

Excerpt from the Upcoming book

Evolution Revolution:

Yoga, Ayurveda, and the Rise of the Soft Power Culture

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Redesigning Religion

Many people are questioning what the term “spiritual” means because its meaning has digressed away from its original meaning in the esoteric traditions. For many in the modern era who have grown apathetic and turn away from the dogma of major religions, living a natural lifestyle has become the new spiritual. In many ways, natural lifestyle is replacing traditional religious practices. One aspect of this lifestyle is meditation. Meditation has many forms and the power it has for connecting us to our true nature is being recognized by all types of people.

The practice of meditation has been associated with the Eastern mystical traditions for countless millenniums. Meditation practice is probably the most iconic of the ancient practices of the mystics. Let’s be clear, meditation is not a religion, and in fact, rather than bind us to dogmas, meditation leads to freedom from desires, pain, and suffering. When these mental conditions are overcome, bliss is revealed as the source of our existence. A great sage¹ once said, “When there are thoughts, it is distraction: when there are no thoughts, it is meditation.” There is light in the senses, there is light behind the mind and intellect, there is light operating the cosmic mind (Hiranyagarbha), and then finally, there is the light of Brahman (God), pure consciousness. Meditation illumines these functions of our life and purifies each of these so that our individual consciousness comes to unite with the supreme source of light that is behind all existence. This is what the myriad techniques of yoga aim to do. Whether it be the ego, mind or the senses all are sustained by the light of pure consciousness.

¹ Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi.

Religion that is not defined by a person's daily conduct is based on blind faith and does not foster the essence of what it means to be spiritual. In Vedanta, the process of self-inquiry (vichara) into the nature of one's existence, is one of the primary practices for evolution. Religion has nothing to do with spirituality if it creates division amongst humankind and perpetuates violence. When a person is described as "religious" it usually means that they follow certain practices and beliefs according to a particular system that aims at eradicating pain and suffering while promoting bliss. Yet many of these religious practices appear to conflict with what many now consider to be a spiritual lifestyle. If the purpose of religion is to promote bliss and remove pain from human life, would it not endorse a universal truth? In doing so, religion would embrace the diversity as a part of the magic, that people evolve according to their own self-awareness. This would promote the appreciation of life and the consciousness that upholds this world.

Cultivating Consciousness through Culture

Integrating ayurveda's principles into one's lifestyle is more about cultivating a consciousness culture rather than just following a set of principles. Ayurveda is a profound system that was practiced millenniums ago and yet it is highly relevant today, mainly with regards to its ideals of harmonizing one's relationship with nature. Many recognize that humanity has lost its regard for nature, so integrating ayurveda into our lives is a way to find it again. The concept of living in harmony with nature has two profound implications. One is its practical side whereby we apply the principles for greater balance of the mind-body relationship, which, without doubt, is needed today on a very fundamental level. The second implication of living in harmony with nature is in gaining at least some understanding of "the world" as merely a projection of the mind; this is from the perspective of Vedanta.

Ayurvedic routines without Vedantic philosophy can perpetuate attachment to the body and increase a person's sensitivity to the world. Without the underlying foundation of Vedanta, ayurveda becomes similar to a project like the "save the world" or "save the oceans" movements. One becomes focused on saving the body as if that is what dictates one's quality of life. Ayurveda is meant to be part of the evolutionary pathway and is a spiritual endeavor. When one does not care for the body, spiritual evolution does not take place. God has a physical body and it's called earth. Even though God cannot be destroyed, when humans damage the relationship they have with nature, in the many ways we have witnessed over the last several centuries, we endanger humanity. This is because our pathway to spiritual freedom is eroding.

The practice of selfcare (svasttavritta) and harmonizing one's relationship with nature promote balance and longevity so that ego's attention to the body or one's identification with the body is gradually minimized. The selfcare practices of ayurveda are well balanced with the sacred rituals of yoga and the mental attitude taught in Vedanta. Cultivating consciousness through culture depends on a balanced relationship between outer and inner awareness. Consciousness expands as one builds the capacity to

listen and learn from the world. The entire Vedic traditions of the golden ages (satya yuga) were based on these ideals of listening and learning. This cultural focus on balancing inner and outer awareness spawned a devotion for God that remains today; and it was accelerated in 19th and 20th centuries by an entourage of sages like the Bhakti Bengalis² that applied these ideals to overcome the British empire.

The relationship that one has with “the world” should be examined with the microscope of nightly introspection to eradicate the mental conditions that bind us to anything that the mind, intellect, ego, and senses fall prey to. The practice of introspecting “nightly” does not only mean to find a quiet and calm place to sit and reflect on one’s day, although this is a good practice. The mystical and more profound meaning of nightly introspection³ as mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita is based on interiorizing the mind through a methodical and scientific process. The aspirant begins to remove the shadows (hence use of the term nightly) that cloud over the mind. These shadows are simply referring to conditioned consciousness, and we strive to prevent such conditioning from manifesting where they create a robotic personality.

The average person lives in the world based on their subconscious or unconscious mind. This directly influences their capacity to live in a conscious manner. The only way to change the consciousness of a culture is to change the subconscious mind. Everyone has to be trained in exercising the conscious mind. This is what yogic techniques are for: to release the power of super consciousness and become a jivanmukta, a liberated soul, while still living in the physical body. This is precisely why asana, the third limb of Patanjali’s eight-limbed system is so foundational to higher consciousness; the aspirant must exercise discipline over the body, the spine, and create physical stillness so that one can enter and transcend the subtler domains of subconscious mind. This is the magic of Integral (Sampurna) Yoga or Kriya (Raja) Yoga as taught by the great lineages of India, like those of Swami Sivananda, Paramahansa Yogananda and many others. Yoga provides the teaching and the techniques for transcending the major states of consciousness.⁴

² Sun, Moon and Earth, *The Sacred Relationship of Yoga and Ayurveda*, Chapter Six, “The Rise of Bengali Yoga.” by Mas Vidal (Lotus Press, 2017).

³ Verse 1, Chapter 1, “*On the holy plain of Kurukshetra (Dharmakshetra) when my offspring and the sons of Pandu had gathered together, eager for battle, what did they, O Sanjaya?*” From *God Talks with Arjuna: The Bhagavad Gita*, by Paramahansa Yogananda (Self-Realization Fellowship, Los Angeles).

⁴ Four basic states of consciousness are unconscious, subconscious, conscious and super-conscious. The Sanskrit wisdom literature defines the mind as Antahkarana Chatushtaya (four aspects): **Chitta** (unconscious and subconscious), **Buddhi** (enquiry-sakshi, discernment-viveka), **Ahamkara** (ego playing the role of egoism) and **Manas** (sense mind used for experiencing the practical reality or Karmendriyas and Jnanendriyas). The Unconscious mind stores the Samskaras (seed tendencies, habits reflected in the robotic nature of most people). The Subconscious mind contains the Vasanas (subtle desires that are the source of one’s sentiments and feelings referred to in Sanskrit as Shubha and Malina Bhavana. The Mind or Chitta is a term that is considered as all inclusive. Based on the teachings of Sri Swami Jyotirmayananda (Yoga Research Foundation, Miami, FL).