

Yoga and Christianity

Foundations of a Christian-spiritual way of meditation and practice.

By Heinz Grill, 1998

Raja yoga and its synthesis with Christian spirituality

Raja yoga was developed in India, about 200 years BC by the wise seer and Sanskrit grammar teacher Patañjali. This path, divided into eight stages, describes a kind of law for the development of concentration and will and gives, in a brief way in the so-called *raja yoga* sutra, interpretations as to how the super-consciousness can be won as a spiritual experience. The name *raja* means king, the yoga got its name since it appears like a royal system, which gradually leads up to a crown of spiritual experience. *Raja yoga* may be viewed as a kind of sum or compilation of a disciplined yoga path, which strives as its highest goal for the development of concentration and perfect pure awareness, in a silent thought-sense. The short aphorisms, but yet very detailed psychological law of *raja yoga* need some additional information and interpretation today, so that it can be grasped and understood by the present consciousness of our time. First, however, we want to outline *raja yoga* with the most essential points.

1. *Yama*: code of conduct

- *ahimsa*:
 - Non-violence in all actions, words and works, in the essence of expressions as the highest ideal of life.
- *satya*:
 - Truth, search for truth, justice, the highest veneration of all truth and righteousness; Truth as the highest human principle and as an expression of divine creation
- *asteya* :
 - don't steal; the psychic principle of material freedom; Freedom from possession; Non-identification with fame, wealth and success.
- *brahmacarya*:
 - Purity of desires; Abstinence from sexuality and all its related and compensated forms; the beauty of the pure ideal of physicality.
- *aparigraha*:
 - not collecting and hoarding; the psychological principle of negating a worldly illusion and a mentality striving for security.

2. *Niyama*: Life observances

- *saucha*:
 - Mental and physical purity; purity of passionate thoughts.
- *santosa*
 - Contentment, independence from goals within the world of polarity.
- *tapas*
 - Fire, discipline, untiring thirst for action for the highest perfection.
- *svadhyaya*
 - Studying scriptures.
- *isvara-pranidhana*
 - Devotion to the chosen deity, to the Lord in his revelation and form; Devotion to the saint.

3. *Asana*

- Posture, attitude, body exercise, meditation posture, feeling of awe for God; devotion in the form of offering the body in its chosen artistic posture.

4. *Pranayama*

- Control of breathing and control of subtle currents and energies; Feeling the cosmic dimension of the breath.

5. Pratyahara

- Withdrawal of the senses from worldly concerns, inwards towards the *antara atman* or to the essential substance; withdrawal of the senses from the world of the body and its projective radiation.

6. Dharana

- Concentration on a chosen object; alert attentiveness in the thought to an emotionally free region; observation of one's own thoughts and feelings as fleeting impressions of the restless mentality.

7. Dhyana

- Uninterrupted attention to the object of contemplation and becoming one with the object; remaining in the deeper, awake and emotion-free sense; pure contemplation of meaning and peace in mentality; completely projection-free thought perception.

8. Samadhi

- Super-consciousness; the pure meaning; the pure thought level in the fulfillment of thought through the joy of the unmanifest soul.

With a systematically structured gradual path, there is a danger for the aspirant that they will orientate themselves towards a one-sided fixation of the will and towards subjective trance states and not take in the transforming high grace of a soul into themselves. For our present time we must recognize that high, truth which emerges from the rebirth of a new creative spirit itself and which, through its mysterious and imponderable character can transform the physical and psychological life of our existence. *Raja yoga*, with its eight levels requires today an additional interpretation and a careful, well-considered and well-differentiated development of meaning for the existing and used terms of this system. The yoga of Patañjali describes in the sutras a number of deep, so-called imaginations, which are based on experience and insights into the spiritual world. These insights from Patañjali go back over two thousand years in the past, and they can, therefore, hardly be understood and practiced by our present, and very differently constituted mentality. Perhaps it will be interesting to look for the spirit of Patañjali, his personality and his spiritual heritage in the supersensible world. Patañjali and his spirit were reborn in the medieval scholastic period. His spiritual legacy is a soul or a mental faculty for a high level of thought systematization. The system of *raja yoga* represents a great mental performance, which Patañjali possessed from his imaginative ability to see, and from his ability to combine, which was acquired from Sanskrit grammar and his perception to connections. His thoughts were also guided from a very great Indian yoga master at the time, whose name is no longer known today, and who had extremely high abilities, so-called siddhi or supersensible magical powers. Patañjali was a master of this mental recording and a short, mental, aphoristic reproducing. In this sense, *raja yoga* has a first typical western character trait, because this way of thinking and systematizing a spiritual path corresponds more to the occidental mentality. The soul of Patañjali gives that power, which leads the thought life into a clearer form, into a relational combining and system-based perception. For this reason, we find in those schools who choose *raja yoga* as their main meditation theme, very clear psychological philosophical thought images. The soul of Patañjali radiates through this yoga with its hidden power.

The system itself would, however, without meditation on the sutras, once again be an orientation-aid, which hardly has any real, inner, transforming value. At first it is much more like a subtle psychological structuring or like a well-anchored ladder, which represents a systematic instruction and defining possibility for spirit schooling. *Raja yoga* is less the starting point for developing experiences, it is in its entire representation rather, the imaginative spiritual result of a great, imagined and realized experience. It is like a short psychological work of art of a great, inner vision. The sutra describe the end of a realization and, therefore, have, in spite of their intellectual clarity and simplicity, an encoded character.

Such a high and ideal art, as developed by the great seers and teachers of the Indian people, can in the rarest cases be imitated and re-practiced by our completely different mental consciousness. For these reasons, preparatory efforts in the form of simpler mental exercises and images, as well as imagining the reality of the mind, prove to be very helpful. For a Christian yoga we strive for a systematic meditation training and

the direct knowledge of the thought in its transcendent reality. The pure thought in its light existence belongs in its vision and reality to the highest and supersensible level, which in the sense of *raja yoga* would correspond to the eighth member, the *samadhi*.

Furthermore, it seems helpful, if the light of attention is drawn to the way in which the scriptures act upon us and speak to us in what they say. Today the terms require, as already mentioned, careful consideration and a finely tuned inner direction of reference. The terms, which Patañjali used emerged in the lively observation of a great teacher or guru who was able to accomplish materializations and much more, and so he could start from an assessment close to life. The approach to the terms today not only a theological or abstract philosophical or exegetical endeavor, it is rather connected with a deep empathy and a first inner visionary work of meditation.

For this preparatory work it seems helpful to carefully describe and illustrate the terms used here in the sense of an integral yoga. What is a creative imagination, what is a spiritual inspiration and what is the highest level of intuition? The level of imagination describes the essential view of the thought, the essential vision and essential vision in relation to the thought processes and one's own mentality. The thought appears, to the perception and observation, like a light from heaven, like a star in its radiant sparkle, that expresses joy and ease. The imaginations are pure thoughts, which weave almost weightlessly over the body and which carry one expansive idea and a simple form of blessedness. The *raja yoga* sutra carry this light of blessedness and purity in their expression. Most of the words of the saints and initiates are imaginations, which describe a lawfulness of the creation of the world. These imaginations carry within them the natural power to enlighten one's thoughts and to inspire the aspirant's inner intentions.

A further and heightened level is that of creative inspiration. Inspired thought is the living inner word, it is spirit and it is life, it is light and it is truth. Inspiration is the inner of heaven's light, the delightful and melodious tone of the spirit, the fine melody of the word, the infinitely sensitive soul being, glory and art at the same time in the expression of the word, the soul in connection with prophecy itself. Inspiration is an intensification in the imagination and not only brings forth an observing dimension of spirit, but a self-fulfilling and subtle-feeling perception in the middle of one's own being. The inspired words carry a deep subtle-feeling power of the soul in their inner, and therefore they can give the reader an immediate idea of the soul. The words bestow delight and love, expanse and freedom, inwardness and blessedness. Through reading inspirational scriptures we take up the direct grace of the soul.

The next level, intuition, is after inspiration, it is the highest intensification and perfection in the forming of thoughts and realization of thought. At this stage the perfectly pure thought appears, which has become free from all wishes, projections of the flesh and from all feelings and needs of the earthly world, and works in its direct sublimity and purity. This thought is no longer a being bound to thinking, but it is God himself, and it forms direct access to the highest. The thought has become a self and its own nature in spirit. This thought, from intuition, has the greatest and highest uplifting power, which the reader notices in a silent, inner peace and in an inexpressible subtle-feeling for truth. The thought has become love and it is in itself a direct, creative expression of the highest. Through reading intuitive thoughts, which have a special inner claim, we receive the high grace of holiness and the highest revelation of the spirit, and this has a strengthening effect on our individuality and on the creative formation of personality.

What meaning can these imaginations, inspirations and intuitions have for the formation of the *raja yoga* path in its eight steps? The thoughts out of the levels of creative being carry a supersensible logic or a deep force of law, a sovereign enlightenment capacity or a moving soul, a love within them that does not come from flesh and blood. And so from the world beyond, these thoughts can enlighten and liberate the individual being. The path proceeding from these thoughts begins, therefore, generally speaking, from above or proceeding from *samadhi* downwards and slowly forms into the various limbs of yoga. *samadhi* means, in a simple sense, something like the meaning that remains after the dissolution of all dualities: *tad-eva-artha-matra-nirbhasam svarupa-su-nyam iva samadhi*. And to this inner meaning or to the innermost being of the thought, we must be concerned. From this light and from this soul like, over-arching thought life the lower levels of the whole of *raja yoga* receive that deep soul and deep inner warmth, which is necessary for every practical realization of personal being. Yoga today begins, paradoxically, in that place, which eludes

its locality through its its own mysteriousness. **For some it might be shaped out in a step by step formation from the lower limbs and rise to its higher ones, and for others it might begin in the middle with asana exercises and pranayama exercises or with concentration exercises. The starting point is different from the outer limbs and mysterious from its inner alignment. The inner, beginning yoga activity of the soul in its mystery, however, does not begin, as one might think from the coarser to the finer, rather, it takes its way from the light to the manifest and moves from the spirit into matter in an often paradoxical game. For this reason, the outer system of a described path appears to have a relative value, while the inner activity that we take up with ourselves, with the formulations and concepts that we learn to shape productively, is of major importance. Yoga in a synthesis and integral unity leads the seeking heart and the struggling for truth mentality, out of particular inspirational thoughts into the world with its many different expressions.**

The psychological system of raja-yoga lays its foundations essentially on the ethical moral rules and on a corresponding purity of the conditions of existence. These rules are like the basic foundations of a house, upon which the walls of the further stages and limbs will only gradually rise up. The crown of the building is the top floor of *samadhi*, that is only gained after the basic steps and the careful construction of the wall in the developing concentration. Raja yoga, however, is more the finished building and gives the image of an architecture in a very perfect and vivid way. Its expressive strength in the image and in the definition of the words has perhaps a timeless and thus universal meaning in yoga. The differences that arise through the development of time and through the differences in mentalities, are less in the definition of the words, but more in the type and use of the relevant building materials. The building of rules and the conditions for the development of concentration, the endeavors for complete integrity and well-ordered discipline, as well as the classification of life, are probably always valid for all times and zones of a spiritual development of consciousness. The materials for this change, and these modifications must receive an appropriate assessment. Perhaps the picture of the house and its structural engineering can explain the facts in more detail. When a house is built with bricks, mortar, wood, and connecting materials, it appears to be closed in itself from the outside world. If it is, however, made of crystals or of glass suddenly the inside appears like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the upper like the lower, and the light lives equally in all corners. Our current mentality may on the one hand be very far removed from any transcendence and spiritual reality, and yet it shapes in its innermost center that hidden seed of an inexpressible creative power that actually rests within us and that we have to use to build a transparent building of yoga. Self-consciousness is the key point, and in its light transcendence it becomes the builder of the building with yoga, and it is this center and the spiritual part in us in the significant meaning of the level of thought, and since this is in us, we create through an endless effort and love for the significant meaning and its realization in the transparent enduring work of yoga.

The path of yoga certainly needs a high ethos and a very clear, inner, positive attitude and affirmation to life in order to shape it out. For our time, however, and for our very worldly life it would be a very strange and stressful attitude to life, if we have to translate the thoughts of *yama* and *niyama* only from our own strength and exertion. What is the ideal life in *satya*, in truth of the pure commandment? What is the truth in the art of speech and in the formulation of an independent creative attitude towards life? Do we not speak continuously from and about false testimonies, due to a lack of inner knowledge and insight into the eternal laws? Isn't it a lie if the tongue only philosophizes about the everyday problems of existence and perhaps makes a few petty claims based on its own self-created wisdom? Or may the Western citizen speak at all of a law not to steal and with this defend attachments, property rights and possessions? The laws and life-rules of yoga carry for the simple, common and natural religious understanding a high ethos that is important for life, which has a general validity for sincere, social and moral community building, and for a deeper philosophical judgment they carry an inner metaphysical and high secret in their words, which is only accessible through the development of an initiation. Initiation is love, which works in its own will and flows from one personality to another and will in turn reveal itself through the personality. The laws of *yama* and *niyama* are, in the highest sense, love itself.

For the first steps on the path of yoga observations can be directed to the thoughts and their spiritual meaning can be directed. Perhaps the aspirant on the path of yoga might think that *samadhi*, the so-called super-consciousness, always equates to an extinction of personal nature and a complete silence of thoughts.

samadhi further carries, however, an inner secret and a knowledge like a soul in its inner. *samadhi* is the raised, looking out of itself soul or the result of a completely separate soul, which at the same time maintains the consciousness in a pure sense-meaning and bliss. The thoughts and feelings may not even merge completely into the sphere of nirvana or extinction. The state in super-consciousness is like an overflowing life of light, which is as if coming from heaven or from within the thought and which looks at all other thoughts, moods of the body and fleeting impressions of the mind with peace, tranquility, equanimity and delightful freedom. The experience, in the moment of the opened curtain, is suffused with soul and with that pure knowledge of a higher freedom and a perfect present consciousness of reality.

So that we can come to an approximate idea of the not only empty, but fulfilled state of *samadhi*, contemplating the thought itself helps us. The contemplation of thoughts is a useful starting point for meditation and for all endeavors and all exercises. What is the thought, and what is the particular value of an inspired thought? In every thought lives not only a formal meaning, but in it, exists a fine substance and imponderable, inner, spiritual being. The thoughts of saints and wise personalities, who realised the highest secret, have a spiritual value or, as the modern esoteric says, a kind of energy, which can illuminate and fuel the heart and mentality. Reading inspirational writings and meditating on the words and thoughts of saints leads on the one hand to a better basis of understanding of the essential questions of existence and, leads in other ways, to an inner touching of the soul with its very own mystery. Inspirational texts give the heart to meditation and, through their **soul-like/spiritual character**, lead the petty and one-sided, limited thoughts of the mentality into a much wider, daring and high view to reality. From these thoughts and the ideas and sensations resulting from them, deeper sensory perceptions and first experiences awaken, which contribute to the purity and wise insightful knowledge power in the personal being.

The stages of *dhyana*, meditation, *dharana*, of concentration, and of *pratyahara*, the withdrawal of the worldly senses gain, through these preparations and discerning criteria, a meaning that is more independent and liberating from the strict will and from the one-sided vital orientation towards success. The strict building of *raja yoga* will soon receive a light, which makes it more permeable within its walls. *dhyana* is the word for 'meditation', and according to our orientation suggested here, it is synonymous with resting and perceiving in the soul or in sacred gnosis, *vijñana-maya-kōsa*. The meditation arises from a self-existent light and is based in the solid structure of the ether. The deep sense, which is a fulfilling love and does not radiate from the flesh and blood or projective, psychological levels of experience, but from the mystery of a grace shrouded in the soul itself, brings the light of meditation into the various levels of shaping out. From this light or from this soul being the consciousness is detached from the body or, in other words, the ties of the old inheritance are loosened from the soul. The *purusa*, as it is known in *raja yoga*, recognizes the determinations of being and modifications of nature and thus gains the guidance over its *prakṛti* (nature). The *purusa* detaches itself, in a certain sense, from the *prakṛti* and recognizes the overriding unity, which is in *brahman* or a greater, vitality and mentality that is a completely, otherworldly and sublime reality. Concentration also describes a detachment from old inherited patterns or traditional fixed ideas and places thinking on a pure, illumined level of thought. The thought may not necessarily disappear from its reality, but it becomes the soul and its overseeing and free being-existence. This process of detachment and separation of the soul from the physical, projective currents and patterns, from all painful and excited feelings and from the dominant radiance of the desiring flesh, is a process of concentration and may receive its name as *dharana*. *dharana* is not the extinction of a thinking or a perception, but it is a pure form of consciousness that unfolds above the emotional or bound body currents.

On this path of creative confrontation, the word *pratyahara* gains a newer, broader and pictorially real content. *pratyahara* is resting in the created reality of the image itself. The aspirant on their path of truth could very easily succumb to a conceptual fallacy. In the traditional sense, *pratyahara* means the withdrawal of the senses from the objects of the outside world. Where does the practitioner, however, direct their attention? The danger of bodily and mystical-emotional sinking would be very easily possible from the meaning of the word. *pratyahara* should, however, be seen as a glimpse into the bodily and organic interior. The secret of *pratyahara* lies in paying attention to the highest essence and thus on the soul content of a text or on other chosen objects for meditation. The light of attentiveness, therefore, slides quite soon past the formal meanings of the words of a message, a thing, an ideal or a name, and turns to the deeper, inner nature of the imponderable and ineffable dimension and creates a real idea for itself through creative examination,

which becomes the image and becomes the bearer of inner meaning. In *pratyahara*, therefore, the eyes and wider senses may in a natural way remain open, and yet they must, accompanied by a deeper sense of thought, explore the inner secret of their outer vision.

A further and more elementary level of *raja yoga* is the so-called *pranayama*, which means something like 'the control of the life force' or *prana*, the life energies. For this purpose, in the classical sense, the yogin uses various cleansing and energising breathing exercises, which reach in a very intense way into the vegetative nervous system and prepare newer control rhythms over the body for the psyche. For a Christian yoga or, more simply said, for a comprehensive synthesis in spirituality, these steps of breath and energy control can very easily create distractions and steer the goal in too much of a body-bound direction. The preparation in yoga, therefore, foregoes the classical *pranayama* exercises and first develops the somewhat less effective, but nevertheless more sensible and safe consciousness of the breath. The breath remains in a free flow during all mental and physical exercises. Attention follows the quality and rhythm of the breath and discovers in the eternal stream, a great cosmic vision. The breath is the cosmic companion of our existence. For practicing yoga here in the West, this free use of breathing exercises seems to be very favorable, since we have lost a feeling for the breath and its cosmic existence. The breath is usually so much entangled with thinking or with vital feelings, so that it usually needs a gentle training over a longer period of time, which brings it closer to its original expansiveness and quality.

One of the most important and most easily accessible areas of yoga is *asana*, the so-called postures of yoga. In the beginning the practitioner put the whole meaning of yoga in *padmasana*, in the lotus posture, which is probably the most suitable meditation posture. The many physical exercises, which exist in hatha-yoga, join together to form a fixed system, which above all through the physical body and through the energy centers in it, prepares the *cakra*, the appropriate energetic space for calm and equanimity. These physical exercises can in certain circumstances contribute to considerable difficulties and misunderstandings in Christian yoga, since they all too easily lead to an overemphasis on physical health and vital well-being. The sense of physical exercise lies in the striving for spiritual perfection and the realization of a soul, which lies beyond all tangible and perceptible radiations of the blood. This soul is the *paratman* or the highest reality, it is God himself, who is to find an integral form in us. Yoga with the physical exercises can, however, lead in the right understanding to an aesthetic and artistic field of work, in which the body is surrendered with reverence to the ground of this earth, and practice becomes an inner humble bow to the Creator. The way of practice can rise to a prayer and become free from sensory attachments by training the thought, subtle feelings and will. An *asana* expresses, in this sense, an imperceptible joy, an unobtrusive beauty and love.

For quick progress in yoga, the aspirant must always very precisely and repeatedly read the thoughts of their teacher or the thoughts of holy scriptures and inspirational texts. They have to take it in, like nutrition, repeatedly, and through active confrontation think over and contemplate on them. Then these thoughts will lead to fruitful ideas and sensations. The *niyama* rules, which are five in number, are not tied to a static and monotonous attitude, but rather they move life with a constantly renewing, deepening and transforming consciousness. Satisfaction, *santosa*, taken as an example, should not be the forced result of one-sided asceticism and withdrawal from life. Without the moving power of consciousness and without the constantly repeated meaning of an expanding consciousness, it would be more of a narrowness than a real foundation of life. Satisfaction is certainly only possible in the long term for those who are oriented towards a high and highest goal, which exceeds earthly needs and thus revitalises all given dependencies, failures and conflicts that everyday life raises. The *niyama* rules acquire a certain individual sense, when the aspirant remains in the living stream of development and wishes to take up their life with inspirational thoughts of high scriptures and initiated teachers with natural interest and joyful concern.

The *yama* or so-called rules certainly described the highest demand on the path of *raja yoga*. In a less demanding sense, we may be content with sincere observance of the laws. In a deeply esoteric-Christian sense, however, this obeying of the rules is not enough. The path of the realization of the highest self or of the *paratman* leads over many years to profound changes in the familiar conditions of the personal being. We have a name and this name is given to us through our parents. This name and the associated idea of a personality does not remain, however, over the years of deep spiritual training receive. We practice yoga and struggle for knowledge of the supersensible worlds, we strive for purity in character and a growth in the

ability to love. With the devotion to the highest conceivable and possible ideal, which we call 'God', and with the help of dedication to the holy scriptures and a loving devotion to the saints, and with the practice of yoga, that seed of an other worldly and higher substance flourishes, which wants to express itself from within in a slow way through the mental, vital and physical being. It is truly the deeply Christian countenance, which works through humanity from within over the days and nights and very slowly leads the individual as well as the whole to his own image. The name, which we received from birth will one day be supplemented by a new name.

The path of realization of yoga leads to a certain self-surrender or to a holding back from old, hereditary patterns and participates in the gracious, predestination of the thoughts of the saints. From self-surrender follows self-respect as a greater, nobler feeling of personality, and on self-respect follows self-discovery as an inner, deep participation in the life and destiny of great people. The *yama* rules, with *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacarya* and *aparigraha*, will one day become a direct expression of our own integral personal being.