

Meditation and Spiritual Transformation

In August 2015 I attended a seminar with Kausthub Desikachar on Meditation and Spiritual Transformation. It is a fascinating subject, not least because people use these words to mean many different things. This was an approach rooted firmly in the tradition of yoga.

He started by saying that in the past yoga was seen as able to be used for three different functions - *laukika*, to improve the quality of daily life; *vaidika*, to help our spiritual journey, and *cikitsa*, healing, so that we may more easily follow one or both of the former paths. This seminar would look at *vaidika*. The word comes from the root *vid*, to know, (as does the name of India's great teachings, the *Veda-s*). The spiritual journey is thus seen as one of getting to know and understand our self better, including all the different parts of ourself and all our different relationships.

Yoga, as propounded by Patanjali, understands the world as being a very close relationship of two utterly different things: *purusa* (spirit), and *prakriti* (matter). We, being part of the world, are composed of these two disparate parts. *Purusa* can be translated as consciousness, awareness, the witness, the seer, the experiencer. It is also what gives us life, *prana*. *Prakriti* includes our body and senses, mind, emotions and memories, in fact, everything that is not *purusa*, everything that changes. Most very close relationships go through difficult times, and this one is no exception! Over time, as we grow older, we tend to identify more and more with our material side - with our body, our mind, the roles that we take on (gender, parent, job), how we feel people think of us...but none of these things is permanent, none of these things is our very deepest self, consciousness. And because we lose touch with this constant, unchanging part of ourself, we become more prone to anxiety, anger, fear - all sorts of things that would not be such a problem if we were still able to function from an awareness of ourself as something greater than all those things which change.

And not only do we lose our connection to our true self, we also often become at odds with, or even disconnected from, other parts of us - our body and our feelings. Women's magazines ask their readers which part of their body they hate the most! Our society does not encourage us to think kindly of ourselves. Ask someone how they feel, and they often need to think about it. Or we are dissatisfied with who we think we are, and try to be something, or someone, different.

This is one of the main reasons why yoga practice can make us feel so good: in bringing awareness to our body, breath and mind, it brings together all those different parts of us, making them once more a harmonious whole, at one with each other. And as we become

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more in tune with ourself, so we can be a more effective member of our family and of our community, and more aware of our purpose.

Unfortunately, we - like all the rest of the material world - are creatures of habit and of patterns (*samskara* in Sanskrit). So, even though we may feel good after practising, we soon tend to revert to old ways of thinking and behaving. Yoga teaches that we can never get rid of old habits. We can, however, build new ones that ultimately become stronger than the old. This is why it places so much emphasis on daily practice. Repetition is the way to build new habits, whether it is for the body - developing better posture, or becoming stronger or more mobile; or the breath - breathing more calmly, slowly and deeply; or the mind - for instance, replacing the mind's negative judgmentalism towards ourself (I am no good/ugly/stupid/unloveable) with an ability to identify from the heart, the place beyond identities.

Our actions usually come from a connection to the material part of us - memories and feelings associated with our body, mind and senses, and so they are often not actions, but reactions based on our past. When we act from the heart, our actions are linked to *purusa*: we act according to reality, to the actual moment. *Purusa* is free, spontaneous, and unbounded. *Prakriti* only feels comfortable with structures... and structures unfortunately become rigid: they try to keep things the same in a world which is actually changing from moment to moment. *Purusa* teaches us to connect with NOW - this moment, and this moment, and this moment (the first word of the Yoga Sutra-s, of course, is *atha*, now). This is why the goal of yoga, according to Patanjali, is *kaivalya*, freedom, freedom from dependence on structures which are no longer relevant, freedom from the ties of *prakriti*.

The spiritual life is to live freely, moment to moment. This doesn't mean that we don't take the past into account, or that we don't bother to plan for the future....but we retain a connection with the present, we continue to see things anew, so that if things change, we can too. Spiritual transformation is not changing the spirit - it does not change. It is allowing spirit and matter to have a harmonious relationship, in which matter is the good servant of spirit, the true self, but not the master.

All this of course is easy to talk about, less easy to put into practice. This is where yoga again comes into its own, with many ways of helping us to be more aware of our deeper dimensions. This we shall look at in another article.

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He will be giving a seminar in London in 2017, from March 23rd to 26th, on the Chakra-s.