The pat that changed my life

I was introduced to yoga at a very young age, as I was born into a family of yoga practitioners. But as I grew up I practiced asana only occasionally. I never took it up seriously and wholeheartedly, even though I had developed a deep interest in the philosophical aspect of yoga at a very young age. My father, Shri Prabhuji, a Sanskrit scholar and dedicated practitioner of yoga, taught me various texts on Hatha and Raja Yoga, such as the Yoga Sutras, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads with traditional Sanskrit commentaries. At the age of 24 I was already teaching a complete course on Sage Vyasa’s commentary of the Yoga Sutras in Shri Kailas Ashram Brahmavidya Peetha, Rishikesh, thus for the first time in 20 years conducting a course on Yoga Philosophy in this highly respected institute for studying Advaita Vedanta.

Despite all this, I rarely practiced asanas. One of the reasons of this, apart from my own laziness, I must confess, was that asana, treated as merely the physical aspect of yoga, was generally considered an inferior form of yoga than other forms or methods, such as jnana-yoga (yoga of knowledge), bhakti-yoga (yoga of devotion), japa (meditative repetition of a mantra), meditation, worship or scholarly inquiry into the nature of consciousness. This might come as a surprise to many because Rishikesh became a world-renowned centre to study yoga after the Beatles visited it in February 1968 to learn yoga and meditation with their master Maharshi Mahesh Yogi. Furthermore, many great masters who contributed to the dissemination of the yogic wisdom into the modern world, which includes Swami Vivekananda and Swami Sivananda, had studied or lived in Rishikesh. Asana was often accused of strengthening sharira-buddhi (the awareness that ‘I’m this body’), or, in other words, of promoting a body-culture. Hence it was seen as a hindrance to the realization that ‘I’m pure consciousness which transcends the body and the mind.’ Quotations such as “Only that should be considered a proper asana in which constant contemplation on *brahman* (pure consciousness) can occur comfortably, not the other one which is uncomfortable.” (Sage Shankaracarya in Aparokshanubhuti 112) were used to support the misinformed view. Of course there were notable exceptions, but this was the prevailing view held by nearly everybody, especially by those belonging to various scholarly or devotional groups.

I started questioning this view when I saw many of the scholars and senior teachers suffering from serious health problems easily preventable through asana practice. I thought, didn’t our ancient masters teach us that “the body indeed is the first and foremost instrument to cultivate righteousness and wisdom in our life” and thus it should be taken good care of as an instrument to achieve a higher purpose? After all the Vedic masters stated in their final teachings to a graduating student: “Let there be no neglect in one’s health” (Krishna Yajur Veda Taittiriya Aranyaka 7.11.1) That is why the very same Rishis (Vedic masters) who gave to us the deepest teachings of the Vedas and the Upanishads also developed the sciences of Yoga and Ayurveda stating that “the highest foundation of righteousness, wealth, fulfilment of desires and freedom from ignorance lies in good health.” (Caraka Samhita Sutrasthana 1.15) A healthy body is a requirement for self-realization: “Only someone free from diseases can properly know themselves.” “Know thyself while you are still healthy.” (Ayurveda Sutra 1.12 & 15) Even Sage Patanjali lists physical sicknesses as one of the nine hindrances of yoga. (Yoga Sutra 1.30) Ancient yoga masters tell us, “A yogi gets rid of diseases through asana” and “Asana should be practiced because it bestows stillness, good health and slimness of the limbs.” (Hatha Yoga Pradipika 1.17) At home I was seeing my mother leading a normal life despite of two major road accidents and 22 surgeries only thanks to her dedicated practice of yoga. But it seems I needed to see another living example and a push to inspire me to take up asana-practice wholeheartedly.

This came to me when Guruji visited our ashram’s yoga center on 3 January 2011. The duty assigned to me was to welcome Guruji and lead him into the Yoga Hall. At the age of 92 he was as vibrant, radiant, youthful and energetic as I had seen him the last time around 15 years ago. In his address to the gathered yoga students from all parts of the world he spoke about how to be a real sadhaka (spiritual aspirant). (A transcription of Guruji’s speech can be read online on <http://www.iyengaryoga.in/be_a_sadhaka.html> ) His talk changed my understanding of yoga completely. I realized that in asana we find a practical application of what we study in the sublime teachings of the Vedas and the Upanishads.

While walking out of the Yoga Hall Guruji smiled at me, he remembered me as a small child reciting the Vedas and the Upanishads in front of him 15 years ago, gave a very heavy pat on my back as I bowed down to touch his feet, and said, “You should practice.” I could really feel the energy flowing from his hand as he lovingly patted on my back. It was a kind of feeling I will never forget in my life. There was tremendous love in it, yet there was simultaneously a call to wake up and a kind of warning in it. Today when I remember this incident and the fact that very soon after this incident I started joining the yoga classes of my mother Usha Devi, who studied with Guruji for many decades, very regularly, I am reminded of what Sage Patanjali and Vyasa state in the Yoga Sutras, “When a yogi is firmly established in truthfulness, his speech becomes capable of inspiring noble actions and their fruits.” “If he merely says to an unrighteous person, ‘Become righteous!’ he becomes righteous.” (Vyasa’s commentary on Yoga Sutra 2.36) Undoubtedly, the short meeting with Guruji and his loving pat on my back had changed something deep within me on a very subtle level. He said “Practice!” and I started doing it.

Today after practicing for more than four years I realize that asana promotes a body-culture only if practiced just to stretch the body, but certainly not if practiced to expand one’s awareness, as taught by Guruji; certainly not if one works through asana with the body to acquire an experiential direct understanding of one’s consciousness. Then asana becomes a door to enter within through the first layer of our being, the annamaya kosha (the physical layer of the Self), in to the deeper layers of our being. Then asana becomes the most important practical step to go within. It is the firm practical foundation on which the beautiful mansion of living spirituality is to be built. Endurance can never be developed without practicing asanas. There can be no long-lasting mental stability and relaxation without first acquiring physical relaxation and stability through asanas. A life in accordance to the principle of brahmacarya will remain a far-fetched dream without them. Every person wishing to tread either the path of meditation or contemplation of the inner Self (atman) should prepare themselves first on a physical level through asana. Undoubtedly, asana means to be seated within oneself: “Asana means to be seated in one’s own essential nature. The definition of asana is to sit attentively and with awareness in any posture of one’s choice.” (Guru Gorakshanatha’s Siddha-Siddhanta-Paddhati 2.34). But only after years of practice can someone really master the proper posture which will give rise to stillness and will not be harmful for the body, thus enabling them to enter the inner mysterious depths of consciousness and then sit there. But I might have never understood all this, if I hadn’t met Guruji on that day.

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