From Yama to Samyama

Yama and Samyama form the start and culmination of yoga practices. Yama is personal practices consisting of ahimsa (noninjury), satya (truthfulness), asteya (not appropriating what belongs to others), brahmacharya (moving toward Ultimate Truth or Brahman), and aparigraha (nonacceptance of gifts). This is followed by Niyama which are restraints of saucha (purity), santosha (content), tapah (penance), svaadyaaya (study), and Isvara pranidhana (surrender to a higher principle). Samyama is bringing together the last three stages of the practices, namely, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi. Having defined these (in a limited way), let us look at their role in yoga practices.

It is said that these are yoga angas. The word “anga” could be understood in two ways: Steps or limbs. If these are steps, we need to take one step at a time. If it is interpreted as limbs, we could practice all eight limbs of yoga and as we progress, the limbs grow, mature, and attain completion.

PRACTICE OF YOGA ANGAS

Thus, it is important that the limbs of yoga practices are brought forth by Yoga teachers so that a complete psychospiritual basic of yoga is understood and practiced. This psychospiritual base need not violate anyone’s preferred spiritual orientation or belief system. In general, it is possible to enhance one’s spiritual attitudes through Kaivalya, which is defined in the last sutra of Patanjali (4:44) as reversal of natural tendencies in a person. Thus, practicing yoga, we are moving beyond nature! Nature has endowed us with certain predispositions, certain mix of satva, raja, and tamo gunas. This is our baggage we carry and yoga teaches us not to fall in the trap of gunas, rather to outwit them and transcend them through our practices. Thus, the last sutra instructs us to become gunātita – move beyond gunas, as Bhagavad Gita also intones.

The ultimate objective of yoga practices is thus to move beyond one’s natural tendencies of anger, frustration, disappointment, happiness, and contentment, all of which could be short lived. To reach a state of eternal happiness or bliss, one needs to start from Yama and reach Kaivalya through practice of Samyama. The eight limbs of yoga cater to the well-being of the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the practitioners. Proper food gives strength to the body; asana and pranayama practices provide uniform movement of prana in the body bringing calmness to the mind; self-study provides a plenum for progress toward our goal and surrender to the Ultimate Principle takes us to experience bliss. Thus, each anga of the yoga practice has a role to play in the complete success of the practices. However, it should be noted that the angas are not separate entities; it is said that the eight limbs should progress simultaneously and in equal measure. Thus, as asanas are practiced, one thinks of maintaining an attitude of expansion into infinity; with pranayama, one should surrender to the higher principle. Then, in Samyama, we bring attention to inner reality and its connection to the external world. Thus, as each anga is practiced, we bring to bear the entire psychospiritual nature into focus. In a recent article, the authors say: “Even considering asana alone, there are significant differences in the way physical movements are done in yoga and physical exercise. This makes it compelling to call yogasana as a movement-based contemplative practice or a psycho-spiritual practice rather than just a set of physical movements.”[1]

SPIRITUAL QUOTIENT

Intelligent quotient was a popular measure to assess a person’s capability in terms of his/her contribution to the bottom line of an organization. It soon became clear that an important stabilizing factor in this equation is the emotional maturity and ability of a person to interact with others in mutually beneficial manner; emotional intelligence/quotient became an adjunct to performance criteria. At present, a spiritual and altruistic attitude is thought to be important to reach full potential of an organization as well as for the holistic growth of people and industry. Thus, the bottom line is presently lined with happy workers, dignified workplace, and altruistic care of all involved. In case of extreme work environment, it is more important to provide this care in the workplace.[6]

Emotional quotient has many components of relevance in responding to workplace demands. The important ones are self-awareness (being aware of one’s own emotional status), self-regulation (controlling one’s own emotions), and empathy (understanding others’ emotional status). While these are essential in interacting with people in a closed environment, it is still not complete in trying to appreciate and help other people going through emotional roller coaster. Thus, spiritual quotient was introduced to assess and develop altruistic development of self and others. It is said that in some native cultures, competing (as in games and even amongst children) was not a component of personality development. Children helped each other and did not understand the concept of standing first in any game since the spirit of competition was not taught to them. In a modern workplace, this may not be a practical policy. However, helping others in the group,
concern for others’ shortcomings if any are important components so that the organization grows along with the employees. Developing virtues and applying them in one’s interaction with others are vital in this complex and competitive world today.

The natural outcome of practice of Yama and Niyama is these altruistic attitudes regarding welfare and love toward others who also go through ups and downs of life. Yama and Niyama, if practiced truthfully and fully, become mahavrata or great commitments that transcend time, space, and situations. Further, the entire environment around the person becomes charged with these virtues and hostility is not seen in his/her presence. In the recent past, we have many examples of people who practiced satya and ahimsa and this fact (absence of hostility) was observed in their vicinity. Thus, there is immediate outcome of Yama and Niyama practices.

However, the ultimate goal of practicing yoga is to achieve transcendence and to break this cyclic existence. Dharana, dhyana, and samadhi are the three states that prepare one toward this transcendental goal. These three together is called Samyama (sam meaning total and yama meaning to control). “So Samyama means complete mastery over the psychic process or complete control of mental concentration.”[3] Many advanced siddhis or psychic powers are attributed to Samyama on various objects and content of consciousness; however, these are not to be pursued by a true yogi.

Many disorders seen today are the result of lifestyle aberrations. Yama and Niyama form comprehensive practices that have positive impact on lifestyle, and hence important in the current health maintenance and disease resolution scenario.

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