

The Necessity of Self-Discipline

By Satyanarayana Dasa

The purpose of Yoga is to quell the mind of all disturbing thoughts, and this is not possible without self-discipline. Thus, without self-discipline, success in yoga is phantasmagoria.

Yoga and Self-Discipline

Yoga has often been wrongly construed as a collection of Asanas or postures, but it is really a system of self-discipline. *Asanas* and *pranayamas* (breathing exercises) constitute only a small part of the vastness of Yoga. The various types of Yoga systems, all of which originated in India thousands of years ago, include Karma Yoga (*yoga* through action), Raja or Ashtanga Yoga (*yoga* through physical and mental austerity), Jnana Yoga (*yoga* through knowledge), and Bhakti Yoga (*yoga* through devotion).

Out of these, Raja or Ashtanga Yoga is the most commonly known. It has eight Angas (limbs) that are a progressive series of steps or disciplines to purify the body and mind, ultimately leading the person to enlightenment. The first two limbs, *yama* (restraints) and *niyama* (observances), are common to all disciplines of Yoga. The other six limbs are *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breath control), *pratyahara* (control of senses), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (trance).

Yamas and Niyamas

The *yamas* (restraints) are five moral injunctions, aimed at destroying the lowly nature. They should all be practiced in word, thought and deed.

- *Ahimsa* (non-violence)
- *Satyam* (truthfulness)
- *Asteya* (non-stealing)
- *Brahmacharya* (control of all senses)
- *Aparigraha* (non-covetousness)

The *niyamas* (observances) are five moral injunctions that complete the ethical precepts started with the *yamas*.

- *Saucha* (purity, meaning internal and external cleanliness)
- *Santosha* (contentment)
- *Tapas* (austerity)
- *Swadhyaya* (study about the self, that is, the soul, through spiritual texts)
- *Ishwara Pranidhana* (surrender to God's will)

Yoga in a Conducive Environment

Discipline is of two types—internal and external. Internal discipline is at the individual level; it is the set of regimens that is followed by individuals and is not dependent on their dealings or situations in society. External discipline is at the social level. It does not allow individuals to be free to do whatever they like, but requires them to follow social norms, state laws and the work ethics. In former times, various types of *yogis* practiced their disciplines with the support of the social, political and economic environments. The whole of Indian society, including its educational system, was geared toward attaining the goals of Yoga.

According to the Bhagavad Gita, the perfection of one's actions culminates in Yoga—*yogah karmsu kaushalam*. Lord Krishna goes to the extent of saying that a person not engaged in Yoga is not intelligent (*nasti buddhirayuktasya*). The speaker of Srimad Bhagavada Purana, one of the most popular scriptures of India, very explicitly declares that the purpose of human life is to inquire into the ultimate reality and not just to work full time for money. He also adds that money is not meant for squandering on sense gratification. Rather, it should be used for self-realization. One should not harbor desires and amass objects only for sense pleasure. No wonder that the various *yogic* disciplines attained their ultimate heights on Indian soil and produced masters in their fields.

Yoga in an Unfavorable Milieu

The present social, political and economic systems are not designed to support *yogic* systems. Rather, they are anathema to them, especially in the West. In India the old culture is not yet altogether dead, although, concerted efforts have been made during the past few centuries to strangle it! In the West, one feels a sharp contrast between the individual Yogic discipline and society at large. This creates a dichotomy in the life of the *yogic* practitioner, who is sandwiched between the two contradictory systems.

At home, the atmosphere is geared toward spiritual practice and the *yogic* practitioner is at peace. But one cannot remain confined within the boundaries of the home. Upon stepping out of the home, she or he is faced with a world based on artificiality and consumerism. The senses are bombarded with various stimuli to distract the mind from the path of Yoga.

Moreover, she or he must deal with co-workers, superiors and inferiors, who may have no interest in spirituality whatsoever. The *yogic* practitioner is eventually forced to wear a mask to socialize with them.

This is a frustrating experience for adults, and even more so for children. *Yogic* practitioners naturally love to inculcate their convictions into their offspring. The children, however, may not have the same faith and understanding as their parents. At school they have classmates, friends and teachers who may have no knowledge or interest in the practice and principles of Yoga. Their habits and behavior may be opposed to the *yogic* discipline. These children find it quite frustrating to switch roles from spiritualist at home to a materialistic person. What they hear from their parents gets contradicted in school or in association with friends. They become confused and have a hard time deciding what proper behavior is.

Their children's behavior, on the other hand, may be frustrating to the parents, too, as it does not match their expectations.

Solutions to Peer Pressure

Practitioners should remain consistent with their *yoga* practices and not lose hope and feel frustrated. Impediments from the environment are only external. The real obstacles reside in the mind. If one can have a stable mind, all other problems can be tackled. Even in India, the birthplace of Yoga, spirituality is not a bed of roses.

Every place or situation has its advantages and disadvantages. Obstacles either mar one's progress or can be stepping stones to the summit of success. Instead of feeling morose in an unfavorable condition, accept it as challenge and become stronger and wiser. Just as one develops muscles by walking uphill or swimming against the current, one can become internally strong by facing external disharmony.

In the great epic Mahabharata, Srimati Kunti, Arjuna's mother prays to Lord Krishna and asks Him to send obstacles and calamities her way. (Arjuna is one of the central characters of Bhagavad Gita to whom Lord Krishna sermonizes.) You might wonder why anyone would want more troubles, but she has spiritual wisdom. When everything is going favorably, our tendency is to be callous and lethargic mentally—we become complacent with our achievements. Srimati Kunti wants to remain alert and aware.

Tips for Maintaining Self-Discipline

Here are a few things that you can do to maintain your self-discipline in Yoga and spirituality.

1. Associate with like-minded people, at least once in a week. Good association is very important, especially, for neophytes.
2. Listen to discourses about the *yoga* process you are following. Attending discourses or watching them on TV should be a continual process to keep your mental batteries recharged.
3. Follow your *sadhana* regularly at a fixed time and place. Try to maintain awareness about yourself as a spiritual being at all times.
4. Do not force anything on children or on anyone else. As far as possible, explain logically to them the pros and cons of *yogic* principles. They will naturally follow if they are convinced about the outcome, but this requires patience and time. Forcing is easy, but it does not work in the long run. Once children grown up and become independent, they will rebel. However, if they are convinced but unable to follow because of the influence of their peers, there is a possibility that they will take to the process when they are mature and more capable of making independent decisions.

Today, millions of people have taken to the path of Yoga and spirituality, but many of them find it difficult to remain firm on it and eventually deviate from the most important aspect of human development. If you are one of them, re-dedicate yourself to *yogic* principles and, applying self-discipline, you will be able to lead a physically fit, mentally equipped and spiritually blissful life.