

# YOGA IN THE VEDAS

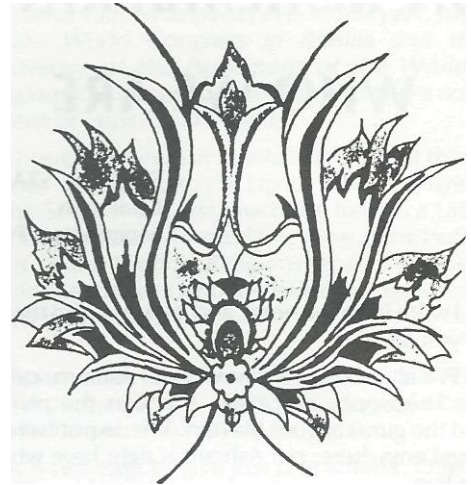
Jeanine Miller, France

What do we mean by *yoga*? Yoga in the West has been thought of only in terms of physical yoga: the exercises, the postures and so forth. But the *yoga* that one discovers in the Vedas has nothing to do with this. The word means union. Union with what? Union with our Higher Self, our inner God or Divinity. Union implies harmony. The first step is thus harmonisation of ourselves — physical, emotional and mental — for we are very complex beings. All these aspects have to be harmonised before anything can be done to bring ourselves into union with the highest, for the highest abides in perfect harmony. The process of harmonising ourselves, leading to its culmination - union - is yoga.

## THEVEDAS

The higher aspect of yoga can be traced to the Vedas. Most swamis place under the umbrella of the word *Vedas* all the holy scriptures of India, but from the orthodox point of view this is incorrect. The Vedas, strictly speaking, are four collections of hymns which were composed a few thousand years ago by the great seers whom we call the rishis at a time when man\* communed with nature far more closely than he does now, at a time when man received visions, when man could hear in his own heart the very pulse of the universe, when he entered into complete absorption with the *devas*. These four collections of hymns are the *Rig Veda* - the Veda of the Divine Sound or Word, the *YajurVeda* - the Veda of the sacrificial formulas, the *Sama Veda* — the Veda of song, and finally the *Atharva Veda*. Atharvan was a great rishi, and the *Atharva Veda*, named after him, is the Veda of prayer or the Veda

\* The word 'man' is used broadly to mean both man and woman.



of the people.

These four are the basic Vedas. To them in time were appended the *Upanishads* which are esoteric treatises dealing with some of the mysteries of the Universe and of ourselves, and often explaining verses from the *Rig Veda*, the oldest of the four Vedas.

The word *Veda* comes from the root *vid* which means *to know*. A second meaning of the word is *to find*. The fundamental meaning of *Veda* is the *real* or *Wisdom knowledge*, the Greek *gnosis*.

## YOGA

In yoga certain disciplines are outlined, such as the restraints, abstention from wrongdoing, and the observances, these being steps towards the harmonisation of the human being. Abstention from harming, from falsehood, from robbing and so forth are the commandments. In relation to the observances, Patanjali puts it succinctly thus: *Purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study and surrender to the Lord*; such being the requirements asked of the ancient candidates for yoga. But what of Westerners? In general we fall very far short of these disciplines. Self-discipline and self-study mean facing ourselves, finding out about ourselves, working upon ourselves, discovering and surrendering to the Divine Will. All this implies a tremendous inner search and is contained in the one little word *tapas*, which will be mentioned further on, that inner discipline whereby the control of the little self, of the emotions and the mind can be achieved. Afterwards come concentration, meditation and *samadhi*. How can we translate *samadhi*? We have not had such a concept in the West, but the Christian mystics speak of ecstasy, so sometimes we translate *samadhi* as such although *samadhi* is not always

ecstasy, but something quite different, a gathering together of all the energies of our being in one-pointedness, piercing through to the very core of being. These, then, are the key concepts of yoga.

### **YOGA AND THE RIG VEDA**

These key concepts can easily be compared with what transpires in the *Rig Veda*, the oldest of the Vedas, little known even to the Hindus because of its outdated language. The language of mythology and poetry is understood with great difficulty. Mythology is the repository of man's cosmic sentiency, man's communion with the Cosmos. The soul projects upon the screen of the Cosmos in a dramatic story its own striving, its own struggling for the light and its own finding, expressed as the conflict between darkness and light, between the Self and the not-self, between right and wrong, between the gods and the demons.

We find in the *Rig Veda* the great battle of Indra, representing mind against the forces of inertia and chaos symbolised by the dragon whose very name means obstruction. The key to many of the myths is hidden in *The Secret Doctrine* and in Jungian psychology - the psychology of the Soul, not the psychology without the Soul which is accepted in the universities. Since the second world war scholars have begun looking into the *Rig Veda* with greater psychological understanding. A basic knowledge of yoga philosophy has also helped. We now have, therefore, a better appreciation of this ageless collection of hymns to the devas which, in spite of being only hymns of praise to the gods, reveals a tremendous civilisation.

I mentioned the observances. These are *purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study, and surrender to the Lord*. How do these compare with what we find in the *Rig Veda*? We must consider these ideas in the context of Rigvedic civilisation.

### **SACRIFICE**

In such context we note that, to the Vedic mind, purification and sacrifice were the two wings on which man grows to Self Realisation, to heaven, to the conquest of the self symbolised as the sun. The Vedic ritual of the sacrifice was performed every day and epitomised the action of give and take. / *give to the fire the best in me*, and the best in the poet very often was the hymn by means of which he expressed his vision, his aspiration, his yearning. As a result he received further inspiration. So there is the ingoing and the outgoing pulsation of life, the offering and the receiving. In participation through the ritual which was a reflection of the Cosmic Order, individuals

learned to integrate themselves in the vast Order and this could only be done through the inner and outer purifying of the self and the coming together in the sacrifice. We have lost the understanding of this concept of purification and sacrifice. Sacrifice does mean to *make sacred*. For such a purpose purification is necessary. Here we find the Rigvedic equivalent to the *observances* of yoga. When it comes to *surrender to the Lord* which implies devotion or *bhakti*, Western and Indian scholars, influenced by the West, claim that there cannot be any *bhakti* in the *Rig Veda*. I claim, however, that the *Rig Veda* is full of hymns which show *bhakti*. Here are some excerpts:

*My songs-of-praise, high-aspiring, speed forth as messengers to Indra....uttered by my spirit to touch his heart.* (Rgv X, 47.7)

*May this song-of-praise be foremost in touching thy heart in blessedness.* (Rgv I, 16.7)

One of the poets is in trouble, and has stopped communing with his God, so he is asking:

*What has become of our friendship of old when we two kept unhindered company? O Varuna, law-abiding, I went into thy mighty mansion, thy thousand-gated home.* (Rgv VII, 88.5)

*With my own heart I commune with the question of how Varuna and I may be united. What gift of mine will he accept unangered? When may I calmly look and find him gracious?* (Rgv VII, 86.1)

We cannot but admit that this is complete devotion.

### **TAPAS**

One of the most important words which holds the key to yoga is *tapas*. It comes from the root *tap* which means to *burn*. *Tapas* is that within us which is burning us, inflaming us to realise our inner fullness which is God. It means self-discipline, self-oblivion, practising meditation and contemplation. So *tapas* combines austerity, purification, self-study, self-discipline and so on. That the word is found in the *Rig Veda* again and again proves that the practice of *tapas* and the knowledge of its essential meaning goes back to remote times. Indeed it was one of the secrets of the rishis. It can be thought of as the *flame power* of meditation. One of the Gods, Indra, was declared to have conquered heaven through his *tapas*. The fervour of his meditation was so great that he was able to reach out even to the supreme light. Indra represents the mind, and it is so expressed in one of the *Brahmanas*. One verse of the *Rig Veda* says that Re, the meditating God, made heaven his special conquest, and not only heaven but the nectar of immortality which is hidden in the third heaven.

Herbert Whone writes:

*When sound in the physical world is uttered, there is interpenetration at all levels, causing resonances to occur at the level of the body, at the psychic level and at the deepest level of creative intelligence - all within the framework of ratio.... The ratio inherent in the sound man finds himself able to utter is a reflection of the ratio of the higher sound of cosmic intelligence. Knowledge and use of this lesser ratio are for man a gateway to his lost source.... (The Hidden Face of Music)*

This passage, unbeknown to its author, holds the key to the understanding of the secret of Vedic *mantra*, of light and sound being one, and of their power of taking you right to the core of yourself. Part of this secret is found in one Sanskrit word (*arc*) which means both *shining* and *singing*. So, one verse says:

*Sing forth a hymn, lofty, profound, for divine Varuna.*

You can translate it as *sing forth* or *shine forth*. To *shine forth* a hymn may sound poetic, but can the logical mind fathom the meaning of this simple phrase? Such simple but striking phrases abound in the Vedas. They give pause for thought, for deepening our approach towards the mysteries of the psyche.

The *mantra* is not fashioned intellectually. It emerges, is aroused, from the depths of the heart. The following verse tells us:

*Men find Agni (the fire, the flame, the creative flame) hidden in the cave, when they have sung their mantra which is fashioned in their heart. (Rgv, 67.2)*

Notice *hidden in the cave*. This archetypal expression is found throughout the ages, in all the traditions but especially in the *Upanishads* as well as the Christian scriptures. Jesus was born in the stable of the human body, in the cave of the human heart. In the darkness of the *cave*, in the *womb* of the mother, grows that seed which will become divine, which, when born, becomes a human being or a soul-infused person. In the cave of the heart also wells forth that sound which rings true, which is the very essence and epitome of our inner being, which, as the *mantra*, can take us back into our innermost centre. This is the esoteric meaning of *rig veda*, the science of the word or sound.

### THE HEART

So now we turn to the last of the great expressions of yoga mentioned in the *Vedas*, and that is: the heart. Patanjali says:

*Awareness of the nature of consciousness is gained by contemplation in the heart. (Yoga Sutras III, 35)*

Why in the heart? Because the heart means the centre of the human being and contemplation in the chakra of the heart awakens us to the understanding of the higher consciousness which, as *buddhi*, radiates through the heart. The only way we can understand this is by going into meditation, for nothing can explain it logically or rationally. The *Rig Veda* itself tells us, for example, that *Varuna placed intelligence in the heart*. Another verse says:

*My ears, my eyes speed after this light lodged here within my heart. (Rgv VI, 9.6)*

The light of consciousness has its root in the heart and the heart is the gateway to the soul. From the soul comes the light, through the heart, which lightens our mind. Again and again the poet refers to *Agni* as *seated in a secret place*, as *bringing to birth within the heart a thought as light*. Again thought, thinking, becomes light. This light which is *Agni* enlightens our darkness, enlightens our mind. *Thought moving from the heart, fashioned in praise, goes to Indra, the Lord.*

### KNOWING THE DIVINE WITHIN

That there were stages for reaching out to the light within is indicated by a few hints. For example:

*In the fourth degree of prayer the sage found the sun till then immersed in gloom. (Rgv V, 40.6)*

St. Theresa also enumerates and explains the *degrees of prayer*. These degrees, therefore, all build up, leading to a supreme illumination or *epiphany* when the *rishi* was *visited* by a divinity. In the above verse the *sun* is the point of illumination. Two further instances could be cited:

*The lordly herdsman of the whole universe, the enlightened one, has entered into me, the simple.... (Rgv, 164.21)*

*I have known this mighty celestial man, refulgent as the sun beyond the darkness. Only by knowing him does one overcome death. No other way is there to go. (Yajur Veda, 31.18)*

Only by knowing the divine within us can we overcome death! Obviously the death of the physical body does not matter any more when you have contacted the God within, the Divine spark; in Christian terminology, the Christ within. Thus:

*Desireless, wise, immortal, self-existent, contented with the essence, lacking nothing is He. One fears not death who has known him, the atman, serene, ageless, ever youthful. (Atharv, X, 8.44)*

The ultimate goal in yoga is union with the

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Transcendent which is the Immanent; hence the conquest of separation, of death. This some of the rishis achieved. The above quotations are among the most beautiful and revealing of the world's religious traditions. The Vedic sages looked upon the loftier light beyond the darkness and thus transformed, realised that from the furthest star right to our innermost heart, burns the same dynamic spark, the fire of creation and regeneration, the spirit that makes everything one, everything new. *He who is in the fire and He who is in the heart, and He who is yonder in the sun, He is One*, says the Maitri Upanishad. Then it is that the sages realised that Deity is that whose

*shadow is death, whose shadow is immortality.* (RgvX, 121.2)

This is indeed the flight from the alone to the Alone.

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