

## **THE EVER CHALLENGING MAXIM "KNOW THYSELF" (abridged)**

Presented by the ancient Greeks and in the Kathopanishad, and the means to realize this Knowledge by Yoga.

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Your Excellency Ambassador, dear friends,

Tonight you have given me the privilege to talk on the ever recurring dictum "know thyself", which in an epoch of fantastic discoveries and high technological achievements still has a tremendous appeal on the man of today.

The ideals, and mentalities, the social conditions, cultural and religious aspects of ancient civilizations were very different from ours, so our view of the ancient texts cannot reflect the whole of their truth.

We may safely assumed, that the ancient Greeks and later philosophers of the West as well as the rishis and yogis of ancient India searched for a transcending truth, a metaphysical knowledge, an absolute Reality, which would perhaps explain the various types of causes and the supreme conditions of existence in this world.

Historians have left us without precise indication about the antiquity of the famous maxim "Know Thyself". However Pausanias and Plato tell us that the 7 Sages of Greece came to Delphi and dedicated to the god Apollo 3 maxims: "Go surety and ruin is at hand"; "Nothing to excess" - which is still in use today, like in the Swedish counterpart "lagom ar bäst" -, and

"Know Thyself". We are told that these three maxims were much admired in Antiquity - Plutarch has commented on them.

Of these three, the more than 2000 years old admonition "Know Thyself" is the most famous. Cicero and Juvenal speak of its divine origin (it was generally attributed to Apollo himself) and Plato says that it is the sum of all knowledge. Plato's teacher, Socrates, cited it constantly and regarded this saying as the holiest of all texts.

It has its equivalent in the Kathopanishad, but discarding a possible common source or a possible priority of the Greek or the Upanishadic version of the famous saying, I will confine myself to its essential implications and the means for us to reach the Self as conceived by and according to Yoga.

There would seem to be strong evidence that the Greek and the Hindu had a common ethnic origin. The societies depicted in the Iliad and Odyssey of the Greek herald, Homer, and those of Vedic time present more than occasional similarities.

Moreover, the structural resemblances between the Sanskrit and Greek languages give support to the plausible hypothesis that the Greek and the Hindu were one and the same people, originally. But the essential difference between the Greek and the Hindu thinking lies indeed in the fact that in spite of repeated attempts to revival, and because of lacking efficient means to acquire the desired metaphysical knowledge, the Greek ideals and philosophies have become nothing more than history, having but little inspirational value, in general, and providing no rational methods in particular to spiritual seekers.

The ancient conception of man's divine nature and the Platonic paragon was unable to grow deep root in Greece or in the Hellenistic world. It wavered under the attacks of new philosophies, replaced in turn by another world religion, Christianity, to succumb finally under the fatal blows of our contemporary rationalism.

On the other hand since time immemorial and down to our days, India has provided continuous, unbroken living traditions for those who are in search of Truth. These traditions have survived the vicissitudes of India's long history.

In the history of humanity, we find the recurrent expression of existential questions that characterize man's ontological and eschatological concerns. The formal causes may vary greatly: Speculations on the true meaning of life, deep grief and sorrow, pleasure satiety, frustrations, fear of imminent disasters etc.

But essentially the questions are always the same:

"Who am I?"

"What is the purpose of this life?"

"Is there something after death?"

As concomitant consequences of no less significance, we find man's need of ethics, the thought of a possible reward or punishment for his actions and, within or without a religious context, his soteriological concern, as expressed in various doctrines of salvation.

Excluding the monistic view of Being as the sole Reality (sohang, soahang), the statement "Know Thyself" entails two main propositions:

First: I do not know my Self

Second: I can know my Self

The first is common evidence, because soon after having been in contact, through the senses, with the objects the world man recognizes his own ontological existence: The Knowledge of the objects is relative and subject to the existence of the "I".

Without the I, the world does not exist.

The second proposition (I can know my Self) implies the possibility for man to know an entity, the Self, which seemingly is different and separate from the objects of the world.

As to the nature of the Self, we may note that in our daily life in our waking, sleep and dream states, we experience that of the "I" through the senses of perception, is always associated with the outer world or our own body. We may also think either in a concrete way or in abstract concepts. However, our awareness of the I is practically always in relation to the sensorial. And our thinking, characteristically enslaved by the time factor - another major contingency to our mode of living -, as it is, gives us no clue as to the baffling nature of our real Being.

If we are ready to accept the ancient theory that man's destination is nothing but God, the Supreme Consciousness, we shall then have to admit the necessity for man to re-incarnate and adopt the deterministic view that all our deeds, sayings and even thinking generate the prospects, good or bad, or our future lives; unless we adhere to the idea of a possi-

ble redemption of our soul by the grace of an avatâra, an incarnation of God, such as Krishna or Christ, or through advanced knowledge of the kind that was propounded by the Gnostics.

According to Yoga the Self, Atman, is identical with the Divine. It is jivatman, the embodied spirit, and when in union with the Supreme Spirit, Paramâtman, it results in what has been technically called, Yoga. This definition is found in the Yogashikopanishad. The word Yoga has been defined in many ways but none of them will ever account for the whole phenomenon of Yoga: the higher stage and the final state of Yoga are indescribable. This is the reason why the ancient scriptures and the yoga masters always emphasize the necessity for he who questions to find the answer as to what yoga is, in the practice of Yoga.

A most reliable source of the definition of Yoga, is found in the second aphorism of the sixth Darshana by Patanjali:

"Yoga citta writti nirodha".

The fundamental factor in all forms of Yoga is control. When the mental control developed to its highest stage, as expressed in deepest thought concentration - samâdhi - the technical stage of Yoga occurs. It is the final stage of the mind control process. Yoga consists then of three inseparable and interrelated factors, namely:

Supercontrol

Superconcentration

Superunion

In the highest form of samâdhi, the yogi's consciousness is gradually absorbed into the Supreme Consciousness where both the individual consciousness and the control factor disappear. What remains is only Supreme Consciousness, also called God.

The yogic experience is not the product of any analytical endeavor of the intellect. Nor is it based on dialectical thinking having thesis, antithesis and synthesis as a basis. It does not result from logical thinking or speculative reasoning, however subtle, nor is its source in inference and hypothesis. It is not founded on the unreliable logic of the Reason either.

It is an "enstatic" state of consciousness acquired "intuitively" that enlightens and transcends the sensorial and intellectual states. It is immediate and negates the spatial factor, the psychological time and causality thus transcending the characteristic dualism of our lives.

Yoga has its origin in the earliest times of Man's History. Evidence of Yoga practice has been discovered in Egypt (about 3 000 B.C.), and in Mahenjo-Daro, India, giving us clear evidence of Hatha yoga originating from Vedic times. I would like to show you still older archaeological evidence in the form of yogic postures appearing in rock-carvings found in 1952 in Addaura, Sicily. This would seem to indicate the existence of Yoga in the Mediterranean Basin between 15 000 - 10 000 B.C. According to specialists these figures would represent a dance with bodies whose anatomy, strength and vigor in expression has never been shown before in the palaeolithic art. The Hatha Yogi will easily identify the well-known bhujangâsana and, beneath, makarâsana (the locust posture), or perhaps vrischikâsana - the scorpion posture, in these rock-carvings.

The original Yoga is called Mahayoga, that is, the highest Yoga. Its eight constituents, technically called ashtanga yoga, characterize it. From more than 100 various yoga doctrines that have been substantiated hitherto four principal doctrines have emerged. This is evidenced by the Upanishads, thus indicating the Vedic origin of these doctrines. These are:

**Mantra Yoga**

**Layayoga**

**Raya Yoga**

**Hatha Yoga**

Raya yoga, which is also known as the "Royal Path", includes other yoga doctrines such as jñana yoga, karma yoga and bhakti yoga.

In these four yoga doctrines we find ashtangayoga to be reflected with some differences, but always the same in number. I will briefly tell you about these four yoga doctrines:

**Mantra Yoga**

Literally the word "mantra" means, among other things: "To be free from the mind". The word "mantra" consists of two distinct components that are "man" and "tra". These two components are the respective abbreviations of "manas"(=mind", from which the Latin words "mens" and English "mind" are derived, and "trana", that is, "to make free from".

Mantra, which also is an instrument or a kind of carrier in the mantra practice, consists of a sound or a series of sounds, which as a rule have no

linguistic significance. Mantras are used in virtually all Yoga doctrines, and also in rituals in India.

In the yogic practice, a bija Mantra is given to a serious and fit student who has qualified for diksha - initiation. The Guru will then put on the student the obligation of keeping the mantra to himself only, as otherwise the "awakening" of the mantra will be badly affected.

There are pundits in India who question the secrecy of mantra on the ground that there are many mantras disclosed in literature. This objection is quite irrelevant; because a mantra or a series of mantras published in a book constitute in fact no mantra at all. The mantra becomes a mantra only when a guru to a disciple duly imparts it personally. In traditional Yoga the disciple's mantra is actually included in the guru's own spiritual practice, so as to improve and quicken the disciple's spiritual progress.

The fact that secrecy is not imposed on other mantras like for instance Pranava (Om) or "Krishna" is explained by the fact that these mantras have an immense potential available only to a very advanced yogi, though general benefit can be derived by other people too. The mantra yogis are known to possess superpowers. In general, superpowers are not demonstrated so much.

### **Layayoga**

This yoga doctrine comprises efficient purificatory methods and special concentration methods wherein the chakra system has a prominent position. The chief feature of this Yoga path is to rouse the latent spiritual po-



tential called Kundalini. My teacher, Professor Shyam Sundar Goswami, has devoted a whole book to this subject in which you will also find a scientific presentation of yoga in general and of mantra in particular. His book\* "*Layayoga*" is considered to be a classic in available Yoga literature.

### **Raya Yoga**

The expression "Royal Path" indicates that the doctrine in question is a very advanced one. In Raya Yoga the adept is expected to have such mental control that the exercises can be directed mainly towards the pure concentration processes. The disciple is thus expected to have the capability of complying with advanced requirements so as to reach the highest stage of consciousness at an early stage of practice.

In this connection, it is interesting to note what Shiva, the originator of Yoga according to Indian tradition, has said, namely, that without first having practiced Hatha Yoga, Raja Yoga cannot be undertaken. Also, he said that without Raya Yoga, Hatha Yoga is incomplete.

### **Hatha Yoga**

We have now come to the last of the four doctrines, mentioned before and which have in common the eight-fold path, called Ashtanga Yoga. Hatha Yoga is too often presented as a substitute system for gymnastics, which, backed up with some rules on diet, fasting and cleansing, aim at man's wellbeing, improving his capability to relax and to concentrate his mind, etc.

Such an objective is of course worth aiming at but we should not forget that Hatha Yoga provides, traditionally, far higher goals, than helping man to stay healthy and happy, efficient in his daily work or even giving him renewed energy to meet everyday requirements.

A serious practice of yoga pre-supposes the practice of yama and niyama. These two practices consist of ten physical, intellectual and ethical rules. They are essential in the practice of those students, whose ambitions are not confined to purely physical results.

The first of these ten rules is:

**Harmlessness (ahimsa)**: Which means doing no harm either physically, by words or even in thought to others. This important practice deserves our special attention, because it is, in fact, the very key for achieving real and lasting peace, for the individual in particular, and for nations in general.

Non-violence is well known in modern times to be a very different weapon which was successfully handled by Mahatma Gandhi in giving India her independence after more than one century of colonial rule.

The yogis say that when ahimsa is practiced regularly and devotedly, its negativity, as expressed in the initiating letter "a" to mean: non-, becomes positivity. From being non-violence at the initial stage ahimsa develops into a neutral feeling, tolerance, sympathy, compassion and leads ultimately to a universal love, a feeling which extends to all living beings

including plants. It is an illusion to think that man could ever love his neighbors at will, or whenever commanded to.

Truthfulness (satya}: That is, to speak the truth and to act in a truthful manner.

**Non-stealing asteya)**: Which in the widest sense means refraining even from stealing the ideas of others.

**Sexual control (bramacharya)**: A control which when completed relates to both the conscious and non-conscious aspects of our lives; in action, speech and thought.

**Non-acquisitiveness (aparigraha)**: This is refraining from what is superfluous to one's natural or basic needs.

**Cleanliness (shoucha)**: A rule, which embraces both the outer and the inner aspects of the body. Under this heading also dietetic foods and fasting are included.

**Contentment (santosh)**: The cultivation of a positive feeling in our life is intimately connected with our inner Being.

**Asceticism (tapasya)**: In the Hatha yogic practice this relates in the first place to the physical aspect and as such implies that the power of the will is carried over and beyond the physical and mental limits; there is also a general practice of tapas. In contrast to the specific tapas, there is addi-

tionally verbal asceticism and mental asceticism in which the practice of silence plays an important role.

**Spiritual study and mantra exercises (svâdhyâya)**: These include the study of Holy Scriptures and the japa mantra practice.

**Concentration associated with deep feeling towards God (ishvara pranidhâna)**: In that practice surrender to Godhead is a very important factor in the student's practice.

Following these 10 rules is asana, that is, the psycho-physical exercises which technically consist of a process aiming at the control of the whole skeletal musculature to develop the body in a harmonious and symmetrical way. This occurs by the application of dynamic and static exercises, by developing the flexibility of the body, speed, strength and endurance.

**Prânayâma**, which consists in particular of various breathing processes with or without the use of mantras.

**Prathyâhâra**, which is the last preparatory exercise before the practice of concentration proper Prathyahara can adequately be described as the withdrawal of the senses from outer objects.

**Dhârana/dhyâna/samâdhi**: These are the very concentration processes with their various phases. They come as a last stage in the eight-fold path, following preceding exercises referred to which are traditionally considered to be of great help, if not indispensable, to the Hatha yogi and also to other people where man's ambition is directed towards Knowledge of the Self, a knowledge which in fact involves a full control of the senses

and of the mind. To be successful in "meditation", which is the key to such a great control, one has first to acquire a firm basis on which to stand, that is, a sound and well-controlled body, which is vitalized by appropriate physical training, adequate diet and purifying practices, all these combined with mental purity.

The realization of the Self, understood as the Supreme Reality, is certainly not given to all and everyone. The Indian so-called freed-alive beings, jivan-muktas, known to us are but a handful of yogis, although they may have their counterparts in other countries.

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To realize that a real and durable change of our present situation only can start when we as individuals change ourselves has not as yet been inculcated in our minds, especially where too much dependent or selfish thinking is prevailing at the prejudice of man's personal development.

In this respect the yogis' vast experience tell us that substantial changes do occur, en route, during a serious and continuous practice of Yoga, before the spiritual journey ends.

May I therefore urge all of you, my friends, in concluding where I actually started, thus completing a cycle as it were, to carefully meditate on the wise admonition from Ancient India:

"Arise, awake and seek a teacher; First know who art Thou"

© by *Basile Catoméris*

\* The US paperback edition is prefaced by Dr. Georg Feuerstein.