YOGA AS A WAY OF LIFE

Dr Ananda’s Lecture in the UK 2013

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“We are grateful and indebted to such an exceptional and true humane being.” - Yogacharini Aishwariya.

We’ll begin by sitting quietly, allowing for introspection, letting the mind settle into wherever we are. A sense of stability occurs within, allowing the body-mind-emotion-spirit-complex to be as aligned as possible at this point in time. We are invoking the spirit of the Great Masters of timeless traditions, from so many different cultures, manifesting as the embodiment of the Guru, the Guru-Spirit that enables us to grow. We are invoking that spirit to guide us on our path, letting the vibrations pass through us in a healthy, harmonious manner.

(Chanting of the Guru Gayatri)

Aum tat paramparayaya vidmahe jnana lingeswaraya dhimahi
thano guru prachodayatey Aum

When Kalavathi asked me some time ago, “Do you want to give a talk?” I said, “Why not? That's what I've been doing since the age of four.” Around that age, my parents realized I only had an on-button, and no off-button! Interestingly, I get my karma back with my son, who does the same. My mother often says, “If you want to know what Karma is, look at that little guy!”

Kalavathi then wondered, “What could the topic be?” I thought to myself, “I go to medical conferences to talk to doctors about the health benefits of Yoga. I talk to Yoga teachers about different techniques. And I talk to my patients... a lot!” One of the most important things I do is talk with my patients. No doctor today seems to do that. The general routine with a patient is, “Get your X-ray, MRA, and scan done...” Must you be a doctor to do that? Anybody can do that! The art of medicine, as I call it, has been lost in modern times mainly because it takes a lot of heart. You need heart to practice the art of
medicine. To practice the science of medicine, you simply need a brain which functions at a certain level.

The same thing has happened to Yoga. We’ve gotten caught up with the science of Yoga. The latest book on the subject talks more about the negative aspects than the positive ones. There is a lot of positivity. And, of course, any human endeavour will have its pros and cons. One must understand that a great deal of awareness, consciousness, and responsibility is needed if we are to live a life of Yoga. So, when came time to choose a topic, I thought: “Yoga as a way of life”.

What is life? It is the experience we have as an individual. It is the experience we have as a living entity, who thinks we are an individual. It is the experience we have as a body endowed with a spirit, or a spirit endowed with a body. It is the experience within, of each and every experience we have, from the moment we were born until the moment we leave the body. There are ups, there are downs. There are days you wonder why you were ever born. There are moments you ask yourself, “Is it really worth it?” It is good to have those moments. In fact, I often tell my students that it is in these moments of despair, these moments of dejection, depression (usually self-engineered,) that, as my father would so beautifully say, “There is an opportunity for a break-through.” He often said, “a nervous breakdown is an opportunity for a break-through, if we are able and ready to recognize it as such.”

My mind goes to the very first recorded counselling session in human history. I will not say “the very first,” (I think the first must have been when Adam and Eve encountered troubles), but the first recorded one, a beautiful scripture known as the Yoga Vashishta. The Yoga Vashishta is an absolutely beautiful life lesson in poetry, in prose, in stories. If you want to get points across, the best way to do so is through stories. The six-months-intensive-course students say, “Dr. Ananda teaches Mantra, Yantra, Tantra classes, and also, his story telling classes”. That is how it is known. Stories are a beautiful way to get concepts across. Aesop’s fables are equalled by the Indian traditional Jataka tales; especially the animal tales. It is more acceptable for animals to misbehave or ‘say’ stupid things than it is for human beings.

The Yoga Vashishta has stories within stories within stories within stories... There is such a wealth of information if one searches. These stories were delivered by the mind of a great Seer, a Rishi called Vasheeshta. (The sage’s name is pronounced “Vasheeshta”; the story is pronounced “Vaghishtta”.) This story comprises all the tales that Vashishta tells Lord Rama. Lord Rama is said to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the Sustainer, the conservatory energies of the universe - those energies that keep things going. In modern times, I’d call Vishnu the maintenance engineer. Given that maintenance takes a lot of money, he has as his wife Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth. These energies are combined in a very beautiful manner when you think about it.

Vishnu gives a very beautiful assurance to his devotees. He says, “whenever righteousness dims and unrighteousness is on the upswing...” (you can see a lot of that these days in the world. It is quiet astonishing to see the low levels we can fall to and still call ourselves human), he gives the advice: “Yada, yada hi dharmasya...” Now, Dharma is righteousness. If you asked my father, or rather my mother, what Dharma is, she would say that it is “right-use-ness.” Using everything that we have, that we’ve been given, and all our faculties as they are meant to be used, is right-use-ness. In fact, my father often defined Yoga as the science of right-use-ness, the science of righteousness. Not the modern use of self-righteousness, as it is not this negative aspect, rather, doing
that which needs to be done, in the way it needs to be done, at the time and moment it needs to be done, for the people for whom it needs to be done. All of these pieces have to fit together. Doing the right thing at the wrong time is not Dharma. The right thing, in the right place, at the right time, but for the wrong person, is again going off track. It is like going through one of these mazes that we play as children. You go in one direction, backtrack, go in another direction, and back again – finally you get through it. Negotiating these crossroads is Dharma. It is often translated as religion or other things, but Dharma is righteousness.

At the personal level Dharma is responsibility. What is responsibility? It is the ability to respond in the appropriate manner. Let’s consider the nervous system. It is wired in such a way that signals coming from our feet travel to a particular point in our spinal cord. Impulses coming from the thorax travel to another point in the spine, as different spinal nerves are being used. The moment we stimulate the spinal column at a particular point, a reflex action is set off. This is called a reflex arc. This is the beauty of our nervous system. When we gently tap the patellar tendon at the knee with a soft hammer, there is a knee-jerk reflex. Every point in the body can be tested - the corneal reflex (blinking reflex), or the plantar reflex, for example.

What happens with those reflexes? The reflex arc functions at the same level as the input, and there is something called a reaction. You punched me, I punch you back. That’s a reaction. You were nasty to me; I’m going to be nasty to you. You smile at me, I smile back. What is this? Reactivity – a reaction. When a reaction occurs, it is more of a reflex. There is no consciousness at all. It is very fast. However, if you pause or “take a deep breath and count to ten,” something different happens. Nowadays, some email companies have started to implement that. They give you five or ten seconds to withdraw your email when you have just typed something nasty. Why be nasty to someone in the first place? Instead of saying, “let me think about it and respond,” we react immediately by sending an e-mail. Only then do we think, “Oh my God, cut the cable!” But it’s already been sent.

I had a friend who used to tell me about a certain group of Indians who are the bravest and the strongest, yet they are the ones who get teased the most. They are the most heartful, loving people. He used to be in my hostel, and if there was any fight anywhere in the hostel, he would be down there within seconds hitting everybody. If you asked him, “What are you doing?” he would say, “I can’t help myself, I do and then I think.” He had the consciousness to know what was happening. That is the first step.

The other thing to consider is that we overreact. This is another risk. When we test reflexes, some people just exaggerate. Someone may simply say “Hello,” and you punch him in the nose for that. Often when you break down the argument to its essentials, you ask yourself, “Was I really fighting for that?” It is called hindsight.

If you give it a little gap, this signal travels up your spinal cord to your brain, that wonderful creation of the divine. You start to analyze the pros and cons. You start to analyze the context in which something is happening, has been said or hasn’t been said, done or not done. And then you start to respond. A few minutes ago I was nearly reacting. I thought, “Kalavathi should bring me a cup of tea. How will I survive in this cool country...?” I could have reacted like, “Kalavathi, you haven’t done this, how dare you not do it...” But I kept quiet and kept doing what I should be doing. I just kept my mouth shut. And what happened was that the moment I did that, I got my tea. It is called “jumping the gap”.

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In the last Olympics the “fastest guy on earth,” the guy who won the hundred meters, Bolt...The name is interesting, how life puts things. In the word-championship the guy jumped the gun. What happens is that the moment you allow for a gap, it is the window through which consciousness can come in. I will come back again and again to this gap because this gap is objectivity. The brain is the receptor for this consciousness to come in. And the moment you have this, you respond in an appropriate manner. That is responsibility.

**Dharma as responsibility**, as right-use-ness: What does Krishna/Vishnu say? “Whenever righteousness dims and the unrighteous are exalted I shall come back again for the sake of humanity.” So many avatars, you may call them, have come in so many forms. We normally talk of the ten avatars of Lord Vishnu, but they come in so many forms and continue to come, yet they are usually not recognized until they have passed. Remember hindsight? I say we are blessed with hindsight and very few are cursed with foresight. Foresight is a curse. I always make this point because when you see things people would never see, possibly only ten years later, you become the outcast. You are casted out and have become the *forerunner*, who becomes the *foreigner* because you have gone out of the well, so to say, and now what lies outside. Those who are in the well will never believe when you say, “come with me.”

There is a very beautiful verse in the Bhagavad Gita where Krishna says:

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yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata
abhyutthanam adharmasya tadalmanam srjamy aham.

paritranaya sadhunam vinasaya ca dusktam
dharma-samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge.
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Yuge, the different time periods... Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, is said to be the perfect man. I don't know whether such a man really exists, but he is said to be the perfect man, a human being who’s reached his full potential, in tune with **Dharma – righteousness** and responsibility. As a teenager however, he goes through what all of us go through in those troubling years. Rama is in complete despair, wondering what life is all about... and considers those spiritual questions. Most teenagers have these spiritual questions, and just because nobody provides answers they are said to be trouble-teens. When working with young kids, they ask questions that really make my brain cells pop open, as I start to try finding answers. That is when Rama’s father calls their guru, Sage Vashishta and says, “Please, help him! Can you counsel him?” The first recorded counselling session of human history is this beautiful scripture on why life happens, what it is about, what are the lessons we live, and learn what disease is. Psychosomatic disorders are elucidated in great detail in this text, which is at least five thousand years old! We human beings have troubles of a hundred years because that is the maximum we generally live. Compare this to five thousand years!

Five thousand years ago, he talked about psychosomatic disorders. They are called **Adhi-Vyadhi**. **Vyadhi** is disease of body; **Adhi** is where it starts in the mind and above the mind. These agitations that come down through our physiology, our psychology and into our body are so beautifully discussed.

**Adhi** is the root cause. We first have mental agitations - feeling a bit jittery, nervous, anxious or depressed. This transpires through the layer of energy channels, the **Nadis**. Unstable **Nadis**, where the energies flow in opposite directions, affect the digestive
system. In all traditional systems of medicine, great importance is given to the digestive system. Disease comes through the digestive system. Hyperactivity, under activity or other activity, nowadays referred to as ‘paraneoplastic syndromes’ (body parts that shouldn’t secrete hormones start secreting them,) disease manifests. But where does it start? Psychic fears. This agitation comes down through the body; the body starts to react to these psychosomatic fears. It doesn't respond, it reacts. And then you have the snowball effect where the blood pressure goes up, the blood sugar goes up, the muscles tighten, the digestive system goes haywire, tremors of the body start to occur along with muscle spasms. But if you can straighten the root cause, the Adhi, you come back to normal. This is a description of the psychic and psychosomatic phases.

If that kind of use settles into the body, it becomes somatic. These disturbances are now permanent. Blood pressure and blood sugar are permanently high, the muscles and digestive system have permanently gone off. If you are still unable to rectify the situation, it settles into your organs. T.O.D is what we call this state in medical terms - target organ damage. The organs start to go out. The heart, kidneys, brain go out. The organs have reached the end stage of the disease cycle.

All this is discussed in this text. If I had been in the same place a hundred fifty years ago, if I had said as a medical doctor, “your mind can cause disease,” most probably I would have been burnt at the stake. That is medical science. Today we understand psychosomatic, stress-based diseases – caused by stress, aggravated by stress. Every disease you can think of today is stress-related. And what is stress? Stress is when we move away from Dharma, from responsibility, from righteousness, from alignment, from harmony. When harmony occurs in the mind-body-spirit complex (add emotions as they are a very dynamic aspect of us human beings,) when it is aligned properly, health occurs. But if malignance starts, what immediately happens is the harmony between thought, word, and deed has disappeared. You may think and tell someone, “I should get up early in the morning and go for a run. I’m going to do this!” And then you don’t.

When one is in harmony with thought, word and deed, there is no conflict. In Yoga we speak of the “tri Shakti,” the three powers of the intellect, the Buddha:

1. **Iccha Shakti** - the power of will. This Iccha Shakti is when you want to do something, you intend to do it, and you have the will to do it. In Tamil, it has morphed to “Ishlam,” meaning “something which I like”.
2. **Jnana Shakti** - the power of wisdom - to know whether it is good or not, to be done or not.
3. **Kriya Shakti** -the power of action. The intent, knowing whether it is good or bad, whether it is to be done or not, healthy or unhealthy etc., and then having the power to do it.

When all these three powers, Iccha, Jnana and Kriya work harmoniously, you say what you think and do what you say. When you intend to do something, you consider whether it is the right thing to do or not. If it is, then you do it. And when you might want to do something but you think, “Well, it is not really the right thing to do,” you don’t do it. Then harmony manifests in your life, in every moment of your life. This is every day, all day work, not “OK, I was harmonious between six and seven in the morning.” People surprise me and I surprise them when asked, “How many hours of Yoga do you do a day?” And I reply, “twenty-four hours.” Every moment of life is Yoga.
But people think they get their Yoga between six and seven, and the rest of the day they can be in Bhoga, the opposite of Yoga. Once you awaken to Yoga, it is permanent. There is no going back to sleep.

I had a dear student ask me, “Why did you ever wake me up? It is so painful!” But I had no choice, “you were asking to be woken up.” Sometimes people don't put it into words, but everyone who comes into your life, comes with a reason. I value everyone who comes into my life, in whichever way they come. Some come in a very pleasant way, giving me a cup of tea. Some try giving me poison. Then, I remember that one of the greatest Greek philosophers had to drink poison. If some people think you are worth poisoning, it means you are doing something good! If people want to throw stones at you, it means you are at least standing up. As my father, Swami Gitananda would say, “Ananda, when you stand up there will be a few people who want to garland you and honour you. And then there will be many others who will want to throw stones, sticks and rotten tomatoes. Either you get used to both or you lie down, dig a whole, jump in it and cover yourself with mud.” Two choices: Either you die, stop living or, if you are going to live, be ready for both. Both are imposters.

This brings me to the beautiful concept of Raaga-Dvēsha. Raaga is that which attracts, and Dvēsha, that which repulses. They are the likes and dislikes, both sides of the same coin. Whether it is the like or the dislike, they both get you off track. There is a beautiful verse in the Baghavad Gita, “Ragadvesha viyuktaistu vishayan indrieishcharan.” For the Yogi who has gone beyond Raaga and Dvēsha, tranquillity is achieved. It isn’t going beyond only the Raaga or the Dvēsha, but both: like-dislike, happiness-sorrow, heat-cold. These are called the Dvandvas. “Dva” means two. The “two-twos,” so to speak, always come in pairs: like and dislike, hot and cold, up and down, sweet and sour always come together. One doesn’t exist without the other. It is a buy-one-get-one-free arrangement in life. You want one; you get its corresponding opposite for free. Either you take both or you leave both.

We, as human beings, must inherently deal with the inborn Kleshas, psychological afflictions. They are part of us. Patanjali tells us so beautifully, “Avidya, Asmita, Raaga, Dwesha and Abhinivesha” these are the five Kleshas. They are inborn psychical afflictions, part of one's inheritance, simply by being born human. Ignorance of the real self, a sense of false ego or individuality, “I am different from you!” - duality is the root of all disease. Again, I cite my father, who used to say, “You live in a happy and healthy universe, so why are you unhappy and unhealthy? You are nothing but the universe, a microcosm in a macrocosm, yet you have moved away from your essential nature, which is happiness, health, harmony, balance, bliss...” Keep adding words! That is our real nature.

Someone asked me, “Dr. Ananda, are you always happy?” A difficult question to answer in an interview, but I said, “Yes, my essential nature is happiness, is bliss.” But at times, I fall away from my essential nature and then, luckily, I still have a mother around to give me a kick in the back by reminding me to “get back to your essential nature!” My father used to say, “Remember your name! Your name is Ananda. Ananda means bliss and if you are anything but bliss, you are not being you.” The importance of name in India is very well understood. What you call someone influences what s/he is. “Namarupa” – Nama is name, Rupa is form. If you call someone “darling,” you bring out something in him. If you say, “you idiot,” you bring out something else. This is something that we, as a human race, have forgotten. The importance of what we call ourselves and others. Name
is sound, vibration. That is why one has to be careful with the pet names one uses. We then wonder why people are the way they are. We invoke that!

The **power of sound** lies in invoking something. When you ‘in-voke’ something within you, you ‘e-voke’ it. Science calls this ‘evoked potential’. We do a lot of in-laboratory studies in neurophysiology. We have people watch television. They watch the same black and white dots on the screens. And when they look at something like that TV-screen (or hear something, feel something,) an evoke potential is set off. Certain neurons in specific parts of the brain are activated, depending on what is heard, seen or felt. When we feel something in our body, the sensory motor-homunculus is activated. Science understands that when we look at black and white dots, when we hear a deep sound or when we have a stimulus, it does something. But interestingly enough, that same science doesn't recognise that what we call somebody sets off the very same process in a person’s neuro-system.

The great masters of the past and present tell us that when we are able to harmonize with our essential nature, the essential nature is **Sat, Chit, Ananda:**

**Sat** is that reality which is often said to be ‘the Truth.’ But when you say truth, is it like a half-truth or a quarter-truth: it was true yesterday, but not today. That vagueness exists. Absolute Reality however is **Sat**. You could also speak of ‘Absolute Truth,’ but then it becomes a bit of “my truth” and “your truth”, which becomes this religious fanaticism that rules the world.

**Chit** - consciousness. What is this consciousness? It is not just something at the level of the intellect or the brain in the sense of “thinking about the divine, having expanded the consciousness, the divine coming down to my mind...” It is not about that. It is a consciousness that runs through every cell. Every cell in our body has consciousness. Again, even twenty or thirty years ago, I would have been torn apart by the scientific community for making this statement. Today, I can get away with it, because a few more people accept it. Every cell has consciousness. But what is it? It is the same consciousness that is found in the macrocosm of the universe, a consciousness which is of a unitive principle. This is a very important concept, the unitive principle. Everything is ultimately all-one. We experience this many times in our lives. We experience it as feeling alone, lonely. But the trick is not to feel alone, but ‘all-one’. You just change it a bit and suddenly you realize that we are all one. We admire people who go somewhere for the very first time. But they are most of the time alone, because when you go somewhere and you are the first, you really don’t have a crown with you. The first people to climb Mount Everest, the first people to go to the North Pole, even at the physical level, I’m not even talking about the spiritual level, even just in these accomplishments. Being able to feel this all-onesness that exists in you, that exists in me, and a consciousness that exists through every living being, and then take it a bit further, even to the non-living, and to understand that it is the same. When I understand that you and I have the same consciousness going through us, there is no parting anymore. You are no longer a thread. When does the thread come in? The moment I say, "you are different from me" – be it any of the human-made differentiations of colour, cast, religion, nationality, language, food - there’s an innumerable set of differences we have come up with. Yet ultimately, if you can look at the consciousness that runs through each and every being, while taking it a bit further to non-living things too, that is **Chit.**
We have looked at Sat, the reality that manifests through everyone; Chit, the consciousness that manifests through everyone, and now the third principle, Anandam—bliss, our essential nature.

How do we come to understand that our essential nature is the manifestation of absolute reality, consciousness and bliss? How do we begin to tune in and harmonize? We first have to become aware of the different aspects of our lives. This is where it starts: waking up. The moment you wake up, you start to become aware. And where does this start? With the awareness of your body; to be aware of what your body is doing, what your body needs, how your body responds, what your body likes or doesn’t like, understanding its limitations and its strengths. This is awareness of body.

There are people who go into shops, put things into their pockets and upon being questioned, don’t even know what they’ve done! It actually happens and they aren’t lying when they say they don’t know what happened. It’s as if the hand had a will of its own. I had a few of these experiences in childhood. We had a large garden full of fruits and other things. We had a watchman to check people, because people would put things into their pockets and walk out. When caught, they had an astonished look on their faces like, “How did that get into my pocket?” Initially, you just think people are acting, and then you notice that it doesn’t even enter their consciousness!

I see that in my son and daughter. They sometimes just run around and my daughter says, “He hit me!” And he says, “I did nothing!” But by running around, his hand just went off on its own and happened to punch his sister in the stomach. He’s not lying. The movement was so natural to him, and she just happened to be in the way. That’s all. It’s fine when talking about children, but when it comes to adults, it’s a whole different ball game. You find people shooting others, throwing bombs, and they don’t even know what they’re doing.

To have awareness of your body, to know where you feet are, where your hands are, where your head is... You find people walking through a door, hands hitting the wall, feet knocking over a glass of water, and they don’t know what’s happening. There’s no body-consciousness. My father used to say that dinosaurs became extinct because their brains were so tiny compared to the rest of their bodies, the head never knew what the tail was doing. It is like modern government departments, where one doesn’t know what the other is doing... Or like the long lorries or buses or worse: airplanes. Thankfully, my friend down in Australia, a pilot, told me that they just keep the pilots so that the passengers don’t panic. He says, the planes can take off and land on their own, they don’t need a pilot anymore, but if the passengers knew there was no one in the cockpit, they would panic, and so they just have two guys sitting there. Imagine that you have people driving around who don’t know what their feet are doing. The feet should be controlling the accelerator or the brake. Or people becoming surgeons. I often do talks on Yoga at medical conferences and tell people to lift the right hand and shake it, and the left, and the right, and at least ten doctors lift their left hand! You could find a lot of excuses, but the inherent root is that they are just so unaware!

Becoming aware of the body is the first step on the journey to regaining that sense of harmony. It is called Sukham. Sukham is ease. As in Asana: “Sthira sukham asanam.” An Asana is a posture in which you are stable and at ease with yourself. For me, Patanjali’s definition of Asana is not just doing the Asana, but it’s when you are established in a state in which you are at ease with yourself. That becomes your Asana. It becomes your perspective and point from which you live. Where you live is your Asana. Where you are
established in a sense of stability and are at ease with yourself. You could say that you gain this through the Asana. When you do a posture, when you start to be steady in it, when you develop a sense of ease in it, then you start to transcend the physical effort, this is what Patanjali refers to when he says: “prayatna shaithilya,” you relax the effort.

Some people interpret “sthira sukham asanam” as Patanjali saying that it ‘should be easy.’ So don’t do any Asanas that are too demanding. We have amazing interpretations of the Yoga Sutras: “Patanjali has advised to do only easy Asanas, he’s telling us not to make any effort.” But he actually says, “relax the sense of effort,” which means that you transcend the feeling of “I am doing, doing, doing, look at me!” and go beyond that. You go from doing to being. This is the key. We human beings are supposed to be, but we are always doing - human doings. There’s a great philosopher who said that human beings are nothing but featherless bipeds. We walk around on two feet, and the only difference between us and those chickens out there, is that we don’t have feathers, but we basically have the same chicken-brain. I’m just translating the great philosophers of the past into modern terms. How many human beings are out there amongst the 7 billion featherless bipeds? We are defined by what we do rather then what we are. If you ask anybody “Who are you?” You get the name, the mother’s name, the father's name, the credit card number... We get stuck in all these things we’ve created.

I came across a beautiful advertisement a few years ago. There was a comic character called Fido -the guy with hair sticking upwards. He comes into the advertisement, an empty screen. He is so traumatized and scared at finding himself on an empty screen that he takes out a pencil, draws a chair and sits on it. He is so happy to have a defined place to be. We are like that - in search of who we are. We add a credit card number, an e-mail ID, a Facebook ID, and we keep on adding things, so we think we know who we are. It is like mucking up the pond when you see nothing. Then, you don’t see anything because your head is in the mud, because you’ve mucked it up. That is self-responsibility, responsibility for the self. If just that lesson were taught to us as the human race, this planet would be an amazing planet.

**Awareness of body.** This is beautifully cultivated by the body-work in Yoga: Asanas, Kriyas, Mudras, and Bandhas... All of these help understand where we stand, where we sit, where we lie down, whether we are using the right or left, top or bottom, whether we are bending forward, backward or twisting right or left - when performed with consciousness. But how many people do this with consciousness? The purpose is to foster consciousness, but it’s like starting a pump: there has to be a bit of water to start it off.

The next step is **awareness of emotions.** It is a bit tougher. Awareness of body is tough for most people, but awareness of emotions... Why do we feel the way we feel? Why do we do the things we do, as a motivated by our emotions? If you want to gain control of the emotions, the best way to gain this is through Pranayama. The breath is the key to control of emotions. I was talking about mucking up the water. If you want to clear up the water and see things as they are, the best tried and trusted method is through breath work. This doesn’t mean that you have to go for something complicated. Something as simple as breathing in and breathing out, for an equal count of six or eight, stabilizes the emotions. When you look at small creatures, like rats or rabbits, you see how fast they breathe. Observe their reactions. Compare this with bigger creatures, like elephants and notice their breathing. If you go up to an elephant, jumping up and down,
he will think to himself, “What is this featherless biped doing?” but doesn’t really care. If however you go to a mouse and snap your fingers, it runs off.

Taking a deep breath and counting to ten is basically breath-awareness. Letting things settle, allowing all the muckiness to settle to see things as they are is achieved through breath awareness. We normally don’t see things as they are, but as we are. Our perception is not of what is there, rather of what lies within us, because we perceive things through our tainted glasses. If they are green, everything looks green; if they are blue, everything looks blue; if they are pink, it’s pink… If you want to clarify your vision, Patanjali prescribes Pranayama. He speaks of the ‘covering’ that blocks the inner light, “tatah ksiyate prakashavarananam.” That Praksha - inner light, is covered by a shroud. People translate this as a veil, but a veil is so thin, you would see through it. It is a shroud, a dark shroud, which covers the light, creating darkness. It is about being able to remove it, so you can see. In fact, at the end of the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna tells Krishna, “Lord I can see, I can see! Finally the scales that were covering my eyes have lifted, I can see!” We experience this in our own lives. There is confusion, and when clarity comes we say, “Ah, yes, now I see.” When we finally ‘see’ something, we often use the phrase, “reality dawns.” Everything was always there; the only difference is that we opened our eyes. My mother uses a beautiful phrase, “Ignorance is just the refusal to see.” Why is it that you don’t know a certain thing? Because you ignored it! And what is ignorance? Why do you ignore something? Because you have refused to look at what was right in front of you, all along!

That was one of the cartoons I drew. There is this guy on a small island, the typical maroon-island, and he is looking with his periscope in one direction. There is a ship passing by right behind him, but he’s looking in the opposite direction, “I’m going to look only in this direction!” and here is the ship going by. How many times does this happen in life? To be able to see, “tatah ksiyate prakashavarananam.” Patanjali tells us that the shroud is thrown off, and finally, you can see the light. You have chosen to see, that is what it comes down to. It isn’t that the light suddenly comes, rather that you’ve chosen to look and now see.

You must become aware of your body. You must become aware of your emotions. And now comes the more difficult part: awareness of mind. The mind is the most amazing instrument ever created or discovered in the whole history of this planet. I don’t know about the rest of the universe, but for this planet, I can make this statement.

The mind is faster than anything else. People think light is the fastest thing – but no, the mind is faster! Your mind is the fastest thing. Light is like kindergarten compared to the mind. Your mind is the super-sense, that super-sense that powers all your sensory apparatus. The mind is the connection to the cosmos we’ve attained, when we have gone away from home by the process of duality, by thinking we are different. But it is also the tool by which we can get back home, by understanding that dualities are artificial and that oneness is the reality. Sat, Chit, Ananda. The mind is both. Patanjali gives a beautiful example to illustrate this. He says the whole universe exists for two reasons: one is for you to experience it, and two, it is for your liberation. That which is, is there for your Bhoga, for your experience; but then it is also there for your sustenance, maintenance, and liberation. Similarly, the mind is the cause of our coming away from the oneness, and also the tool by which we can go back to that state of oneness.

Of course, some people will ask why we should ever move away, but that is what life is all about. It is a continuous contraction and expansion in Spanda – Nishpanda, the
contracting and expanding universe that we understand. That is what life is all about: Spanda – Nishpanda. Spanda is a contraction, the activation, and the movement away. Nishpanda is the relaxation, the deactivation and the coming back home. It is like your heartbeat.

This mind can be very difficult. It is very restless. Arjuna, in the Bhagavad Gita says to Krishna, “The mind is like the wind, it is so turbulent! I cannot control it!”- “Cancalam hi manah Krishna, pramathi balavad drdham. ... vayor iva...” - “It is more terrible than the wind, what can I do about it?” Krishna says the same thing as Patanjali, “Abhyasa Vairagya.” The swan needs his two wings to fly high: Abhyasa is the effort, the self-effort, not somebody doing it in our behalf. And Vairagya is objectivity. I was telling you about the gap, that which differentiates reactivity and responsibility. That gap is Vairagya. That gap is the window where consciousness is permitted to come in and see things as they are, rather than as we think they are. Abhyasa is the Spanda, it is the doing - making the effort. Vairagya is to let go of the effort. Spanda-Nishpanda is just like the Universe’s exerting-relaxing coupling ever going on. This is understood as the dance of Shiva and Shakti, the male-female principles of the universe. There is this constant interaction going on, which comes down into Yoga as the concept of Hatha Yoga, the ‘Ha’ and the ‘Tha’. The Ha is the solar energies, the Tha, the lunar ones. These are the equal and opposite energies we need to balance on our way back home.

Abhyasa for me is again a message from the Bhagavad Gita, which is very relevant in modern times: “Do your best, and then leave the rest!” - seven hundred verses from the Bhagavad Gita. We can summarize it in that one line, “Do your best and leave the rest.” People say, “Wow, this is great! I have signed it to God and then I left the rest!” But have you really done your best? People forget the first part, but this first part is the most important. This is what Patanjali refers to when talking about relaxing the effort, it does not mean, “do not make effort.” It means, “Make the effort and then transcend it.” You do your best and then you leave the rest. It isn’t that you don’t do anything, just sit there waiting for God to come and help you. And then say, “God doesn’t answer my prayers.” Many people say that! Don’t they know that “no” is also an answer? You prayed to God and God said “no,” because our prayers where only a question of, “Give me, give me, do this for me, do that for me...” Leave the rest, maybe, but you haven’t done your best.

It’s like in the movie “Bruce Almighty,” Jim Carrey is standing in the middle of the road and he calls upon God, and a truck runs over him. When he gets to meet God he asks, “Why didn’t you save me?” and God says, “The least that you could have done is get out of the truck’s way.” But no, “I am going to test God by jumping in front of a truck.”

Do your best and leave the rest is again a Spanda-Nishpanda, that exaltation-relaxation-coupling. That is what the Universe is about: expansion and contraction. We become aware of our body, of our emotions, and then the mind. This mind is often described in a very beautiful manner. It is said that the mind is like a drunken monkey. You know what monkeys are like. And then you give it a few pints, not too many, just enough to remove the inhibitory aspects of the brain. A drunken monkey, bitten by a scorpion and I would add, on a hot tin roof - this gives you a visual of what the mind is like. We want to control it. We think, “Here I am sitting and meditating.” That’s very difficult. It’s like a student approaching a teacher and asking, “What should I do?” The teacher says, “Meditate on anything but monkeys!” and the student cannot do anything but think about monkeys for the next five days.
In case you have a misguided idea that doctors heal you, I must tell you that no doctor has ever healed a single patient by means of any of the therapies. It is the patient healing himself. The patient heals himself while we, the doctors, keep him amused and give him a bill at the end. People get a fracture, go to hospital and say, “The doctor put plaster bandage and healed my hand.” All the doctor’s done was to put your hand in the plaster, so you wouldn’t act like a monkey by checking every two minutes if the bone’s healed, because this is what you would have done. The plaster is there just so you won’t hurt yourself, but the doctor didn’t perform any actual healing. Your body has that amazing genetic code that can heal itself. It is said that we could heal anything if we could just stop checking every two seconds, but the mind is like the monkey, incessantly saying, “Look, does it still hurt?” We are like Prometheus, who had given light to the humans and was punished by being chained against a rock where the hawks would come and eat at his liver, growing back again the next day. Remember that those stories are not false at one level: you can grow your liver back, if you just leave it alone. But leaving it alone is very difficult. The moment we say, “Don’t think about the liver!” it’s spoiled. This is what we doctors do, because we don’t understand the power of the mind.

We say, “Oh my God, you have this disease!” The moment we do that, the patient regards himself as condemned. The doctor should have said, “You have this disease, but it’s not a problem. You’ll be able to manage it. Come on, let’s do it,” instead of saying, “Oh my god!” He’s already set something in motion. It’s similar to reading statistics: “This cancer has 85% chances of dying, and that type of cancer 90%... when you do surgery you have 65% chances of no recovery...” I am not against this form of medicine because this is how it’s evolved. But when you plant negative thoughts, two things happen. First, most of the time negative thoughts have more power. The moment you say, “There are only 65% chances of survival,” the person concludes that there are 35% chances of non-survival, which means that the mind starts focusing on those 35% of non survival without looking at the 65%. You have immediately set in motion those 35% like a message to the universe, “This is what you want! So I give it to you.” You’ve asked for it. It is like people who walk out the door thinking, “I am going to have an accident, I know it.” And when it actually happens they wonder why it happened, as if God were against them. You have to be very careful what you set up in the mind.

I don’t know too many doctors who understand this. But this is the first thing that I tell the patients. They come and say, “Doctor, ... my diabetes, my hypertension, my back pain...” Why have they started owning it? It’s become their belonging, their property. And the moment something becomes our property, something belongs to us, we don’t want to let it go, because now it is ours! Identification occurs with the diabetes, the high blood pressure, or the back pain. I tell them to start saying “the diabetes, the high blood pressure, the cancer, the back pain,” to start making it feel uneasy to be with them. The moment you say, “my friend” you have created a bond. Or, “the family.” I will not persuade you to say “the friend”, “the family” - the queen might get away with things like that. The amazing mind has created an identity, “I am a diabetic, I am a cancer patient.” You have created an identity just as bad as “I am my credit card number, I am my address, I am my Facebook-ID. “We have the tendency to identify, and usually we choose the lowest common denominator. We don’t usually go for, “I am the Divine, I am the Universe, I am Sat, Chit, Anandam.” We’d rather choose, “I am this depressed rag everybody steps on.” We identify with the lowest common denominator and we stick to it. No amount of anti-depressants, anti-high blood pressure, anti-cancer chemotherapy,
anti-diabetes medicine is going to rectify that. You have identified with the disease. The drug will only suppress it for some time. It's hidden under the carpet. It isn't easy to clean this up because the mind can be so fatal, so devious. This is where human tendencies, such as sadism or masochism come from; the mind tends to enjoy it.

When we sit down to meditate and think that our mind is going to shut down, the mind says, “Fine, now these people have got into something called Yoga. So, I'll make them think that I am enlightened.” It creates these false experiences like “Ah, I am there!” and you stop the search. It is like you're watching a movie about South India and you think you are in South India. Initially, the mind tries telling you that you don't have time for Yoga or that Yoga is not for you. It's fine in hot India but not in cold countries, it's not really the in-thing, you feel tired after, your muscles ache. “Why should somebody tell me what to do and how to breathe? I know how to breathe!” It tries all these tricks. And if these tricks are exhausted - this tactic didn't work - then it tries something else.

The mind is a tool, but one needs to go a bit above it to be able to guide it. That is the next stage: **awareness of awareness itself.** That is quiet a state of being! To be aware of the body is difficult, to be aware of the emotions is more difficult, to be aware of the mind and its functioning is even more difficult. However, as one slowly grows in consciousness, it has its own momentum just as gravity has its own power. As one starts growing in consciousness, one gets sucked into this greater momentum. You get into this kind of autopilot mechanism that starts to elevate you. This is where awareness of awareness comes in.

Swamiji used to talk about that from around the 1950s, when teaching in Trinidad and later in the '60s in Canada, and the '70s in India. Later, Amma, my mother, came to study with him, and she added a fifth awareness, “Before all of this can happen we first have to be aware of how unaware we are.” This is the pre-requisite: to first know “I lack awareness of body, emotions, and mind – let me start working!” This is not intellectual – it's something you experience. This realization happened not by her deep meditation sitting in the high Himalayan caves. It happened one day when she was with Swamiji. As a student she was very gung-ho on attaining liberation, and she was up to him and virtually holding the collar of his orange kurta, “Swamiji, I want enlightenment, I want liberation, I want this awareness of awareness itself!” And Swamiji said, “Meenakshi, will you please stop stepping on my toes.” That is how Amma understood that first we need to become aware of how unaware we are before we depart on the journey.

When we talk about **Yoga as a way of life, it is a way of life in which every moment we try to be as conscious and as aware as we can be.** Conscious doesn't mean that I can see all of you and know that we are here. That is a very mundane level of consciousness. We are talking about consciousness as a sense of awareness that is multidimensional, looking at the same point from different angles. How is something perceived not just by me but also by all of you? How do you perceive this moment? When I start to have an all-encompassing level of consciousness, this is what consciousness means in Yoga. It is not just my personal point of view. It is the full perspective, like an action scene in movies when the camera goes 360 degrees around the actor, suspended mid-air. That is what we are looking for: to be able to sort of stop the moment and take that 360-degree perspective.

When you have this every moment it becomes Yoga as a way of life. For me life and Yoga are basically synonymous, because life is something that can be experienced every moment. With every moment in life you grow, you learn. Life is this entire journey from
life to death. It isn't that you are born and one day you die. That is not the goal; the entirety of the goal is the process of the journey, of living the life. And Yoga is just like that. Though we say that Kaivalya is the goal, what we learn on the way to Kaivalya is more important. Kaivalya is the final point, but what happens on the way is of crucial importance. When one lives life as one should, with consciousness, awareness, as a human being, fulfilling our dharma, with righteousness, responsibility, response-able, then we live life as it should be, we live L-I-V-E. But if we don't live it this way, we live it in reverse: E-V-I-L. You can call this coincidence, but for me nothing is coincidence. If we live our life as we should or if we don't, it's not outside; it is in us.

Organized religions in any form want a few more sheep to be part of the herd, whereas Yoga says that you will find your divinity and attain it, manifest it. This is a journey from the self to the Self. No one can do it for us. If I really want to make a lot of money, I should find a way where I do the practice and the other person reaps the benefits, then I can charge him. People would gladly pay a lot if they could get the benefit of Surya Namaskar by me doing it for them.

It is said in old scriptures, “Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions.” If there is a noble thought, I don't care too much where it comes from. If noble thoughts come to us, let us be open and humble enough to receive them. Today, I saw a nice thought on Facebook, attributed to Deepak Chopra, who has just basically packaged the old wisdom of India in his own words. He said, “Religion is all about someone else's experience, whereas spirituality is about one's own experience.” Einstein stated that “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” Why is he talking about religion? It should have been spirituality, because there is a big difference between those two.

The World Health Organisation really struggled with finding a definition of spiritual health without it being religious. You are spiritually healthy when you are at ease with yourself, that’s all. You cannot really be spiritually unhealthy, because the spirit can never be unhealthy. But you can fall away from spiritual life. That is possible. There cannot be a negative aspect to spiritual health, but you can fall away from it. But then, you can also regain your balance. That middle path, the alignment and balance does not mean that you attain it once and for all, and then you live happily ever after like in a fairytale, where the hero and the heroine marry and live happily ever after. Does the story end there? In real life, this is where the story starts.

The definition of health according to the WHO is “a state of well-being” at the physical and social level and, finally, they added the spiritual aspect. But the moment we say it is a “state” of well being, you'd think, “Let’s get there and stay there!” People think of it as something to attain, but it also has to be maintained. It is even more difficult to maintain than to attain. The best example is any #1 sportsman. They struggle to get to number one, but then it is even more difficult to maintain and stay number one. Like Messi seems to be the #1 in football today. He got there, and now every match he’s expected to score at least one of his spectacular goals.

The standard’s been set. You get to that state of wellbeing, and then there is the next state of wellbeing, and there will be challenges. One day you feel down, and you pick yourself up, then you will feel down and get up again; but what really matters is how well, how efficiently, how you can, with least hindrance, get back to where you were. It is like walking the tight rope. You do fall down, but how well can you get up again? In
Tamil we have a beautiful statement: “To fall down but to get up without sand in your moustache.”

A common question I’m asked is, “You’re a Yoga teacher, and you’re not well?” But I am human. Or, “You’re a doctor, how can you not be well?” But I am a human being. Or worse, when my wife is asked, “Your husband is a doctor and you are not well?” It is not that you don’t fall down. It is that a spiritually healthy person is not someone who doesn’t fall sick, is never unhappy, who never loses his temper. That is all human but it is about how well you can come back to your state of balance. That is what health is all about, that is what Yoga is all about. That is what life is all about.

Yoga is not separate from life. **Yoga is life, and life is Yoga.** The more we understand that, the more we understand that every posture we execute, every breathing technique we perform, every contemplative practise we do, ultimately leads us back to that state of balance, which is our **natural state.** Balance, health, happiness is our natural state. If we don’t have that, it is because we have gone away from it, that’s all. Then we should do what needs to be done to regain it and do it. Do I have to make changes in my life patterns, my lifestyle? Do I need to change my diet? Do I need to drink a bit more water? Do I need to decrease my caffeine? Do I need to increase my caffeine?

It is about looking at your life and finding the answers to that question: **“What brings me back to that state of balance?”** That is the dynamic state of health - the moment one starts to live life as one should, as a human being with consciousness, awareness, empathy and understanding. The more understanding you demonstrate, the more you get; the more respect you give, the more you get; the more gratitude you feel, the more you get; the more love you give, the more love you get back. But never expect it from the same person. You give love and it comes back ten-fold. Yet we are so focused on the one person to whom we gave it, that we forget the ten people who gave it back. You give someone respect and he doesn’t give it to you, but it’s been given from a hundred other people. This is when you need the 360-degree perspective in your perception of things.

My wish is that all of us grow. That all of us begin to experience that perception of expansive consciousness, that we all are the best that we can be in this lifetime. That is the least we can do as a human being.