

Chapter one: THE INNER SELF

suddhatattva sandhanadva apashushaktihi

*Contemplation of the inner Self frees the individual
from his suffering and feeling of limitation.*

Shiva Sutras I:16

ONCE A SEEKER went to a great master. Bowing reverentially in the traditional manner he said: “O master, I seek enlightenment, please initiate and teach me so that I may attain That!”

The master replied in a kindly manner: “Certainly my son, *tat twam asi*, you are That, the divine Self lives within you. Meditate on that Self, know that Self, merge in that Self, realize that Self!”

The seeker was disappointed. “O master, I know all that already. Why, that very teaching was featured in this month’s *Yoga Journal*. Please give me the secret teachings, I want the real stuff!”

The master said: “That is all I know. That is my entire teaching, I have no secrets. There is nothing that I have not given you. However, if you are not satisfied, you can go down the road to the next swami’s ashram and see if he has something more suitable for you.”

The seeker approached the other guru and said: “O master, I seek enlightenment, please give me the initiation and your most secret teaching so that I may attain That!”

The guru said: “I do not give my teachings so easily. You must earn them. You must do *sadhana*, spiritual practice. If you are sincere then you can stay here and work for 12 years. Only in this way will you earn my initiation.”

The seeker was delighted: “That’s just what I wanted. That is real spiritual life, real *sadhana*. I’ll begin at once.”

The guru assigned him the job of shovelling buffalo dung in the back paddock.

The years went by. Each day as he shovelled the dung the seeker dreamt of his future enlightenment. He ticked the passing days and months off his calendar. Finally 12 years were up; the great day arrived. He approached the guru with hands folded palm to palm.

“O my guru, I have served you faithfully for 12 years. I request your teachings and initiation as you have promised. Please bestow your grace on me.”

The guru said: “My son, you have served me well. You truly deserve my teaching. Here it is: “*Tat twam asi*. You are That, the divine Self lives within you. Meditate on that Self, know that Self, merge in that Self, realize that Self!”

The seeker became enraged. “What! Is that all? The guru up the road gave me that the first time I met him and I didn’t have to shovel buffalo dung for him for 12 years!”

“Well,” said the guru. “The truth hasn’t changed in 12 years.”

What is this inner Self? It is our deepest nature, at the very core or source of the mind. It is the place of love, wisdom and contentment, the place we have touched in our most profound experiences in life. It contains the restorative peace of deep sleep and the vivid joy of our best experiences in the waking state.

The inner Self is the essence of a person: it is also called the *soul*. When a person dies, his Self leaves the body and moves on. The body is left lifeless and inert. If you see a dead person you become aware that it is no longer the person you knew. The body is a vehicle for our true essence, the inner Self.

In another version of the 12 years story the seeker became enlightened as soon as he heard the teaching of the second guru, even though it was word for word the same as that of the first guru. After shovelling dung for so long, the seeker had prepared the ground inside him and was now ready to absorb the teaching. This version also has merit. The Self (I also refer to it as the inner Self or the awakened Self) is paradoxical. It is very close at hand, closer than the closest. My teacher once told me: “Everyone knows his own Self.” It is also very elusive.

Over the years mystics have debated whether there is a Self or not and some claim that the core experience is not the Self but the void or emptiness. When I look here and now to the core of my experience I discover my awareness. Awareness contains both understanding and feeling in their most basic forms: understanding that precedes specific thoughts, feeling that precedes specific emotions. There is also a sense of “I” that does not identify with my body or my life story, but with awareness itself. If you want to call this a void you can, but it is a feeling, conscious, Self-aware void.

About a year after I began to meditate I had a significant experience. I was meditating one day in India when I began to feel myself levitating. I floated to the top of the room and hovered near the ceiling. I thought: “I am doing the Indian rope trick, I will be in *Ripley’s Believe it or Not*.” I had no doubt that my whole body was floating in the air until I opened my eyes and looked down. Then I saw that my body was still sitting in meditation. So it wasn’t that my

body was levitating, *I had left my body*. Whatever *I* was, was on the ceiling. I understood in that moment, *by direct experience beyond any doubt*, what is meant when the teachings say that you are not the body, you are the Self.

In India the quest for the experience of the peace of the Self is given the generic term yoga. The term yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj* to “join” or “harness”. The English word “yoke” comes from the same root. The yoke was an important instrument in Vedic society since it controlled the horses which pulled the plough or the cart. In the Vedic mind there was a correspondence between joining the horse to the plough and joining the mind to the Self. Thus, yoga means “union”, the uniting of different aspects of a person in order to uplift him. Yoga encompasses techniques such as breathing exercises, chanting, service, and especially contemplation and meditation that bring about this union.

In the West the term yoga is most often associated with the physical postures of *hatha yoga*. The term yoga has a much wider application. When I use the term I particularly refer to meditative practices which increase self-knowledge and connect us to the inner Self.

A definition of yoga I like is: “*Yoga is intelligent effort*”. Yoga does imply effort. One school of thought claims that since the Self is always present no effort need be made to attain it. This is an attractive thought, but in practice it is nonsense and even harmful. The Self can be experienced spontaneously by grace, or by accident, but to stabilize in the Self, a consistent, intelligent and passionate effort must be made for a long time to realize it completely. Few become anchored in the Self when they first hear the teaching. Most of us have to go through a long practice of meditation and contemplation and make inner progress little by little, bit by bit.

No amount of effort that goes in the wrong direction will attain the goal. We may run with courage, stamina and speed, but if we are going in the opposite direction we will not reach the finish line. There must be true insight and understanding. Meditation helps us understand ourselves and shows us in what direction our effort can be profitably harnessed.

THE ART OF MEDITATION

In the field of meditation the main authority is the ancient sage Patanjali. Patanjali lived at least 1500 years ago and wrote the *Yoga Sutras*, a concise treatise of 196 aphorisms on the art of meditation, as relevant today as it was then. Patanjali’s second aphorism (after introducing his topic in the first) is probably the most famous statement about meditation ever made:

yogas citta-vritti-nirodhaha

*Yoga (i.e. meditation) is the effort to still
the thought and feeling waves of the mind.*

Yoga Sutras of Patanjali I.2

Usually this aphorism is translated “Yoga is to still the thought waves of the mind”. This translation, while technically accurate, has created the illusion that there is no meditation unless the mind becomes completely still. The effect of this notion has been to make generations of meditators insecure and dissatisfied with their meditation. Of course in deep meditation the mind becomes completely still, but it is not correct to say anything less than that is not meditation. In valuable states of meditation, thoughts continue to play in the mind. Thoughts in themselves do not stand in the way of meditation. Negative thoughts and negative feelings are, however, another matter and must be pacified.

The statement “yoga is the *effort* to still the mind” is more in the spirit of Patanjali’s teachings. A practical teacher, he would have called any and all movement to still the mind meditation.

The idea of quietening or stilling the mind gives meditation a unique place, since in most of our other activities in life we want the mind to be active. The one exception is in sleep, and, in fact, meditation and sleep have a strong relationship. In both activities the mind is turned inside and becomes still. In both activities the still mind approaches the inner Self and draws nourishment and refreshment from it. The difference is that in sleep the Self is approached *unconsciously*, while in meditation it is approached *consciously*.

In his next aphorism Patanjali introduces the idea of the inner Self:

tada drashtuh svarupe ‘vasthanam

*Then the Seer is established in his own essential
and fundamental nature.*

Yoga Sutras of Patanjali I.3

The Seer is the inner Self or witness. When the mind is still, the Self shines forth. One of the commentators compares this situation to the moon’s reflection in a still pool of water. When the water is still, the reflection is perfect.

Patanjali then tells us what happens when the mind is not still:

vrtti-sarupyam itaratra

*In other states, the Self is obscured by the thoughts
and emotions that play in the mind.*

Yoga Sutras of Patanjali I.4

The Self is obscured by an agitated mind—be it anger, fear or despair. Continuing the analogy, if a wind stirs up the pool, the reflection of the moon is refracted and colored by the agitation of the water. In practical terms this means that when we are gripped by agitation we are “no longer ourselves”. Anger, paranoia and intense desire can be forms of temporary insanity in which we do things we later regret. Under their influence the force of the Self is obscured.

Meditation is a method of quietening the mind and experiencing our deepest nature, the Self. The value of experiencing the Self is incalculable. It is an awakening, an upwelling of energy, joy and wisdom. There are a number of ways that this awakening takes place. It can even happen spontaneously for no apparent reason.

Over the years I have heard many accounts of the inner awakening. One man was lying in his bed when he felt a bolt of energy enter him. Another was driving along a freeway and had to pull over because he became absorbed in Cosmic Consciousness. At the age of 16, the great sage Ramana Maharshi underwent an intense fear-of-death experience and in one half hour was completely transformed. Similar experiences are more common than you might expect.

The awakening can also happen in the presence of a self-realized being, as it did for me in the presence of my teacher, and as it did for him in the presence of his teacher. In my case I felt energy rushing through me. I had a series of experiences of higher Consciousness similar to the out-of-body experience I have already described. The awakening can also take place through meditation techniques like the ones in this book, which have been passed down in a strong tradition of great souls from teacher to student .

KEY IDEAS OF CHAPTER ONE: THE INNER SELF

- The inner Self is our deepest nature, the core, and the source of our mind.
- The quest for the experience of the Self is given the name yoga.
- Yoga is intelligent effort.
- The essence of meditation is to still the thought waves of the mind.
- When the mind is still, the Self shines forth.
- The awakening is an up-welling of energy, joy and wisdom.