THOUGHTS ON ADHI VYADHI

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One evening this last winter after our regular Thursday night yoga class the discussion turned to the yogic approach to mental health. One of the students brought up the subject of a coworker who had been going through a great deal of anxiety about potentially losing her job. Another coworker had suggested the woman take Gestalt Therapy sessions to remove her growing neurosis. So she proceeded to engage a therapist who used a process of asking her to recreate the painful experience of being fired from her job over and over again as the central tenet of the therapeutic process. Several months later the lady actually was fired and found herself delighted with the results of the therapy when she found she had been able to so reconcile herself to her termination that she left her job in a state of apparent equanimity.

The Gestalt practice eased this woman’s fear by a simple process of over familiarization. People are easily bored. By way of example think back to a moment when you felt particularly alive and fresh with delight, perhaps a time when all your senses danced with significance at deeply experiencing the fresh bloom of a flower in a shaft of early morning sunlight. Now imagine yourself trying to recreate that same intensity 30 days in a row, or even sit quietly and support the intensity of that experience for 30 minutes. Have you ever been able to experience the clarity of an event like that as profoundly in the 30th minute as it was in the first? Not very likely. In fact it is even more likely you won’t even be able to accurately recall what happened during that first moment, and will be lucky if 30 minutes later you are still enjoying the residual effect of the initial reaction. If you’re like most people you will find yourself looking at the flower and wondering what the big deal was all about in the first place. Now bring that same principal into the realm of therapy and you will find that if you want to take control of the proclivity to jump whenever someone pops an empty grocery bag, sit and have someone pop a hundred bags for you. By the time they’re done unless your nervous system was
previously damaged you’ll probably find that as with the flower you’ll find yourself wondering how you could have ever been startled by a popping bag in the first place.

So after we discussed the apparent success of the Gestalt process another student asked what the difference would be between this contemporary approach and the yogic process of mental health, or adhi-vyadhi. My initial response that evening was that the yogi learns to become detached from the objects of the senses and thus removes himself from the cerebral noisemaker that leads one down the path to insanity. However all that is easier said than done. It is easy to tell fat people they could lose weight if they really wanted to by eating only 1 doughnut instead of 6. And it is easy to advise someone whose stomach is turning over because they have just been diagnosed with cancer that they shouldn’t worry because worry is just going to aggravate the condition. As we know it is a lot easier to give good advice than to follow it. We all know what our neighbor should be doing, but the road map to that mystical moment when we can personally put everyone’s good advice into action in our own lives is most easily found through the practices of yoga. With the construction of a personal yoga sadhana the doors of opportunity open as old samskars crumble and make room for healthy evolutionary life patterns. After all what could be a healthier place for someone seeking serenity and clarity of purpose than the surroundings of an ashram or some other genuine yogic environment. In the timelessness of a yoga setting what safer laboratory could be created where the only fears might be the assault on a fragile ego by a traditional guru, or the threat to an empty wallet from a modern teacher with ambitions for a larger marketing budget?

On the other hand the unfortunate people immersed in the Western psychological process are so busy analyzing, wearing out, or suppressing unpleasant mental patterns they don’t even begin to produce any real sense of internal integration or yoga. Obviously the Western approaches can provide useful tools to erase, overcome, or sublimate unpleasant life experiences, but the root of those experiences remain deeply buried in the human psyche. A student of yoga recognizes the fact that we create our own reality. If you don’t want to get fired from your job it’s insane to practice something you don’t want to happen. What was the lady doing who feared losing her paycheck, but planting the seeds of her termination and then keeping the experience fresh enough in her mind until there
was no possible alternative than for the karmic process to bring it to fruition. In fact at this very moment that part of her mind which fears the popping of a bag or the loss of a job is hard at work inventing something much more horrific and much more difficult to root out with one of these simple psychological processes.

The struggle against failure only produces failure. Have you ever heard of anyone healing a wound by continually picking at the scab? I guarantee if you spend all your time thinking about chicken little, the sky will fall. Let me remind you of the ancient story of the yoga student who wanted to acquire the siddhi of being able to walk on water. He trained diligently with his teacher for years until his guru decided he had prepared his chela sufficiently for the effort. With great fanfare the entire ashram and several surrounding villages gathered on the steps of the local temple tank early one morning for the student’s final exam. Just before the young man stepped out on the surface of the water his guru came down to whisper the final instructions in his ear. The teacher told him that after these many years of mastering the most difficult practices he would now be able to step out on the surface of the tank without sinking if he was careful not to think about monkeys. Needless to say, being a well-trained, but otherwise typical human being his mind began struggling to avoid thinking about monkeys, and of course failed. And at that moment he sank to the bottom of the tank. As detached observers we smile at the irony because our neophyte water walker never would have ever thought about the subject of monkeys if his guru hadn’t planted the seed in his mind. But in the same way don’t we make real the fear of innumerable events that will never enter our lives, but which are perhaps not so subtly suggested by the insurance industry, the media, or our friends? And in this way we live our lives in fear of the unknown until such time that the fear itself becomes more damaging to our mind and nervous system than if the imaginary event had actually occurred.

To understand the concept of adhi-vyadhi from a yogic point of view it is necessary to understand that insanity or loss of mental equipoise is the result of a dysfunctional relationship between the mind and body. Adhi is another term used for the anamaya kosha, or physical body, and vyadhi is a diseased or dysfunctional mind caused by an unhealthy relationship to that adhi. Yogis have realized for thousands of years that consciousness operating freely without the irrational attachment to the objects of the
senses will produce a mind that is healthy and filled with anandum, or cosmic joy. In the same way the body by itself when left to follow its own path without the corrupting influence of the mind will follow the life sustaining rules of its own intelligence and maintain a vibrant good health. When the body needs vitamin A for example, the hand will naturally reach out for a bundle of carrots when passing through the grocery store. When the body begins to dehydrate the feet will walk of their own accord to locate a glass of water. This concept is powerfully expressed in the classical symbology of the “Bhagavad Gita.” Here the image of a racing chariot drawn by horses frightened and excited by the passions of battle can be paired with the modern image of Buster Keaton plunging down hill in an old Ford, a startled look of astonishment on his face as he gazes at the steering wheel which has come loose in his hand. What passed for comedy in those old movies has turned out to be an allegory of life in the 21st Century. In the “Bhagavad Gita” Krishna, representing higher consciousness, calmly controlled the racing horses of the senses thus keeping Arjuna sane, secure, and on the path to moksha. Buster Keaton had the hand of his director, Fatty Arbuckle, to shield him from the laws of physics and guide him safely to the bottom of the hill, the pretty girl, and the happy ending.

If you’re like most people in the 21st Century you feel like your car is racing down that hill or your chariot is plunging into battle without either Krishna or Fatty Arbuckle to make sure your ending is going to be a happy one. You have commitments you don’t have time to keep, you have bills you can’t afford to pay, and you have dreams and aspirations which have been subverted by the need to produce a paycheck. Fortunately for most the world’s courts have told us we are no longer responsible for our own lives and destinies, but are now the innocent victims of forces beyond our control. Whether it is subliminal marketing, unscrupulous big business, or politically incorrect governments; modern man now views himself as the innocent victim of a predatory culture. Arjuna understood that he needed the wisdom of Krishna to guide him out of the maze of his lower nature. Buster Keaton hopefully had enough sense to not confuse his movie role with his real life. Modern man however foolishly depends on a capricious jury to save him from the folly of his life decisions. If we think a hefty court settlement is going to enable us to live healthier more well balanced lives we are severely deluded. If anything
the courts have crippled our inherent evolutionary natures by telling us we are simply victims of external forces and not responsible for our life decisions.

To be human is to be insane anyway. We all carry around this devilish little devise in our brains called the hypothalamus, which makes sure we’re continually absorbed in either worry, insecurity, or feelings of worthlessness. And as if that weren’t enough it poisons our social relationships by keeping us fixated on questions of whether or not we are going to have a sufficient amount of food, affection, space, wealth, or recognition. So the question naturally arises why were we constructed with our own personal objects of self-annihilation in the first place? Christians would have you believe God placed it there to make us suffer because someone none of us know stole a piece of fruit from God’s favorite tree. However it seems to me that if God could create an entire universe in 7 days, he wouldn’t have much difficulty replacing that piece of fruit even more quickly than it was plucked from the branch. In fact Christians make God sound like a pretty mean spirited guy. Yogis on the other hand recognize we were born into a vibrant benevolent universe filled with prosperity, joy and well being. They understand the gods didn’t give us this gift of life to suffer and be miserable, but to celebrate the joys of the universe. However as many of you will no doubt remember the kind of parties teenagers threw when their parents went out of town for the weekend, you will also remember the wiser parents usually hired babysitters or chaperones to look after their kids when they were gone. We were issued this hypothalamus at birth to keep our life celebration from getting out of hand, and for our own self-preservation. Without this personal chaperon we would quickly lose our common sense. We would feel invincible enough to cross the street without looking both ways for an approaching bus, complacent enough to spend the first week of good spring weather at the beach instead of planting our crops, or irresponsible enough to believe our offspring would grow up to be useful well socialized adults if left to develop through their own natures. The hypothalamus is there for our use, not our abuse. If we are invited to a buffet, are we expected to eat everything on the table? Of course not. It is useful to have garbage dumps at the edge of our cities, but do any of us want to live there? Not if we don’t have to. In the same way we carry the hypothalamus to provide a useful function, but it was never intended as a place for the mind to take up permanent residence.
An expression coined by the health food industry several decades ago goes, “you are what you eat.” I tell my students it is much more important to remember that you are what you think. The essence of adhi-vyadhi can be summed up by a principal Swamiji used to regularly remind his students: “if you want to be sane, you need to do sane things.” The brain’s cellular apparatus operates at over 200 impulses per second. This means that over 200 times every second of our lives we are challenged to be conscious. This takes practice. We’re not just talking about quietly sitting for 15 minutes in the morning, or chewing each bite of food 55 times during meals. All day 24 hours a day constant vigilance is required to train the mind to remain conscious and to maintain its evolutionary journey. I think one of the reasons people enjoy small babies so much is they haven’t yet started thinking. They haven’t begun the great buildup of negative samskars, which later in life become a maze of neuroses and psychoses. The great saints of India laugh. They sit enthralled by the most simple things. If you want to return to that essential nature you need to return to that childlike state of mind. Life is not a journey on an Indian train. In life you don’t have servants or porters to carry all the steamer trunks of your mental baggage. If it’s true the average life span is about 78 years that seems to me an awfully long way to carry an expanding collection of fears and anxieties. I find it challenging enough to get from one side of the Dallas airport to another in 40 minutes with a single handbag. What baggage is this consciousness which fears flying to Beijing to be awed by the Forbidden City, and yet be afraid to get on the plane because the destination is the source of the SARS virus. In reality we come, and then we go. In life learn to travel light.

As we struggle for control of our own mind, the central question in any serious practice of yoga is how to overcome the tyranny of the hypothalamus? The answer lies in the “Mahabharata.” During the archery contest at Draupadi’s swayamvara Arjuna won the bride because of his unwavering concentration. The object was to shoot an arrow into the eye of a wooden fish attached to the end of a long pole by aiming at the reflection of the fish in a barrel of water. Where the other contestants saw either a fish, the end of a pole or the sky with a fish suspended in it, Arjuna saw a glint in the eye of the target. In other words Arjuna had his 200 impulses per second focused on the center of the target. The other contestants thought they were concentrated because they were able to direct 25
impulses per second or possibly even 100 per second, but the prize was great and the challenge didn’t reward anything less than perfection. What then is insanity, but poor or wrong concentration? If we let joy and harmony into our minds for 3 seconds out of 10, but use the remaining 7 for worry, anxiety, and fear aren’t we ultimately going to misdirect this life which began with so much promise?

In the modern world we solve problems with action. We buy self-help books, we go to lectures, and then we make grand pronouncements, and maybe take a few hatha yoga classes. But who generally benefits other than the author or the owner of the yoga franchise. Contrary to this contemporary approach you can’t expect to change by wrestling with your problems and grappling with your insecurities. Remember the monkeys? Even as the practice of yoga is based on right thoughts and right action the mistake that people, particularly those of a Judeo-Christian background make, is to be self critical when they fall short of the ideal. It’s like struggling to run up the face of a steep sand dune. The faster you run the quicker you slide down the face. When a yogi or yogini wishes to accomplish something they determine the path they wish to take, and then they begin. It’s the power of icha shakti, the power to do. When I took my first 3-month course from Swamiji he took a sizeable period of time during the first month discussing the elements of an appropriate yogic diet. He weighed in heavily on the importance of vegetarianism. His arguments were clear and cogent, and he convinced me vegetarianism was certainly the healthiest way to live. However coming from a strong meat eating culture my mind also told me there was no way I would ever make the change. At least once a month I went to France’s last monument to haute cuisine in India, Le Grand Hotel de Europe, for a fine steak dinner. After the course I flew to Nepal and continued dining on water buffalo and canned goose from the People’s Republic of China. However during that same time I continued to do my yoga practice until at some point, I couldn’t tell you when, I stopped ordering meat in the local restaurants. It was the practice of yoga that made me a vegetarian, I didn’t decide to become a vegetarian. The hamburgers weren’t torn from my desperate fingers; I practiced the kriyas and prakriyas of yoga and the desire to eat dead animals dissolved in my consciousness. It was living positively, in the way nature intended, that provoked the change. And following that same principal if we wish to be sane, we need to learn to practice sanity.
To walk the yogic path is to aspire to oneness. If so, oneness to what? Our body is like a house with all the doors and windows open. We enter, stay a bit, and we then we leave. That which rises from your meditation fears nothing. It has always existed and always will exist. One of the central questions posed in the second chapter of the “Bhagavad Gita” is why we cause ourselves so much mental anguish in the first place. As Krishna says to Arjuna, “Never was there a time when I was not, and never shall there be a time when any of us will not be.”

Who grieves the death of a single cell in their body? Don’t we lose millions every hour? There is no pause for commiseration, there is no grief, and there are no elaborate ceremonies. After all we’ve got billions of cells, what’s the big deal if we lose one? In the same way was god on anyone’s side in the war between the United States and Iraq regardless of what the politicians told us. Of course not. If someone is forced out of their body by another human does the universe change course no matter how despicable or inhumane the circumstances surrounding the event? Transcendent consciousness immersed in the flow of universal energies feels no pain or discontent. Learn to embrace your birthright. To give oneself up to the inner life is to experience a joyous spontaneous insanity anyway. Release the mental pressures and psychological tensions. Let them go. More significantly learn to release the thoughts or thinking patterns which originally created the mental imbalance. Replace them with an evolutionary pattern of consciousness. A commonly understood principal among fakirs and those with a high pain threshold is to expand the pain and let it diffuse through the cells of the entire body, so that pain does not collect into a single point. When we consciously embrace the universe any mental distresses we might carry become so dispersed that finding them again is like looking for a lost bag of rupees at a beggars convention.

Ultimately we don’t escape from insanity: we accept sanity. Our birthright is a vibrant consciousness and a radiant joyousness. Don’t wait lifetimes for the inevitable to occur, embrace it now.