

Surrender & Service in Yoga

(From upcoming book by Mas Vidal titled "Sun, Moon & Earth")

Power of Surrender

I can't think of anything more powerful to do in life than to surrender to its fluctuating nature. What I mean by surrender is not to give up on life and become a drifting fool, but to give up on the idea that this material world will bring us everlasting happiness.

Learning to surrender can help us work with the forces of nature and our individual karma, rather than oppose them. The great saint Sri Ramana Maharshi made a bold statement in this regard: "The ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their prarabdhakarma.¹ Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try as you may. Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to prevent it. This is certain. The best course, therefore, is to remain silent."

By remaining silent, we surrender to life's journey as the observer who partakes in the world but remains above its fluctuations—a monumental task. Alternatively, haven't we seen enough evidence that the "I," "Me," "Mine" mentality is destructive to our physical, mental, and emotional health, not to mention our ecology? Yogis, saints, and great teachers have proclaimed selfless surrender to be the solution to every problem and the secret to every mystery. The act of surrender strongly aligns with having faith and devotion, along with discipline or tapas,² as the cornerstones of spiritual development. Tapas strengthens the mind to overcome obstacles that can retard our progress. The obstacles in life are the tests that make us stronger and help us to understand ourselves better.

There is a story that the great young Swami Rama Tirtha tells about his daylong struggle to solve a mathematical equation. Finally, when he decided to give up—some accounts say he also was about to surrender his life—the answer came to him. He says that when you chase after Vedanta, it keeps running from you; but when you surrender and stop seeking it, you discover the truth directly inside you. "The greatest sadhu, the greatest Indian monk, the greatest swami in this world is the Sun, the rising Sun." The Sun is the soul that gives us light, guides us, and teaches us that it is always there. Everywhere we are, all we need to do is surrender to its presence.

¹ One of the three main types of karma, along with *sanchitta* (sum of our past karmas, good and bad, which are changeable) and *purushakara* (results of our current actions). *Prarabdhakarma* is charted in the birth natal chart or horoscope, the picture of the sky at the time of one's birth.

² One of the fundamental components of the yoga system. It is considered the platform to spiritual living and a necessary aspect of attaining health and wellness in the mind-body. In yoga, it is also related to asceticism. The great sage Patanjali considers it one of the three main constituents of the Kriya Yoga system. It is said that when pure tapas is developed, it leads to perfection or enlightenment.

One of the other important principles that is a great complement to the attitude of surrender is self-study or introspective analysis, known as *svadhyaya*. If we analyze ourselves, our own lives can become our scriptures. Through self-analysis, we can understand who we have become, discover where we are headed, and embrace where we have been. Many have reduced *svadhyaya* to intellectual study and memorization of words and phrases in scriptures. However, the practical way to apply this very valuable principle is to find the answers we seek in the experience of our own *sva* or life.

The highest principle of surrender is *ishvara pranidhana* (“commitment to the Lord”). It is the last of the introductory *yoga-dharma* principles, because it is the most powerful stance one can take to succeed on the spiritual path. On my first trip to India, I learned to surrender through the many circumstances that kept arising. Various occurrences tested my understanding, not to mention my patience, and prompted me to question “who” I was. Eventually, I learned it was more important to change my attitude than to try to change my outer circumstances, although it is sometimes necessary to remove ourselves from certain circumstances. It seems that India has the capacity to teach us many things about ourselves, especially Western spiritual aspirants traveling there for the first time. I highly encourage it. Many of the deepest yogic teachings can be discovered in the subtle nuances of the culture.

Many of the expectations I carried had to be destroyed or transformed: everything from the timing of the train to ideas I had about the way my yoga and meditation should be, just because I was in India. Everything I did or tried to do on my first sojourn practically forced me to surrender, “let go,” adapt, and change to become someone new.

These lessons culminated when I was counseled by a monk named Swami Vishwananda. He suggested several things about my meditation practice that in a metaphorical sense said a lot about how I was living my life at the time. My practice was not in full accord with my actions. He said, “It’s important not to get caught up in the mechanics of things or that everything should be in some perfect order, but more important is the end result. For example, if you are meditating regularly and then spending the rest of your day in meaningless activities, without right thought or presence of mind, then your whole day has been wasted and the meditation was rendered useless. Practice meditation and the techniques but then surrender them and hold on to the unchangeable, God.”

The key is to hold on to the quality of consciousness cultivated in meditation as long as we can. In later years, I understood this as staying in present awareness, in the present moment, observant of all things. Many of the experiences of my inaugural trip to the motherland began to make more and more sense to me later. I learnt that meditation was not just a matter of sitting and practicing various techniques and rituals, but was about arriving at a new place of awareness and holding on to that insight and consciousness in everything I did.

Everything in the universe is trying to guide us back to the soul magnet, a special place that everyone is seeking, some consciously and others unconsciously. As mentioned earlier, fear is the most destructive of emotions, as it cripples the mind by creating

limitations and obstacles. Also, fear attaches the mind to materialistic things and superstitious outcomes. Fears create illusion. On the other hand, ishvara pranidhana is a practice of real surrender to God, embracing the idea that we are not completely in control of our lives. Proper yoga sadhana teaches us how to work with unseen and mysterious forces, removing the veil of illusion that fear creates. What we do have control over is how we adjust and adapt to life's circumstances as our life slowly transforms itself. How we do things becomes much more powerful than what we do or try to do.

People try to control out of fear of a certain outcome and the emotional pain associated with it. The more suppressed or unresolved emotional experiences become, the greater the need to control our outer environment. The yogic concept of surrender is the most powerful technique one can practice to release the mind from fear. Yogis like Krishna and Rama were warriors or Kshatriyas, fearless and peaceful as they dealt with many challenging life circumstances. They had families, they were kings, and they overcame radical challenges during their lives. A great king or queen sits at the throne of omnipresence by learning to shut off the mind through pratyahara and experience the profound surrender that is Divine.

The value of these core yoga principles comes about holistically, when they are practiced integrally, beginning with a sound foundation in the yamas and niyamas. Over time, they help us develop the necessary state of mind and character required for using the body as an instrument in asana and pranayama. If our social and personal life is not in accord with natural law, the use of the postures and breathing techniques can create physical and mental complications.

The core principles I have discussed are the foundation for lifestyle reformation and a prerequisite for health and wellness. Yoga stretches alone are not enough to bring us health, and fall short of yoga's grand goal. In other words, the way in which we live our life, the yamas and niyamas, significantly influence what we become, regardless of how much yoga we are practicing. These first two yoga limbs, which enumerate social and personal guidelines for balanced living, can be studied at traditional lineage-based yoga schools or most ashrams. I have found the writings of Paramahansa Yogananda, distributed by the organization he founded, the Self-Realization Fellowship, to be the most thorough and concise teachings on how to live a balanced and purposeful life.

Service in Yoga

Our ability to surrender is largely dependent on the discipline that we can create in service to others (*seva*). The yoga traditions have thrived longer than any other ancient tradition mainly on acts of selfless service to humanity. Service has always been a part of any culture that lives for a higher purpose. It is becoming more and more evident that the concept of service and barter will become the business model of the new age, with companies, families, and individuals exchanging services and commodities with one another, rather than commerce being based on monetary currency that actually has no "real value" or credibility.

There was a time in America when all currency was actually backed by gold or silver, but eventually this was no longer possible. It seems that stock markets and the value of the dollar depend greatly on the psychological mood of the country as interpreted by the media. Any type of economics, either personal or societal, based on spending or taxation will eventually fail, as it goes against the law of exchange or karma. The law of karma means that for every action or intention there is an equal reaction: cause and effect. If the majority of the world holds to a consciousness of buying, taking, spending, and acquiring, the universe will need to find some way to keep the earth in balance.

The concept of seva will eventually save the business world and our economies from complete destruction. Until then, global economies continue to teeter, along with idea that everything will continue to rise. It is said that what goes up must come down. Living and working on the basis of the idea that value of homes, real estate, and the cost of goods and services will just continue to rise is blind as the wind. These things may be difficult to understand at the present time, but Vedanta is not confined to India. It is the most practical and efficient way for us to evolve as a species.

Seva extends to anything we do to propagate the balance of life. When we serve the whole, we serve ourselves. I am not discrediting the value of being an individual or the importance of making choices in work or life that benefit us directly. The power of seva, however, comes in a more subtle form. As we serve others, we take attention off our own selves, the “I” self. The secret lies in the mind shifting its attention off the body, senses, and desires. Seva is the Karma Yoga way to purify our samskaras or habitual tendencies and buried selfish desires. When we find ways to serve each other, we help ourselves understand that we are all interconnected, to nature and all living things.

Seva can give people a sense of purpose and direction. It is the vehicle that carries the yoga practitioner, or anyone for that matter, to an integral approach to yoga. In Karma Yoga, all expectations of an outcome should be removed. Seva is a doorway into metaphysics, a type of informal training where not only discipline is developed, but many other powerful yogic practices such as renunciation (*sanyas*) and surrendering our attachment to the fruits of our actions (*tyaga*). Both are core teachings of the Bhagavad Gita.

Another powerful yoga practice that aligns well with the act of service is *japa yoga mantra*. This practice involves repeating powerful Sanskrit mantras while service or a chore is being performed. These are affirmations that help remove the mental clutter that veils our peace and enable us to have greater awareness. The old adage rings true: “What we think, we become.”

True seva free of any personal gain or profit can teach us great patience and how to surrender to the next phase of life. Seva helps us embrace the spiritual path, which is slow, long, and requires walking the razor’s edge. In Hindu mythology, Hanuman is the monkey God who personified service and loyalty, as poetically expressed in the epic story the Ramayana.

Seva has been the backbone of the yoga tradition for thousands of years. There many major dharmic organizations throughout India that operate solely on service and donations. Such organizations, founded by yogis figures like Mata Amritanandamayi, Satya Sai Baba, and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, to name a few, have built schools and hospitals, and provided aid in natural disasters and food, clothes, and shelter for millions throughout India and the world.

In India, yoga has never been a business, as it has become in the West. Yoga will only endure through selfless service by those working for the higher good of mankind. Rather than spending so much time making ourselves happy, we can serve others. In return, a blessed gift is received: greater compassion for the world. Swami Vivekananda said, “The law of life is giving.” When we practice seva, we not only benefit ourselves karmically, but we serve the great ones who have upheld these truths as living examples of the great scriptures.