

The Full Force of Yoga:

Living the Yoga Life

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Physical

The asanas, pranayama, deep relaxation techniques, and cleansing practices of

Hatha Yoga foster:

- Better health, greater energy, flexibility, and strength
- Every organ and system in the body is brought to balance, and the body is brought into harmony with the mind

Mental

A calmer, clearer, more joyful, focused mind, and a more open, loving compassionate heart, can lead to:

- Improved ability to learn
- Greater compassion
- Greater creativity
- Increased ability to handle life's stresses
- More harmonious relationships
- Improved decision making and problem solving abilities
- Increased financial prosperity
- Increased sense of meaning and purpose in life

Spiritual

- The end of suffering
- Experience of Oneness: attainment of Self-realization

The above list presents an incredible array of benefits. But many make the mistake of looking at this list like an arithmetic problem in which numbers in the first two categories add up to - inevitably lead to - the Spiritual benefits listed at the end. This is not necessarily the case. The health, peace, joy, love, and prosperity that the physical

and mental practices of Yoga can bring still cannot erase the root cause of suffering. Reduce it, yes. Make for a nice, full life? Certainly. But it will not really do enough to mitigate the painful effects of realities such as disease, old age, and death. Why can't all the wonderful physical and mental benefits brought by Yoga erase suffering?

When we explore the spiritual level, the most refined and elevated level of Yoga, we need to begin asking ourselves not "What can Yoga do for me?" but rather, "What can I do to tap into the full force of Yoga, the force that can put an end to all my fears, anxieties, and worries?"

Our automatic answer to the above questions is usually, "Yes, of course, if there's anything I can do to alleviate my suffering a little, or better yet, avoid it, I'll do it. Who wouldn't?" Next we need to ask a really important, probing question, the answer to which largely determines our success in attaining the spiritual goals of Yoga "Am I *really* willing to do what it takes?"

Let's reflect together on the transformative power of Yoga, how it can be released in our daily lives, and discover if our understanding, intentions, and efforts are up to unlocking the full force of Yoga.

Reflection One: The Goal of Life

Consciously or unconsciously, we seek to find happiness in all we do. From choosing a career or life partner, to deciding what to wear, eat, or what brand of toothpaste to buy, the goal is the same: to be happy. We won't knowingly choose anything that will bring us pain or sorrow. If life presents us two or more unwelcome choices, we will choose the one that we believe will bring us the least pain. Some people really dislike going to the dentist. They also would dislike the pain of a toothache. There are those that would suffer the pain of the infected tooth rather than see the dentist. Others, even though they have an intense anxiety over seeing the dentist, go because they dislike the pain of infection even more. And not only does our search for happiness motivate every decision, it is strong enough that if we feel there is no hope for our happiness, we may think that it is better to die than suffer so much.

This is it in a nutshell: we don't really want a vacation, nice job, great sound system, or anything else. We hunger for the happiness that we think these things will bring us. It would not be incorrect to understand Yoga as the science of approaching happiness directly, without any intermediary.

The happiness we seek is within us as our True Nature. When our minds become clear, focused, and utterly still, we experience the unbounded Peace of our own Self.

Reflection Two: Why Can't Life Always Be Happy?

To understand this, we should know a little about *dukha*, the Sanskrit word translated as “suffering”.

Looking at the roots of the word, we find it means something like “bad axle hole.” On a wheel, the axle hole is in the exact center of the wheel. If it is not, the wheel cannot rotate evenly. The result is an uncomfortable, shaky ride. It's not only physically unpleasant, but the instability of the ride brings up anxious doubts about our safety (like turbulence on an airplane). The mind is repeatedly drawn to the rough ride. It's difficult to relax and be at peace.

Our actual level of safety as well as the intensity of anxiety we feel are determined by how far off the axle hole is from the center. If the hole is way off, the ride can be alarming. (Keep in mind, our rough ride is not solely determined by the off-center axle hole but by the road's own potholes, ruts, and obstructions). What's more is the fact that this wobbly wheel makes controlling the vehicle more difficult. All in all, it is clear that we're not destined for a pleasant ride.

Each and every life is like a wheel on a journey – countless cycles of coming and going, unavoidable and sometimes unwelcome changes, uncertain futures - all the experiences that we create for ourselves, or that life unexpectedly tosses our way. The question we need to answer is this: Is there any way of living that will provide a centered, stable axle for my life?

There is only one thing that, placed at the center of our lives, will provide a safe, comfortable, peaceful ride: the Self, the Spirit, or God. Even placing any or all of the physical and mental benefits from our list there won't do the trick.

You might want to glance at that list again. We have all experienced most of those benefits at times and for a while, but not always or consistently. Since they are not - or more accurately, since *we* are not - rooted in the Self, they can and will come and go. The unexpected twists and turns that life can throw at us are often very powerful disruptors of our peace. Changes to our health, relationships, finances, the world situations, can all throw us into anxious, angry, or depressed states. The only refuge, which is utterly stable, is the Self, the Divine in you, that *is* you.

Reflection Three: Dedication is the Key

If your goal is to eliminate suffering, there is no substitute for a life dedicated to attaining Self-realization. To dedicate means to give yourself over to; to consecrate. It certainly includes giving yourself to the practice and principles of Yoga. But in order to eliminate suffering and attain spiritual maturity and enlightenment, we need to cultivate a deeper, fuller dimension: the giving, or offering, of all of who we are to the Divine. This can be understood as the dethroning of limited ego-centered desires and activities that we have placed at the center of life and replacing it with the Absolute,

the ground and source of all life. In Yoga, this attitude is called *Ishwara Pranidhanam* (*Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, sutras 1.23 – 1.27, 2.1, 2.32, and 2.45). *Ishwara* is the Supreme Being, and *pranidhana* means to “put first, to put in proper alignment.”

Of particular practical note is the first sutra listed (1.23). It comes after a long list of ways to attain enlightenment. It’s as if the author, the great sage Patanjali, winks as he says, “You can do all sorts of rigorous practices, or you can just put your life in proper alignment. Put God first.” It is this principle that opens the door to the full force of Yoga.

Reflection Four: How to Live a Dedicated Life

What we’re really trying to do is, “Go with the flow.” What a beautiful saying. It sounds so nice, like floating on an inner tube down a lazy river on a warm summer’s day. The flow is God’s Will, the laws that govern life and the universe (*dharma*, in Sanskrit). In truth, putting your life in attunement with the Highest Will can’t be accomplished without effort. First and foremost, it requires a firm commitment to making the shift from a limited ego-based life to one based on seeking and following the will of God. Someone once gave me a poster that pictured a graceful white swan serenely floating on a pond. It read: “*Seek the will of God: nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.*” That should be our watchword, one that we repeat every day and in every circumstance.

We well know that our resolutions often don’t last very long. Our minds are used to darting here and there, getting bored, and then flitting around looking for new distractions. Make the mind strong and steady through meditation, chanting and prayer, selfless service, study of sacred wisdom, self-reflection, and a keen, unbiased observation of the ways of life.

Reflection Five: It’s Not So Easy to Do

It seems like a no-brainer. If we engage ourselves in the physical and mental practices of Yoga, we gain all sorts of wonderful benefits, and if we add the spiritual dedication, we erase suffering. Yet, we find few students of Yoga who really follow this path fully. Why is this so? There are two big reasons: fear and habit.

Fear: It is often said that the unknown is our greatest fear. It certainly is at or near the top. At its foundation fear is about the dread of loss. We all seek certainty in matters that affect our safety and happiness. Feelings of loss of control, of losing someone or something we cherish, and of status are all fertile seeds that feed fear.

Fear causes the mind to retreat and our thinking becomes more rigid and reactionary. Rationality is lost or hampered, and the lessons of memory are also often forgotten. Our faith may weaken or slip away. We feel confused or defenseless. We are not inclined to even try something that can help us. Master Sivananda taught that what paralysis is to the body, fear is to the mind.

When it comes to Ishwara Pranidhana, leading a dedicated life, the God-at-the-center-of-life-or-nothing attitude seems to negate having fun in this world. What about the joy of relationships, vacations, and all the other beautiful things we are given to enjoy in life? Truth be told, there is good reason why spiritual teachings and even clergy and spiritual teachers can seem like life-denying grumps. We seem to hear so much talk of our sinful nature and the evil temptations that we encounter in the world.

The remedies for fear are faith (not based just on belief, but on spiritual experience), loving kindness (expressed in service), and knowledge (including self knowledge through practices such as meditation and from the study of sacred texts and Nature).

Habit. Our character is the result of long sustained habits. Habits are formed under three principle factors: well motivated intent, repetition, and environmental support.

- *Well Motivated intent.* If we take an honest assessment of our lives, we will come to the realization that most often, if at all possible, we end up doing what we really want to do, and not so much of what we think we should do.
- *Repetition.* Like a river that over thousands of years, wears down rock to form a canyon, our repeated thoughts and actions are powerful creators of habit. As we all know, habits are difficult to break or change. The mind finds it easier to continue as it has than to change. It takes little or no thought and much less energy. Of course, not all habits are bad. Many have a place in the Yoga life. Good habits accelerate our growth, for example.
- *Environmental Support.* This category includes all those factors outside our own thought process that exert every powerful influence on our choices and quality of life. It is composed of such factors as the expectations of family and friends, of society, and of tradition in general. We are hard wired to be social beings. We care what others think of us. If we seek to do something that is not understood, or approved by those around us, we may face their disapproval or even ostracism. In spiritual endeavors, we utilize environmental support by associating with people whose goal is the same as ours. Used this way, it is a very potent force for positive change.

Considering the powerful stagnating effects of fear and habit, it should be easier to see why change, even if it is for our benefit, can be so difficult to achieve.

Reflection Six: How to Put God First

This teaching to put God at the center of our lives is not limited to Yoga or Eastern faith traditions. For example, Lord Jesus also taught it: *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (Matthew 6.33) In yogic terms, Jesus is encouraging the practice of Ishwara Pranidhana. What are the “things” Jesus is referring to? They are not glitzy, fancy

things, not even core aspects of life: family, friends, and career. He is referring to food, drink, and clothing – the essentials of life! (See Matthew 6.28 – 32)

If God is the Maker and Supplier of all things, it makes sense to put your life in alignment with your Creator before considering or acting on anything else. That is why seekers learn and apply the moral and ethical guidelines of their tradition, such as the Ten Commandments, the yamas and niyamas of Yoga, or the dasa seela of Buddhism, or the most universal guideline found in all faith traditions: the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

To keep ourselves in alignment with God’s Will, we turn to another practice: acceptance. This practice is the force behind the simplest, yet most powerful of all prayers: “*Thy will be done.*” This can be the most difficult prayer to pray because to do it fully and genuinely, we need to dig deep within and find the strength and courage to tap into the faith that already is resting at the core of our being.

If we put our lives in alignment with our Center, then all other aspects of our life will also fall into place. Life will make sense. Suffering will begin to evaporate. In aligning yourself with the Highest, you are actually beginning the process of finding the deepest meaning and purpose of your birth. If a life lacks meaning and purpose, all the beauties that the world offers are at best, distractions. On the other hand, a life with meaning makes the enjoyment of the beauties of life infinitely richer and more satisfying.

Reflection Seven: The Full Force of Yoga at Home

Many who have resolved to experience the full force of Yoga have retreated to forests, caves, or ashrams to lead the renunciate’s life. Leaving behind most of what the world regards as essential for happiness, they observe vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience (to their Guru and the teachings). It requires great understanding, determination, and discipline to retreat from daily concerns, but it allows them the opportunity to fully focus on their goal.

What about householders? Can they pursue the same goal, or is it prevented by the grinds and temptations of daily life? Can a householder’s life also channel the full force of Yoga?

Today, many think that a Self-realized householder is a rare thing. Much of the yogic lore and tradition seems to be implying that this is so. Monks, hermits, and other ascetics populate the panoply of great Yoga masters and sages.

Consider the following line written by the great yogi Swami Vivekananda in his poem praising the renunciate’s life, “*Song of the Sannyasin.*”

No man who thinks of a woman as his wife can ever perfect be.

The implication seems pretty clear. Being married is an immovable obstacle to enlightenment. Oh well, maybe next lifetime... or maybe not.

Let's try looking at that line from within the context of a marriage. A man who thinks of a woman as his wife (or a wife thinking of a man as her husband), who misses the spiritual essence and reality of their partner, is misapprehending who they live with. Their partner is a living expression of the Highest. And so are the children, the boss, the noisy neighbor, and the friends. It is the limited vision that blocks perfection, not the relationship.

What can be greater, more powerful, more spiritual and yogic than being able to perceive your partner as an expression and gateway to God Realization? And what could be more difficult? This spiritual vision is the vital core in discovering the full force of Yoga in home life.

You probably won't easily see God in your partner. We know their human weaknesses and limitations all too well. Staring in their eyes and repeatedly reminding yourself that your partner is God won't work too well, either. The wonderful paradox of spiritual life is this: you will see the Divine in your partner – and in everyone and everything else, for that matter – when you perceive the Divine in you *as you*. So, along with the daily affirmations that “*I am Thine, all is Thine, Thy will be done,*” we need to do two things:

- Clear and steady the mind using as many of the practices of Yoga as possible to experience the God within
- Serve those around you and dedicate (there's that wonderful word again) the fruits of your acts to God. The Bhagavad Gita reminds us that “*the dedicated ever enjoy Supreme Peace. Therefore, live only to serve.*” This is the highest practice of Ishwara Pranidhanam. God is at the center.

There is no reason that you have to move to an ashram or cave. Householder life offers a continuous stream of opportunities to elevate the mind beyond names and forms to the Essence behind them all. We are challenged to constantly remind ourselves of the Essence behind appearances. What incredible lessons we can learn, and how quickly we can overcome the limitations of our spiritual ignorance in householder life!

Renounce the feeling that you are holding the “house.” It's all God's anyway. All that you have are blessings given for your welfare. Concealed within every challenge and problem is the grace to unlock its precious lessons.

With this kind of devotion and understanding, with a selfless, loving heart, you can certainly discover the joy of Self-realization.

Reflection Eight: Finding Time to Get Enlightened

Many students of Yoga make the mistake of thinking that time is the most important element in having success, and one of the most difficult to find. While it is certainly true that we need to make time for such practices as Hatha Yoga and meditation, this need not take time away from our daily responsibilities. We can grow a lot with an hour or so of practice each day. True, you might have to wake up a half hour earlier to do this, but it is more than worth it. The way you accomplish the much vaunted 24-hour a day practice is by changing your outlook. The great sage and Yoga master, Sri Swami Sivananda reminded students of Yoga to, “*Convert every action into Yoga with the magic wand of right attitude.*” By now, you know that the right attitude is dedication, Ishwara Pranidhana.

For those students of Yoga who benefit from regular attendance at Hatha Yoga classes, who teach Yoga, belong to a Yoga organization, or who often attend programs on Yoga philosophy, finding time does present more of a challenge. Family and friends may not be accustomed to, or understand, your interest or intensity. You have a duty to serve your family. Do what’s needed to assure their health, happiness, and welfare. But remember that if you don’t take care of yourself first, your health, well-being, and spiritual self, you will have less to offer them. Learn the lesson your own heart teaches you daily. We know that the body cannot survive very long if the heart stops beating. The heart is a servant of the entire body. Yet, it first pumps blood to itself. This seemingly self-serving act is in reality, a selfless one. The heart knows that if it doesn’t take care of itself first, the entire body will suffer.

Serve your family well. See to their health, comfort, growth and well-being. But don’t forget to do the same for yourself.

Reflection Nine: Are You Ready for the Full Force of Yoga?

If you are ready to experience the full force of Yoga, cultivate the following qualities. They are the powerful tools and faithful companions in the quest for unshakable happiness.

Honesty

Before taking any journey, we need to know two very important things: where we are going and where we are. We have discussed what the spiritual destination is, now you need to find out where you are.

Ask yourself if you are really interested in this, the highest goal of life? Are you willing to make the necessary changes in your attitude and life to achieve it, or do you still believe that there are other things that can bring you the joy you seek?

Courage

Are you willing to live a life that is not, in some ways, conventional? Do you really believe that it is more blessed to give than to receive? Are you ready to use life's "intangibles" as guides for living your life, or do you trust the tangibles a little more? Are you willing to - or at least believe it is possible to - let go of grief, fear, anger, and thoughts of retaliation, and vengeful justice? Can you forgive those that hurt you while you help those that persecute you? Are you willing to let your love flow to one and all? Do you have the courage to cultivate a life that reflects all the qualities you admire most?

There is a wise quote from the author C.S. Lewis regarding courage as an integral part of developing any virtue: *Courage is the form of every virtue at its testing point.* Go within, find your inherent spiritual strength, and act according to what's good and beneficial for all.

Knowledge

It helps to study at least a little to keep the mind focused on the goal and the path. Study can also inspire us – inspiration is the fuel for living the Yoga life.

Read various commentaries of sacred texts and the biographies of great sages and saints.

Integrity

This means to practice what you preach. Are your thoughts, words, and actions in harmony? If not, look within to assess how you really feel, and be vigilant that your words and actions conform, not necessarily to what most people expect, but to spiritual principles.

Practicality

Think of yourself as serving God through all your daily activities. It's not a child crying in the next room, it is God. It is not your family you need to work to support, it is God. Dedicate the fruits of your actions to God in the form of your life partner, children, supervisor, friends, the surly policeman who gives you a speeding ticket, the virus that brought a cold to your nose, and the squirrel who eats your tulips. All have come to teach you and to nurture your spiritual aspirations. The lessons may be difficult to discern at times, but they are there. Have patience and keep mindful, the reason why things happen the way they do will one day become clear.

One other important point should be made here. We need rest and recreation, too. The mind and body can overdo it. Ways to rejuvenate are part of Yoga, too. Just be sure that whatever rest or diversion you engage in leaves you rested, refreshed, and

ready to resume your daily activities. But remember, rest and recreation do not mean a break from your practices. The core of your practices should be continued.

Persistence

Your practices are the very foundation of your spiritual life. Do something every day for your health and peace. Don't miss a single day. But if you do, don't dwell on it. Get re-inspired, reboot yourself and continue the next day. There is a great heroism in having a daily practice. You don't need to find a cave, do austere penances, or fast for forty days. In fact, in many ways, doing that is easier than maintaining a daily practice. The middle path is Yoga. Even if you slip ten thousand times, never give up. No one has succeeded from the beginning.

Loving Kindness

Live to serve others. There is a joy in serving (not *from* serving, but rather *in* serving). There is a love inside you that is like an inferno that will obliterate all your mistakes, weaknesses, every trace of selfishness, and every limitation that stands in the way of Self-realization. But this love is not a simple emotion. It is not so much a feeling, but our instinctive impulse to selfless action.

Love is never idle. It seeks the benefit of everyone. It is a one-way street of giving, without expecting any expression of gratitude in return. Love is its own reward. Love is the opposite of separation, fragmentation, and alienation. It is the force of Oneness. It is eternal, never born, and undying. Love is God and God is love. Love is who you are. It is your True Nature.

Don't wait for that feeling of love to manifest before you act. Love works the opposite way. It flows in and through you when you serve others. Give, give, and give. And don't forget to love yourself, too. You are as worthy of unconditional love as anyone.

Open yourself to selfless love daily. Find ways of expressing it through active service, prayer for others, charity, and sharing the teachings of Yoga.

Conclusion: Follow the Simple Way

If experiencing the full force of Yoga sounds appealing to you, if these principles light even a small fire in your heart, your ultimate peace and joy is certain.

Every day:

- Practice at least some Hatha Yoga, take brisk walks, eat a more balanced yogic diet, do something to improve your health.
- Meditate, pray, chant, engage in any practice to calm, clear, and focus the mind.

- Be wary of the feeling of ownership. It makes the mind more petty and limited. As my Master Sri Gurudev Swami Satchidananda often said: *Everything you call 'mine' is ready to explode one day or other. You have to diffuse those mines if you want to find peace in your life. How? Change your 'mines' to 'things.'*
- Discover the joy of serving others. Without any personal expectations of gain or gratitude, do something for the sake of others.

Let these practices and principles grow in you, and you will grow with them. Give them the proper environment of knowledge, patience, perseverance, and regular association with fellow seekers who can support and help guide you. This is the Yoga life. This is how to experience the full force of Yoga.