

STARTING POINTS: YOGA AND DUALISM

To understand the uniquely practical bent of Indian philosophy – and to avoid getting lost in the details – it's important to understand the starting point of their philosophical venture, the deeply felt and very human concern at its heart.

The starting point of Indian philosophy had always been the experience of suffering as an inescapable fact of life. The sages were not so pessimistic as to say that there is no joy in life; but our joy is always qualified or limited by some form of pain and suffering, if only the painful experience that all good things come to an end. The pain of endings, of separation, of old age, sickness and death force us to take a step back and examine our situation; the experience of such pain motivates us to look more closely at our perception and experience of ourselves, and even to look at how we actively participate in *creating* the suffering that we claim we want to be free of.

Their conclusion was simple: at the root of suffering lies the fact of **change**; and as we suffer the flux of change and loss, we have a growing sense of how we have become **separated** or distanced from our own happiness or joy. Change is the cause of suffering (in direct proportion to our desires and expectations); a sense of separation or alienation is the effect. The sages of yoga wished to address both in terms that help us to understand and overcome them.

DUALISM

The sense of separation is at the heart of what is known philosophically as a **dualism**. A dualism marks a disparity, division or chasm between two kinds of experience, and these two realms of experience seem impossible to reconcile. One poet-saint of India named Tukaram sang of this predicament in his *bhajan*, asking 'Is this world poison, or is it nectar? On one side of the road I see people crying and suffering; on the other I see them laughing and joyful. Is this world poison, or is it nectar?' How does one answer this question without discounting one side or the other?

That is the predicament set by the dualist, who argues that both sides are equally and ultimately true and real. A dualist will not attempt to fix or right the problem, since the problem is accepted as a 'given.' Instead, one can only 'liberate' oneself from the dilemma, escaping from participation in it. Happiness and sadness are two poles of a single problem known as *samsara*, a loose translation of which could be 'going in circles' or chasing one's tail. One solution is to simply give up having and desiring a tail.

Yoga is the name given to the various ways of approaching and overcoming the predicament, not all of which are dualistic. One of the meanings given to yoga is 'union,' and in each philosophy, the 'union' that takes place has a slightly different meaning, depending upon the philosophy's characterization of the problem, whether dualistic or nondualistic. In all cases, yoga suggests a return to a state of wholeness, an effort to make whole what has been split asunder. Yoga is an effort to come 'home.'

We do experience glimpses of our own joy in our lives, and there are times when difficulties and suffering seem to distance us from our innate experience of our own joy. When we are happy, we feel 'at home' in our happiness; when unhappy, we feel alienated and estranged, as if in a lonely, foreign land. Yoga is a union in which we are reunited with our own joy, and tells us that that joy is an elevated and abiding spiritual state, our true home. It is a state far beyond what we briefly experience at the satisfaction of a fleeting desire.

Thus the question each yogic philosophy has to answer is, how or what are the ways in which we get separated from our own joy? And how is this separation to be overcome?

Yogic thought is marked by an awareness of two distinct (though related) dualisms, and is a response to them. The first identifies the distance between human and divine experience; the other

marks the way in which we often feel divided against ourselves as we get caught up in the daily whirlwinds of activity, thought and desire.

The dualistic philosophies of yoga accept that these problems cannot be solved, but rather can only be ‘dissolved’ through liberation; the situation itself is simply the way things are. We are indeed far from our true home – we are souls ‘fallen’ into a body, and seeking our way back to our true abode. To the dualist, the union that comes about through yoga is a return to our original state, entirely apart from our present situation of estrangement.

The greater part of yogic philosophy is nondualistic, which means that, while these sages recognize the experience of alienation, they rejected the idea that this is really how things are. We are not in some ‘other’ or ‘foreign’ land that is alien to our spiritual self. Rather we feel this way and suffer because of our own mistaken or limited perception, or our own forgetfulness and inability to recognize the presence of the Divine. We have somehow lost sight of the truth that we are *already* home, and we are thinking and behaving as if we are far away, in ways that make us suffer. Despite the fact that the lives we live in the body are temporary and mortal, we are nevertheless *already* fully in the heart and presence of the Divine. To the nondualist, yoga is the process of awakening to or ‘realizing’ the Presence of the Divine that is already fully *here*, rather than attempting to go somewhere else to find it, or to unite what was never truly divided.

Regardless of which school you find more convincing, credit has to be given to *both* sides for taking very seriously the real and often painful experience that is at the heart of spiritual yearning – the experience of being divided, set apart, distanced or far from our true self. While life is a venture and a journey, we do have a sense that we have ventured a bit far afield, and would like to get home.

When looking at the yogic philosophers’ explorations into this experience, we find these two dualisms coming into their sharpest focus in two distinct periods of philosophy, though the yogis were aware of both dualisms in some fashion from the very start.

DIVISION BETWEEN HUMAN AND DIVINE

However much we believe in divinity or the presence of the spiritual perfection, love and benevolence of God, most of us would admit that we don’t ordinarily *experience* that presence directly from moment to moment in our lives. To the yogi, belief or faith in that presence is not enough. The yogi wants to ‘realize’ or experience that presence at every moment, and wants no sense of separation, distance or alienation from the presence of the Divine to mar this constant communion.

The issue of this separation from the Divine is first taken up in the earliest texts of the **Vedas**, which addressed through myth the gap they felt between the human and the Divine. On the surface, the life of man and that of the ‘gods’ (and ultimately the Divine itself) are so different as to be separated by a chasm, though at the same time they are related by mutual dependence. Man (who labors to produce food and wealth) and the gods (who provide the resources through the elements) must offer to and nourish one another, bridging the gap between them through sacrifice and offerings, else they both suffer.

Thus the duality or ‘split’ came from the original act of creation; man’s spiritual response is to heal this split, bringing the manyness of creation back to wholeness. He does this through building a spiritual community among men as well as becoming whole within himself. The wholeness he brings about is then offered back to God in sacrifice, thus nourishing and restoring the Divine. In this way the circle between man and the divine is completed, and the dualism is healed.

Thus on the surface, the Vedas began with the assumption of a dualism, or dualistic view of the universe. Beneath the surface of the Vedas, however, there was a more profound mysticism that was nondualistic; later traditions – especially Vedanta – sought to draw this mysticism out as the essence of yogic experience, the real ‘Truth.’

The overall question posed by the Vedas was put in terms of sacrifice and offering, and remained for each yogic tradition to answer: what is the offering or sacrifice that we are called upon to make in order to achieve this wholeness, and how is the offering to be made? What are the means for offering ourselves back to the Divine, in order to reunite with the Divine Self?

DIVISION WITHIN - BETWEEN HEART (SOUL) AND MIND (EMBODIED LIFE)

Along with the feeling of distance from the divine, a second strain of dualism lies in the recognition that we often feel **alienated or distanced from ourselves**. We often express this alienation as the division or conflict between ‘heart’ (not just emotion, but a spiritual sense of self) and ‘mind’ (our thought, calculations and machinations revolving around the ego and its needs, desires and distractions)

This perception of a dualism was addressed most specifically in the **Classical Period**, where the dualism to be healed was within man himself – the gap between one’s physical / mental (in the most mundane sense of the ‘whirlwind’ of ordinary thought) life, and one’s innermost spirit or spiritual life. Yoga became more an attempt to overcome the division within *oneself*, and by that effort, to reunite with the Divine (since the Divine is one’s own *true* self).

The **dualistic** philosophies of the Classical Period ‘dissolved’ the problem by choosing one (the life of spirit or Purusha, the experience of samadhi) *over* (and to the exclusion of) the other (the material world of the body, the experience of the ‘fluctuations of the mind’ in the world of samsara). Patanjali gave detailed advice on how to make that choice in one’s yogic practice in his famous Yoga Sutras.

The **nondualistic** philosophies of the later, Postclassical Period argued that there was never really a ‘choice’ to be made, except in one’s own attitude, feeling and perception – one’s *bhava* or way of relating to and feeling toward self and world. There are not really two separate ‘worlds’ of spiritual and egoistic self, except in our ideas and perception. One does not realize the Truth by turning away from our ordinary world of experience – our experience of our own mundane self, but rather by looking more closely and seeing through the veil of ‘otherness’ by which we ordinarily relate to our ego-self and world. The world – and we ourselves – are an ever-changing expression of the Divine itself, and is never truly ‘other’ than this one divine creative Consciousness. Realization does not come about through exclusion of the material, limited aspect of our own being, but rather an awakening to the Truth that the Divine Self dwells within us *as us*; it is we, in our bound state, who perceive the Divine Self as other.

YOGIC PRACTICE AND THE TWO DUALISMS

The two dualisms are also quite obviously distinct and yet closely related – when alienated from self, we are at the same time alienated from God or the Divine; when alienated from God, we are also isolated within the ego and alienated from our deeper, truer, more ‘connected’ and spiritual self. The philosophies of yoga attempted to understand how and why we arrived at – and got stuck in – the experience of this separation, and it is mainly through their treatment of the very materiality of our embodied existence that they arrived at and began to refine their answer.

Yet the sages were very practical people; the ideas they presented in their philosophies were never enough by themselves (though some are always happy to settle for discussing them to their intellectual satisfaction), for ideas and concepts are as much a part of the problem as they might be of the solution. The yogis wanted to bridge the gap experientially. Mere belief or faith was not an answer, since ‘belief’ in something that is not one’s present experience simply reaffirms the gap. They were not satisfied with expressions of mere belief or faith.

The sages sought a means, an experiential bridge by which to fully realize their understanding and fully awaken to the realm of Truth. In general, of course, that bridge was the practice of yoga. And within that practice, the experiential bridge is the *prana*, the energy contained within the experience of the breath and all of its subtle energies. By means of the prana, every moment of our ordinary experience offers an open door into the experience of yoga, of union. The prana is always in one way or another the bridge between the merely physical/mental experience of the body/mind, and the state of perfect and full Self-awareness that is samadhi.

The experience of prana is thus always at the heart of yogic practice, and yet the character and significance of the practices of pranayama (yogic practices centered around the experience of the breath) is different at different times in the development of yoga, according to the character of the philosophy of the time – especially whether dualistic or nondualistic. The *practices* of pranayama throughout the history of yoga are pretty straightforward and uniform; but the *experience and meaning* of the practices – the philosophical interpretation of the transformation that takes place through the power of pranayama – varies a great deal.

And so an account of the evolving understanding of yogic philosophy needs to include an account of prana and the significance of the practices relating to the prana at every stage. In its full bloom in the Postclassical Period, these teachings evolved into the refined and experiential appreciation of the Prana as Kundalini, the divine force of Grace.

In order to move further in our account of this great evolution, we need first to set the context by identifying the ‘periods’ of yogic thought, which we’ll do in the next section.