

Exploring Yoga with Raghu Ananthanarayanan

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This article is based on an event by New Acropolis Culture Circle with Raghu Ananthanarayanan, who spoke on the *Yoga Sutras* by Patanjali. Raghu is a behavioural scientist, yoga teacher and author. He has dedicated his life to the study and application of yoga and Indic traditions to guide the inner transformation of individuals and shape leadership and culture building of organizations.

A prayer to Patanjali
Om. yogena cittasya padena vAchAm,
malam sharIrasya ca vaidya kena.
yopAkarottham pravaram munInAm
patanjaliM prNnjaliRAnatosmi

AbAhu puruShAkAram
shankha cakra asidhAriNam
sahasra shirasam shvetam
praNamAmi patanjaliM

This prayer to Patanjali sets out the context of our discussion. It says that Patanjali gave us 3 things: Ayurveda - enabling us to see how the body can be made wholesome, Grammar & Language - how vac or speech can be made into something meaningful and beautiful, and of course, Yoga.

Human up to the shoulders;
with a conch, a wheel, a sword
and the abhayamudra;
shining bright
with a thousand serpent heads.
To this form of Patanjali
we offer our respects.



Image by Raghu Ananthanarayanan

MISCONCEPTIONS ON YOGA

There are usually two images used to depict yoga. One is an image of a person standing on one leg with his arms overhead in what is called *Bhagirathi asana*. The other is an image of a person sitting in *Padmasana*. However, when you read the *Patanjali Yoga Sutras*, these two images are hardly there.



Yoga is understood as just Asanas or something highly esoteric. Yoga somewhere in the middle. This middle ground is what we called Antaranga Yoga.

There is a very important sutra in the second chapter *Patanjali Yoga Sutras*, which starts with '*tapahsvādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānānikriyayogaḥ*'. *Tapas* here is again misunderstood. *Tapas* which is often translated as austerity, is simply a way of ripening and maturing. *SvAdyAya* means to understand oneself more deeply. When you do these two things, you start understanding the real foundation of all of existence. It is *Ishvara* (Primordial Consciousness). The middle ground here is the *svAdyAya*. It means you go closer and closer to the true nature of yourself. *SvAdyAya* is a process of peeling of layer after layer of what we think is our self. To discover something deeper until you come to a point when you drop off from all ability to associate or describe and you get to a mind that is capable of *dhArANA* & *dhyAna*. This is a very critical process of transformation of the mind and is usually not spoken of.

UNDERSTANDING YOGA

Antaranga Yoga; Yoga as a means of moving inwards

Everybody experiences *duHkha* (sorrow). One of the first questions that yoga asks is how do you end *duHkha*? And then makes a simple observation, that unless you first take complete responsibility of who you are and what you are, you cannot take a step toward ending sorrow. You cannot take any external authority as a saviour, you cannot take mere learning and knowledge as a way of ending sorrow. Obviously, more and more material acquisition is not to be. This whole process of enquiry involves freeing oneself of these notions because these are all false ways of approaching the issue of how to end sorrow. And it's only when you shift from there and move into taking full responsibility does your *tapas* or your *svAdyAya* fructify. Whenever you have deep doubts in yourself and you are experiencing sorrow, the natural tendency is to go outward, either to look for a cause outward or to look for a solution outward. Rather we need to shift inwards.



Learning about self through Yoga, *tapas* and *svAdyAya*

'Yoga' and 'meditation' are used as separate terms but in reality, if there is no meditative process, there is no yoga. My teacher Krishnamacharya would say that when you are doing *Asana* practice, if you're not doing *dhyAna* (attentiveness) on the body, it is not yoga, it is just a physical exercise. *DhyAna* happens when I locate my sense of self in more and more subtle levels within. When I am anchored in subtle levels of being, I can observe the more gross, the more manifest levels clearly. The subtle can observe the gross, the gross cannot observe the subtle. The entire practice of *svAdyAya* is learning how to locate oneself at more and more subtle levels of the self and the mind from which one can observe things.

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Having learnt this, the *Asana* practice becomes a very interesting process. Initially, I was surprised to see the power of this whole process. When I was a young teacher and teaching *Asana* practice to a person, I put her into a very simple pose along with the breathing and she just started weeping. I was very concerned and thought maybe I've made a mistake. When she came out of that posture, she spoke to me about her divorce 10 years earlier. The entire memory of that pain, of the separation, was being held in the body. This could get released once she really got in touch with, and started to allow a communication between the subtler aspects of the mind and the body. The process of observing where one has internalized all kinds of hurts and wounds and so on is a very critical part of *svAdyAya*.

Many practices that I've taught in yoga are actually to help you to get into a subtle inner space from which you can observe if your body is full of toxins. The moment you start observing something difficult, there will always be an emotional charge along with it. If you're holding on to shame and guilt you cannot observe yourself.

In fact, one of the preconditions in Yoga is for you to look at yourself compassionately and to not be caught up with shame and guilt. We usually look at ourselves based on some book or some set of 'shoulds and musts', almost trying to make sure that the public prosecutor within us doesn't send us to jail. So placing ourselves as an audience and having this internal drama is not observation.

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To observe oneself, one has to look at oneself with a lot of curiosity and compassion (referred to as '*maitri bhAva*').

There is also another very interesting idea in the *Yoga Sutras* of how to do this observation. The first step is to do some practice that allows you to get in touch with those parts of yourself which you've suppressed, which you normally don't pay attention to. And the second is what happens when you start observing. One of the tendencies of the mind is that the moment something comes up, the mind jumps in asking, 'Now what do I do about it?' 'How do I stop this pain?' and other related questions. Yoga tells you that this is a wrong approach, because the moment you ask this question, you go back to the same mind that created the problem. These two things are very critical steps of what is called *tapas*. *Tapas* is the process where first you get in touch with those parts of you which need healing and the second is you don't get caught with the immediate pull of the mind to go back into the familiar and again get locked up in the same process that created the problem in the first place. Doing this requires a certain intensity and energy, it causes heat. Using this energy to ripen and mature is *tapas*.

Understanding meditation

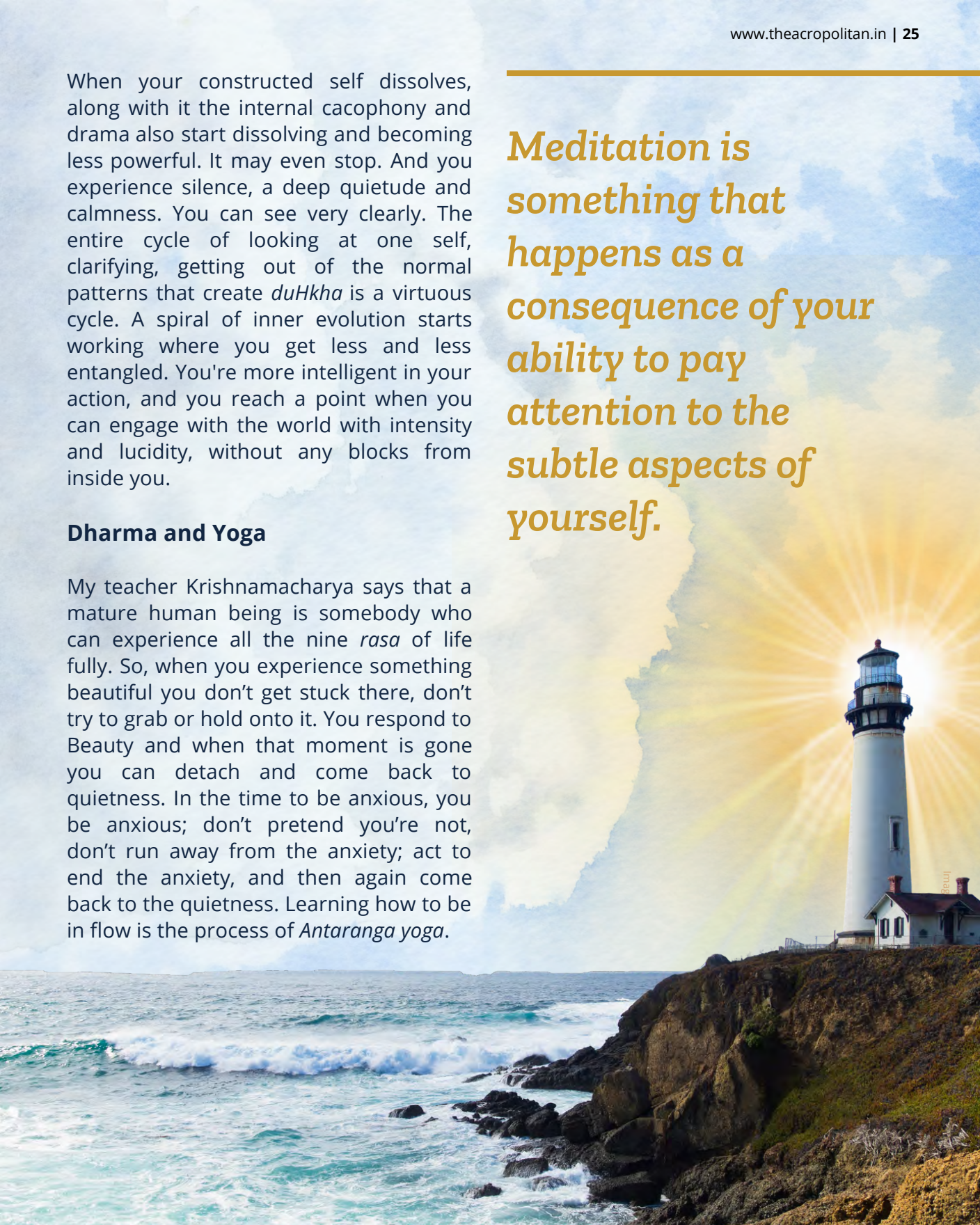
If you stay with the observation, the entire process by which the mind gets caught up with certain ideas, the way it retains them, and the entire drama, the entire inner dance becomes visible to you. Watching this from a state of quietness is the practice *dhyAna*. You can see the whole inner structure that you have created, a sense of identity and an acquisitive-defensive attitude. *DhyAna* dissolves this structure and the underlying psyche which is conditioned by your ways of interpreting the world, and other people; your ways of constructing your sense of self, starts dissolving. And as this dissolves, a deeper Intelligence inside starts appearing. The initial ways in which this Intelligence appears is either through interesting dreams or flashes of insight. Once you learn this process, you just stay with it and the rest happens automatically. Meditation is something that happens as a consequence of your ability to pay attention to the subtle aspects of yourself. It is not something that you can be taught, nor something that you do. In fact, **meditation happens when there is no you!**

When your constructed self dissolves, along with it the internal cacophony and drama also start dissolving and becoming less powerful. It may even stop. And you experience silence, a deep quietude and calmness. You can see very clearly. The entire cycle of looking at one self, clarifying, getting out of the normal patterns that create *duHkha* is a virtuous cycle. A spiral of inner evolution starts working where you get less and less entangled. You're more intelligent in your action, and you reach a point when you can engage with the world with intensity and lucidity, without any blocks from inside you.

Dharma and Yoga

My teacher Krishnamacharya says that a mature human being is somebody who can experience all the nine *rasa* of life fully. So, when you experience something beautiful you don't get stuck there, don't try to grab or hold onto it. You respond to Beauty and when that moment is gone you can detach and come back to quietness. In the time to be anxious, you be anxious; don't pretend you're not, don't run away from the anxiety; act to end the anxiety, and then again come back to the quietness. Learning how to be in flow is the process of *Antaranga yoga*.

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Once the mind is capable of this deep quietness, this mind can direct itself to any enquiry with extreme lucidity, sharpness and focus. The third chapter of *Patanjali Yoga Sutras*, have about 30-40 ideas of where you can direct this mind-starting from understanding your own patterns, your own *samskAra* and *vAsanA*. It goes all the way to looking at the stars, understanding astronomy, understanding a strength, understanding the body, understanding how matter gets created, an entire cross-section of things. What is very interesting is that a mind that is capable of this quality of enquiry, has to go through a process when it becomes ethical. So the entire process of understanding dharma is inherent in the process of *Antaranga yoga*.

There's a very beautiful assumption that yoga makes: A mind that is quiet, not filled with appetites and yearnings of various kinds will naturally act with *ahimsa*, will naturally act from *satya* and so on... and hence, its interface with the world will naturally be filled with compassion and truth. It will not be acquisitive and extractive. It is not a mind seeking gratification and self-aggrandisement. The actions of this person enlivens one's contexts and spreads joy. 