

The Sublime Path of Yoga

A recent translation in English of the verses of Sankara ably leads one on the path of perfection through Yoga.

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The sublime path of yoga leads to oneness with the Supreme *Brahman*. Sankara Bhagavatpada in a series of verses shows the true seeker how the ultimate state of *samadhi* can be attained and what it feels like to be in that state. *Yogataravali* as these slokas are collectively known, is undoubtedly a masterpiece. Each and every word in this treatise is pregnant with such profound meaning that one does need the enlightened guidance and blessing of a real *guru* to grasp the true spirit of this work.

Prayer to the Guru

Invoking God and invoking the *guru* are one and the same. In the true sense of the word the *guru* has reached the ultimate stage in spirituality and is in a position to lead his disciple. *Guru* is thus equal to God.

True to the tradition of our land, it is the *guru's* lotus like feet

(*charanaravinda*) that one invoked and worshipped as *guru* himself. They have the power of removing all delusions and restoring tranquillity to the seeker's mind. Hence they are referred to as the "antidote to all poisons."

Sri R. M. Umesh has done yeoman service to the seekers of the Self by translating it into English with an appropriate commentary. The present article is essentially an adapted version of his book, "Perfection through Yoga" published by Sri Sharada Trust, Sringeri, Karnataka, India. The verses and their meaning are given in Part Three.

Contemplation on Nada

The primordial ever auspicious Lord Sadasiva, perfect and compassionate, has spoken of a myriad modes of absorption. But Sankara regards only *samadhi*

associated with contemplation on *Nada* as the worthiest of all *layas*. Here, *Nada* connotes the primordial internalised sound of the very life process of a being.

It is abstract, and can be heard or felt even without the auditory mechanism. The individual has to attune himself to it by constant practice. The state of *samadhi* arising out of identification with *Nada* is the noblest and worthiest experience.

Prana or life energy is similar, but not the same as the air we breathe. *Prana* is subtle and abstract, while air is gross and physical. Air is restricted to the lungs and respiratory passages, while *Prana* pervades the whole body.

Nadis are channels for the passage of *Prana*. There are 14 principal *Nadis*, such as *Ida*, *Pingala* and so on, but the most important one is *Sushumna* which connects the *Muladhara Chakra* situated at the base of the spinal cord to the *Sahasrara Chakra* in the head. It passes through *canalis centralis* of the spinal cord. Once again, the *Nadis* are not physical tubes but subtle passages for the flow of *Prana*, just as *Chakras* are not physical locations but abstract power centres.

Nada Anusandhana

The practice of controlled breathing characterised by regulated inhalation (*Puraka*), retention of breath (*Kumbhaka*) and regulated exhalation (*Rechaka*) is called *Pranayama*. This leads to the purification of *Nadis*, if practised with proper restraints (*yamas*), observances (*niyamas*) and postures (*asanas*). Restraints include truthfulness, non-stealing, non-possession beyond absolute necessities and the like. Observances include contentment, austerity and devotion to God. Postures should be firm and comfortable, such as *Padmasana* and *Siddhasana*.

As the *Nadis* are purified one perceives *Nada* emerging as *Anahata*, the abstract inner sound. This is distinct from *Abata* or the sound produced by physical striking leading to vibrations. The state of contemplation on *Nada*, termed *Nada Anusandhana*, is worthy of salutation. It is the means of attaining the Truth. In such a state, the mind as it were dissolves in the Supreme. This is called *Vishnupada*, the state of *Vishnu* signifying the pervasion of the *Brahman* within oneself.

Three positions going by the names of *Bandhas* (literally, locks) are described in Yoga which help control *Prana* and thereby the mental processes. They are the anatomical counterparts of the physiological processes of *Pranayama*.

The first is the *Jalandhara Bandha* wherein the head is bent forward and downward onto the chest wall. This is associated with the *Puraka* phase of inhalation. The second is the *Uddiyana Bandha* wherein the abdominal muscles are contracted inwards and upwards. This is associated with *Kumbhaka* phase of retention of breath. The third is the *Moola Bandha* wherein the perineal muscles and anal sphincters are contracted with the assistance of pressure by the heel as one sits. This too is associated with *Kumbhaka*. The three *Bandhas* are hailed by Sankara as the agents that free the person from the bonds of time.

Awakening Kundalini

Proper practice of the three *bandhas* is said to awaken *Kundalini*, the primordial power that resides in the *Muladhara Chakra* at the base of the spine. This power is normally likened to a dormant coiled serpent blocking the portal of access to

Sushumna Nadi as it lies. When awakened, by yogic effort, *Kundalini* is said to traverse up this *Nadi* which is now opened up. During its passage upwards, it activates the *chakras* symbolising various levels of energy activation of the Self. Ultimately it reaches the *Sahasrara Chakra* in the head, producing the state of *samadhi*. *Prana* is directed totally inwards as it follows the *Kundalini up* along the *Sushumna Nadi* culminating in *samadhi*.

Supreme Symbolism

The divine nectar of immortality of soul is said to be tasted by the yogis in this state. The source of this ambrosia is the *Chandra Mandala* within the *Sahasrara Chakra*. Whether it is the *Lambika Yoga* as practised by Sri Vidya Tirtha (of Sringeri Sharada Peetham) or *Hatha Yoga* in which the practice of *Khechari Mudra* is prescribed by cutting the frenum of the tongue to make it more mobile, it is the proper practice of *Pranayama* combined with meditation that sets the state for *samadhi*.

The symbolism contained in these verses is explained with great intelligence and insight by the author. One should not or need not get into

controversies on whether a serpent can reside within the human body, or whether *Chakras* can be identified on dissection, even as nerve plexuses. *Kundalini* is to be understood in conceptual or metaphoric terms.

Even *Shandilya Upanishad* concedes in using the term *sarpavat* meaning “like a serpent.” The essence is one of mind control superimposed on body control. This process is capable of leading to the supreme awareness of the Self in the *samadhi* state.

Kevala Kumbhaka

Attenuation or near stoppage of the inward-outward movement of *Prana* as it keeps traversing internally along the *Sushumna Nadi* is *Kevala Kumbhaka* (isolated restraint of breath). This is evident from the severe restraint in the flow of breath during *samadhi* as indicated by a very low or negligible tidal volume.

With the *Prana* coming under control, so do the mind and its wanderings. As a result, sense objects dry up too, since after all worldly objects are only what they are perceived to be by the mind. With no cogniser or perceiver, there can naturally be no cognised or perceived element either.

Perfect *Nada Anusandhana* goes with *Pranayams* and *Kevala Kumbhaka*. Sankara likens the emergence of this exalted phenomenon to the blossoming of a lotus. Of the innumerable *Kumbhakas* described in *Hatha Yoga*, *Kevala Kumbhaka* is given the pride of place by the learned ones.

Trikoota

In the *Kevala Kumbhaka* state, the *Prana* is said to abandon the *Ida* (lunar) and *Pingala* (solar) *Nadis* and ascend through the *Sushumna* into the *Trikoota*. This is an abstract space between heaven and earth signifying the cosmic expanse of endlessness. Anatomically, this is related to an area in the human body between the middle of the eyebrows and the crown of the head. Yogic philosophers have always drawn conceptual parallels between cosmic entities and anatomic ones, signifying as it were that the perceived universe or the force that pervades it resides verily within our own selves!

The mind gradually dissolves as *Prana* diffuses in the *Trikoota*. Note the emphasis on upward movement from dormant energy in the base of the spine to sublimation in the crown region. This symbolic ascent

of rising above the ordinary is possible even for lesser mortals!

In describing this unique state in other terms Sankara talks of the residue of whatever *Prana* is left behind after the symbolic *Kundalini* serpent has devoured most of it as it rises in the Sushumna. There is no reference to *Prana* abandoning the usual channels of *Ida* and *Pingala Nadis*. Nevertheless this has to happen if *Prana* were to follow *Kundalini* up the Sushumna, being consumed by it in the process. The remnant *Prana* eventually dissolves in the Vishnupada or the state of Vishnu, symbolising the all pervasive supreme within the space of one's own heart.

Whichever way one looks at it, *Kevala Kumbhaka* exercises must be performed repeatedly. Or else one does not gain mastery over the *Prana* which may run amok like a wild elephant. It is only with repeated practice that a true *yogi* achieves slow and steady breath control and in parallel, a control over his mental activity.

Raja Yoga

In contrast to the processes already described hitherto, Sankara goes on to elaborate on a higher form of Raja Yoga. Here, he gives

no targets of gaze, no restraint of air movements, no *bandhas*, no strain of mental fixation and the like. Mind is controlled on an ongoing basis which is way above all such aids. For instance, the aid of sight fixation is replaced by the visualisation of the whole universe as permeated by the *Brahman*; the three *bandhas* are replaced by the primal lock of *Brahman*; and so on.

Undertandably, there is no regulation of time or place to practise Raja Yoga. A secluded place is any place of perceived union with the *Brahman*. And fixation of mind and thoughts become one with perceiving *Brahman* wherever the mind and thoughts go. External aids, such as *Pranayams*, are dispersed with.

The Seer and The Seen

Going onto the most sophisticated interpretation of relativity of perception, Sankara presents an exquisite version of the unreality of the perceived objects, including one's own body and mind. One's Self becomes the ultimate seer. The 'seen' elements automatically vanish with such realisation. The seer blends with the *Brahman* and ceases to exist in the conventional sense. As the seen elements are only perceptions

of the seer, they too disappear. In such a state, the seer, one with the *Brahman*, is imperishable. There is neither life nor death, neither sleep nor wakefulness.

How to Renounce?

Sankara then moves on to explode the myth of renunciation. Merely giving up physical things one by one, or even discarding one's own body, is not renunciation. One should know that it is the mind that wanders and constitutes the bond of attachment. One should really aim to renounce the mind which is but the *vasanas* and the concepts of "I", "Me" and "Mine."

This term symbolises the steadiness of the mind in the Supreme. Unlike the *dhyana* state, the mind has to make no conscious effort to stay fixed, but is nevertheless one with *Brahman* without effort. Bodily movements, such as blinking and breathing, virtually grind to a halt. Yet the person is aware. It is like being in deep sleep without actually sleeping. It is a state to be experienced to be understood.

Uproot Sankalpas

Mind control and sense control necessary for the *Manonmanee* state

cannot come unless desires and the resolve (*Sankalpa*) to satiate them are removed. As Manu said, the leaping flames of fire cannot be doused by pouring ghee on them. They only grow stronger in the process. Lasting satisfaction through gratification of desire cannot be achieved. The mind keeps wanting more and more all the time.

On the contrary, forced abstinence makes the longing more severe. It comes back with a vengeance once the restraint is removed. One should aim at not removing desire *per se*, but the cause of desire, namely *Sankalpa*. The only way to uproot *Sankalpa* is to fix our attention on to the Supreme with an indifference to everything other than the *Brahman*.

Amanaska

This means the destruction or elimination of the very entity of mind. It is achieved by repeated recourse to *Manonmanee*. The need for repetitive effort is emphasised or else *vasanas* regrow. *Manonmanee* and *Amanaska* are thus very closely interlined and their external manifestations are also similar, e.g. *Shambhavi Mudra* in which the opening and closing movements of

the eyes stop as vision is turned inward. The ego-mediated identification of the entities of “I”, “Me” and “Mine” is destroyed in the process.

Sankara alludes to a slight time lag that occurs between natural Amanaska state and the actual union with the Supreme as the very ultimate experience of *Jeevanmukti*. This delay is probably attributable to the two-step process of realising *Atma* and recognising that it is *Brahman*. Even in the *Bhagavad Gita*, such a sequential phenomenon is referred to as the Lord tells Arjuna, “Having known Me in truth, he forthwith enters into Me” (XVIII □55).

Yoga Nidra and Samadhi

Yoga Nidra refers to the sleep-like state which is however not an inert condition. It symbolises the perfection of reaching *Amanaska*. The resultant *samadhi* is so profound that it cannot be disturbed even with the most powerful external stimuli. Yet it is not a negative state like clinical coma.

Sankara calls upon the seekers of Truth to climb to this supreme state, where ignorance is destroyed, conceptions are eliminated and the mind ceases to exist; an

imperturbable state of active inaction; let creepers grow around the body of the yogi; let the birds build nests in his ears; the seeker’s inner being stays untrammelled in this blissful absoluteness!

Relevance Today

How can *Yogataravali* help us lesser mortals who are worried about our day to day responsibilities of life?

This is where the beauty of Hindu Advaitic philosophy lies. The *Bhagavad Gita* tells us through the voice of the Lord to the beleaguered Arjuna to “stand up and fight.” No true Vedantin would ever ask us to stop doing our part in life. In fact, we must do it to the fullest of our ability. But with this difference. If we become genuine seekers of Truth, we can go about our tasks with inner poise and peace. We can all be Raja Yogis in a manner of speaking and still be productive citizens in the modern world of computers and electronics. This indeed is the practical message of the *Yogataravali*.

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