

Jnâna-Yoga: Yoga of Discernment and Self-Transcendence

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We all seek to maximize happiness and minimize pain and suffering. Beneath this fundamental theme is the urge to find our true identity. Few of us are aware of this process or the reason for much of what we do and how we relate to life. Yoga brings awareness to this ongoing project of largely unconscious self-expression and quest for identity. Ken Wilber has called this primal urge the Atman Project, which is the *âtman* or transcendental Self gazing at itself in the mirror of conditioned existence (*samsâra*). Most of human life consists in the Self mistaking its various reflections for its real nature, which in actuality transcends all that is conditional and finite. Yoga is the Atman Project at its finest: the conscious process of recovering our ultimate identity beyond all assumed roles and secondary identities.

Self-realization—the recovery of our true identity as the *âtman*—depends on applying discernment to everything that is presenting itself to our conscious awareness, realizing that whatever is an object of consciousness is necessarily not the Self, which is the ultimate or transcendental Subject. The classic process of this *via negativais* epitomized in the insight “I am not this” (*idam na aham*), “I am not that” (*tan na aham*). The formulaic expression of this method is *neti-neti* (“not thus, not thus”), which was first taught in the early *Upanishads*, the esoteric or gnostic scriptures concluding the Vedic revelatory literature. To this classic process the modern Indian sage Ramana Maharshi provided a complementary approach in the contemplative question “Who am I?” Whereas the former process focuses on the object of consciousness and its unreal (not necessarily illusory) quality, the latter approach has the transcendental Subject as its direct target. For when we inquire “Who am I?” we are inevitably led to a series of perceptions about ourselves, which we recognize to be limited and therefore not indicative of our true identity.

Thus “Who am I?” might give rise to the notion that we are our body, but upon closer inspection we realize that this is not the case, that consciousness is not inevitably bound up with our physical existence. Or we might think that we are the mind, but then, again upon closer inspection, we recognize that the mind too is merely a superimposition upon the transcendental Self, which is pure Being-Consciousness quite free from thought or emotion. Deep self-inquiry in the form that Ramana Maharshi taught gradually reveals to us our various layers of habitual misidentification: “I am of a certain gender, race, age, nationality with such and such a social and educational background” etc. If we persist in the exercise of radical self-inquiry (“Who am I?”), the sage of South India assured us, we will discover our true identity.

During this process of meditative self-inspection—called *âtma-vicâra* in Sanskrit—we automatically, if step by step, transcend ourselves. The fact that self-transcendence is even possible indicates that Consciousness exceeds our biological and mental-psychological conditioning. If self-transcendence is so natural to our being, why does it appear to be so difficult? The simple answer is that our conditioning to identify not with our true Self but any number of substitute identities is extraordinarily strong and requires a powerful sustained effort on our part to be overcome. We must dismantle our

misidentifications as we become progressively aware of them, not merely once but over and over again until this new habit of discernment (*viveka*) is firmly established. Then, regardless of the circumstance, we can remain in a witnessing disposition instead of losing ourselves in our habit patterns.

The discovery of the Self as the witness (*sākshin*) of all mental contents—whatever the level or state of consciousness—is a most important event in our life as spiritual practitioners. This witnessing is not merely an intellectual activity, for the intellect is transcended in the process of witnessing. Rather it is a tentative or, when the process has fulfilled itself, the actual and permanent recovery of our Self-Identity. The Yoga of witnessing is *buddhi-yoga*, the yogic path of wisdom through which we perceive our habitual and therefore binding (karmic) patterns of thought and behavior. The term *buddhi* stems from the same verbal root (*budh*) as *bodha* meaning “enlightenment/awakening” and *buddha* (“awakened”). Thus when wisdom dawns in us, our sense of identity shifts from the body and mind and the external world to the witnessing Self. To the degree that this shift has occurred within us we are free. This inner freedom from our karmic conditioning coincides with our realization of undiluted happiness or bliss (*ānanda*), which, like Being and Consciousness is a hallmark of the transcendental Self.

Self-realization is the end of all suffering (*duhkha*). This is the highest human objective. We are not born to suffer. Suffering is merely a function of our spiritual ignorance (*avidyā*), which occludes our innermost identity, the *âtman*.

When we have realized the *âtman*, the body, the mind, and the world at large cease to be objects for us. We recognize them as our very Self. Then our Self-vision (*âtma-darshana*) encircles everything. We realize ourselves as the ultimate essence and foundation of all beings and things. Yet we no longer fix on particular beings and things—i.e., on a particular body, mind, or world—as demarcating us. We see through all eyes, we hear through all ears, breathe through every breathing being in the universe, illuminate every single mind, shine in every star, and also are spread out infinitely in the interstices between galaxies and even between the infinite universes that constitute the cells of our space-transcending, time-transcending Being-Consciousness (*sac-cid*).

Tat tvam asi! That art thou!

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