

Attainment of Yoga

Maladies and Remedies

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

[Every adventure poses challenges and obstacles and the hero is he who face them with determination and cheer and overcomes them. The high adventure of Yoga is no exception; but fortunately the Yogic path has been scientifically explored by Patanjali and other Rishis and appropriate counter-measures prescribed for removing the impediments. Swami Harshananda of the Ramakrishna Institute of Moral & Spiritual Education, Mysore, is a deep Sanskrit scholar with a number of books on philosophy, religion, temple architecture etc., to his credit.]

A millionaire once asked his son to prepare a list of all the things he would like to possess in order to be happy. Very enthusiastically the boy prepared and brought a long list of seventeen items. After scanning it, the father scored it all off with his red pencil and wrote the words "PEACE OF MIND" in big letters. Then he advised him thus: "My dear boy! Even after possessing all these seventeen things, if you have no peace of mind, they are worthless. If, on the other hand, you have peace of mind, these seventeen will become irrelevant!" What a wonderful insight into life!

Knowingly or unknowingly, all of us are struggling to get peace. As long as our mind is in pieces and the pieces are in ceaseless mutual conflict, peace eludes us. It is only when we learn to put these pieces together so as to make the mind whole and integrated that we gain the peace of Kaivalya.

This is easier said than done. However, with competent guides like Patanjali who are ever eager to help out of infinite compassion, this task should not be that difficult.

Patanjali, the great master of the Yoga system, calls these pieces of the mind as vrttis, modifications, which are ever arising

and never subsiding. Yoga or union (yuj = to yoke) of the individual self with the Supreme Self will result through Yoga or Samadhi, (yuj = to get samadhi or perfect concentration) when these Vrttis are controlled, suppressed and eliminated, by the right kind of discipline and training. This discipline and training is also Yoga.

One who wants to be healthy and strong should be well aware of the diseases and debilities which destroy health. After all, prevention is better than cure! Similarly one who wants Yoga should be fully aware of the factors that destroy Yoga, or, those that are not conducive to it Patanjali, with his highly scientific outlook, has systematically listed these factors which he has termed as Antarayas ('intruders in the path of Yoga'). He has divided these into two groups. He calls the first as 'Antarayas' and the second as 'Vikshepasahabhuvah' (co-existing with mental distraction').

The 'Antarayas' are nine (*vide* Yoga Sutras 1.30): Vyadhi (Disease), Styana (mental laziness), Samsaya (doubt), Pramada (heedlessness), Alasya (physical laziness), Avirati (absence of dispassion), Bhrantidarsana (false perception), Alabdha-bhumikatva (noni

attainment of Yogic state) and Anavasthitatva (falling away from Yogic states when obtained) Let us now consider them one by one.

1. Vyadhi (physical disease): Ayurveda, the Hindu science of health and longevity, defines physical disease as the condition of imbalance of the three basic humours of the body viz., Vata (the wind), Pitta (the bile) and Sleshma (the phlegm). Uneven flow and distribution of the Rasa (chemicals produced by food and drink) as also the shortage or surfeit of the sense organs is another cause of disease. Since the body and mind are closely interconnected, it is but natural that diseases of the body disturb the mind making it almost impossible to practise Yoga. Hence curing the disease, restoring, rebuilding health and strength is a must for Yoga. Apart from medicines, diet and following the rules of health and sanitation, the practice of asanas, can be of great help in this direction. The asanas, often being imitations of the posture of birds and animals, can give not only health and vigour but also the particular ability of body for which the particular animal (whose posture is being imitated) is well known. The advice of Lord Sri Krishna to the Yogi to be moderate in eating, sleeping, recreation and work, since excesses destroy health, making it impossible to practise Yoga (vide Gita 6.16, 17), is very relevant in this context.

2. Styana (mental laziness): The mind is an expert in playing tricks. Also it is very choosy. It jumps to activity when there are prospects of pleasure or immediate results. Where and when sustained hard work is needed, it just stays put! It is human nature to desire good results without taking the trouble to do good, and to abhor evil results without taking the trouble to avoid evil. (On the other hand people often go out of the way to commit sins!).

The only way of conquering the evil is by cultivating discrimination and will power. Discrimination gives the conviction that Yogic disciplines help in achieving concentration and peace. Once the conviction arises, the mind must be forced to do the bidding of its master, the Sadhaka (spiritual aspirant).

Development of will power is a problem that is often faced by everyone of us. If we can exercise our body and build up its strength gradually, there is no reason why the same cannot be done with our mind! By denying ourselves small pleasures and temptations to begin with, we can gradually but surely build up our will power. The example given by the Holy Mother of the farmer who could lift a bull because he used to carry it daily since the time it was a small helpless calf, can give us much-needed encouragement here also.

3. Samsaya (doubt): In any new field of venture doubts and misgivings are always there. When it concerns a field like that of control and concentration of mind which is purely intangible and subtle, the rising of doubts is inevitable. The field of operation of such doubts is almost unlimited. Starting with doubting the veracity of the scriptures and the Guru and extending it to one's capacity for achieving Yoga, it can end in doubting one's own very existence! While observing that the ignorant, the unbelieving and the doubting people, will ruin themselves, Lord Sri Krishna comes down heavily on the last group by asserting that they lose both this world and the next (Gita 4.40).

Cultivation of Sraddha or faith in the holy books, the spiritual teacher and oneself, is the only antidote for this malady. One should impress upon oneself that even day

Today life is not possible without faith in one's relatives, friends and neighbours. How much more faith, then, is needed in spiritual life, which is a journey into the unseen and unknown?

4. Pramada (heedlessness): If eternal vigilance is the price of freedom, it is even more so the price one should pay to get spiritual freedom. Here absence of vigilance will inevitably lead to Samsara (the eternal rounds of births and deaths). That is why the great sage Sanatsujata goes to the extent of declaring that Pramada is itself Mriyu (death) (*vide Sanatsujatiya 1.4*).

Pramada constitutes forgetfulness and heedlessness with regard to the knowledge and cultivation of virtues like Ahimsa (non-injury) and Satya (truth) which are declared as the means to Yoga. Unless they are assiduously cultivated and protected, Yoga is not possible. Any lack of vigil will lead to quick and steep fall in spiritual life like the fall of the ball that slips out of the hands of a careless child playing with it at the top of a staircase (*vide Vivekachudamani 324*). Much care is bestowed in the world on petty self and filthy lucre. Should not at least an equal amount of care be bestowed on the means of Yoga which is spiritual wealth?

5. Alasya (physical laziness): There is a witty saying that laziness travels so slowly that poverty soon overtakes it! If laziness is thus the enemy of even Preyas (worldly well-being) how much more is it so with regard to Sreyas (things spiritual)? The only way to overcome laziness is by engaging oneself in healthy activities including service to others.

6. Avirati (absence of dispassion):

Yoga concerns things spiritual. Yoga is perfect concentration on the self leading to self-realisation. This is impossible unless the mind is drained of all its dross. Attachment to the non-self, things mundane, lust and lucre as Sri Ramakrishna puts it, is the dross. God and mammon cannot go together. So the aspirant after Yoga must relentlessly practise detachment and dispassion. As in the case of the development of will power, here also detachment can be built up starting the practice with smaller things. But this is only the negative side. The positive side, seeing real danger in objects of temptation through cultivation of discrimination, is the better way.

7. Bhrantidarsana (false perception): This and the next two obstacles are more serious, hence needing greater effort and more tactful handling. At the intellectual level, false perception can manifest itself as misunderstanding the teachings of the guru and the scripture. This can be due to dullness or perversion of intellect. More often it is due to self-conceit. In any case questions and discussions with the Guru in all humility will solve this problem.

False perception is possible at the psychic level also. Wrong methods of practice can lead to hallucinations, which can be remedied only by consulting the Guru or souls advanced in spiritual life. But then, how to know whether a psychic experience is true or false? True experience gives joy and peace whereas the false one may not have any impact or may even cause unhappiness, fears and tensions.

Psychic experiences like clairvoyance and clairaudience, though true in themselves can produce a false sense of self-realisation

thus blocking further progress. This is akin to the foolishness of the man who missed the train by whiling away his time on the roadside magic show! It needs great strength and wisdom to transcend the temptations of such psychic powers as often develop as a matter of course in spiritual aspirants. Patanjali himself warns the aspirants against this danger in Su. 3.51: 'When supernatural beings occupying celestial spheres invite the Yogi (to their worlds) he should neither be tempted nor puffed up with pride, since there is every possibility of a fall into Samsara.'

8. Alabdhabhumikatva (non-attainment of Yogic states): In spite of the fact that the aspirant is correctly practising the various steps and disciplines of Yoga, he fails to attain any of the Yogabhumis (planes of psychic and spiritual experiences) mentioned in the textbooks of Yoga. The malady behind this frustration and its remedy can be more easily understood in the light of a fine parable of Sri Ramakrishna. A farmer used to toil the whole day and water his field. The next morning he would find the field completely dry. Failing to discover the reason, he sought the assistance of his friend who showed him some rat-holes behind a bush, which were swallowing up all the water. Once these rat-holes were sealed, the problem was solved. Similarly, there are 'rat-holes' in our personality which need closing and sealing. Any deep-rooted evil tendency like inordinate attachment to lust and lucre or mercurial irritability or crass selfishness can be the 'rat-hole'. These evils often camouflage themselves as desirable virtues and so the aspirant fails to recognise them in their true colours. By dispassionate and deep introspection, consultation with the Guru and brother disciples, one can discover one's weaknesses and try to eliminate them, there-

by quickening the progress.

9. Anavasthitatva (falling away from Yogic states when obtained): This obstacle is even more serious. With great difficulty the Yogi succeeds in raising his mind to certain higher states but very soon it slides back to lower ones or goes back into the old rut. It is like the mongoose to whose tail a piece of brick is tied by the mischievous children of the house. After great exertion when it reaches its hole near the roof of the hut, the weight of the brick piece pulls it back.

The reasons for one's fall are similar to the aforementioned while describing the previous obstacle. The 'brick' of old Samskaras (tendencies) has to be removed first.

To these nine obstacles, Patanjali adds five more classifying them separately as the second group. They are: Duhkha (sorrow), daurmanasya (despondency), Angamejayatva (restlessness of limbs), Svasa (forcible inhalation) and Prasvasa (forcible exhalation). He calls these 'viksepasahabhuvah' (co-existing with mental distraction), because if they exist, they are immediately and invariably followed by mental distraction.

Duhkha (sorrow and suffering) can be caused by physical diseases and injuries, mental tensions, natural calamities and so on. As long as it exists the mind will be in a disturbed state making it impossible to pursue Yogic practices. Removal of the causes that give rise to Duhkha or enduring it patiently when found to be inevitable is the only remedy.

Daurmanasya (disappointment) is caused by unfulfilled desires and ambitions. This will automatically lead to agitation in the mind. It is neither possible nor desirable to

fulfil all our desires and ambitions. Hence one should take recourse to discrimination and be convinced that desire is the root cause of all our troubles. Once the intensity of desire is lessened, the shock of disappointment also will be lessened. If and when it is completely eliminated, the problem is permanently solved.

Angamejayatva (restlessness of the limbs): When sorrow, disappointment and despair are not sublimated by discrimination and will power they cause tremendous restlessness in the mind. This affects the nervous system getting reflected in physical restlessness. The aspirant is thus unable to sit steadily on the seat and frequently changes his position. Persisting in the practice of Yoga, of repetition of pranava (Om) and attitude of surrender to God will gradually lessen this disturbance.

Svasa and Prasvasa (forcible inhalation and exhalation): These are actually obstacles to the practice of pranayama. When the yogi wants to retain the breath, it is forcibly thrown out and when he wants to exhale the breath it is forcibly drawn in. This defect is due partly to mental restlessness and partly to lack of practice in pranayama. Apart from the methods mentioned previously for controlling the mind and reducing its restlessness, vigorous and regular practice of pranayama will restore the balance in breathing. This will again exert a sobering and calming effect on the mind.

So far, the fourteen obstacles listed by Patanjali, have been dealt with. Appropriate antidotes have also been suggested. But does Patanjali himself suggest directly or indirectly any method by which all these obstacles to yoga can be nullified and eliminated? We have some sutras which help us to solve this riddle.

Patanjali was obviously a devotee of God. This is why his Yoga system is known as 'Sesvara-Sankhya' (the Sankhya philosophy that accepts Iswara or God) as opposed to the Sankhya system which by contrast is labelled as Nirisvara-sankhya (the Sankhya that does not accept God). Patanjali, after dealing with the topic of Samadhi (perfect concentration giving super-conscious experiences) in great detail (1.12 to 22), declares in the very next sutra that Samadhi can be obtained, alternatively, by devotion and surrender to God. If devotion to God can give even Samadhi, can it not give a much smaller result of the removal of obstacles to Yoga? Obviously it does. This he accepts in su. 29, wherein he declares that meditation and devotion to God will remove all the obstacles to Yoga and give self-knowledge.

Obstacles and impediments are inevitable in every field of life and more so in the life of the spirit. As Swamji puts it, "Great things can be done by great sacrifices only!" Hence the immensity or intensity of the obstacles should bestir the yogic aspirants to even greater efforts and more dogged persistence instead of dampening their spirits.