YOGA

by Tapovan Maharaj

He alone is the real yogi who has transcended the three mental states,
lethargy, passion and goodness and reached that supreme state of Self-abidance.
Nobody else deserves that name. Others in their ignorance, only confuse the ends and means.
It is therefore the supreme duty of a student of yoga to understand the real nature of yoga
and pursue it enthusiastically and whole-heartedly.

– Tapovan Maharaj

Yoga is defined as "*yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ"*. That is, it consists in attaining complete control over the vacillations of the restless mind. The process involves eight steps: Yamas, Niyama, Āsana, Prāṇāyāma, Dhāraṇā, Dhyāna, Samādhi. First, one should master Yamas, Niyama and Āsana. Then proceed with Prāṇāyāma. Prāṇāyāma means the conquest of prāṇa by practicing *Recakam*, *Pūrakam* and *Kumbhakam*. The *Sutra* describes the nature of *Prāṇāyāma* which one may attempt after attaining mastery over the *āsanas*. Drawing the air deeply (inhaling) is called *Pūraka*; letting it out gradually (exhaling) is known as *Recaka*. The complete stoppage of breathing (neither inhaling nor exhaling) is designated as *Kumbhakam* and that is the most important part of *Prāṇāyāma*. Not only *Haṭha Yogis* but the *Rāja Yogis* also accept Prāṇāyāma as an element of *yoga*.

The 'ha' sound stands for the *Prāṇa* known as *sun*, 'tha' signifies *Apāna* which is called *moon*. The union of the two is called *yoga*. From this description of Haṭha yoga given by its principal exponent, Gorakshnatha, it is clear that the particular type of yoga stops with the attainment of health. However long a tree might live, it is no more than a tree. Rāja Yoga, therefore, accepts prāṇāyāma merely as a means to an end, namely, control of the mind.

Prāṇāyāma should be practiced slowly and with great care. *Prāṇa* is like the lion: to tame him into a cat is a difficult task, indeed. If one succeeds in doing so, he of course reaps great benefits; if he fails, he may have to face dangerous consequences. The man who conquers the individual *prāṇa* by regular and patient practice, simultaneously conquers the collective *prāṇa*. All one's physical and mental powers proceed from one's individual *prāṇa*, similarly all the acts of the Universe originate with the collective *prāṇa.* Thus by conquering the individual *prāṇa* the yogis conquer the collective as well. In fact, collective prāṇa and individual prāṇa are not two different entities but one and the same. So the devotees of the *yoga* philosophy claim enthusiastically that a *yogi* who has effected the complete conquest of the individual *prāṇa* will have the sun and moon at his beck and call, because he has obtained control over the collective *prāṇa*. However, we need not examine the validity of these claims here as they relate simply to the realm of possibilities.

After the conquest of prāṇa one should practice *Pratyāhāra*. *Pratyāhāra* is the technical term for withdrawing the mind from the pursuit of the senses. Ordinarily, the mind is flowing out through the clefts in the surrounding rocks. A sound is produced somewhere near us, we hear it, whether we like it or not. Somebody comes, we notice the arrival whether we like to do so or not. Thus, irrespective of our likes and dislikes, we are being continually attracted by sights and sounds. And our mind, enslaved by the senses, is engaged in a relentless pursuit of them. If we do not check this lamentable vagrant tendency, our mind cannot turn inward

and fix itself upon anything. It is a well-known fact that we become aware of external things only when the sense organs, the senses and the mind come into contact with them. If one's mind and one's senses do not come into touch with each other, no knowledge results. Until we are able to control the sense organs, the senses and the mind which are all separate but which become one empirically and keep them in their proper places we shall have to remain as slaves to our senses and it will be impossible for us to concentrate our mind upon any one object. And therefore it is plain, one cannot become a *yogi* until one is able to regulate the connection and the disconnection of the mind and the senses. As it is the *prāṇa* that carries on the processes of connection and disconnection irrespective of one's will, one shall be able to withdraw the mind from the senses, on one's developing the control of *prāṇa* by the practice of *prāṇāyāma*.

Once a man has developed his power of *Pratyāhāra*, he must proceed gradually to *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna*, *samādhi*, etc. These are the 'Subject of imagination' of the mind. To begin with, one must try to concentrate upon physical objects. From the contemplation of the physical, one can pass on to the spiritual. There is a great variety among the objects of contemplation according to the varying tastes of the practitioners. The lotuses of the *mūlādhāra* and the shining 'lights' are some of the favorite concrete aids to concentration. The *Bhaktas* generally prefer the divine form of Viṣṇu, Śiva, etc. In fact, every object helping to check the constant wave-like movements of the mind, and enabling the mind to flow out like a single stream, is good enough. This pinning down of the mind according to one's tastes, to spiritual or physical objects such as an imaginary bright light in the heart or between the eyebrows or on top of the head or on Viṣṇu, Śiva or Devi, is called *dhāraṇā*. If this control of mental activity is continued for a long time it is called *dhyāna*. The state in which the distinction between meditation and meditator disappears, and the object of meditation alone shines, is called *samādhi*. Samādhi lasts longer than dhyāna. When a man has succeeded in attaining *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna* and *samādhi* with the help of corporeal means [with form], his next effort must be to reach these states through incorporeal means [formless]. According to the Yoga dialectics, the 5-subtle-elements, the 'I'-sense, Supreme-Self, the Absolute are such incorporeal objects; according to the Vedāntic school of thought they are Spiritual power, Spiritual destiny, and the mind. *"Only when the mind has passed through these various stages and got rid of the impurities of passion and lethargy, it can comprehend the Self which is the finest of the fine, with no form or attribute."* Through the *dhāraṇā* and *dhyāna* the mind gains strength and rises into the prolonged state of Samādhi. When mind has become one with the Self, as the camphor becomes one with the fire, or the salt becomes one with the water, all distinctions between the meditator, the meditation and the meditated disappear and the Self begins to shine by Itself. This last and highest state of mind is called by the Yogis as *Asamprajñāta*; it is called *Nirvikalpa* by the Vedāntins. This state of samādhi raises a *sādhaka* (trainee) to a *siddha* and a layman to a *yogi*. He alone is the real yogi who has transcended the three mental states, lethargy, passion and goodness and reached that supreme state of Self-abidance. Nobody else deserves that name. Others in their ignorance, only confuse the ends and means. It is therefore the supreme duty of a student of *yoga* to understand the real nature of *yoga* and pursue it enthusiastically and whole-heartedly.

There are several stages in the practice of *yoga*. One must proceed step by step from the lower to the higher stage. But if, by God's grace, one has already transcended some of these stages, one can, of course proceed directly to the next stage. If a man has attained *dhāraṇā* without practicing *prāṇāyāma* and *pratyāhāra* in this life, he need not waste his time or energy practicing those earlier exercises. Similarly, if his mind, in its innate purity, can readily concentrate upon the abstract, he need not court corporeal aid. So everyone must examine *one's* mental equipment and proceed higher and higher as it may be possible in each individual case. The science of *Yoga* acknowledges *Asamprajñāta* as its highest goal. It recognizes him who has reached that state as the supreme *yogi*. It also admits that there is nothing illogical if qualified persons reach the goal at one leap, while persons less qualified have to reach it by the regular practice of *Prāṇāyāma*, *Pratyāhāra*, etc.