outer senses.

But I would explain it in the following manner. Control of the outer senses is the condition of steady love in the Godhead, at all times and under all conditions. "It is the highest form of love", it is said in the *Narada Bhakthi Sutra*. It is only when such steadfast love toward the Absolute is gained that the purity, the joy, the asceticism, the study, and the surrender to the Lord mentioned in the *yoga* of activity will also be obtained. When control of the inner senses is won, bliss and peace will become your possession through the source of all bliss and peace, the being-a-awareness-bliss (*satchidananda*) Universal Absolute Entity (*Parabrahman*).

These two (control of the inner and outer senses) are not derived from dry worldly material objects. "He is sweetness", "*Brahman* is bliss", say the *Upanishads*. It is in and through *Brahman* that the material world is endowed with even the tiniest modicum of joy. Without the basic *Brahman*, which is the most complete and the fullest sweetness and joy, this fleeting evanescent appearance thereon cannot be so sweet and joy-giving to the worldly minded! Without that basic sweetness, the world would have been terribly bitter. For the little sweetness that material objects give, the Ocean of Nectar is the cause. Association with the knowers of *Brahman*, discussion with them of the nature of the absolute in a spirit of humility and earnestness, a thirst to realize the Reality, unwavering love toward the Lord—these are the characteristics of those established in control of the outer senses. Stalwarts with these characteristics will not be affected by derision or praise, by wind or sun or rain, by honour or dishonour. They will tread the path of liberation free from all attachment to anything except the one single aim of realizing the bliss of unison with the basic *Brahman*.

People who have realized the stage of outer-sense control will be ready to sacrifice everything for the acquisition of wisdom. They will run to any distance to listen to discussion of *Brahman*; they will obey every instruction of the wise; they will attach themselves to those who teach the science of ultra-consciousness (*chinmaya-tha-thwa*), as if they alone are their most intimate friends; they will put up with any trouble in fulfilling their wishes. These are the signs of people who have achieved control of the outer senses (*niyama*).

### **(3) Regulation of the (sitting) posture (*asana*).**

One should have a steady posture in sitting. That is to say, one should neither shake nor sway. But even sitting like a rock, motionless and with all joints locked, can never be called *asana*. That is not the sign of real *asana*. *Asana* means both steadiness of the physical frame and inner joy that blooms in the heart. So whatever the posture adopted by the aspirant of *yoga*, it must be both steady and comfortable. That is why Patanjali advised a steady and comfortable posture.

I am telling you the same thing, in another way, what the best and most success-yielding posture is. It is that posture in which one is most unaffected by the external world. It is the posture that comes from practice of a moral life, meritorious in the world and in accordance with the *Vedic* path. It is absolute lack of interest in matters unconnected with the highest *Atma*. When people whose ways you do not appreciate come near you, there is no need to find fault with them; there is no need either to laugh at them or show them your contempt. It is enough to continue to do your work, unaffected by their arrival.

Let those whose behavior you do not appreciate follow their path; leave them alone. That is the attitude of unaffectedness. After the dawn of love for the Absolute, the aspirant gets this feeling toward all worldly things. To be more exact, one should constantly be turning over in the mind the reality of *Brahman* and the unreality of the world —*Brahman* is truth; the world is unreal. One must avoid comradeship with the bad and even too much friendship with the good! Attachment of this nature will drag one away from the path of withdrawal from the objective world to the path of external activity. Give up attachment to the momentary, the things clothed with the trappings of name and form. Once you have achieved this attitude of unaffectedness, you will have unshakeable peace, self control, and purity of mind. You will have the steadiness and stability of posture (*asana*).

### **(4) Regulation of the breath (*pranayama*).**

*Pranayama* usually means control and regulation of the inhaling and exhaling of the breath. In the yoga-sastras, this is explained as comprising the various stages of regulation of breathing —practices to gain control of the five vital airs, closing the right nostril and inhaling air through the left, closing the nostril with the right hand while breathing, etc.

But I would explain it this way: Control of the breath is possible only for those who consider this whole universe as “unreal”. We see golden ornaments of various types and styles, all made of the same metal, gold; and yet, we like one more and another less —not all of them equally. We have given various names and forms to these articles according to needs and fashions, likes and desires; and yet, we are bound by a meaningless delusion that blinds us to the actuality. When the ornaments are thought of, are being manufactured, are in use, and are finally melted into a lump they are and remain “gold”, don’t they?

Likewise, so many names and forms appear and reappear in this world, rise, grow, and get destroyed. And yet, that which is the basic substratum, the eternal, persists in and through all this change and remains eternal. Just as the multiple forms create illusion and arouse feelings of hatred and love, so too these forms and names delude and create attachment. They make us believe that they themselves are the source of joy. But don’t the scriptures say that the universe is nothing but *Brahman*, the beginningless, the endless, the unblemished, the ever pure? They declare that the ornaments are passing phases, that gold alone is eternal and real and true. Therefore, you must take everything to be *Brahman* and *Brahman* alone. Convince yourselves that all appearances are the product of delusion (*maya*), practise always that type of discrimination, evince great interest in knowing the reality, and be

ever alert to recognize the truth that everything is *Brahman*.

Of course, in the deluded stage, the world appears as real and *Brahman* as a meaningless concoction. In the stage of intelligent clarity, the world is grasped in its true sense as unreal. The fairy of delusion overpowers you by her charms and her arrows of falsehood and guilt. Only the person possessed of the vision of universal *Brahman* can soon escape her wiles. Such a person fully knows that names and forms arose a little time ago and disappear a little time after. In the *Gita* [II 28], too, it is said; “These, Oh descendent of Bharath (India), appear in the middle only.” The world is subject to evolution and involution. To understand this, one need not wait till the end of the world; it is enough if the angle of vision is corrected. That is the gateway to real knowledge. That is real control of breath, the consciousness that the world is unreal (*mithya*).

The genuine master of breath control will picture the world like letters written in pencil many years ago: indistinct, hazy, misty. Knowing that *Brahman* alone is all this, such a one will never be drawn toward their environment, however fascinating it may be. Earnings, wealth, property —everything is unreal, valueless, not worthwhile. This conviction is the best sign of breath control (*pranayama*).

#### **(5) Control of the mind (*prathyahara*).**

The tongue tastes, the eye sees, the ear hears, the skin feels, the nose smells. Each sense acts thus throughout life, right? The senses have to be withdrawn from the external objective world and turned toward the internal mental consciousness or awareness (*chittha*). This process is called mind control by Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras*. However, I shall define it in another manner.

The inward activity of the mental consciousness (*chittha*), that is to say, the perpetual insight of the mind, the fundamental directive force of all the senses, that is the real meaning of mind control. It is only when the consciousness realizes that this is all delusion-born and delusion-maintained that it will draw back its feelers from the sensory world and give up its worldly selfish attitude. The general nature of the mind is to waver and hesitate and flutter in its search for happiness and peace. When it knows that the things it ran after are transitory and meaningless, it suddenly grows ashamed and disillusioned. Then it begins to illumine and clarify the consciousness.

Aspirants who have attained this stage will be watching the outer world as a huge pantomime; the inward look will give them such joy and contentment that they will repent for all the time wasted in external activities and pursuit of sensory joy. So, the straight, sharp, single-pointed vision of the mind toward the *Atma* within is the real control of the mind (*prathyahara*).

#### **(6) Concentration or single-mindedness (*dharana*).**

Patanjali has explained that when the awareness (*chittha*) is fixed in one place, it is named concentration (*dharana*). I would say that it means more the undeviating attitude of the mind, its unwavering character. When the mind gives up attachment to external objects, when it is saturated with repentance for past foolishness, when it is filled with remorse, renunciation, and understanding, when it directly fosters the development of progressive qualities of the head and heart, then it truly becomes fit to join the ideal. It contemplates only the ideal. Such fixed attention is what is meant by concentration.

To whichever place the mind may wander, instruct it to find only *Brahman* there. Whatever ideas and pictures it may form, instruct it to find only *Brahman* in those creations of the mind stuff.

Treat your consciousness (*chittha*) as a little boy. Bring up that boy, training it to become wiser and wiser.

Caress it into good ways. Make it aware that all objects that are “seen” are just products of one’s own illusion. Remove all its fears and foibles and focus its attention steadily on the goal only. Never deal forcibly with the mind; it will yield easily to tenderness and patient training. Correct its waywardness by means of the attitude of renunciation. Destroy its ignorance by means of instruction in the knowledge of the *Atma*. Strengthen the interest with which it is already endowed toward the realization of *Brahman*. Let it give up the attraction toward the evanescent and the false, the mirages created by fancy and fantasy. Turn its face inward, away from the external world. By these three methods, concentration can be firmly established.

During both the waking and the dream stages, as well as during all the process of mental spinning and weaving of colourful pictures by the imagination, the mind has to be watched and trained. It must be made to flow, single-pointedly and steadily like water from a sluice, toward *Brahman* and *Brahman* only. That is real concentration (*dharana*).

### **(7) Meditation on the Divine (*dhyana*).**

Spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) that flows in a single direction is meditation (*dhyana*). I have already described its various characteristics in *Dhyana Vahini*. Meditation, in short, is the uninterrupted dwelling of the consciousness in wisdom, the consciousness itself becoming thereby the embodiment of wisdom.

All this is *Brahman*. The ocean of divine nectar (*amritha*) is everywhere divine nectar. Whether in the well, in the tank, in the river, or in the ocean, water is water. So too, when all is *Brahman*, all is the same substance appearing under a multiplicity of names and forms. Space (*akasa*) is inside as well as outside the pot, and it is the same space, although it appears as two, interior space and exterior space! The *Brahman*, too, appearing as various bodies with their own individual characteristics, is One and One only. Like space inside as well as outside the pot, it is One. Experiencing that One and only *Brahman*, avoiding all feelings of difference and distinction, that is the sign of meditation on the Divine, the essence of the meditation on the Divine experience, however much individuals may vary.

### **(8) Complete absorption in the reality (*samadhi*).**

When form is ignored and only meaning is felt, that is *samadhi*. This is the opinion of Patanjali. *Samadhi* can be explained in another manner also. When someone who is engaged in meditation on the Divine forgets both themselves and the fact that one is engaged in meditation, then it becomes *samadhi*. That is to say, when one is merged in the thing on which one meditates, one enters into the stage called *samadhi*. Meditation on the Divine fulfils itself, becomes complete, in *samadhi*. Meditation strives, proceeds through effort, but *samadhi* comes effortlessly. It is the culmination of the eight-fold discipline.

When one knows that there is not one iota of distinction between the individual (*jiva*) and the *Atma*, that they are one and the same, then it is the highest *samadhi*. It is the fruit of ripest meditation, the dearest moment of *yogis*, the destroyer of ignorance, the signal of the grace of God. Incessant thirst to know the *Atma* as all is worthy to be encouraged and welcomed, for it is the path through which all doubts can be eliminated.

*Samadhi* is of two types, differentiated and undifferentiated. In differentiated *samadhi*, the threefold nature of knower, knowing, and knowee will still persist. When it is realized that the knower is *Brahman*, knowing is also *Brahman*, and the thing to be known is also *Brahman*, then there is no more agitation or activity; that is undifferentiated *samadhi*.

*Samadhi* is the ocean to which all spiritual discipline flows. The seven streams of inner-sense control, outer-sense control, posture, regulation of the breath, mind control, concentration, and meditation on the Divine all find their consummation in *samadhi*. Every trace of name and form disappear in that Ocean. The server and the one who is served, the meditator and the one who is meditated upon—all such duality is dispelled and destroyed. One won't even experience the experience, that is to say, one won't be aware that one is experiencing! Oneself alone, nothing else—that is *samadhi*. If there is anything else, it cannot be *samadhi*. It is something like a dream, a fantasy, a passing vision at best. *Samadhi* can admit of nothing other than *Brahman*.