

Many of the religious traditions of the world have, for centuries, employed psycho-physical techniques for achieving spiritual awakening. Despite this fact, the question of the validity of such techniques has been a source of ongoing philosophical and scientific debate. Modern Western culture has only recently begun to acknowledge and make use of the body-mind connection for the purposes of healing and heightened spiritual awareness. However, the notion that there is a reciprocal connection between the state of the body and that of the mind has long been an integral aspect of East Indian culture. In a discussion of the ancient practice of Yoga, and of the ideological framework underlying it, this essay will investigate the role of psycho-physical technique in emotional and spiritual liberation.

Because the various ways of understanding human nature are so enmeshed in the semantics of their descriptives, it is important to clarify our terminology when we discuss such things as 'mind', 'body', 'emotion', and 'spirit'. For the purposes of this essay, it must be understood that two different aspects of 'mind' will be implicated. One aspect is the physiological brain, which unconsciously generates thoughts and emotions and governs the automatic functions of the body. The other aspect is consciousness, or what we will refer to as 'spirit', consisting of the creative energy and concentration which can alter or overcome the automatic quality of our thoughts and emotions by intentionally controlling various functions and activities of the brain and body.

We might say then that the function and purpose of psycho-physical techniques is to enhance emotional harmony and spiritual awareness by developing control of the unconscious aspect of mind through conscious control of the body. Although their specific means and the worldviews which inform them differ to some extent, one of the central aims of psycho-physical practices is to quiet the thoughts, emotions, and sensations which ordinarily condition our behaviors and experiences and thus hold us in their sway. Like all such practices, Yoga is potentially far more than merely a physical and mental exercise. Understood to be one of the means to achieving spiritual liberation, Yoga is deeply rooted in the belief-system of the culture from which it originates.

It is a particularly Hindu conception of human nature and existence which gives rise to the practice of Yoga in its various forms. Yoga is founded on the assumption that human beings are fundamentally separate from, or greater than, their somatic and psychic processes. The 'True Self' is

believed to underlie the biochemical manifestation of the individual and to be connected with a universal Ultimate Reality beyond that of which we are commonly aware. The Guru Raphael comments:

...the aim of every kind of Yoga is the union with the Principle, the freedom of the soul from the bonds of phenomenal individuality and its reintegration with the Spirit...It is a 'raft' which, if employed wisely, carries the soul from the unreal to the real, from death to immortality, from darkness to light (1990:13)

Through the disciplining of the body and mind, using a variety of Yogic techniques, the devotee comes to realize the extent to which they are more than just their material manifestation and that, by transcending this, it is possible to achieve a freedom from conditioning which allows for boundless creative energy and inner serenity in an awareness of the fundamental unity of the True Self ('Atman') with Ultimate Reality ('Brahman'). The ideal goal of the Yogi, this state of higher consciousness referred to as 'turiya' can only be attained in the final stage of Yogic practice.

In the general Hindu worldview, our existence in this world is thought to be an illusion ('maya') consisting of an eternal cycle of death and rebirth ('samsara') from which liberation ('moksha') is ultimately sought. Hinduism distinguishes three main paths ('margas') for achieving moksha: 'karma-marga', the way of actions; 'bhakti-marga', the way of devotion; 'jnana-marga', the way of knowledge. The practice of Yoga has been associated, to varying degrees, with each of these paths. In fact, the word 'Yoga' is often used to denote 'way' and, in combination with each of the three margas, refers to three different forms of Yogic practice. There are also six schools of Hindu philosophy ('darshanas'), which are grouped by association into three sets of two: Nyaya and Vaisheshika; Samkhya and Yoga; Purva Mimamsa and Vedanta. As we can see, Yoga is traditionally associated with the Samkhya darshana, a system of understanding attributed to a mythical founder named Kapila.

According to Samkhya cosmology there exist two eternal realities: 'purusha', the masculine principle of pure spirit consciousness, and 'prakriti', the feminine principle of material differentiation. It is the interaction between these two realities which has caused the evolution of existence as we know it (1981:5). All things, including human beings, consist of both these principles simultaneously, inasmuch as purusha has become bound-up in the expression of the three qualities ('gunas') of prakriti: 'sattva',

lightness; 'rajas', passion; 'tamas', darkness (1994:400). In Samkhya, the illusory quality of this world is seen to be the result of the enmeshment of purusha with prakriti, so that liberation is achieved through recognition of the original separateness of these two principles and of the identity between the cosmic principle of purusha and the spiritual consciousness of the True Self. To quote Klaus Klostermaier's explanation:

A person who is able to analyze experience in such a way as to differentiate purusha from prakriti in consciousness, seeing in prakriti the reason for the contingency of all things and the basis for all change and multiplicity, is free...By doing away with objective sense perception, by tracing back egoism and discursive reasoning to prakriti, by coming to know the true nature of prakriti, purusha becomes emancipated (1994:401)

Although Samkhya metaphysics are far too complex to be fully elucidated here, suffice it to say that the basic concepts which I have outlined provide the theoretical underpinnings of 'Raja' Yoga (Royal Way), thought to be the oldest of the Yogic systems, which is expounded by Patanjali in his classic Yoga Sutra (1994:397). The inability to recognize prakriti as separate from purusha is attributed to 'avidya'; a lack of insight and wisdom manifested in egoism, attachment, aversion, and love of physical life. Avidya may be overcome through Yogic techniques, which involve "...the dialectic interaction of positive effort and renunciation" and the purification of the mind through "...truthfulness, friendliness, compassion and contentment, together with an indifference toward happiness and unhappiness, virtue and vice" (1994:402).

Raja Yoga is comprised of eight stages, or 'limbs', each of which is designed as mental and/or physical preparation for the next stage (1977:94-5). The first limb of Yoga is that of self-control and is called 'Yama'. This involves 'ahimsa', or the practice of non-violence in word, thought, and deed. The second limb, 'Niyama', involves the regulation of extremes through the following five observances: 'shaucha' (purity of life), 'santosh' (contentment), 'tapas' (self-sacrifice), 'svadhyaya' (study of scripture), and 'Ishwara pranidhana' (dedication to the Lord). The third limb, the 'Asanas', are specific body postures held in sitting, lying, or standing positions. The fourth limb is 'Pranayama' (control of the breath). The next three limbs, 'Pratyahara', 'Dharana', and 'Dhyana', involve the withdrawal of the mind

from sense objects, concentration of the mind, and meditation. The eighth and final limb is the attainment of 'Samadhi', or inner composure, which clearly cannot be accomplished without having mastered the preceding stages of body-mind discipline. In the deep concentration of Samadhi, the purified state of consciousness that is turiya allows for the awareness of 'viveka' (discriminatory knowledge), which recognizes and thereby effects 'kaivalya' (alone-ness); the freedom of purusha (spirit) from enmeshment in the qualities of prakriti (matter).

Having offered a general description of the theory and techniques outlined in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, we are now in a position to attempt to account for their efficacy. H.L. Sharma points out that, according to Yogic teachings, the human being has two "ends" at which systemic influences may be exerted and changes effected: the "internal, i.e. cortical or mind-end; and the external, i.e. peripheral or muscle-end". Sharma further observes that:

Stimulations can begin at either end and travel towards the other. A thought-stimulus initiated at the cortical end...changes the quality of life as a whole. [Physical stimuli]...begin their operation at the muscle-end of the system but they essentially aim at transforming the quality of consciousness (1979:36)

It is fascinating to realize that these two 'poles' of the human system correlate directly with the dualism of purusha and prakriti, as well as with the cosmological dualities found in other cultural traditions such as the Yang and Yin of Chinese thought and practice. Regardless of the terminology which one uses to describe it, an understanding of the dynamics of this polar relationship would seem to be applied in all psycho-physical techniques for healing and spiritual liberation.

While we have established that physical behaviors, such as controlling the breath or performing bodily postures, can affect the emotional state of mind (and vice-versa), the question of how such influence actually occurs remains to be answered. Sharma offers the following explanation:

The psychology of *pranayama* [breath control] is very simple. William James holds that emotion is an organic resonance and is initially felt in the pit of the stomach, in palpitation of the heart and other vital functions and, finally, it is realized as an experience. Known as the James-Lange theory in psychological literature...its core...is that organic resonance and vital functions are bound up with emotional experience...To stay undisturbed

and unswayed by the passing events of life and to reduce emotional reactivity to a useful level is the ultimate object of *pranayama* (1979:43-4)

It is unfortunate that Sharma here refers to the James-Lange theory of emotion, as it is one which has been discredited by empirical experimentation. The inadequacy of this theory lies in the finding that test subjects who were injected with adrenaline experienced the physiological responses associated with strong emotions, but reported that they knew they were not really afraid or angry. It has been concluded elsewhere, however, that physiological responses to stimuli are indeed one causal factor in the subjective experiencing of emotion. In Schachter's "Cognitive Arousal" theory (1991:481-2), emotion is caused by a combination of one's physical response with one's cognitive assessment of the stimulus situation.

Thus, we might amend Sharma's explanation of the psycho-physical connection by adding that an essential element in the effectiveness of the body's impact on the mind is the intellectual and/or spiritual context within which this takes place. When one practices Yoga, or any other psycho-physical technique, one is no doubt aware of the expected benefits of such a technique. I would suggest that this cognitive context of belief and expectation is sufficient for the physiological responses aroused by the actions of the practitioner to induce the desired emotional state. For example, if one breathes deeply and calmly one feels the emotion of peaceful serenity, but only providing that one is also cognizant of purposefully employing the potentially pacifying effects of deep-breathing.

At this point, then, we have apparently offered an explanation for the effectiveness of psycho-dynamic technique in the enhancement of spiritual awareness. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to go further because such a materialistic explanation seems far too mundane and reductionist a treatment of the subject at hand. We have touched on the philosophical, physiological, and psychological understandings, but what about the Divine aspect of the 'higher state' that techniques such as Yoga claim to lead to? As we have discovered, the Hindu school of Samkhya explains psycho-physical dynamics in terms of the energetic forces of prakriti and purusha inherent in the human being and in the Ultimate Reality of the universe. Perhaps, as so many have argued, this sort of metaphysical explanation is merely a mythopoeic and infantile representation of what the mature mind recognizes as

empirically explainable phenomena, devoid of 'spiritual' essence and impetus. However, I am personally troubled by this sort of attitude and much prefer the viewpoint of 19th century philosopher and intellectual historian Wilhelm Dilthey who, according to James C. Livingston, felt that:

Expressions of the human spirit reveal intentions, purposes, and meanings, knowledge of which requires *understanding*. This knowledge is not reducible to scientific laws or to those modes of *explanation* that are possible in the study of the nonhuman world (1993:43)

Recently, religious pluralism has begun to include scientific understandings of the world in its view that all of the diverse religious traditions merely represent different forms of human awareness of a singular Ultimate Reality. Furthermore, such thinkers as Paul Davies, Ian Barbour, and Fritjof Capra have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which empirical knowledge of the natural world can actually enhance, and be enhanced by, spiritual understandings of these same phenomena. In conclusion, I would assert that it is not actually necessary to establish whether the validity of psycho-physical technique rests on a biological, intellectual, or spiritual reality, or on a combination of all of these. I have tried to show that regardless of one's choice of explanatory framework for such practices, for those who undertake them conscientiously, psycho-physical techniques are of indispensable phenomenological value to both the body and the mind, as well as to whatever subjective sense of heightened spiritual awareness one may be predisposed to gain from them.

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