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The Social Dimension of Yoga

By Raghu Ananthanarayanan*

Often Yoga is simply seen as exercises for physical and mental health. But Patanjali's work known as the Yoga Sutra is a holistic spiritual approach that can be enriching to secular and religious people alike. This interview with Raghu Ananthanarayanan focuses on both the secular and spiritual dimensions of yoga. Siddhartha (editor).Siddhartha: It is not surprising that yoga is popular among religious people, but I am surprised at the number of secular practitioners. How do you explain this?

Raghu: The key ideas and concepts of yoga are found in all spiritual teachings. All of them agree on the fundamental tenets of yoga. Yoga mentions Ishwara or God in only four or five sutras (aphoristic statements). But if you take out these references it makes no difference whatsoever to the body of the texts. So you can actually look at yoga without ever having to refer to a god or some other creator.

Yoga talks about intelligence. It talks about transcended realities that one can experience. It does not talk about a god in any form. So, it is very clear that yoga is both a secular and spiritual path that begins with cleansing one's mind and becoming capable of lucid perception.

One of the first practices recommended in yoga is also found in Buddhism: maitri, which is friendliness, compassion and relatedness with people. The idea of ahimsa (non-violence) as a fundamental practice comes up in the Yoga Sutra several times. The other thing that comes up is the importance given to the word satya (truth).

Yoga Sutra don't exclusively talk about justice and fairness in a social context. But it talks about how a person has to engage with society in a way that is fair and life giving. It talks about non-violence, truth, how to relate with women, sexual conduct, about how to look at your work and what work really is, what you own and what you do not own. It clearly defines all this.Siddhartha: What is the social context of yoga?

Raghu: To answer this I need to refer to the Vedic teachings and the Hindu way of life. I don't think there is something called a Hindu religion. If you look at all the practices which form the body of what a Hindu is supposed to do, all of them are practices that help you to find a way of interfacing with the world in a meaningful and compassionate way and contribute to the growth of society.

My teacher Krishnamacharya was told by his Master Ram Mohana Brahmachari, (who lived in the area around Manasarovar) that if he really wanted to understand yoga he would have to go and live in the world. He had to get married and have children.

So yoga was seen as something that prepares the person to engage with the whole of reality with a high degree of mastery. It is not about going away or renunciation or any such thing. In fact there is not even one yoga sutra that says give up life and go away and meditate on your own.

Siddhartha: The notion of renunciation has always been there in all religious traditions. I suppose a good image would be Shiva sitting on the mountains and meditating.

Raghu: Not really. If you look at the Hindu tradition renunciation is at the last stage of your growth. Also there are clear statements that say that the idea of sanyas or renunciation is giving up a sense of 'I' and 'mine'. It is not necessarily about renouncing the world in the way that has been popularly thought of. Shiva got married. Shankara, the great scholar of advaita and a 'renouncer', was confronted by a housewife who objected to his teachings since he was not a householder. So, the importance of the householder is very central to much of Hindu thought.

Siddhartha: If you look at the different paths (margas) of liberation such as the path of knowledge (jnana) or the path of devotion (bhakti) or the path of action (karma), where would you situate yoga?

Raghu: In my understanding these are all approaches that an individual follows depending on whether he is oriented towards knowledge or feeling or action. I don't think they can be seen as distinct paths or mutually exclusive. If you look at the yoga sutra you find practices which are close to jnana marga (the path of knowledge). There are other practices which are definitely attuned to bhakti (devotion) and there are clearly practices which are oriented towards the path of action. In the Bhagavad Gita Arjuna goes through various types of yogic learning. Each Chapter is called a certain type of Yoga. At the end of the Gita, Arjuna is asked to take a sanyasi's (detached person's) attitude and go into battle.. He was not asked to take a sanyasi's attitude and walk out of the battle field. So the different margas or paths are all different propensities and not fundamentally different paths to liberation.

Your engagement with the world and your action in the world is an inevitable and you cannot get away from it.

Siddhartha: Is not yoga also about right perception?

Raghu: Yes it is fundamentally about right and insightful perception. Yoga talks about two modes of perception. One mode of perception is your ability to perceive what is. The second mode of perception is interpretation through ones constructed idea of reality. This construct is born out of partial understanding, delusion, fear and desire. Such a construct distorts the perception of what is. In many ways the entire practice of yoga is simply to root out all constructed perceptions and constructed interpretations and be able to perceive reality as it is.

The Yoga Sutra also defines internal practices that will help you to engage in the world. If I have to deal with the world with non-violence then I must learn to deal with anger and hatred and other self-distorting processes within me. According to the Arthashastra, a king, for example, has to be a yogi, which implies that unless the king has an understanding of yoga his ability to defend justice and to govern righteously will be deficient.

Siddhartha: Of course the way different people experience samadhi (blissful mindfulness) would also be coloured by their social perspectives. Somebody who does not have much concern for the world can perhaps experience Samadhi in a limited way and somebody who is concerned with the world can also experience it.

Raghu: Not possible. Why I am saying that this is not possible is that when you experience deeper and deeper states of being in yoga you actually get engaged at deeper and deeper levels of universal sorrow. The idea that you escape from dukkha and suffering through a practice of yoga is completely wrong. It is an escapist definition of yoga. When you meditate and go deeper into yourself you actually come in touch with a deeper sense of being... what you call the universal archetypes and the universal subconscious. The process of discovering a state of Samadhi is a process of letting go of the more superficial identifications with the world. The sensual world with its distinctions is transcended and a more subtle state of mind becomes ones ground of existence. In this process you will actually come in touch with deeper and deeper levels of your own sub conscious. A false sense of distinction between me and the world is lost, therefore the escape from pain, or sorrow for example through creating a personal escape is not possible. One touches a state of samvedana or spontaneous experiencing of another's feelings as my own. This process of encountering more fundamental and subtle levels of existence is the process of touching the mind that can be in Samadhi. Samadhi is not an escape from the world...it is profound and subtle encounter with the world.

Siddhartha: You have been mentioning sorrow. I guess it is not only sorrow it is also joy and fulfilment.

Raghu: The moment you touch these levels you also experience joy. If you look at any of the real life spiritual people they all speak about ecstasy or ananda.

Siddhartha: There have been so many different interpretations of Patanjali's yoga sutras. Is there a book or tradition which may be more helpful or appropriate?

Raghu: My teacher Desikachar's book "The Heart of Yoga" is a good first book. He has also written a simple translation of the Yoga Sutra. However, it is important to note that Yoga does not encourage interpretations. You have to base everything on your own practices. The initial sutra in the Yoga Sutra itself says you should only trust your own practice. So it is the practice of yoga that is important and not

any interpretations. And the practices are very clearly put down. There are practices on how you interface with the world. Non-violence, compassion... all these are very important to practice. There are clear practices on interfacing with yourself. How you keep yourself clean, of keeping your body healthy. There are practices like pranayama (breathing) which will help you to enter into the realm of the unconscious. There are practices of sitting and watching the unconscious as it unfolds. There are practices of being able to engage with the world as it is. None of this can be based on other people's interpretations.

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