I alone persist : Blissful : Absolute.

All this is, indeed, Brahman

There is nothing here apart from it

Surely Health is the primary requisite of spiritual life.
CULTURING ONE'S SELF THROUGH YOGA

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ABSTRACT

All aspects of our human personality are cultured through the process of Yoga helping us evolve towards perfection until we reach the state of being ONE with the Divine Self. Yoga helps destroy the klešas, the psychological afflictions that warp our vision, as well as it eradicates the karma bandha that prevents us from realizing our potential Divinity. Maharshi Patanjali has given us a clear road map for this evolutionary journey and has given us vital clues towards understanding both the internal and external culturing processes of Yoga. The cultural teachings of Yoga that spring forth from the antiquity of Indian culture help us in becoming "All One" by loosing our sense of individuality to gain an unparalleled sense of wholesome universality.

Key words: Religion, culture, citta, vṛtti, klešas, karma bandha,

Introduction

Yoga is the mother of all religions, cultures and sciences; the evolutionary path of cultural synthesis through which we may ultimately become the Divine itself. Indian culture is the fertile soil from which this great art and science has sprung millennia ago, and an understanding of the Indian cultural ethos is essential to know "Real Yoga".

Yoga is union/re-union, integration/re-integration, synthesis/re-synthesis and is the process as well as the goal by which we can integrate all aspects of our very being thus becoming ALL ONE.

The klešas (built in, psychological afflictions that warp our vision) and karma bandha (being caught in the action-reaction spiral) prevent us from realizing that we are the Divine Self who is beyond these imperfections (kleśa karma vipāka aśayaiḥ aparāṁśṭa puruṣa viśeṣa īśvara - Pātañjala Yoga.

Sūtra I-24). Yoga gives us a clear road map for our evolutionary journey towards re-synthesizing ourselves to ultimately reach that unlimited, unparalleled, unified state of ONENESS (kaivalya).

Nature of the Individual Human Culture

The evolutionary Yogic process of culturing ourselves in order to attain the highest state of “universal perfection” deals with both the external as well the internal aspects of our individuality that are cultured in a step-by-step manner to integrate all levels thus producing completeness of our whole being.

In the Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā, a classical treatise on Haṭhayoga, the human body is likened to an unbaked clay pot that is incapable of holding the contents and dissolves when faced with the challenge of water. It is only through intense heat generated by practice of Yoga that the human body gets baked, making it fit to hold the Divine Spirit (āma kumbha ivāṃbhastho jīryamāṇah sadā ghaṭaḥ yogānalena saṃdahya ghaṭa śuddhim samācaret - Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā I: 8).

The regular practice of Yoga as a 'Way of Life' helps reduce our physical, mental and emotional stresses that are destabilizing us. The Yogic 'way of life' lays emphasis on right thought, right action, right reaction and right attitude. No wonder Pujya Swamiji, Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaja has defined Yogic living as the “right-use-ness of body, emotions and mind” – a life of righteousness indeed.

The regular practice of yogāsanas, kriyās, mudrās, bandhas and prāṇāyāmas helps to recondition the physical (annamaya kośa) and energy (prāṇamaya kośa) bodies. The practice of pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā and dhyāna techniques helps to recondition the mind body (manomaya kośa) apparatus. All of these Yogic practices help to foster a greater understanding of the union of body, emotions and mind and to bring about their harmony. This righteous (right-use-ness) union of all aspects of our personality is Yoga in its truest sense.

Importance of the External Culturing Processes

The importance of the human body and it’s culturing through Yoga has been stated in the Tirumandiram, one of the most important Dravidian Yoga scriptures. Saint Tirumoolar has described the human body as the temple of the divine stressing on the proper preservation of the body with reverence and care (udambinai munnam izhukken drirunden udambinuk kulle yuruporul kanden udambule uttaman koilkon daan endru udambinai yaanirun thombugin drene - Tirumandiram 725). He has emphasized purification of internal organs to attain an imperishable body with perfect health (chuzhattrik kodukkave chuttik kazhiyunj chuzhattiri malatthaik kamalatthaip poorithu uzhattrik kodukkum ubayam arivaarkku azhattrith thavirthhudal anjana mame- Tirumandiram 726).
The worldly man always feels that his problem lies elsewhere and that he is the innocent victim of circumstances and fate. Yoga teaches us that most of our problems lie within us and that we have to undergo conscious change in order to solve them. Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri used to often tell his students, "You don't have any problem—you are the problem!"

The yogarûdhya, or one who has attained to the state of Yoga, is described in the Bhagavad Gîtâ as the one who is unaffected by the senses not attached to the fruits of action and has renounced all desires (yadâhi nendriyârtheṣu na karmasu anuṣajjate sarva sañkalpa samniyâsî yogarûdhas tadâ ucyate – Bhagavad Gîtâ :VI-4). This manifests in a detached external attitude towards the impermanent material world and a development of the ability to go within oneself in order to find the ultimate eternal reality.

Importance of the Internal Culturing Processes

According to Maharsi Patañjali, the role of the limbs of Yoga is to facilitate the removal of impurities resulting in the attainment of a higher discerning intellect (aśuddhikṣaye jñānadiiptih avivekakyāte- PYS II-28). This higher intellect is essential for the spiritual culturing process and must be cultivated arduously through the twin aspects of abhyāsa and vairāgya. Yoga also stresses the development of essential qualities such as śraddhā, vīraya, smṛti and samādhi prajñā (PYS I-20) along with the cultivation of evolutionary sanśkāras (PYS I-50).

Controlling the citta vṛttis: The whirlpools of the subconscious mindstuff as described by Maharsi Patañjali (PYS I: 5-11) are of five types. These are pramāṇa (cognition), viparyaya (misconception), vikalpa (imagination), nidrā (sleep) and smṛti (memory). He also states that when the mind is not controlled there is identification with these Vṛttis (vṛtti sārupyaṁ itaratra- PYS I: 4) and that the whole process of Yoga is aimed at "cittavṛtti nirodhaḥ" so that we are established in our true self (svarūpe’vastānam- PYS I: 3). Patañjali elucidates that the key to success is dedicated and determined practice (abhyāsa) coupled with a detached, dispassionate objective attitude (vairāgya) towards everything (PYS I: 12).

Working on the citta bhūmi: It is important to work on the internal and external states of the mind that consist of the undeveloped, inert mind that is as dull as stone (mūḍha), the totally distracted state of mind (kṣipta), the partially distracted state of mind (vikṣipta), the concentrated state of mind (ekāgra) and the controlled mind of the true Yogi (nirūddha). Qualitative culturing of the mind from the lower states to the higher is part of the entire Yogic process.
Subjugating the kleśas: According to Patañjali most of our problems stem from the five psychophysiological afflictions (pañca kleśa), that are inborn in all human beings. The pañca kleśa (PYS II-3) are ignorance (avidyā), egoism (asmitā) and our sense of needing to survive at any cost (abiniveśa) as well as the attraction (rāga) to external objects and the repulsion (dveṣa) to them. Ignorance (avidyā) is usually the start of most problems along with the ego (asmitā). Then, our sense of needing to survive at any cost (abiniveśa) compounds it further. Both attraction (rāga) to external objects and the repulsion (dveṣa) to them need to be destroyed for tranquility and equanimity to dawn. Patañjali further states that the practice of kriyā yoga (yoga of mental purification) consisting of tapas (disciplined effort), svādhyāya (self analysis) and īśvara praṇidhāna (surrender to the divine will) is the means to subjugate these five mental afflictions and attain to the state of samādhi or oneness with the supreme self or the divine (PYS II-2).

Dealing with the antarāya / citta vikṣepa: Patañjali is blessed with foresight and cautions us that there are many obstacles on the Yogic path to Kaivalya and offer the solutions to them too. In Sutras I-30 to 32 he describes the nine obstacles faced by sādhakas in their sādhana and enumerates these antarāya or citta vikṣepa (PYS I-30) as vyādhi (disease), styāna (dullness), saṃṣṭya (indecision), pramāda (procrastination), ālasya (sloth), avirati (sensual craving), bhrāntidarśana (fantasy / illusion), alabda bhūmikatva (inability to attain any higher state), anavasthitattva (inability to maintain that state that has been attained earlier). He also details the four-fold external manifestations of these internal obstacles (PYS I-31) as duḥkha (pain / suffering), daurmansya (despair/ depression), aṅgamejayatva (tremors) and śvāsa praśvāsa (irregular respiration).

Patañjali then goes on to suggest different methods to stabilize and clear the mind in Sutras I-32 to I-39. Focused practice of one principle (ekatatva abhyāsa – PYS I-32) is stated to be the best method to prevent and deal with the obstacles and their manifestations. The modern tendency of running from teacher to teacher and the following of method to method without any depth can never bring any result as it is the very opposite of this vital advice.

Aim of External Culturing

In the Pātañjala Yoga Darśan we find an excellent description of the attributes of bodily perfection (kāya sampat) that arise out of the external culturing processes of Yoga. It is said in Vibhūti Pāda that perfection of body includes beauty, gracefulness, strength, and adamantine hardness (rūpa lāvaṇya bala vajra saṃhanana kāya sampat-PYS III: 47). The effulgence that is characteristic of good health is also mentioned when it is said that deep concentration on samāna
CULTURING ONE’S SELF THROUGH YOGA

(energy of digestion) leads to radiant effulgence (ṣamāṇa jayāt jvalanam -PYS III: 41).

This is also exemplified in śvetāsvetara upaniṣad where it is said that the first signs of entering Yoga are lightness of body, health, thirstlessness of mind, clearness of complexion, a beautiful voice, an agreeable odour and scantiness of excretions (laghutvam ārogyam alolupatvam varṇaprasādam svara sausṭhavam ca gāngas subho mūtra pūrīsam yoga pravṛttim prathamam vadanti- śvetāsvetara upaniṣad: II-13).

The various Haṭha Yoga practices help in reconditioning of neuro-muscular and neuro-glandular system – in fact, the whole body – enabling it to withstand stress and strain better. This is well brought out in the Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā when Yogi Svātmārāma says, “Slimness of body, lustre on face, clarity of voice, brightness of eyes, freedom from disease, control over seminal ejaculation, stimulation of gastric heat and purification of subtle energy channels are marks of success in Haṭhayoga” (vapuḥ kṛṣṭavatm vadane prasannatā nādasphuṭatvam nayane sunirmale ārogyatā bindujayogni dīpanaṃ nāḍīviśuddhir haṭha siddhi lakṣaṇam– Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā II-78).

Swami Kuvalayananda, the visionary founder of Kaivalyadhama says that the Yogic way of living places a great emphasis on appropriate diet conducive to producing a peak state of health along with an encouragement of the natural processes of elimination through various cleansing processes such as the nadi shuddhi or mala shuddhi.

Aim of Internal Culturing

Yoga not only considers the importance of attaining a dynamic state physical health but also more importantly mental health. Qualities of a mentally healthy person (stitha praṇāsī) are enumerated in the Bhagavad Gītā as follows:

- Beyond passion, fear and anger (vīta rāga bhaya krodhah-BG II.56)
- Devoid of possessiveness and egoism (nirmaṇo nirahānākaraṇaḥ- BG -II.7)
- Firm in understanding and unbewildered (sthira buddhir asammudhāḥ-BG -V.20)
- Engaged in doing good to all creatures (sarva bhutahiteratāḥ- BG V.25)
- Friendly and compassionate to all (maitraḥ karuṇā eva ca- BG XII.13)
- Pure hearted and skilful without expectation (anapekṣāḥ sucir daksāḥ- BG XII.16)
Maharsi Patañjali tells us that we can gain unexcelled happiness, mental comfort, joy and satisfaction by practicing contentment (santoṣāt anūttaṁ sukha labhaḥ- PYS II: 42). This link is quite apparent once we think about it, but not too many associate the need for contentment in their greed for anything and everything in this material world.

The Bhagavad Gītā delineates qualities of a spiritually healthy person in verses 1, 2 and 3 of Chapter XVI. These include: fearlessness (abhayam), purity of inner being (sattva samśuddhiḥ), steadfastness in the path of knowledge (jñānayoga vyavasthitiḥ), charity (dānam), self control (dama), spirit of sacrifice (yajña), self analysis (svādhya), disciplined life (tapa), uprightness (ārjavam), non violence (ahimsa), truthfulness (satyam), freedom from anger (akrodhaḥ), spirit of renunciation (tyāgaḥ), tranquility (śanti), aversion to defamation (apaiśunam), compassion to all living creatures (daya bhutesv), non covetedness (aloluptvam), gentleness (mrdavam), modesty (hrīcāpalam), vigour (tejah), forgiveness (kṣamā), fortitude (dṛṣṭiḥ), cleanliness of body and mind (sauca), freedom from malice (adroho), and absence of pride (nā timānita).

Methods of Culturing

Abhyāsa and Vairāgya: Patañjali stresses the importance of abhyāsa and vairāgya in Sūtra I-12 when he says that the vṛttis will cease on their own accord once one has perfected the twin keys of Abhyāsa and Vairāgya. He goes on to define abhyāsa as the uninterrupted, disciplined and dedicated practice done with Divine aspiration (PYS I-14). The nature of vairāgya as a cultivated nature of dispassionate objectivity, so essential for every scientist be they either the experimental modern ones or the experiential ancient sages is dealt with in Sutras 1-15 and 16. He gives a cross reference to the highest state of kaivalya (described in the final Sutras of Kaivalya Pāda) when he states that one must develop dispassionate objectivity towards even the highest state (para vairāgya) if one is to attain it (PYS I-16). As it is often said, if you really love something let it go. If it comes back to you it is rightfully yours and if not, it was never yours in the first place!

Aṣṭāṅga Yoga: The real purpose of Yoga Sādhanā is expressed by Patañjali in Sūtra II-28 when he states that the sustained practice of the various limbs of Yoga is meant for the destruction of the impurities, thus enabling the sādhaka to cultivate the highest wisdom of enlightenment (yogāṅga anuṣṭhānād aśuddhi kṣaye jñāna dīptir āviveka khyāteḥ-PYS II-28). To this end he enumerates the eight-fold royal path of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga as “yama niyama āsana prāṇāyāma pratyāhāra dhāraṇā dhyāna samādhi ” in II-29. Though all aspects of Yoga do in truth work at all levels of our existence, a generalization may be loosely made by saying that the Bahirāṅga
practices such as *yama*, *niyama*, *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* help in the process of external culturing while the *Antaraṅga* practices of *dhāraṇā* and *dhyāna* produce internal culturing along with *pratyāhāra*.

**Kriyā Yoga:** The potent combination of *tapa*, *svādhyaṇa* and *Īśhvara prāṇidhāna* (*PYS II-1*) is prescribed as the method to facilitate attainment of *samādhi* through the elimination of the *kleshas* (*PYS II-2*). The *kleshas* are the root source of the Karmic manifestations in class (*jāti*), life span (*āyusḥ*) and experience (*bhoga*) and so their eradication is vital for culturing the inner aspects of one’s personality to attain the universality.

**Pratipakṣa Bhāvanam:** The concept of *pratipakṣa bhāvanam* is an amazing teaching and must be inculcated in our *sādhanā* of day-to-day living as we face it so many times each day. Even if we cannot replace negative thoughts with emotion-laden positive reinforcements, we must at least make an attempt to stop them in their troublesome track! I have personally found that a strong "STOP" statement works wonders in helping block out the negative thoughts that otherwise lead us into the quicksand-like cesspool of deeper and greater trouble.

**Healthy living:** To live a healthy life it is important to do healthy things and follow a healthy lifestyle. The modern world is facing a pandemic of lifestyle disorders that require changes to be made consciously by individuals themselves. Yoga places great importance on a proper and healthy lifestyle whose main components are:

- **ācāra** – Yoga stresses the importance of healthy activities such as exercise and recommends *asana*, *prāṇāyāma* and *kriyās* on a regular basis. Cardio-respiratory health is one of the main positive by-products of such healthy activities.

- **Vicāra** – Right thoughts and right attitude towards life are vital for well being. A balanced state of mind is obtained by following the moral restraints and ethical observances (*yama-niyama*). As Mahatma Gandhi rightly said, “there is enough in this world for everyone’s need but not enough for any one person’s greed”.

- **Āhāra** – Yoga emphasizes the need for a healthy, nourishing diet that has an adequate intake of fresh water along with a well balanced intake of fresh food, green salads, sprouts, unrefined cereals and fresh fruits. It is important to be aware of the need for a *sātvika* diet, prepared and served with love and affection.

- **Vihāra** – Proper recreational activities to relax body and mind are essential for good health. This includes proper relaxation, maintaining quietude of action-speech-thoughts.
and group activities wherein one loses the sense of individuality. Karma Yoga is an excellent method for losing the sense of individuality and gaining a sense of universality.

**Importance of Yogic Cultural Concepts:**

Various Yogic cultural concepts guide us in shaping our personal life as well as in culturing ourselves in relation to the interpersonal relationships in our social life.

- **Vasudeva Kuṭumbakam** - The whole world is one family. This is an excellent concept which helps one to understand that narrow, fanatical divisions on the basis of class, creed, religion and geographical distribution are all 'man made' obstructions towards oneness. One can then look upon all as his own and can bond with everyone sans any barrier.

- **Pañca Kośa** - The concept of our five sheaths or bodies helps us to understand how all our actions, emotions and even thoughts can influence our surroundings and that 'No man is an island'. Concepts of 'nara' or psychic disassociation help us to be aware of why things happen to us and others in our daily life.

- **Caturvidha Purūṣārtha** - The four legitimate goals of life tell us how we can set legitimate goals in this life and work towards attaining them in the right way, following our *dharma* to attain *artha* (material prosperity), *kāma* (emotional prosperity) and finally the attainment to the real goal of our life, *mokṣa* (spiritual prosperity).

- **Catur Āśrama** - This concept of the four different stages in life helps us to know how, what and when to perform the various activities in our life. *Brahmacharya* is the period from birth till 27 years and is the period for study, conserving the creative impulse and channeling it towards elevating spiritual pursuits. *Grahastra* is the period of responsibility, spanning the period from 27 - 54 years in which we learn to care about others in the family and the social network, fulfilling our *dharma* towards both the young and the old. *Vānaprastha* or retirement is the period after 54 years when one's life can be played over again and again in the mind with a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction having not to worry about anything at all. *Sanyāsa* is the period of life when after performing our duties to the best of our ability for 81 years and after having attained perfection in life we renounce everything for the divine.

- **Niṣkāma Karma**: Selfless action and the performance of our duty without any motive are qualities extolled by Lord Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Performing one's duty for the sake of the duty itself and not with any other motive helps us to develop detachment (vairāgya) which is a quality vital for a good life.
CULTURING ONE’S SELF THROUGH YOGA

- **Karmasu Kauśalam**: 'Skill in action' is Yoga says Yogesvara Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. 'To do our best and leave the rest' is how Pujya Swamiji Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj used to describe the best way of living. Even if we don't practice the other aspects of Yoga, we can be 'living' Yoga, by performing all our duties skill fully and to the best of our ability. A great artist, doctor, worker, singer or sportsman can be a Yogi by performing their duty to perfection and without care for the rewards of the action, even if they do not practice *asana, prāṇāyāma* etc.

- **Samatvam**: 'Yoga is equanimity' says Lord Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Development of a complete personality, neither affected by praise nor blame through the development of *vairāgya* leads one to the harmonious state of 'sthita prajñā' or 'sama bhāva'. This is a state of mind equally predisposed to all that happens, be it good or bad. Such a human is a boon to society and a pleasure to live and work with.

- **Bhakti Yoga** enables us to realize the greatness of the Divine and understand our puniness as compared to the power of the Divine or nature. We realize that we are but 'puppets on a string' following his commands on the stage of the world and then perform our activities with the intention of them being an offering to the Divine and gratefully receive HIS blessings. "It is only with the blessings of the Divine, that we can even worship his holy feet *(avanarulal avan thal vanangi)*" says the Śiva Purāṇam, a Dravidian classic.

**Conclusion**

According to Yogacāriṇi Mīnākṣi Devi Bhavanāṇi, Director of the International Centre for Yoga Education and Research at Aṇanda Āśrama in Pondicherry, Yoga has a step-by-step method of culturing that produces effects at all levels of existence. She explains that social behaviour is first optimized through an understanding and control of the lower animal nature (*pañca yama*) and development and enhancement of the higher humane nature (*pañca niyama*). The body is then strengthened, disciplined, purified, sensitized, lightened, energized and made obedient to the higher will through *asana*. Universal *prāṇic* energy that flows through the body-mind-emotions-spirit continuum is intensified and controlled through *prāṇāyāma* using breath control as a method to attain controlled expansion of the vital cosmic energy. The externally oriented senses are explored, refined, sharpened and made acute, until finally the individuals can detach themselves from sensory impressions at will through *pratyāhāra*. The restless mind is then purified, cleansed, focused and strengthened through concentration (*dhyāna*). If these six steps are thoroughly understood and practiced then the seventh, *dhyāna* or meditation (a state of union of
CULTURING ONE’S SELF THROUGH YOGA

the mind with the object of contemplation) is possible. Intense meditation produces samādhi, or the enstatic feeling of Union, Oneness with the Universe. This is the perfect state of integration or harmonious health.

At the conclusion of the Vibhūti Pāda, Patañjali tells us that it is only the equality between buddhi and puruṣa that brings about liberation (sattvapuruṣayoh śuddhisāmye kaivalyam- PYS III-56). Such a state can only happen if we ourselves become a pure medium for the crystal-clear transmission of the Divine Universal impulses. Purity of thought, word and deed is of paramount importance if we are to become the purest vehicles of the Divine Grace. Yoga cultures us towards attaining that state of perfect clarity.

Yogis wish peace and happiness not only for themselves, but for all living beings. They are not “individualists” seeking salvation for them, but on the contrary are 'Universalists' seeking to live life in the proper evolutionary manner to the best of their ability and with care and concern for their fellow human brethren and those beings living at all planes of existence.

May we all become true Yogis as extolled by Yogeśvara Śrī Kṛṣṇa when he says, “tasmād yogi bhavārjuna –become thou a Yogi, oh Arjuna”.

Hari Om Tat Sat—may that be the reality!

References


CULTURING ONE’S SELF THROUGH YOGA


