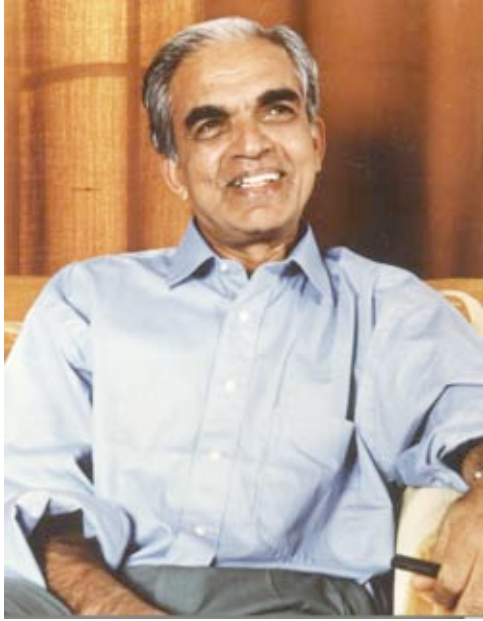


Sound - A Means Beyond Asana and Pranayama



Editor's Note:

The following lecture was given by Desikachar at the Viniyoga America Seminar at Colgate University in August, 1987.

We have briefly covered *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* in these lectures on the different components of yoga practice. I would like us to examine the question: Is there anything more beyond *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*?

This morning I was reciting some Sanskrit verses in which the great masters say that in this time in the evolution of the world, which is known as *kaliyuga*, the strict disciplines that should go with yoga are not possible. The vigorous practice of *āsana* with *bandha* and *mudrā*, sitting in a very good seated posture, long breath retention after inhalation and after exhalation—not all these are possible at this time. So, they said, we have to find other means.

In this context, what is meant by yoga? For the ancient people, yoga was not just physical or respirative gymnastics. Yoga is to do something with the whole person so that the mind changes from the usual unfocused mind to one that can be focused on anything significant. The object of

focus could be God, or trying to master oneself, or some other important idea.

Patañjali defines yoga as the ability to direct the mind toward something, even if it is complex, and to retain that direction for a length of time, until something about that object is clearly understood. So yoga is the conscious attempt to focus the mind in a desired direction. This requires certain practices and disciplines because we have to undo many things that have happened to us in the past.

The ancients-thought that some simpler system to change the mind must be found—something which will not require all the rigors of disciplining the body, the breath, the food habits, etc. That's why Manu, our forefather, said that, in the *kaliyuga*, the practical way to change a disturbed mind is *saṃkīrtana*. Manu says, we must go on reciting the name of God, again and again. He says don't worry about disciplines; that will come later. Just start by reciting the name of God.

I want you to examine this question. In yoga, is there allowance for the proposal that even something done mechanically can give good results? Let us consider that question with the use of Patañjali's *yoga sūtra*. In the first chapter, different methods are proposed. The first proposal by Patañjali is not *āsana*, not *prāṇāyāma*, but what he calls *īśvara praṇidhāna*.

It says, this is yoga: The mind has so many different kinds of activities, some good and some bad. It is possible to change this mind through practice. He does not define practice. He simply says *abhyāsa* (practice).

It's like I go to a doctor, and the doctor gives me a sheet of paper and says, "Buy this medicine." I open the sheet of paper and there is nothing, just a name. So Patañjali simply says, "practice," but what practice, he doesn't say. And then he says, of course, some people are born lucky. They don't have to work hard; it is already in them. And he says, a lot of enthusiasm is required. If you have the enthusiasm, the driving force, you will succeed. But what to do?

When you go to a doctor, they talk and examine and test the knee, test the neck, etc. But what really matters is that sheet of paper that says what medication to take, when to take it, and so on. So we wait for that. We want to see it.

Our sheet of paper begins with what Patañjali calls *japa*. *Japa* is the recitation of some symbolic higher force, again and again. For the Hindus it is *Om*, for the Muslims it is *Allah*. Whatever it is, you must not be apathetic about it; you must want to do it.

So *japa* is the first advice by Patañjali for rectifying an unfocused mind. Only those who have experienced this can appreciate the effect. But he is not insisting on it. Patañjali has a good strategy of not insisting on anything. Because with insistence comes a slight resistance. Or you say, "This is what the book says ...I have to do it." Instead he says, if you want, you can try this.

So the first advice he gives is the recitation of *Om* for the Hindus, or something like that for others, recited slowly, in a proper way, a number of times. Somehow things will be changed. Can we believe this?

I will give you an example. Monday poor Martin was in a mess. He comes here at 8:45, and he wants to make so many announcements. He must have been tired also with so much to do. I was sitting there watching, and I thought, how am I going to change this disorganised mind to one that is organised? I said to myself, it is very simple. I will start with some chanting. You remember, we did some chanting, and then we were ready for the class.

How does this happen? I've always been mystified by this. When my father blesses a marriage, he always does some chanting. The moment he begins to chant, the whole atmosphere of the room changes.

I've never understood how it happens, but it happens. It happened Monday. There were only fourteen *mantra* which simply say, 'let us hear the good things in the ear.' Probably only one or two of you understood what the *mantra* meant. But with those letters, with certain notes, there was a change in the room. This happens because of the

power of sound. Whether *it is Om* or something else that talks about a higher force, it has a power.

In fact, this is the basis for our Sanskrit grammar. Sanskrit grammar is called *śabdānuśāsana*. That is, you started the sound; you will realise what the sound represents. You don't worry about what it means, you just go on reciting the sound. *śabda* means sound—*Om* or *Nārāyaṇa*, or Jesus Christ—whatever it is. You just go on repeating it, and eventually you will reach what this sound represents. Very often people have been drawn through the sound to the reality. So with this as the basis, our ancient people proposed a very simple technique. That is, if you have some entity that you like, maybe your teacher or your God, or whoever it is, just try to make a way of saying it. So at least your mind will be quieter, and maybe one day you will come in contact with the object.

There is always a link between *śabda*, the sound, and the fact. You may know it or you may not know it. Often the principles that these sounds represent, like God, are unknown to us. Where can we show God? But we can talk about it. Certain sounds represent God. For the Hindu, no other sound is more acceptable for God than *Om*.

So reciting such sounds must take us to a higher plane. That is what chanting must do. Somehow we are elevated. And when I say this, I am not promoting any religion. It is simply a fact that sound has an effect on the mind.

I will tell you a story. Some fifteen years ago in our state of Tamil Nadu, we had the same political party that was running all of India. Then there appeared some very good political speakers from another party. Their only qualification was that they knew Tamil, and they had a special way of speaking. Somehow, they changed their voice so that it had a quality you liked to listen to. Some say it was liquor, but maybe it was also practice. In three years, the political party in power was overthrown and replaced by a party with no qualifications except that when they spoke, you wanted to listen. Their force was not money, not political strength, but training of voice.

So whether it is our *japa*, or *Om*, or the chanting experience we had on Monday, or this example of the political party that swept the polls so fast in a few years, it is the power of sound and the significance of sound. Patanjali must have thought of that when he proposed, "Okay, don't worry about *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*; just recite a good sound, loudly, in a nice way, and you'll see what happens to the mind." He says that this will take you back to yourself.

One of the foremost requirements in yoga is to understand oneself. We must, finally, look at ourselves and chanting helps us do that. At the least, we will begin to see that, "yesterday my voice was so good; today it is not so good. Yesterday I could recite this *Om* five times in one exhalation. Today I need to breathe in between. Today there is some shortness of breath. Maybe I'm not well; maybe there is a disturbance."

So chanting will take you back to yourself, and you will begin *to* see yourself in a way you haven't seen before. That is why Patañjali says, *tataḥ pratyakcetanādhigamah*. Through this chanting, you appear in front of yourself. Therefore you begin to see. Of course in the beginning we see very little. As we develop this technique, we see more and more.

So this is the first of the non-*āsana*, *prāṇāyāma* techniques that Patañjali has offered us—the use of sound as a means to understand and rectify the mind, to understand ourselves. That is why chanting is very popular in India, and I must say, it is becoming popular elsewhere also.

I can also anticipate that it will become more difficult to practice the discipline of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*. Since the body is not the same today as it was when the ancient people designed the *āsana*, it is better to have some choices. Perhaps Patañjali knew that.

Question:

You said sound will bring you back to yourself. Would this carry through so that you enter into that higher self?

Yes, that is exactly the idea. It is the beginning of a process that can go very far. The first thing I am conscious of is my body and how it responds in a

waking state. But we can go further than that. It is a question of how disciplined we are. The more we go into it, the more we will know, until finally we go back *to* that consciousness which is very deep inside. The Sanskrit word for this is *sat-cit-ānanda*. The approximate translation of the word, *cit* is consciousness. In India, if we were to describe the basic characteristics of God, the first word we would use is *cit*. He is not like a stone but is ever conscious. *sat* means that he exists. It emphasises that he is a permanent entity. And then *ānanda*, that is, there is no sorrow.

We believe that what exists deep inside us is not simply a human consciousness but Divine Consciousness. It is one of the important teachings that God is as much inside as elsewhere. Take this word, *Om*. The O is very long. *Om* does not represent me, my mind. It represents something beyond. It represents God. So when I produce that sound, *Om*, with feeling, it has to take me back to what it represents. But this takes time. We have to go through that in layers.

According to our teaching, understanding of higher things happens step by step. If you read the *upaniṣat*, for example, they say the first understanding is that we have a body and this body requires food. A little later, maybe we will know something about the mind. It is only afterwards, when we have understood something about the mind, that we can go deeper than that. So it a progressive step. But it can go as far as the original *cit*, that is, the God him or herself.

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