

The meaning of 'yoga' as 'unity' by Jane Bennett

Before starting this yoga teacher training course I had only a limited understanding of the meaning of the word 'yoga'. I was aware that 'yoga' could be translated to mean 'unity' and I also knew that this meant the practise of unifying the body, breath and mind when practising asanas. Through my yoga practise I had experienced this unity of body, breath and mind and, having suffered from ME/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome for quite some years, had noted the physical and psychological health benefits of practising this unity. Since reading about the philosophy of yoga, I have come to discover that the meaning of 'yoga' as 'unity' goes much deeper than my original understanding. The theme of 'unity' appears in the ancient yoga books and scriptures again and again and I have come to discover that 'unity' is deeply embedded in the philosophy of yoga.

Yoga is much more than just an exercise class for toning the body and relaxing after a stressful day at work, it's a spiritual philosophy and teaches us a way in which to live our lives, a way to change our thought patterns, as well as a way to live in peace and joyfulness. The word yoga comes from the root 'yui', to yoke or bind together. Also, the Upanishads, a book containing the earliest records of yoga practise, are known in Sanskrit as "Advaita Vedanta", which can be broken down and translated to mean "union or unity". Within the three main yoga philosophy texts, there appear to be three themes of union, which I will explain in this essay.

Unity in life

Yoga isn't a religion, rather a philosophy, a way of living and a way of answering questions such as "Why am I here?", "What's the meaning of life?" and "What happens when I die?". The ancient yoga scriptures explain that there is a unity in life and that we must live life in full awareness of this unity. Eknath Easwaran explains this as follows: *"The ideal of the Upanishads is to live in the world in full awareness of life's unity."*ⁱ Whilst translating the Bhagavad Gita he says: *"... all things are interconnected because at its deepest level creation is indivisible. This oneness bestows a basic balance on the whole of nature such that any disturbance in one place has to send ripples everywhere, as a perfect bubble, touched lightly in one place, trembles all over until balance is restored."*ⁱⁱ My favourite explanation of this concept is Sri Swami Satchidananda's because it uses scientific language that I'm more used to. He says that *"Using the scientists' language, there is nothing but energy everywhere. And according to the Yogic scientists like Patanjali – and even*

many modern scientists – behind the different forms of energy is one unchanging consciousness or spirit, or Self.”iii

So yoga teaches us that we are all essentially the same, being made up of the same energy, we all came from the same source and everything on this planet is connected. Unity in life is an important point to understand and take on board before considering some of the other meanings of ‘yoga’ as ‘unity’.

Unity in diversity

The Upanishads go on to explain that there is also unity in diversity. This seems confusing having established that all things on this planet are the same, or come from the same source. In fact we can only really appreciate unity by noticing diversity: *“He is this boy, he is that girl, he is this man, he is that woman, and he is this old man, too, tottering on his staff. His face is everywhere.”iv* Eknath Easwaran goes on to explain that: *“Unity is the centre – in Upanishadic terms, ‘in the cave of the heart’ – of conscious beings, while diversity flourishes on the surface of life.”v* My interpretation of this is that by understanding that we are all essentially the same, we can appreciate diversity, but when we don’t have this basic understanding, we fear diversity and see it as a threat. The Bhagavad Gita explains that: *“In a word, the mind looks at unity and sees diversity.”vi* It is only through controlling the mind and appreciating unity that the mind can appreciate diversity.

Unity in meditation

Meditation is the way in which we can learn to appreciate unity in life and unity in diversity. We meditate in order to connect with our individual self and therefore to understand that we are all essentially the same. In his introduction to the Bhagavad Gita, Eknath Easwaran says: *“In the climax of meditation, the sages discovered unity: the same indivisible reality without and within.”vii* He then goes on to say: *“In the unitive experience, every trace of separateness disappears; life is a seamless whole.”viii*

Before starting this course I had read a few books on yoga and so I understood that the purpose of practising the yoga asanas that we are taught in a class is to be able to meditate. I think that most people who have taken a few yoga classes aren’t aware of this. The goal of yoga is to still the mind and meditate and once this has been practised and achieved we experience peace and joy: *“The goal of evolution is to return to unity: that is, to still the mind. Then the soul rests in pure, unitary consciousness, which is a state of permanent joy.”ix* Without meditation, i.e. without stilling the mind, the different levels of the mind, e.g. the ego, the intellect or the desiring part of the mind, are controlling us. When this is happening we see nothing but differences in the world. Sri

Swami Satchidananda explains in his translation of the Sutras: *“The entire outside world is based on your thoughts and mental attitude. The entire world is your own projection. Your values may change within a fraction of a second. Today you may not even want to see the one who was your sweet honey yesterday. If we remember that we won’t put so much stress on outward things.”*^x Eknath Easwaran explains it like this: *“The world of the senses is real, but it must be known for what it is: unity appearing as multiplicity.”*^{xi} By stilling the mind through meditation we aren’t being controlled by the different levels of our mind and we can appreciate our true self. In turn this means that we can appreciate the world exactly as it is and realise that everything in the world has come from the same energy and, rather than being different from us, is the same. Tara Fraser explains this in her book, *Yoga For You: “Yoga is the union of the individual self with the universal consciousness.”*^{xii}

Conclusion

In our modern day society, where people are constantly stressing and striving, yoga can become the answer to the question of how to create peace and happiness. Understanding that ‘yoga’ means ‘unity’ helps us to understand that we are all in this together and that we are all the same. This leads to connections and community rather than isolation and fear. Yoga helps us to monitor our minds and prevent unhelpful thoughts and feeling affecting us and thus helps us to create peace, joy and unity.

i Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Upanishads, Introduced and translated by*. Canada: Nilgiri Press. pg. 44

ii Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Bhagavad Gita, Introduced and translated by*. Canada: Nilgiri Press. Pg 32

iii Satchdananda, SS. (2008). *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Translation and commentary by*. Yogaville, USA: Integral Yoga Publications. Pg 8

iv Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Upanishads, Introduced and translated by*. Canada: Nilgiri Press. Pg 327

v Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Upanishads, Introduced and translated by*. Canada: Nilgiri Press. Pg 328

vi Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Bhagavad Gita, Introduced and translated by*. Canada: Nilgiri Press. Pg 29

vii Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Bhagavad Gita, Introduced and translated by*. Canada: Nilgiri Press. Pg 26

viii Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Bhagavad Gita, Introduced and translated by*. Canada: Nilgiri Press. Pg 27

ix Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Bhagavad Gita, Introduced and translated by*. Canada: Nilgiri Press. Pg 47

x Satchdananda, SS. (2008). *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Translation and commentary by*. Yogaville, USA: Integral Yoga Publications. Pg 8

xi Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Bhagavad Gita, Introduced and translated by*. Canada: Nilgiri Press. Pg 29

xii Fraser, T. (2008). *Yoga for You*. London: Watkins Publishing. Pg 14

Living Vibrations: There are an infinite number of living vibrations throughout time and space, that pattern and form the world around us, giving each its own unique template. Galaxies, stars are all patterned and formed by a divine orchestra of sound. It is this music which is so loved by the creator. We are all aware of the sounds that reach the ears as vibrations; compress and decompress the atmosphere around us. Far more subtle are the vibratory patterns that shape and form the cosmos. These sounds as perceived by the mystic at the level of hearing are received as an eternal and unifying humming, designated as the *Pranava* the eternal word and name of God 'OM'.

This living *mantra* and composite of all sounds lives in the heart and soul of every man. It represents the All Powerful the **Omnipotent**, the ever present, the **Omnipresent** and Divine Wisdom the **Omniscient**.

Prior to creation, God (the Absolute Good), had nothing from which to create, only himself, therefore all those things that we attribute to ourselves, exist potentially in God, and if we were essentially different, communication would be impossible.

'OM', the most ancient name of God, when intoned with feeling and awareness of its hidden potential, can restore harmony and help us to become the best that we can be. Our own spiritual name is interwoven with the name of God and we are emanations of the one divine name. To discover our spiritual name we have to step back from the turbulence of the modern day world, become very still and feel for the name and letters that make up the name.

We all resonate and are held in being by an internal vibration and this makes us unique. There are many instruments in an orchestra and notes in a musical scale and if we always stressed the same notes, life would be boring. Hence from the totality of sound that is possible we have our own unique arrangement.

The consonants that make up a word give it structure and character and when standing alone, each has its own character, feeling and personality. When meditating on individual letters and phonetically voicing each one, it will be found that we have an affinity with some and dislike others. The letters we like, we keep and then introduce the vowels to give the name life and meaning. The vowels represent free spirit as there is no closure of the mouth when voicing them; although felt at different levels in the human psyche. The

name is then sacred to you and central to your spiritual life, around which you build your body of light and truth.

The Mandukya Upanishad begins with the words: *'OM. This eternal word is all: what was, what is and what shall be, and what beyond is in eternity. All is OM.'*

The mantra OM acts as a sounding board with the power to reveal and transform; Om traverses every level from the transcendent or Universal to the level where it appears as visible sound and is heard as the mantra OM. What is referred to as a middle sound, is the variety of sounds which are subtle components of the whole. Gross or basic sound is the level of ordinary speech.

All these levels are realistic parts of existence; we have our mystics, artists and those who are down to earth. The yogi working to establish awareness of each level enlarges his boundaries of perception and refines his awareness of all levels. His increased sensitivity can actually be a problem in what is occasionally a brutal world. The transition from being in the world and yet not of it, and able to cope with everything that is thrown at you, takes time and effort.

The mantra OM can be likened to a seed bed of infinite possibilities of a seamless garment interwoven with the sound vibrations of universal language. It is only the refined levels of perception of the yogi that makes possible awareness of the tonal differences that lie hidden within the mantra OM.

The mantra OM traditionally rises from the heart-centred stillness of the anahata chakra, and from which comes the expression 'the sound of one hand clapping', as it is at this point of inception, there is nothing other than the will of God, or the word that orders creation.

This divine sound which precedes and terminates many mantras is often repeated mechanically, without the feeling or devotion that should be accorded this eternal word. When intoning this divine sound, it is to be preceded by a feeling of anticipation and reverence, as it has the potential to rebalance and harmonise a dysfunctional body.

There are many levels at which dysfunction can occur, whether due to erroneous ideas or mental stress, as this affects the way we feel, as no thought is devoid of emotion. Prolonged mental and emotional stress will also affect the biochemistry of the body to the detriment of our health, emotionally and

physically. To re-harmonise and improve the sense of well being, intone the mantra three times at the level of the Will, the Heart and the Head.

The mantra has the power to harmonise at every level and it is in the space between that we become aware of work that needs to be done. The mantra is like a tuning fork that points the way to the level of adjustment needed. For example, if there is a lack of confidence, it will be sensed when voicing the mantra. Then with 'confidence' as the aim, voice the mantra, absorbing 'confidence' with each intonation.

Both sound and silence are of equal importance when intoning the mantra OM, as the silence allows for absorption and assimilation of the revealed significances that surface during practice. The relationship between OM and silence is expressed in two passages taken from the Maitri Upanishad:-

(6.22). There are two ways of contemplation of Brahman: in sound and in silence. By sound we go to silence. The sound of Brahman is OM. With OM we go to the End: the silence of Brahman. The End is immortality, union and peace. Even as a spider reaches the liberty of space by means of its own thread, the man of contemplation by means of OM reaches freedom.

(6.23). The sound of Brahman is OM. At the end of OM there is silence. It is the silence of joy. It is the end of the journey where fear and sorrow are no more: steady, motionless, never-falling, everlasting, immortal. It is called the omnipresent Vishnu. In order to reach the highest, consider in adoration the sound and silence of Brahman. For it has been said:

God is sound and silence. His name is OM. Attain therefore contemplation-contemplation in silence on Him.

It is at the centre and heart of our being, that the silent OM (at the level of human hearing), resounds throughout time and space. It is never not with us and in moments of stress and hyper-activity we can find the wisdom that lies tranquil at the centre of the stormy winds of life. Gordon Smith, Founder Member.

***“Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”***

Victor Frankl