

Your Spiritual Practice and Raja Yoga

Vedanta Center of Atlanta June 21, 2020

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GOOD MORNING ... ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **Today is Father's Day!** Jai Sri Ramakrishna! Salutations again and again to all Fathers, on this day!
- **July 4th** congregational celebration will be online. It's too soon to meet at the Center, without masks — not much fun with masks. So prepare something about the day, to share with us — a tribute to Swami Vivekananda, or remarks about the anniversary of our nation. **NO MORE THAN 5 MINUTES PER PERSON!** Be courteous to others who are waiting to contribute. You WILL be timed, and muted if you go much over the 5-minute limit.

June is a month for study of Raja Yoga, a spiritual path often called the yoga of meditation. As a raja yogi, you use ancient, proven spiritual techniques to quiet your mind and gain control of your attention.

Regular daily practice of Raja Yoga increases your ability to concentrate, and may lead to meditation. This can unite you with the Divine Presence, the source of your being, and liberate you from the cycle of rebirth and death.

CHANT • SONG • WELCOME • TOPIC

Your Spiritual Practice and Raja Yoga

What happens when you simply follow a holy person's instructions? In his *Gospel*, Sri Ramakrishna gives this example: You receive a letter asking you to buy some things — a certain amount of cloth, a quantity of food, and so on — and send them to the one who wrote you the letter, by parcel post. You do as you are asked; task complete. What then? The Master says no need to keep the letter; you can discard it. And, there's no need to ask for further instructions.

What's the point? A holy person's teachings are like that letter: You are told what to do; if you do those things, the outcome is predictable. For example, the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* are a long letter from a realized soul, with detailed instructions on spiritual practice.

Great teachers of the Ramakrishna Order — Vivekananda, Prabhavananda and others — translated the Sutras into English and commented on them, so you would know how to make Raja Yoga part of your daily routine. That's what we will talk about this morning.

First — Don Juan Matus, Don Gennaro, and Carlos Castaneda: 10 years to go from a smart-aleck student working on his PhD, to realization that he was Don Juan's apprentice, to a *brujo* who could abide in the way of being taught by the Toltec lineage, in which Don Juan was a master.

Carlos Castaneda made the restraints, observances, and other practices of the *brujo's* understanding his own, and achieved their results. This great feat took him ONLY 10 years.

Sri Krishna tells us over and over again in the Bhagavad Gita: You must learn to meditate — without meditation where is happiness, where is peace of mind? And He gives us many instructions on how to meditate.

Swami Vivekananda summarized those instructions this way: "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy — by one, or more, or all of these — and be free.

This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details."

Vivekananda's bold words point directly to the purpose of Patanjali's Yoga — the realization of one's innate divinity by gaining control of the outer and inner aspects of the human form.

Many people who practice hatha yoga are acquainted with *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras* — it's usually a sourcebook for their instructors. Students are taught *asanas* (postures or poses) and other ancient, proven techniques to strengthen the body and quiet the mind. Patanjali claims these exercises lead to greater psychological and physical poise, heightened mental alertness, and increased psychic power.

Yet, serious students find these are just the **first** rewards for regular practice of Patanjali's Yoga. Over time, they develop a much stronger ability to concentrate; this one-pointedness of mind may lead to meditation.

Purpose of Yoga: Control of the mind:

From Patanjali's point of view, that is the deeper purpose of perfecting the *asanas* and other techniques: They allow the body to sit perfectly still, comfortably, for long enough to train and calm your mind, and turn it within.

According to Patanjali, most of his methodology — six of the "eight limbs" of his yoga — is devoted to achieving this ability to meditate.

He defines concentration as the ability to hold or repeat the same thought, mantra, prayer, or other practice without interruption for 12 seconds. Meditation begins when the object of concentration can be held continuously for two minutes 24 seconds

Concentration and mediation are difficult because memories, perceptions, feelings, and other thoughts divert the student's attention away from an unbroken flow of awareness. These diversions arise from likes or dislikes, fears or worries, good or bad experiences, immediate desires or fantasies of future pleasures, or simply stimulation from the five senses.

Most people's lives are lived in distraction — they're bored, fearful, even miserable! Patanjali promises that a sincere student of yoga can be free of all that. Through many years of practice, a yogi who sinks deep into the silence of meditation will not be afraid — of life or of death — and is no longer a slave to empty desires.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras prescribe six methods to achieve this freedom. Practiced together — not sequentially — they help create a calm mind, a strong, poised body, and a tranquil way of life, which are the prerequisites for meditation:

1. *Yama* means the restraint of tendencies that keep a student “at odds” with the world. When a person is habitually harmful to others or the environment, is deceitful, greedy or selfish, immoderately sensual, or covetous, calmness of mind is utterly impossible. The Yamas are:
 - *Ahimsa* ~ Nonviolence • *Satya* ~ Truthfulness • *Asteya* ~ Nonstealing
 - *Brahmacharya* ~ In control of one's sexuality • *Aparigraha* ~ Nonpossessiveness
2. *Niyama*: These practices REPLCE the way of life left behind as you restrain the body and mind. The Niyamas broaden Yama to include the student's **internal world** of body, mind and spirit. As a Yogi, you make daily, determined efforts to eliminate all forms of inner and outer impurity; to be content with the circumstances of your life; to prefer the good over the pleasant; to learn from sacred texts, and from your weaknesses and mistakes; and finally, to offer the results of your practice of yoga to the Divine Presence.
 - *Saucha* ~ Purity • *Santosha* ~ Contentment • *Tapas* ~ Self-discipline • *Svadhyaaya* ~ Self-study • *Ishvara Pranidhana* ~ Surrender to the Divine
3. *Asana* means “seat” — specifically, a seat for meditation. Hatha yoga's use of that word is an extension of the term to include many other

yogic exercises. These poses, done regularly with proper guidance, can result in a poised, flexible, healthy body. Such a body allows you to sit still comfortably for an hour or even longer, practicing concentration and meditation.

4. *Pranayama*: Yama means restraint. Prana, often translated as “breath,” is actually the subtle life force that causes the lungs to breathe (and all of the body’s other organs to function). Therefore, pranayama is the regulation of your life force — consciously or as a spontaneous outcome of other exercises.
For instance, while practicing meditation your breathing will slow and may even stop for a time. This natural pranayama happens because breathing is energetically tied to thinking, and fewer thoughts arise during contemplation, concentration, and meditation.
5. *Pratyahara* means “withdrawal of the senses.” The senses are naturally outreaching, so it’s easy to become addicted to pleasant experiences of the outside world — and get stuck there, like a fly to flypaper!
Students of yoga are taught to witness these sensations as just one level of experience. You learn to turn your attention away from sensory stimulation and explore the universe within yourself. Skill in pratyahara is required, to move on to the next step.
6. *Dharana*: Patanjali gives special emphasis to the ability to concentrate (dharana); it will determine your level of achievement. As Vivekananda wrote in his introduction to Raja Yoga, “How has all the knowledge in the world been gained but by the concentration of the powers of the mind? ... There is no limit to the power of the human mind. The more concentrated it is, the more power is brought to bear on one point; that is the secret.”
To perform an asana elegantly, to watch your breath or chant a mantra without interruption, to distinguish the real from the unreal, requires this one-pointed control of your attention. Patanjali says it is the gateway to freedom.

Beyond that gate, you will experience daily life and its miseries very differently. As Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita*, “Yoga is the breaking of contact with pain!”

So the open question for each of us is, Will I follow the instructions given to me by the Great Teachers? Here’s a short poem:

“Just this smart, just this sweet, just this wise: that’s me for now. How to be more? Bring out the divinity within by practice and prayer.”

The great American sage — and by the way a truly exemplary father — Mark Twain wrote this:

Your road is everything that a road ought to be ... and yet you will not stay in it half a mile, for the reason that little, seductive, mysterious roads are always branching out from it on either hand, and as these curve sharply also and hide what is beyond, you cannot resist the temptation to desert your own chosen path and explore them.

The choice is yours and mine, every moment:

- follow the instructions we are given
- **OR**
- follow the little, seductive, mysterious roads always branching out ...on either hand ... desert(ing) our own chosen path to explore (these temptations).

DISCUSSION AND COMMENTARY

Closing chant