

A Flexible Mind

MANY OF US WHO ARE INTERESTED IN YOGA SPEND A LOT OF TIME KEEPING OUR BODIES FLEXIBLE, BUT WHAT ABOUT OUR MINDS? HOW MANY OF US GIVE OUR MINDS THE SAME ATTENTION? YOGA PROVIDES US WITH THE ULTIMATE PRACTICES FOR MAINTAINING MENTAL FLEXIBILITY, HELPING US REACH THE SPIRITUAL GOAL. THE BENEFITS ALSO SPILL OVER INTO DAY-TO-DAY LIVING.

BY ELIZABETH DENLEY

What does it mean to have a flexible mind? Stop and reflect on it for a moment. Flexibility is the same quality, whether it relates to a plant, a building, a human body or a human mind. Flexibility is the ability to adapt, to be willing to change, to be open, to respond with sensitivity. It is the opposite of rigidity, and for the mind rigidity includes fixed, immovable habits and narrow-minded views on what is right or wrong, good or bad, intelligent or stupid, just or unjust etc. A flexible mind is not locked in to set ways of viewing the world. A flexible mind is not prejudiced.

All spiritual traditions have recognised the importance of a clear, simple, open, flexible mind in spiritual practice and evolution. It is not hard to understand why, as the mind is our instrument for experiencing the internal states, for uncovering the inner divinity, for experiencing the perfect bliss of being happy under all circumstances, and becoming one with the ultimate – yoga. The spiritual journey

is one of wonder, and of uncovering the vast inner universe. There is no room for rigidity when venturing into the unknown!

FLEXIBILITY AND EMPTINESS

In the Zen Buddhist tradition it is called *shoshin*, original mind or beginners mind. Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki says: "If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

He also says: "People who know the state of emptiness will always be able to dissolve their problems by constancy."

What does he mean by constancy? The unchanging ability to accept things as they are, with no particular effort involved, appreciating everything, with a mind that is soft and open enough to understand things as they are. "It is the readiness of the mind that is wisdom...wisdom is not something to learn. Wisdom is something which will come out of

your mindfulness. So the point is to be ready for observing things, and to be ready for thinking. This is called emptiness of your mind."

The Shamans of Mexico understand the same principle. Those on this spiritual path are called seers or warriors, and many of their practices are designed to shut down the internal talk, the restless internal chatter of the mind.

Carlos Castaneda writes²: "We talk to ourselves incessantly about our world. In fact we maintain our world with our internal talk. And whenever we finish talking to ourselves about ourselves and our world, the world is always as it should be. We renew it, we rekindle it with life, we uphold it with our internal talk. Not only that, but we also choose our paths as we talk to ourselves. Thus we repeat the same choices over and over until the day we die, because we keep on repeating the same internal talk over and over until the day we die. A warrior is aware of this and strives to stop his internal talk."

Any serious spiritual practice will include techniques for cleaning the mind of the past impressions (*samskaras*) that keep us locked into habits and tendencies and perpetuate our internal talk. Only then is there the possibility of emptiness and flexibility of the mind. In yoga, we find that the techniques for cleaning the mind have been developed and refined over thousands of years of practical experience. This is especially so in the practice of *raja* yoga, the yoga of the mind. Cleaning of the mind is done every day in the *Sahaj Marg* system of *raja* yoga, in the same way that we take a shower or bath to clean the body every day.

WHAT PREVENTS MENTAL FLEXIBILITY?

We regularly clean our houses, our cars, our clothes, and our bodies, because we know that without such maintenance they would become caked with dirt, grime and rubbish, and would eventually become dysfunctional. Imagine a house that has been lived in by a family for 30 years and never been cleaned! Yet how many of us clean our minds regularly to remove the build-up of mental grime and rubbish that we accumulate through our senses, our emotions, and our reactions and attitudes to the world? Think of all the past impressions that have accumulated throughout this lifetime, and past lifetimes, and never been cleaned out! Gradually over time these impressions harden our world view into something fixed and inflexible. No wonder people find it difficult to change! Unless we remove the root cause of our tendencies and attitudes, it is very difficult to change.

This pattern of accumulating mental impressions can be observed through human development. When we are born, we have such innocence, openness and flexibility. As babies, we are like a painter's fresh clean canvas, full of potential. As we grow in childhood, we start to take up impressions from the world around us, but still there is a sense of open-mindedness and flexibility. Shri Parthasarathi Rajagopalachari (Chariji), the living Master, the guru of *Sahaj Marg* says³: "Observing little children growing up around me, I have nothing but wonder, and a sense of tremendous gratitude, for the amazing rapidity with which they shed memories – of persons, places and things!" He also says: "For me, spirituality is nothing more than becoming like a child, because the ego is what is associated with becoming adult."

Chariji helps us see that this openness and flexibility of mind allows us to look at the world with wonder: "It is like the wonder in the eyes of a child – anything it sees is wonderful. Is wonder in the things that we see, or in the way in which we look at things?"⁴

Wonder has always been the means by which yogis have observed the world and developed yogic philosophy as a result of practical experience. Shri Ram Chandra (Babuji) writes⁵: "Philosophy is a subject not based on reason but intuition. It starts not from 'doubt' as most of the western philosophers hold, but from 'wonder.'" Without this capacity to wonder, we cannot observe and accept the universe as it is. We are instead looking at the world through the distorted perception of our own past impressions. It is like looking at beautiful scenery through a train window that has never been cleaned, it is foggy.

As we grow up, we learn values from our society and family. We learn what is right, what is wrong. We become more and more limited and restricted by our experience, and in most cases we are not taught to let go of the impressions, to wipe the canvas clean. So childhood turns into adulthood and the process continues. Unless we are cleaning our minds regularly, we eventually become so set in our ways that we become creatures of habit. Whenever we are confronted with new situations we usually resist changing our habits. When we meet someone who behaves in a way that is different from us, we can often react with past prejudice. Our ego invariably says that we are right and they are wrong, or we are better and they are worse. Our mental flexibility is all but gone. This is because we have let the mind become clogged with impressions (*samskaras*) from the past. We respond to life like a puppet pulled by the puppet master and the puppet master is nothing more than our *samskaras*. We cannot possibly be flexible and present in the moment.

WHAT ASSISTS MENTAL FLEXIBILITY?

1. Cleaning the mind

How do we reverse this process of accumulation, free the mind from past impressions, and bring it back to a state of emptiness and flexibility? In *Sahaj Marg* raja yoga the cleaning of the mind is a part of the daily practice or *sadhana*. Cleaning can also be done by the guru for the practitioners. Yoga – union with the ultimate – is only possible

when the *samskaras* are cleaned away. In fact, before any higher spiritual states can be reached, the cleaning must be done. Otherwise the tendencies and habits of the past pollute and continually pull the aspirant backwards. It is like putting milk into a container that still has a residue of kerosene in it. It spoils the milk.

The cleaning of *samskaras* treats the root cause, and allows the mind to become empty and regain its flexibility. It is cleaning from the inside out.

2. Simplifying character

For the inner work of cleaning to be effective, we must also be willing to change our outward behaviours and tendencies so that they do not remain set and rigid: so that there is balance and harmony between the outer behaviour and the inner spiritual growth. The inner condition becomes lighter and simpler, and the outer behaviour and attitudes must match this process. This outer change is the work of simplifying character. It is our own responsibility, and is done hand-in-hand with the spiritual practice. It is often the hardest part of yogic practice, because the ego resists. As Chariji says, "little children don't have this problem of ego. They are not limited by self-importance and self-respect, whereas as adults we struggle with this. We want to maintain self-respect at all costs (which usually translates into self importance – ego), and as a result we limit ourselves."

This same principle is recognised in all spiritual traditions. Carlos Castaneda writes⁶: "Self-importance is man's greatest enemy. What weakens him is feeling offended by the deeds and misdeeds of his fellow men." In Zen Buddhism, the practice of bowing is used to remove self-importance and develop humility. Shunryu Suzuki says⁷: "Bowling helps to eliminate our self-centred ideas. This is not so easy. It is difficult to get rid of these ideas and bowing is a very valuable practice. The result is not the point; it is the effort to improve ourselves that is valuable. There is no end to this practice."

In *Sahaj Marg* raja yoga, guidelines are given for simplifying character to reflect the inner spiritual condition. These guidelines are called maxims and are Babuji's endeavour "to put into words those spiritual secrets which have up till now come down from heart to

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heart." To follow these maxims requires the removal of self-respect, and the development of self-acceptance and the capacity to see divinity in everything and everyone. In this we return to the state of humility, of emptiness, where we accept and appreciate everything and everyone, including ourselves.

3. Prayer

Another of the practices of *raja* yoga is prayer. When practised correctly, prayer removes self-importance and develops humility, so it is not surprising that it has been such an important practice in many spiritual traditions throughout the ages. Babuji⁸ describes the way of praying with a heart full of love and devotion, creating an inner condition of vacuity or emptiness, so that the flow of Divine Grace may be diverted towards the disciple. It is a natural process, and works like telegraphy. When one end is connected to electricity, the message is carried to the other end. Similarly, everything of the guru begins to flow into the disciple, into the inner condition of emptiness, and this is the connecting link between the guru and disciple.

So from nothingness, emptiness, everything is possible, and flexibility is the natural state. In yoga there is a principle that by removing our own individual creation, we allow the Divine creation to express.

Chariji has put it very simply: "So what is the purpose of yoga? I have been thinking about this for a long time. Of course, obviously when we do the cleaning and we remove the *samskaras* and our different personalities fall off bit by bit, which we call change in character – aggressiveness goes, for instance, greed goes, lust goes. One by one, all of these *samskaras* go and our personality changes. It is as if peeling an onion. You take off skin after skin. You can say it is the peeling of the personality. What is the result? When everything is taken from the onion, what is the result? We can say, nothing. But when we take away everything from ourselves, what is the result? I think we reveal what is within."⁹

4. Being in tune with nature

Flexibility of mind is the natural state of the human mind, cleaned of the burden of *samskaras* and tendencies. To observe naturalness, it can be helpful to observe nature, which is perhaps why so many mystics and yogis of the past have lived in forests and jungles and mountains. This is portrayed in the story of Siddhartha¹⁰ when, at the end of the book, Siddhartha is a ferryman living by the river, and tells his lifelong friend Govinda that much of what he has learned in life he has learned from the river.

The more we remove ourselves from nature, the more we disassociate ourselves from the naturalness of life. Many of us work in offices, drive in air-conditioned cars, and live in air-conditioned houses. We shop in climate-controlled shopping centres for all our needs. We are cocooned from the natural changes in our environment, and it is easy for us to shut off from the natural processes of nature. Yet there is much we can learn from nature. Take the example of a river. Say there is a storm, and a huge boulder falls from above into the river, blocking part of the waterway. Does the water stop? No, it finds another way around if it can, to keep flowing towards its source, the ocean. In the storm, with strong winds, lightning and heavy rain, it is the young saplings that fare better than old trees with rigid tree trunks, because they bend with the wind.

Now imagine a deciduous tree in the autumn. Leaves are turning beautiful shades of gold, orange and red. What would happen if the tree decided that it did not want to let go of those leaves, because it did not want to be barren for the winter? The cycle of creation, maintenance and destruction that is natural would be blocked, the ground would not be enriched by the humus from the leaves, and the tree's inner reserves would not be able to descend into the roots over winter and wait for the new period of growth in spring. Nature is full of examples of flexibility. The river doesn't have to think to be flexible, the saplings and the leaves on the tree do not have to think to

be flexible. Flexibility is everywhere in nature. That state of naturalness, simplicity, openness and flexibility is what we can uncover within ourselves through the practice of yoga, so that our inner universe and the outer universe are filled with wonder.

A flexible mind means our interactions with others will be open and without prejudice, leading to tolerance and understanding among people.

1. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki, 1986, John Weatherhill, Inc., New York & Tokyo
2. *The Wheel of Time*, Carlos Castaneda, 2000, Penguin Books
3. *Down Memory Lane, Volume 1*, Parthasarathi Rajagopalachari, 1993, Shri Ram Chandra Mission, USA
4. *Heart of the Lion*, Parthasarathi Rajagopalachari, 1993, Shri Ram Chandra Mission, USA
5. *Complete Works of Ram Chandra, Volume 1*, Ram Chandra, 1989, Shri Ram Chandra Mission, USA
6. *The Wheel of Time*, Carlos Castaneda, 2000, Penguin Books
7. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki, 1986, John Weatherhill, Inc., New York & Tokyo
8. *Complete Works of Ram Chandra, Volume 1*, Ram Chandra, 1989, Shri Ram Chandra Mission, USA
9. *Revealing the Personality*, Parthasarathi Rajagopalachari, 1993, Shri Ram Chandra Mission, Denmark
10. *Siddhartha*, Hermann Hesse, 2000, Shambhala Publications, Inc.

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