

# Vedanta Center of Atlanta

## How Well Do You Know Yoga?

November 5, 2017

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### CHANT • SONG • WELCOME • TOPIC

November is a month for study of Raja Yoga, a spiritual path often called the yoga of meditation. A raja yogi uses ancient, proven spiritual techniques to quiet the mind and gain control of her or his attention. Regular daily practice of concentration may lead to meditation, which can reveal God and liberate you from the cycle of rebirth and death.

### How Well Do You Know Yoga?

Perhaps you have been practicing Hatha Yoga for some time, with a qualified teacher. You know a flexible routine of poses (*asanas*), and you have gained physical strength and poise, and a sense of inner balance. These are three wonderful fruits of yoga training.

Swami Vivekananda first introduced Yoga to a wide audience of Americans in the mid-1890s. He called it *Raja Yoga*, the “royal path” to conquering your internal nature. Vivekananda’s translation of and commentary on *Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras* was published in July 1896. The book became a bestseller in the United States and Great Britain, influencing the spiritual and intellectual thought leaders of both countries.

The Swami taught that, from Patanjali's point of view, the deeper purpose of perfecting the asanas is to allow your body to sit perfectly still, comfortably, for long enough to turn the mind within. Vivekananda promised that sinking into the silence of meditation "will take away all our misery".

By analyzing your own mind, he wrote, you "come face-to-face, as it were, with something which is never destroyed, something which is, by its own nature, eternally pure and perfect ..." This encounter with Pure Consciousness, the source of your being, liberates you "from fear, from unsatisfied desire."

"Man will find that he never dies, and then he will have no more fear of death. When he knows that he is perfect, he will have no more vain desires, and both causes being absent, there will be no more misery — there will be perfect bliss, even while in this body."

**Yet, why should you believe what the Swami says?**

We know that learning asanas yields pleasing and practical results. What proof is there that if you take more time to follow Patanjali's other instructions, you can achieve anything like what Vivekananda promises?

The first evidence will be found in the life of a qualified teacher of concentration and meditation — a woman or man who shows, by the way they live

and behave, that they are free from fear and vain desire, that they are cheerful, even blissful.

When you are attracted to someone who offers to teach you Patanjali's yoga, watch closely and critically for some time. How does that teacher interact with you and others? What does he or she talk about in casual conversation? As you observe these and other aspects of the teacher's life, your body's intuitive sense can let you know whether to accept instruction from that person.

The second proof is the saintly personalities, alive today or in the recent past, that practiced meditation, centering prayer, or other methods similar to those taught by Patanjali. Mother Teresa, Swami Ranganathananda, the Dalai Lama, Cynthia Bourgeault, Father Thomas Keating, Amma (the Hugging Saint), and Thich Nhat Hanh are some shining examples.

Their radiant lives attest to the power of reaching deep inside yourself, to discover that "which is never destroyed."

Yet, the most potent proof will be your own experience. As Vivekananda pointed out in his introduction to Raja Yoga, you cannot learn chemistry just by reading a textbook. "You must go to the laboratory," he writes. "Take different substances, mix them up, compound them,

experiment with them, and out of that will come a knowledge of chemistry.”

For Patanjali, your entire body, mind, and intellect is that laboratory, in which you can gain the full knowledge of yoga, as defined by Vivekananda.

You may wonder: Who is this great sage Patanjali? Where and when did he live? Why and for whom did he write his Yoga Sutras? Swami Prabhavananda, who taught in the United States from 1925 to 1976, wrote this in a Translator’s Foreword to his book, *How to Know God*:

*“Patanjali’s yoga aphorisms are not the original exposition of a philosophy, but a work of compilation and reformulation. References to yoga practices ... are to be found, already, in (several of the) Upanishads, very many centuries earlier. Indeed, yoga doctrine may be said to have been handed down from prehistoric times.*

*“What Patanjali did was to restate yoga philosophy and practice for the seekers of his own period. But what was his period? And who was Patanjali? Hardly anything is known about him ... As for the date of the sutras, the guesses of scholars vary widely, ranging from the fourth century B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E.”*

Yet, as Prabhavananda remarks elsewhere, this lack of facts about Patanjali matters little when compared to the enduring power of his systematic approach to self-actualization and self-realization. Over the many centuries since they first appeared, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras have completely changed the lives of uncounted millions, freeing them "from fear, (and) from unsatisfied desire."

## **DISCUSSION AND COMMENTS**

### **Regular Closing prayer**