

# **RAJA YOGA REVISITED**

**A GUIDE TO SYSTEMATIC  
SELF-EXPLORATION**

**By Nils Holm**

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## Preface

*All action should originate  
from knowledge,  
but what use is knowledge  
without putting it to action?*

I am not exactly sure what kind of book this is. I tried to describe yoga in a rather objective and scientific way, but in some places I could not help addressing the reader directly, especially when giving instructions. Then there is so much wrong in our world that I could not help criticizing the established structures, either. In these parts I will often challenge the reader to reflect about their intentions, desires, and life-style. This will not always be a nice experience. So when you stumble across wording that questions your values, please keep in mind that this book was written to make you *happy*. However, true happiness cannot be built on a lie. You have to be honest to yourself before you can experience real joy.

Yoga practice is hard, really hard. If you expect this book to teach you a few techniques that you can exercise 20 minutes a day in order to improve your life, you set yourself up for a large

disappointment. Such a technique does not exist. Practicing yoga will not change your life, practicing yoga *means* to change your life. If you are not ready to do so, this book will be no more than just another entertaining reading. In order to be happy, you will have to practice hard. Reading books about yoga is nice, but knowledge will not change anything. Practice is the key to success.

On a stylistic note, I have decided to avoid the use of diacritical marks, which may interfere with the flow of the text. So in the main body of the text “nirvana” will be used in the place of “nirvāṇa”, for instance. Readers who are interested in the proper transliteration and pronunciation of Sanskrit words may refer to the glossary and the pronunciation key in the appendix.

Nils Holm, December 2009

## Raja Yoga On a Page

*Raja Yoga is the science which teaches us how to gain the power of concentration.*

– Swami Vivekananda

- Go to a silent place
- Sit down
- Keep your back straight
- Close your eyes
- Focus your mind on a single point [1]
- Do not move
- When your mind wanders, return to the single point
- Keep meditating for at least 20 minutes
- Meditate every day

[1] E.g.: your breath, a mantram, an image, or a specific part of your body.

## Reasons to Meditate

*As your desire is, so is your will.*

*As your will is, so is your deed.*

*As your deed is, so is your destiny.*

– Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, IV.4.5;  
Translation by Eknath Easwaran

The idea of self-improvement is possibly as old as civilization itself. Of all means of changing our world for the better, it is probably one of the most promising approaches. If we do not walk a path, how can we expect others to follow our example? Yoga is a method of systematic self-improvement that has been invented maybe as long as 4000 years ago and has been applied successfully by a vast number of men and women. Yoga was first described in an ancient collection of Hindu scriptures called the *Vedas* and in particular in the *Upanishads*, a collection of discourses held in Indian "forest academies." The Upanishads are related to the Vedas, but go straight to the core of the exploration of consciousness without paying much attention to ritual and dogma. In a sense, the yoga described in the Upanishads may be considered to be an early, but highly developed form of psychology. Unlike today's western psychology, though, it claimed that the unconscious can be not only explored but even conquered, thereby transforming our personality, allowing us to shake off our sorrows, and making us truly compassionate and happy beings.

Traditional Hindu forms of yoga are taught in the popular *Bhagavad Gita* (between 500 BCE

and 300 BCE). These forms will be described in detail in a later chapter of this text. The Buddha's teachings (about 500 BCE) were strongly influenced by yoga and some of his discourses give detailed instructions on meditation. Patanjali, finally, wrote a comprehensive text on yoga called the "Yoga Sutras" (about 200 BCE). It was very probably him who coined the term "raja yoga" in the first place. Raja yoga encompasses in fact both, physical exercises and meditation practice, but later physical exercise became a separate branch of yoga called "hatha yoga." This text focuses on the mental and spiritual aspects of yoga as taught in the early texts. Its goal is none less than the exploration and transformation of the unconscious with all the wholesome effects that are linked to it.

The ultimate goal on the path of yoga is *liberation*, which means not just freedom from bad feelings, pain, or other unpleasant experiences, but freedom from all attachment to the phenomenal world, including the own body. This does not mean to give up our bodies and live as "spirits" or something similarly esoteric, but to recognize our bodies as what they are: important tools to navigate this world, but nothing else.



Of course we have a *very* strong connection to our bodies, and yoga respects this fact very well. Nevertheless, it tries to teach us that we are *more* than just a machine that functions for a while and then ceases to work. It tries to show us who and what we really are at the deepest level of our consciousness. When we realize this deepest level, the scriptures promise, all our sorrows will be left behind.

Of course, liberating ourselves from *all* illusions of the material world may turn out to be too hard to achieve in one lifetime, except for the most determined of us. But even on the way to the ultimate goal, realizing the supreme reality, practicing yoga has quite a few pleasant side effects. By training your mind to stay focused, your concentration becomes stronger. This effect is so potent that it causes the brain structure itself to change, as a study conducted by a researcher of the Harvard Medical School found out ["Growing the Brain through Meditation"; *On the Brain*; Fall 2006; Vol.12, No.3]. The effects of this transformation can be experienced in everyday life: you become calmer, you are not easily distracted, your perception becomes more acute.

Experience is an essential part of yoga. Yoga does not require you to believe anything, it challenges you to make your own experiences. Even if many yoga texts might seem quite esoteric these days, the roots of yoga are founded in science. Like all sciences, yoga is based on observation, experience, abstraction, and verification. So when you start practicing yoga, be sceptical. Try the methods that it offers you and make up your own mind. All that I ask is that you be open to positive results. I will conclude this introduction with some words that *Swami Vivekananda* wrote in his own book “Raja Yoga” in 1899:

*Each science must have its own methods. [...] These are the truths of the sages of all countries and ages, men pure and unselfish, who had no motive but to do good to the world. They all declare that they have found some truth higher than that the senses can bring to us, and they challenge verification. They say to you, take up the method and practice honestly, and then, if you do not find this higher truth, you will have the right to say there is no truth in the claim, but before you have done that, you are not rational in denying the truth of these assertions.*

## Traditional Yoga

Ancient yoga, which may have been invented as long as 4000 years ago, does not even mention postures. What we know as “yoga” in the west today came much later. Originally, yoga was a tool for discovering and exploring what the sages of those times called the “*supreme reality*,” or *Brahman*. The supreme reality was described as never-changing, all-pervading, yet attributeless and transcendental. It could not be observed with the senses, not even with the mind. You needed to move your consciousness to a higher plane to be able to realize the supreme reality. However, the sages did not want you to *believe* in this reality, they wanted you to *experience* it by yourself. Yoga was the tool they offered to their disciples in order to make up their own minds.

## Jnana Yoga

By experiencing the supreme reality, the meditator realized the unity of all life and the immortality of their soul. They did so by discriminating between that which is real and that which

is an illusion. The path that led to that goal was called *jnana yoga* (the path of wisdom). The goal of the path was to realize that only Brahman is real and everything else is an illusion. Practitioners of *jnana yoga* thought what we experience as the real world to be a dream and they strived to wake up to a higher reality. This waking-up was called *samadhi*. *Samadhi* could only be attained after practicing yoga for a long time and only in deep meditation. This path required determination, patience, and faith. Once a practitioner reached *samadhi*, their life changed dramatically. All sorrows fell away from them and they realized that when they die, their immortal soul will be unified with Brahman. Material goods and sense pleasures meant nothing to them. Their own body was only a tool that they would abandon without fear when the time had come.

Ancient Indian philosophy divides the world into two parts. *Prakriti* is what makes up the phenomenal world that we perceive with our senses. Everything we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think of is made of *prakriti*. Note that the mind was regarded to be a sense, too, because it can perceive things that you can neither see, hear, smell, taste, nor touch, for example abstract

concepts like yoga. However, not even the mind can perceive Brahman, because it does not belong to prakriti but to *purusha*, the spiritual side. Purusha is the cause for everything, including prakriti. A force called *maya* creates prakriti from purusha. He who sees through maya, overcomes illusion and experiences purusha directly. This was the goal of the sages of the old times.

Meditation was used to discover the supreme reality inside of ourselves rather than in the outside world, which is made of prakriti anyway. According to Indian philosophy, each living being carries a small “spark” of Brahman inside of it. This spark is called *Atman* (self). Atman is what remains when everything else is stripped away from consciousness. One who sees Atman inside of themselves realizes Brahman. So meditation was invented to do exactly this: remove from consciousness everything that could veil the view on Atman. First the senses are trained to obey the mind. By focusing the mind on a single point, all input from the senses is blanked out. Next the mind itself is slowed down until it comes to a halt. When the thought process stops without losing consciousness, only consciousness remains. Sensual impressions, thought, and

the ego are eradicated temporarily. This is the state in which consciousness can realize Atman. What is described here in a few sentences is, of course, the work of a life time dedicated to meditation. (Or multiple life times, if you believe in reincarnation.)

## **Bhakti Yoga**

All paths of yoga had the same ultimate goal: realizing the supreme reality, ending man's suffering, bringing peace to the soul, living in tune with dharma, and being of service to fellow human beings. The means to this end differed slightly, though. Some people found it too hard to meditate on a formless, attribute-less transcendental reality. They preferred to worship God in one of the forms that are popular in Hindu religion, like "Krishna," "Rama," or "Vishnu." All of these forms are merely aspects of the ultimate reality that help a yogin to attain their goal. The path of yoga that used worship as a means to realization was called *bhakti yoga* (the path of love to God). The practitioners of bhakti yoga made no difference between Brahman and a personified entity representing God. By wor-

shipping God and meditating on him, they eventually reached the same goal as the jnana yogins. In addition to sitting meditation, they worshipped God by chanting and dancing, while jnanis (practitioners of jnana yoga) typically complemented their sitting meditation with contemplation.

The sitting meditation practice of the bhaktas (practitioners of bhakti yoga) and jnanis also differed slightly. Jnanis typically meditated by repeating the holy syllable *OM*, while bhaktas meditated on one of the popular names of God. A holy word that was being repeated in meditation was called a *mantram*. The most popular Hindu mantram is probably “rama,” named after the *avatara* of the same name. An *avatara* is an aspect of God that came down from the supreme reality to our level of consciousness and manifested in prakriti. Contrary to popular belief in the west, there is only one God in Hinduism. However, God is attribute-less, formless, and immanent and transcendent at the same time, so he or she cannot be perceived directly by us except in samadhi. This is why from time to time God manifests in *avatara*. All *avatara* are expressions of the same supreme reality, though. Even the

expressions of God in other religions are considered to be avatara by many Hindus.

While jnanis attempted to unify their souls with the supreme reality, thereby experiencing God by becoming part of him, the bhaktas did not strive to reach the *deepest levels* of samadhi. When deep samadhi (nirvakalpa samadhi) is reached, the ego ceases to exist. The self experiences the supreme reality directly, but the ego cannot enjoy it, because the transcendental reality cannot be perceived by the senses or described with words. So the bhakta wants to become an instrument of God rather than part of God. By God's grace, his ego is only eradicated to such a degree that he can "see" God in samadhi and enjoy his infinite glory. As *Sri Ramakrishna*, a famous bhakta of his time, once pointed out: "you want to taste sugar, not become sugar."

When a man reached the deepest level of samadhi and remained in it for too long, his body would cease to function. Dying in samadhi was common for a yogin, either because he intended to do so or because his time had come and he entered samadhi for one last time. Remaining in samadhi was not considered to be suicide,



but final unity with God. No matter whether it was brought about deliberately or not, it was called *mahasamadhi* (great samadhi). According to Hindu religion, a being that dies in samadhi is freed from the cycle of death and rebirth. Many sages of the ancient times could not withstand the temptation of mahasamadhi once they had experienced the supreme reality in deep samadhi. This is why bhaktas avoided deep samadhi. They wanted to return to the world of prakriti to serve their fellow human beings and assist them in the realization of Brahman.

When ancient yogic literature demands the “eradication of the ego,” it does not mean that we should destroy ourselves and become soulless zombies. In fact the exact opposite is the case. Indian philosophy distinguishes two forms of the “self.” One of them, Atman, has already been discussed. Atman is what is left when everything artificial is stripped away from consciousness. Only Atman is capable of seeing through maya, because it is itself part of the supreme reality. With the help of Atman, we can see the unity of life and the omnipresence of the supreme reality, even in prakriti. The part that prevents us from seeing Atman in ourselves, in every liv-

ing being, and even in inanimate matter, is called *ahamkara*. Ahamkara is the part of our mind that causes attachment to the ego. It makes us suffer when our ego craves for something we do not get or wants to avoid something that it does not like. It creates the duality of craving and aversion, pleasure and pain. Atman is undisturbed by this duality, but due to the illusion of maya, we are bound to it. According to the ancient scriptures, all of our suffering is caused by searching things we crave and trying to avoid things we dislike. By eradicating ahamkara, we can end our suffering, and enjoy the world as it really is.

This does not mean to become indifferent to everything. In fact indifference would be the opposite of the freedom that the eradication of ahamkara brings. Ahamkara causes the illusion that every being is separate, and the gain of one being is automatically the loss of another. That many of us see the world in this way in our times does not prove that this is the right way or the only way. We all suffer when we do something that causes harm to another being. Some of us suffer consciously, some unconsciously. The ancient scriptures suggest that the only way to be

happy is to cause happiness in others. Because all life is one, the happiness you give will be given to all, which includes, of course, yourself. By removing the source of the illusion of separateness, you lift the veil of maya from Atman and gain true happiness.

## **Karma Yoga**

The principle of cause and effect that is inherent in this theory is *karma*, probably that part of yogic theory that is most widely known in the west—and maybe the most misunderstood part as well. Karma is what you accumulate whenever you attach yourself to the result of an action. Basically, every act that agrees with dharma does not increase your karma but every act of adharma does. There is no such thing as “good karma” and “bad karma.” Accumulating karma leads to rebirth and therefore to death and suffering. Only when the karma of a human being has been completely eradicated at the time of their death, the cycle of death and rebirth is broken and *moksha* is attained. Karma can be eradicated by different means, for example by attaining wisdom (jnana) or love to God (bhakti). Because house-

holders typically do not have much time for contemplation or worship, there is a third path of traditional yoga called *karma yoga*.

Karma yoga teaches *detachment* from the fruits of one's actions. Whatever you do, it suggests, do it as well as you can, but do not bind yourself to the outcome of your actions. When you give something, do not expect anything in return. Whatever you do, make it an offering to God. Detach yourself from any consequences that your actions cause. This is, of course, only possible when your actions are in tune with dharma. When they are not, afterimages of your actions will haunt your thoughts, thereby adding new karma to your score. Only when you manage to act in total conformance to dharma, your karma will stop growing. When no new karma is added, your old karma will start to vanish. Only when your karma is completely eradicated, you will be free from desire. The path of karma yoga is steep at the beginning, because acting for personal gratification is easy. We often do not even recognize that we are acting from selfish desires.

In karma yoga, "*action*" means acting against dharma. When you act in the physical sense, but

are in tune with dharma while acting, you are not acting in the karmic sense. This is what is called “*inaction in action*.” However, when you sit still while you should perform an act of dharma, you may not be acting in the physical sense, but you do act in the karmic sense. By refusing to perform the act of dharma, you accumulate new karma. This is what is called “*action in inaction*.” An example for inaction in action would be if you rescue a bug that is attempting to cross a busy street. Because you save the bug’s life and probably do not think about any “reward,” this is inaction in action. Of course, if you are doing this *in order to decrease your karma*, you will increase your karma, because the act is no longer selfless. (Yes, karma yoga is hard.) An act of action in inaction would be if you watched the bug without helping—knowing that it may come to harm. In this case you would be acting by not acting.

No matter how karma is removed, by karma yoga, bhakti yoga, or jnana yoga, the ultimate goal is to free the ego from desire. Because our ego is mostly made of desires (the desire to experience pleasure and the desire to avoid pain), this means that the ego in the western sense indeed

ceases to exist. Instead of being driven by desires that originate from the phenomenal world, a human being whose karma has been eradicated acts from selfless love and compassion for all creatures. What can be more fulfilling? According to Hindu religion, the last thought of a being when it dies determines where its Atman goes. If you wish to be rich, you will be reborn as a rich (but not necessarily happy) being. If you wish to accumulate power, you will be reborn as a powerful (but not necessarily happy) being. When you have no desire other than to be part of the creation (i.e. God), your last thought will be a thought about God. The Atman of a being that thinks of God at the time of its death will become unified with God and will not be reborn. Hindu religion is a bit like school: you get to repeat the class until you “get it.”

## **Patanjali**

About 200 BCE *Patanjali* composed a fundamental work on yoga called the *Yoga Sutras*. The *Yoga Sutras* were the first comprehensive volume that attempted to describe yoga systematically. Only the discourses of the Buddha provide

a similarly detailed description of the practices that will lead to liberation. The Yoga Sutras describe eight stages on the path to liberation:

- Yama: nonviolence, truthfulness, non-covetousness, abstention from sexual intercourse, non-possessiveness.
- Niyama: cleanliness, satisfaction, austerity, study of the scriptures, surrender to God.
- Asana (āsana): discipline of the body.
- Pranayama (prāṇāyāma): control of the body.
- Pratyahara (pratyāhāra): withdrawal of senses.
- Dharana (dhāraṇā): focusing on a single point.
- Dhyana (dhyāna): continuous focusing (meditation).
- Samadhi (samādhi): oneness of subject and object.

The individual stages will not be discussed in detail here. It is not necessary to memorize them in order to succeed on the path of yoga. Knowing their essence is much more important.

Nonviolence is an essential part of Hindu philosophy that already has been touched by

the discussion of “dharma” above. It will be explained in detail later in this chapter. Truthfulness means to tell the truth and think only that which is true. Non-covetousness means not to desire anything that is not one’s own. Abstinence from sexual intercourse means celibacy for monks and being faithful to a single partner for householders. Non-possessiveness means not to own more than that which is necessary. Cleanliness means to keep your body and mind in good condition. Satisfaction means to be satisfied with that which one has. Austerity is to observe and control the own body and mind. The study of spiritual scriptures (e.g.: the vedas) is intended to lead to introspection and awakening of the own spirituality. Surrender to God can be achieved, for example, through worship.

Asanas are the practice of postures, i.e.: hatha yoga. They are intended to prepare the body for prolonged periods of meditation and allow for the free flow of vital energies. Pranayama is often associated with the control of the breath, but it is more than that. By practicing Pranayama a yogin attempts to gain consciousness of and control over virtually all bodily functions. By withdrawing their senses from the phenomenal world, yo-



gins focus the power of their consciousness on the inside. At this point the exploration of the inner world starts. Dharana is the concentration on a single point, which is the one essential principle of meditation. So meditation is introduced at a rather late stage in the Yoga Sutras. In this text, we will take a different approach and begin with this step, while practicing the others in parallel and only to the degree that each individual is willing to manage. Dhyana is a continuous period of meditation. Samadhi is the climax of meditation in which the borders between observer and observed object (the single point) ceases to exist. Reaching samadhi means liberation.

While the term “raja yoga” was widely used only for the exact path described here, we will not cling to that path. Like the Gita (as most Hindus refer to the “Bhagavad Gita”) we will use this term to denote any form of yoga that concentrates on meditation rather than physical practice.

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