

Two Aspects of Yoga¹

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The Vedānta is a body of knowledge with unlimited possibilities; it is a pathway to spiritual realization, to inner vision; it is mysticism and practice, powered and expressed by the mantric word carved in the mystic heart of the seer. For a Ṛṣi, a Rik is a poetic quantum of energy embodying the “light and sound” substance of the Supreme. Often when dwelling on these masterly ancient texts, one feels as if the Ṛṣi is really using his Rik to drive us along the path into the cave of one’s heart by means of the mantra. Level after level is enlightened and revealed and it is a never-ending series of experiences. As the Rig Veda chants so beautifully “*State upon state is revealed, covering upon covering awakens to knowledge till in the lap of the mother he wholly sees*” (Sri Aurobindo, Hymns to the Mystic Fire, page 231).

In this essay, we examine closely two definitions of Yoga, the first one from a verse in the Katha Upanishad (II.3.11) and the second from the Bhagavad Gita (2.50). These two sūktas are brief in style - so natural to the Vedānta - but bear in themselves an ocean of vibration, of power, of a force of impulsion. The two verses are:

tām yogamīti manyante sthīrām indriya dhāraṇām — apramattastadā bhavati, yogohi prabhavāpyayau — (Katha Upanishad II.3.11).

buddhiyukto jahātīha ubhe sukṛta duṣkṛte — tasmād yogāya yujyasva yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam — (Bhagavad Gita II.50).

Our theme is directed by these two descriptions of Yoga², apparently disjoint but for us intimately and mysteriously yoked. Guided by Sri Aurobindo’s thought, together with an “intuitive–logic” as it were, we seek a plane where these two distinct definitions have a synthesis which we firmly believe will reveal greater light in these verses and also illumine us with the Truth.

While attempting to fathom the profundities of the Upanishads, we keep the following injunction of Sri Aurobindo as a constant reminder and soul-companion.

“The text has to be studied with a great patience, a great passivity, waiting for

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² I invite the reader to also study Sri Aurobindo’s essay “The Evolutionary aim in Yoga”, in The Hour of God.

experience and waiting for light and then waiting for still more light. ... if a man can make his mind like a blank slate, if he can enter into the condition of bottomless passivity proper to the state of the all-embracing Chaitanya Atman, not attempting to fix what the Truth shall be but allowing Truth to manifest herself in his soul, he will find then that it is the nature of the Śruti to reveal perfectly its own message.” (see page 305, Supplement to the Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 27, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.)

Equipped with this intuition, we seek within the Śruti for hints and clues and flowing with it we will try and reach where the ṛtasya dhāra, the stream of Truth leads us. And we have Sri Aurobindo’s assurance when he tells us, “He keeps for us the complete book of the Veda written in our secret being, nihitam guhāyām; veiled, but accessible, He awaits our reverential approach and questioning and, sincerely and constantly questioned, He lights the fire of Agni in our hearts and makes Surya to rise upon our darkness.” (see page 167, Archives and Research, Volume 9, No 2, December 1985)

The verse from the Katha Upanishad (II.3.11)

The first verse translated reads as follows:

A firm holding of the senses (sthirām indriya dhāraṇām) is “Yoga” they (the thinkers) say (tām yogamiti manyante). Then man becomes undistracted and gathered within (apramattastadā bhavati); for verily yoga (yogaḥ hi) is the outward expansion (prabhava) and the drawing back within oneself (apyaya).

The compound word *prabhavāpyayau* has to be comprehended simultaneously at the cosmic and the individual levels. In the cosmic sense this can be understood in terms of the two phases of out-breathing and in-breathing occurring in each cycle of existence.

This word also occurs in the Mandūkya Upanishad, Verse 6, where the Supreme as Prajñā (the comprehending Consciousness) is described thus:

This one (prajñā) is the Master (īśvara) of all, He is omniscient (sarvajña), He is the inner controller (antaryāmi), (who residing at centre of all, governs the faculties corresponding to the being’s various states, while Himself remaining in the fullness of his principial activity); He is the womb, the source, the matrix or primordial substance (yoni), of all that exists (sarva); He is the prabhava and

apyayah of all beings (bhūtānām).

At the level of the individual, the mind, which happens to be our principal instrument of *sādhana*, is in its normal state turned outward (*pravritti*) and hence dissipated. Confused and distracted, it is hardly in a position to hit the target (a theme which we will be discussing in a little while). The mind's natural impulse is to follow in the wake of the senses and hence the first step in this process is *sthirām indriya dhāraṇām*.

The Upanishad carries a single thread of a mighty thought and is at the same time a marvelous harmony of multiple strains. So a verse in the Upanishad is best experienced when perceived as a continuum of thought; in this spirit we examine verse II.3.11 of the Katha Upanishad along with the verses which lead up to it. Thus Katha Upanishad (II.3.10) says:

When the five senses become stilled and settled, the mind and the buddhi stir not in their workings. That is the paramount state (paramāṃ gatim), say the thinkers. (Katha Up II.3.10)

The method is to reject thought suggestions, to cast them away from the mind whenever they come and firmly hold to the peace of the being which in reality always exists behind the trouble and riot of the mind. When this secret peace is unveiled, a great calm settles on the being.

When this is achieved in whatever level of perfection, there follows a state of vigilance, an alertness; the state of being gathered within. It is a poise when there is a "stepping back" as it were, where we view the movements without participating. Then the Ṛṣi says, *yogaḥ hi prabhavāpyayau*.

There is a cyclical rhythm in all that exists. The ṛta, the universal rhythm, the dynamis of creation manifests in everything that exists and there is *sr̥ṣṭi* and *laya* at every moment in our thought, in our breathing. Every outgoing breath comes to a point where it halts and then there follows the incoming breath; every outgoing thought comes to a point where it halts and there follows an incoming thought. The halting point is the moment when there is infinite potential energy before the kinesis begins. The harmony of the ordered-world is one of contrary tensions, like that of the harp or bow and indeed *yogaḥ hi prabhavāpyayau*.

This rhythm, this oscillation and this repetition of the moveless point pervades our existence. In varying amplitudes the cycle repeats itself, in sleep as in waking, in day and night, in rest and action, all is a constant condensation and a spreading-out. Yoga is experienced in this juncture, in the *sandhi*, the point of

inflexion. In the state of *apramattataḥ*, when we poise ourselves in the joining, there is as it were an enduring of this moment. Yoga is the repeated experience of this poise.

This recurs at each level of the evolution of our consciousness. Always there is a pointed concentration, a penetration of a plane of consciousness, a poise and a waiting, then a gathering up of the previous levels, a condensation and then a spreading forth of the gains for stabilization, followed by a new ascent, and again *yogaḥ hi prabhavāpyayau*.

The verse from the Bhagavad Gita (II.50)

Out of the apprenticeship to Ignorance
Wisdom upraised him to her master craft
And made him an arch-mason of the soul
(Savitri, page 26, line 1)

Now we turn to the second definition of Yoga as given in the Gita, which we inwardly feel is intricately tied to the definition in the Katha Upanishad.

The verse translated reads as follows:

One who is yoked by his buddhi to the Divine casts away from himself, even here (jahātīha), both correct doing and incorrect doing (ubhe sukr̥ta-duṣkr̥te), therefore to Yoga firmly yoke yourself (tasmād yogāya yujyasva) , for Yoga is skill in action (yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam).

The word *kuśala* is rendered quite aptly by the English word “skill”. The word skill comes from the Icelandic root, *skilja*, meaning, “cutting, dividing, discernment, discrimination”. Thus the skill intended in *kuśala* is in reality a divine craftsmanship together with the deep wisdom of a Ṛṣi needed while fashioning his hymn or that of a cobbler fully immersed in his shoe-making, the skill where the performance is sacred and the perfection carried over to all fields of doing or making.

How does one attain this skilled poise? The Gita says, *buddhi yuktaḥ*. *Buddhi* comes from the root *dhī*, which is “inspirational thought” or “awakened thought”, and this gives to its possessor rare insight into the realm of divine functioning. Its seat is in the true heart, not the physical heart but the organ of true knowledge. Seated at the centre of the true heart is *a Being no bigger than the thumb of man*

(anguṣṭhamātraḥ puruṣaḥ) (Savitri, page 526).

The excessive cerebral activity needs to be reigned in to reach the state of *apramatta*, when one can yoke oneself to Divine with the *buddhi*. Then one is in Yoga, which is skill in works.

Actions performed by such a skilled worker fulfill the entire reason for the act, *kṛtsnam karma*. The Skill in any performance is a yoking, as of steeds together, or, in other words, it implies a marriage of the master and the means (*The craftsman and the craft grown inly one, Savitri, page 112, line 25*).

Works done this way, steered by the *Buddhi*, are spontaneous and there is no thought such as “have I done correctly or incorrectly?” *ubhe sukṛta-duṣkṛte*.

As Sri Aurobindo says, “*by Yoga the Gita intended a perfect adaptation of the soul and its instruments to the rhythm of the divine and universal Spirit ... Yoga is the passage of the human thinking animal towards the God-consciousness from which he has descended. In that ascent we find many levels and stages, plateau after plateau of the hill whose summit touches the Truth of things; but at every stage the saying of the Gita applies in an ever higher degree*”.

While the outward action may be the same, the difference lies in the poise and the state from which the action is being carried out, a difference in the power and the faculty, a difference in the will and the temperament.

To experience this poise in action we listen now to the Ṛṣi of the Mundaka Upanishad. (1.2.1-4). In the first two verses Brahman is described as *the unity of contraries, the summum bonum, the truth immortal, smaller than the atom, set in all that exists; that Satyam, that amṛtam, That is what should be penetrated; penetrate it, O fair one (tad vedavyam somya viddhi)*.

The third and fourth verses continue:

Grasping the bow, the mighty weapon of the Upanishad, set there (sandhayīta) an arrow sharpened by assiduity and adoration (upāsā niśitam); draw with a consciousness of the same nature as That (tadbhāva gatena cetasā); the target (lakśyam) is That Imperishable; pierce it (viddhi) O Fair one (Somya)!

The praṇavaḥ, Om is the bow, the self the arrow, Brahman the target they say; t’is penetrable by the undistracted one (apramattena); like the arrow, do thou become of one substance (tanmayo bhavet), with the target.

In-drawn within the heart's core in a poise of intense concentration there is a pregnant waiting; the moment endures and causelessly (*ahaituka*), there is a release, a letting-go as it were, a gentle slipping into a dense consciousness (*chaitanya-ghana*), into a rapture. When released by one in Yoga, the arrow, like a bird homing to its nest, will find its own dwelling (*sve dame*). Piercing the target is a result of one's inner state, an evidence rather than the cause of one's spiritual condition.

“Thy concern is only with the action (that it be ‘correct’, in accordance with ṛta), never with its results; neither let the results of action be thy motive, nor do thou refrain from acting” (Bhagavad Gita.I.47).

In summary, *kauśalam* is intuition, conceptual thought, discrimination, force of impulsion and a perfection of the limbs for the final execution. When poised in Yoga, works get done this way, and they stick not to the individual, *na karma lipyate nare*. This indeed is the secret of Karma Yoga.

The Synthesis

The Katha Upanishad has the following exquisite line on the “skill” needed to extract Brahman from within the heart's core, and this line is the one which shows us the way of ascension to a new plane and a possible synthesis of the two definitions:

Tam svāccharīrāt pravṛhén munjādiveṣikām dhairyéṇa

Translated the last line reads as

“Him one should extract with dhairyam from one's own body, like the arrow from the reed” (Katha Up .II.3.17).

The word that needs to be studied with care is “*dhairyam*”, a quality which arises from the root “*dhī*” and the word “*dhīra*” (one possessed of the substance called *dhīḥ*).

A close look at all the occurrences of *dhīra* in the RV and the Upanishad shows beyond doubt that *dhīra* etymologically means “possessing, having received, or being characterized by, the substance *dhīḥ* and hence “wise, having insight into and knowledge of things, connections, phenomena which are hidden from ordinary men”; wisdom can also be classified as practical ability, skill, cleverness; one could translate *dhīra* also as “able, skillful, expert” and we hear the Gita's *karmasu kauśalam*.

A *dhīra* is therefore an exalted being possessed of the faculty of supranormal vision and on the other hand is also capable of creative achievements such as fashioning a sculpture or building a house, or arranging an “*ishṭi vidhāna*”, an altar, requiring expert knowledge into the rituals and order of things. His poise is that of the divine sculptor, with no thought for the morrow, his expression is fashioned in the intuitive heart and it is impelled by his higher intellect and given shape by his skilled hands.

Again, (RV 10.114.9) says: *kaśchandasām yogamā veda dhīraḥ*, i.e “*the dhira is he who knows with expertise the harnessing of the rhythms which underlie existence*”.

The substance, the stuff constituting the mantra was a power--substance, a densified stuff of consciousness, having the potency to give experience, to bring realisation, be a vehicle to carry great ideas across all time barriers. And who is said to have fashioned this speech by thought? None other than a “*dhīra*”, for *dhīrā manasā vācam akrata* (RV 10.71.2). The “skill” or “wisdom” required to “invent” or “create” sacral speech needs deep vision and imagination.

Such is the *dhīra*, the one who can extract the Divine from within like the arrow from the reed, who is poised in Yoga experiencing in total stillness the enduring of this moment.

If one renders *dhīra* as “contemplative”, then he is one who by his contemplation does not merely cogitate on issues but develops the engineering expertise to extricate with great skill, deeply hidden things, ideas. A skill, accompanied by the ponderous contemplation gives a “waiting patience”, unhastened by senses (*sthīrām indriya dhāraṇām*). It is a delicate art and any haste breaks the thread needing enormous labour to recover the lost insight. The “precision tooling” needed in manufacturing industries or the launch of a satellite into orbit, where even a small error can lead to a total failure, are modern instances where aspects of this skill is demanded. A *dhīra* is such a contemplative, not a mere “thinker”.

Gathering the multiple threads of light, we see Yoga revealed as a complex synthesis of mutually interdependent processes acting in tandem on the various planes and parts of our being, and the Vedic *dhīra* typifies perfectly this synthesis. Thus Yoga is the going forth and drawing within in every act of existence, Yoga is the poise in every point of inflexion, Yoga is the contemplative’s delicate act of drawing out of the true self from within, Yoga is also the expert charioteering of the wheel of life, and finally Yoga is the start of

the race and its ending.

We come to a close. Having flowed along two tiny tributaries, one of the mighty Bhagirathi of the Katha Upanishad and the other the Alakananda of the Gita, we reached a point where they met and coalesced. The Yoga of synthesis of the contemplative and the skilled worker takes us to a new state of consciousness. A new light dawns, revealing a power and presence from within. A first plane of ascension above the ordinary existence has been attained.