

Why Yoga Means Union:

The Spiritual, Historical and Psychological Reasons (And Why Patanjali's Yoga Sutras Had nothing To Do With It) - by Ramesh Bjonnes

It is commonly understood that yoga means *union, oneness, bliss*. It is not so commonly understood, however, that Patanjali, the so-called originator of Classical Yoga, had nothing to do with it.

Patanjali, whose philosophy of the Yoga Sutras is becoming increasingly influential in Western yoga circles, never emphasized yoga as union, but rather described yoga as suspension, as restriction, as duality. Yoga scholar Georg Feuerstein remarks in his book *The Encyclopedia of Yoga* that Patanjali's dualistic philosophy never quite took hold in devotion-oriented India, where yoga as union, bliss, even love, has had a prominent place for thousands of years. At least since the time of Krishna, whom Feuerstein suggests was a historical person, and whom some scholars estimate to have lived about 1500 BCE.

In Krishna's Bhagavad Gita, the great yogi warrior and Godhead of the Indian bhakti movement, emphasizes that yoga is *union, love, the source of all things*:

**He who is rooted in oneness
realizes that I am
in every being, wherever
he goes, he remains in me.**

**When he sees all beings as equal
in suffering or in joy
because they are like himself,
that man has grown perfect in yoga. (BG 6.29-32)**

Quote from:

***Gita in a Nutshell #4: Each of Us Is Already Infinitely Wondrous,
Divine If You Prefer.***



Krishna speaks here from deep inside the theist guru-tradition, in which the guru (Krishna) God (Brahman), and the World are in union. Krishna says so in a language reminiscent of the mysticism of the Greek neo-platonic wisdom-teacher Plotinus and Christian sages such as Meister Eckhart.

Fast forward 3500 years and we encounter the contemporary book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihali Csikszentmihalyi (yes, that's indeed how his name is spelled), and we will find a remarkable congruence of thought between the ancient yoga of Krishna and contemporary psychology.

Flow, says Csikszentmihalyi, is experienced when we are in a state of deep, concentrated enjoyment, when we are absorbed in an activity that leaves us in a state of effortless and unselfconscious buoyancy and control. Contrast that to Patanjali's most famous yoga sutra—***Yogah Citta Vritti Nirodahah***— which is translated as follows by Georg Feuerstein:

Yoga is the restrictions of the fluctuation of consciousness.

Not much mention of flow or unity here. Feuerstein's translation gives us a sense that yoga is a discipline to chastise the mind into submission. And that's not Feuerstein's personal intention. It seems to be Patanjali's.

Feuerstein's translation is indeed a lot closer to the literal meaning of Patanjali's words than most other translations I have read. Because, as some writers on yoga have pointed out, many "translations" of this particular sutra reflects an attempt at making it sound more tantric, more heart-centered, more non-dual, union-and-flow-like than what the words seem to imply.

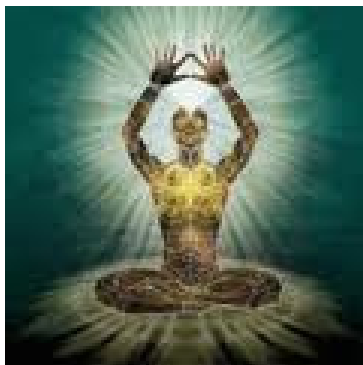
There are no phrases indicating "heart" or "unity" or "oneness" in Patanjali's original sutra. According to contemporary tantric yoga philosopher and Sanskrit linguist Anandamurti, who interprets this sutra much like Feuerstein, Patanjali's intent was that a yogi must suspend his or her "mental tendencies" (*vrittis*) in order to find peace.

But, says Anandamurti, someone in a coma has also suspended his or her mental tendencies, someone in a dreamless state of sleep is not experiencing any mental expressions; but these inward states of "emptiness" are not exactly the same state as yoga.

It appears, then, that in this sutra Patanjali describes some of the psychological effects of yoga rather than the inner revelation and feeling that the deep meditational practice of yoga evokes. Anandamurti reminds us that the idea that yoga means unity, that yoga is a devotional concept and the path of the union between heart and mind; that this profound concept does not originate from Patanjali. In other words, the idea that yoga means union seems to be absent in the Yoga Sutras.

Rather, the idea that yoga means union he attributes to Shiva, the so-called King of Yoga. Shiva allegedly said that yoga means the unity between the individual soul and the cosmic soul, the unity between our heart and the cosmic heart, the unity between oneself and the Other. The Sanskrit transliteration of Shiva's saying is:

Samyoga yoga ityukto jivatma paramatmanah.



The Sanskrit word yoga itself has two meanings, writes Anandamurti. It originates either from the root verb *yuj* with the suffix *ghain* and thus means "addition," or from the root verb *yujin* and the suffix *ghain* and thus means "unification." The ancient gurus Shiva and Krishna and Csikszentmihalyi, the contemporary psychologist, have thus similar ideas about what the inner, experiential state of mind of a yogi is, and that state seems to contrast with what Patanjali had in mind.

For Patanjali, if we take him at his own words, yoga meant the "suspension of our mental tendencies" or "the restrictions of the fluctuations of consciousness." Patanjali wants us to control those *vrittis* in the *citta*, in the mind, and that process, he says, is what yoga is.

From Shiva's tantric perspective yoga would be experienced as follows: when our individual mind has calmed its *tendencies* of boredom and anxiety and its focused, yet dynamic flow dips into the infinite flow of consciousness (*paramatma*), then, he says, we experience yoga as a feeling of union, a feeling of flow. Hence, while Patanjali does not use the term union, there may be a link between his Yoga Sutras and the other two great sources of yoga—Shiva and Krishna. And that link may lie in the way that Flow or Union or Yoga is achieved.

The state of flow, or, for our purposes, the state of yoga, Csikszentmihalyi claims, exists in a dynamic space somewhere between anxiety and boredom. We humans often fluctuate between these three states. We are anxiously tapping our fingers when contemplating the fear of the future or the guilt of the past. We are bored into limp inaction when contemplating our dismal present. But, voila!, we enter a state of flow the moment we engage in challenging but rewarding activities such as music, art, writing, gardening, sports, and, of course, yoga and meditation, activities that let us enter a more challenging and rewarding state of flow. Why? Because we shift our attention from the distracting chatter of the mind, the parts of the mind that is either anxiety ridden or stiflingly bored.



In that state of flow, the fluctuations of the mind that Patanjali is talking about—those *vrittis* of desires, guilt, hurt, pain—no longer sidetrack us, no longer produce feelings of either anxiety or boredom. In that state of flow, we enter the world of union, an inner awe of concentrated bliss, we enter the state of being Krishna is talking about in the Gita, the state of union Shiva exemplified as an inner revelation of oneness. If not the full-blown spiritual states of union, or Samadhi—which are rather rare in yoga—we experience at least a psychological resemblance of it.

What do I mean by that? There are doors, mirrors, or stages of perception. And as these are “cleansed” through spiritual practice, to use William Blake’s famous metaphor, we experience deeper and deeper states of yoga.

In other words, there are stages of union. Our feelings of awe and mystery are just the beginning stages of the journey, until we ourselves become one with the mystery, with the cosmic soul itself, which represent the ultimate union Krishna often speaks of in the Gita.

To understand these stages of union, it is instructive to take a look at the “yogic mind model” of Anandamurti, which differs from the older Vedantic model of the *koshas*, or sheets of being. There are, in addition to the body, five states of the yogic mind. The three first stages in this model roughly correspond to the Jungian psychological model:

- Conscious mind (*kamamaya kosha*): this state of mind has three functions: to sense external stimuli, to have desires based on those stimuli, to materialize actions based on those stimuli.
- Subconscious mind (*manomaya kosha*): this state has four functions: memory, contemplation, experience of pleasure and pain, dreaming. There may be temporary feelings of deep union and awe at this stage.
- Unconscious mind (*atimanas kosha*) is the state of intuition and creative insight; the mind of sublime poetry, art, inventions, psychic awareness, etc. For yogis, there will often be an experience of prolonged periods of union during meditation at this stage.
- Subliminal mind (*vijanamaya kosha*): this level of mind has two main functions—deep discrimination between what is “truth and untruth,” and detachment. It is in this state one starts to experience a near continuous flow of freedom, wholeness, and union, as well as a host of other attributes, including ecstasy, grace, undisturbed attention, spiritual success, etc.
- Causal mind (*hiranmaya kosha*): this is the last or highest stage of inner yogic union, the feeling that there is only a thin veil between our self and the Divine. It reflects the mindset of many great yogis and gurus, while the greatest of them, the enlightened beings, can also pierce this last veil and permanently rest in the Cosmic soul itself.

When the veil between the yogi’s mind of the *hiranmaya kosha*, the fifth stage of the above model, and the cosmic mind of Brahman becomes nearly absent, the result is a near constant perception of great clarity, wisdom and bliss. Metaphorically speaking: the below has become one with the above; the doors of perception have been cleansed.

Another way of looking at this is that the above mind model represents the *jivatman*, the individual soul, and when our individual awareness pierces the veil of the last and fifth stage, the *jivatman* merges in the *paramatman*, the Cosmic Soul, or Brahman.

And, it is said, that the *Jivanmuktis*, the liberated souls, the enlightened beings, live in this realm, on this threshold between the two worlds of being. And that stage of awareness, in reality, is what we mean by yoga as union, the union between the personal soul (jivatman) and the Cosmic soul (paramatman).

It is also in this stage of unity that the yogi truly feels (and not just thinks) that the *above* has become the same as the *below*, that heaven is indeed within.

In other words, Patanjali's, Shiva's and Krishna's ideas about yoga are not the same. They are at most complimentary. What is especially not found in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra about what yoga is, says Anandamurti, is juice, flow, dynamism, the idea that life, when lived to its fullest, is vibrant; that the cosmos itself is one vibrating, ecological, pulsating organism. Thus the idea that yoga is union with that flowing organism; the idea that yogic union resonate with the saying of the great alchemists: as above, so below.

And for Krishna, for Shiva, the center, the source of that flow, that *rasa*, that *lila*, is God, is Bhagavan. And not surprisingly, quantum physicists talk about the cosmos in much the same way. "Every living entity, every animate and inanimate entity, is dancing according to the flow of that *rasa* (flow), according to the vibrational expression of that *rasa*," writes Anandamurti.

When movement is the nature of life, how can yoga be without flow? More to the point, the nature of the whole universe is flowing, dynamic, and pulsating. So, rather than suspending our *vrittis*, our mental tendencies, we embrace them, we love them, and then we surrender them to the cosmic flow. Thus, we try to make all our ordinary tendencies spiritual, sacred, and flowing.



Hence, the simple yet profound idea that yoga means "I am That." I am one with That; I am one with God, I am one with Krishna, with my higher Self, with that transcending flow that runs and pulsates through and within everything. When that profound idea, that feeling, is available to us at any moment, while doing any form of action, then we experience yoga; we are in the flow of yoga.

Yoga, then, is attraction toward That ultimate flow. Yoga is thus not revulsion away from what we do not like (as Patanjali seems to imply in several sutras), not disgust for, or suppression of our basic desires. Rather, yoga is much more psychological, much more elegant: yoga does not turn attraction into repulsion by saying NO to life, yoga says YES to life

by seeking and seeing the bright side of everything, by seeing the wisdom, and ultimately union as an available source of inspiration in everything.

Yoga is thus about seeing union, seeing God, consciousness, oneness, sweetness, love in everything we are, in everything we do. But yoga is not theory, yoga is practice, yoga is living and being. "It is not enough to know how to do it," Csikszentmihalyi writes, while acknowledging that yoga is an "enormously sophisticated" way to experience flow, "one must do it, consistently, in the same way as athletes or musicians..."

And, so, in that light, yoga is practice, yoga is discipline. And the more sophisticated the practice and the discipline, the deeper the flow, the deeper the state of mind and focus, the more overwhelmingly meaningful our sense of union with the Other, with That.

And what are those commonalities between the psychology of Flow and the spiritual practice of yoga:

- Flow is concentration—as during meditation and asana practice
- Flow is increasing sophistication and challenge—as during the practice of more advanced asana and meditation techniques

- Flow is unselfconscious behavior—as during bhakti yoga singing, or in deep meditation, or simply right now!
- Flow is being in the present moment—as during mantra/breath recitation while walking, biking, eating, loving

And, there is another commonality between the yoga of union and Csikszentmihalyi's Flow: the way to happiness lies not in mindlessly following our hedonist desires, but rather in flowing with our call for mindful challenges.

So what are the signs that we are experiencing yoga in our life?

Bill Walz, a meditation and mindfulness teacher at the University of North Carolina writes: "True spirituality requires experiencing a self-transcending connection with Life and with others, but when we live trapped within this disease of self-absorption, the truly spiritual experience is impossible."

And the eminent psychologist Abraham Maslow said: "The sacred is in the ordinary...to be looking elsewhere for miracles is a sure sign of ignorance...everything is miraculous."

About the Author

Ramesh Bjonnes was born in Norway and lived for nearly three years in India and Nepal learning directly from the masters of tantric yoga. Before he became a yogi, he studied agronomy and co-founded an organic farm with other yogis in Finland. Bjonnes co-founded and is currently Marketing Director of the Prama Institute (www.pramainstitute.org), a holistic retreat center outside Asheville, NC. He has written extensively on tantra, yoga, culture and sustainability, and his articles have appeared in books and numerous magazines and newspapers in Europe and the US. He is currently contributing editor of New Renaissance and a columnist for Fredrikstad Blad, a Norwegian newspaper. He lives in an eco-village in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.