

Yoga of Knowledge

Part 1 of 3

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I propose to give a discourse on the subject of *Jnana* yoga, or the yoga of knowledge. I already have considered *Bhakti* yoga, or the yoga of love. Sometime in the future, I propose, also, to consider at some length the yoga of action, or *Karma* yoga. On the subject of the yoga of knowledge, I am better qualified than on the subject of either the yoga of love or the yoga of action or will in as much as my understanding of these two latter forms is a subsidiary effect of the actual successful practice of the yoga of knowledge. Concerning the latter, I have a base that is much more complete. This is not a case of simply recapitulating a scholastic understanding of the subject through the reading of the literature. My knowledge is much more fundamental than that in as much as this was the way over which I traveled prior to 1936 and I know it from direct action, direct experience, direct Realization; and this, after all, is the only authentic knowledge. Purely scholastic understanding would be merely an academic exercise. It would result from a perusal of the extant literature and a bringing of it together into the form of a thesis, presenting it as perhaps something of a curiosity belonging to the culture of another race. It would not carry the authentic understanding of the direct pursuance of the yoga itself.

In the history of mysticism, or the awakening of another dimension or way of consciousness, the literature found in the West is generally listed under the head of a Mystical Awakening. It generally is colored by a Christian orientation, either Catholic or Protestant. Much of it would be classed as a form of the yoga of devotion, particularly in the case of the feminine mystics, such as Marguerite, Catherine, Theresa, and Madame Guyon, also in the case of St. Francis of Assisi, St. John of the Cross. But there are in the list of mystics in the West two figures that stand on a higher plane of competence. These are Meister Eckhart, who has been listed as the greatest mystic of the Middle Ages, and Jacob Boehme, the outstanding mystic of the late 17th, or rather more particularly, the early 18th century—a figure that influenced very greatly the thought of the post-Kantian Idealists, and also the religious movement founded by George Fox and known to us today as the Friends or Quakers. The orientation in this case is Christian and in the latter case Protestant.

In the West, however, there have been other figures if we go back to the days of Greece. One of those that have been quite influential in the current of Christianity was Plotinus, and in his communications he gives us a clear picture of the process in his own consciousness, enabling one to identify it as an authentic case of Realization. In this case, I would say it follows the general classification of a yoga of knowledge. There is also in the “Seventh Letter” of Plato a brief reference which indicates that he, too, is an instance of actual Realization. Without this reference, one would infer this as being true of him from the very body of his teachings—in particular, a certain patness in his figure of the cave in the dialogue known as *The Republic*, and also from the fact that in the Realization

itself, one does find something very similar to what Plato called the *universal ideas*. Earlier than Plato, one would suspect Realization in the case of Pythagoras. Pythagoras is known to have traveled into the East, in India in particular, and there achieved a reputation so that he was called by the Indian proficients the “Foreign Master”—something that was very rare, at least in that day.

In the subject of yoga, the supreme authorities that we have known so far are East Indian. There is, however, a large development in other portions of the East such as the Persian mystics and Lao-Tze in China. Of the latter, we know little; but there is at least one document that has come down to us, namely, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, of which is said to be oriented to Lao-Tzu. It follows a course, however, involving a very different psychology from that of the West, and is essentially inaccessible to the Western mind because of the very great gulf between the Chinese Eastern mind and our own. In India, however, we have the largest development of a philosophy of yoga and a development of a multitude of yogic techniques or practices; and, there are many instances extant in the literature running back at least to the case of Krishna in the discourse given in the *Bhagavad Gita*. But still more ancient, and in a day concerning which our knowledge is very obscure, namely that of the Rishis of the Vedic days, there are the signs of very great awakenings of consciousness to this other dimension. But the language, the imagery, and so forth, in which the reports of these experiences are given, is so obscure as to make them well nigh inaccessible to our present consciousness. And we are only partly helped by the more philosophic discourses of the *Upanishads*, although they are a partial help to the understanding of the wisdom of the Rishis.

Coming to a later day, we have the development that starts with the Great Buddha, the one known as Gautama or Sakyamuni, along about the 6th century B.C. The great achievement of the Buddha begins with his Enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. This Enlightenment was actually the starting of his positive work in the world—a movement that became a religio-philosophical development ultimately attracting the devout attention of hundreds of millions of people. Probably . . .

Following the Buddha, we have figures such as Panini and Patanjali. Of the latter, we have a book on the subject known as *The Yoga Aphorisms* and these are now available in the West. Here is what may be called the great authority on *Raja yoga*. But the figure which will stand out as most important for our present purposes, namely the development of the theory and art of the yoga of knowledge, was a *chela* of Patanjali himself. This *chela* is also known to us very well through the literature. He was Shankara, who is more fully known as Sri Shankaracharya, which means the teacher, and the *Sri* is a title of honor somewhat similar to that of His Holiness when applied to the Pope. Shankara is the supreme expositor of the yoga of knowledge; therefore, we will give some attention to his contribution.

First of all, his life, as I have already given in the past, was outstanding in the sense of its prodigious character; for he had finished with all that could be taught him by the pundits, namely the scholars of his day, by the age of seven and felt the call to the guru at that tender age. He went to his guru, as I indicated in a former lecture,¹ having gained the permission of his mother, and was with his guru a period of four years in

¹ See the audio recording “On Tulku,” part 1.

which, it is said, he had four Fundamental Realizations, and then was on his own at the tender age of eleven, giving his first sermon at Benares on the banks of the Ganges, and also at that age, beginning to pick up disciples. He wrote extensively and discoursed extensively from that time until the completion of his thirty-second year. He founded what is known as the sixth school of Indian philosophy. And it was not until our own day that there emerged another figure, namely Sri Aurobindo, that founded what may now be called the seventh school of Indian philosophy—a long period from about 500 B.C. to 1950 A.D.—but Shankara stands out as the supreme exponent of the yoga of knowledge.

In the yoga of knowledge, an orientation through the assimilation of an appropriate philosophy is of premier importance. This is not so much the case with respect to the yogas of action and of love; and in fact, in the latter case, since the principle of feeling is of predominant importance, there may be even a considerable neglect of any philosophical orientation, the action and preparation being more devotional and perhaps even ritualistic in its nature. And the way of action, a discipline in action may have a much greater importance in the case of the yoga of action or will than a philosophical background; but in the case of the yoga of knowledge, it is very important. Such an orientation is supplied by the philosophy of Shankara. We will not enter into this at length, but develop simply its most important governing principle.

This affirmed principle is to the effect that all in the world of phenomena is simply a *maya*, in other words, an illusion. To be sure, there is no question about the fact that we do have the impact upon our consciousness of sensory images and of the experiences of tangible action in the world, but this is regarded as having much the character that is symbolized by the image of the rope and the snake. Man sees an environment about him; he finds himself apparently conditioned by that environment, and he faces all of the problems that grow out of action within that environment. He finds that the hopes that are deeply planted in his soul are not fulfilled, not relieved by anything he finds in that environment. All promises prove to be, in the last analysis, illusions. He is badgered by the conditions of existence, and suffers from the impact of things about him far more than he reaches enjoyment through them. This is affirmed, grows out of the fact that he has been guilty of a great error, namely, the error of believing in *things* rather than the belief in *Brahman*; the seeing of *things*, the sensing of *things* in general, rather than being aware simply of *Brahman*.

There is the familiar experience of a person walking in wild country which is snake infested, of seeing some sinuous object, such as a rope, a stick, or whatnot, but, instead of seeing a rope and a stick, he sees first a snake. He reacts to it—perhaps jumps away—and then presently sees that it was not a snake but simply a rope, or a sinuous stick instead. The pain of life grows out of this error carried on a major scale. The rope, or the sinuous stick, is not in any way inimical, but the snake that is seen carries the threat of something hostile. In an experience of this sort, I had the opportunity to observe from where the snake, that seemed to be in the stick, came from. At the resolution of the illusion, I saw, in a brief flash, the snake disappearing into my own eyes; and the lesson told by that was that the snake was actually a projection from my own consciousness and was not a real existence at all. The world about, that is so much hostile, although at times pleasant and intriguing, has that effect upon oneself, and is to be viewed as a *maya*, perhaps we might say, in the modern psychological terms, because it is a massive projection of humanity and therefore an illusion. If man dissolves the illusion, he then

finds that the reality is *Brahman*, to use the Indian term, which would be somewhat similar to our conception in the form that would be, the reality is God, and none other than God. However, there is a difference in what we mean by God as compared to the conception of *Brahman*; and, the latter conception being considerably more philosophical, more intertwined into the very necessity of things, more fundamental, in fact, it is a better term. To realize that all things are *Brahman* is to find a universal friendliness in the environment.

The conception of a universal illusionism has been challenged of late by Sri Aurobindo in his first and second chapters on the subject of illusionism in *The Life Divine*. He points out that it is not valid to regard the world simply as a sort of dream, or as a sort of hallucination, as in the case of the snake seen in the rope—and his argument is very impressive. But there is another profounder fact, and that is something that comes from the actual experience of Realization; namely, that when one ascends the ladder of Realization past a certain point, the whole view of the world about appears as simply a phantasmagoria, a something that has no substance back of it, as, in other words, something possessed of no reality whatever, but rather, that a something other, which is not now a clear-cut object but more like a state in consciousness, is the reality—that which is permanent behind the phantasmagoria of experience. This is an authentic part of Realization. I can testify to the fact of its actuality, for I, too, have known that state.

Now, perhaps this thought would help to clarify what is meant by the whole theory of the *Mayavada*, or universal illusionism. Some years ago, I had a protracted contact with a trained theoretical physicist who at the time was reading the manuscript called *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*. He pointed out that the present conception of matter being capable of being reduced to energy involved the presence of an invariant and that the invariant was neither the state known as matter nor the state known as energy, but rather a quality called “energy-momentum.” But whether this that we call matter was in the form of matter or in the form of energy, the quality of energy-momentum remained constant, and that the energetic phase or the material phase were only passing phases; in other words, energy-momentum is the modern physical term for the permanent or invariant feature. Now suppose that at a certain state or phase of consciousness, one became aware of energy-momentum exclusively, then the phases as matter and as energy would appear unreal in that they were merely modes functioning on the surface, at it were, of energy-momentum. The whole universe would appear as energy-momentum and as not an external object. One could then very truly say that cognizance of the world as external object, namely mountains, trees, oceans, stars, planets, galaxies, and so forth, as the relationships of animals, humans, and all of the material things our culture has produced, are only in the nature, essentially, of a phantasmagoria, superimposed upon energy-momentum. Energy-momentum would be the reality, all the rest, only a play on the surface. Energy-momentum, then, would correspond to *Brahman*, or the *Voidness* in Buddhist philosophy, or Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject, in my own philosophy. This alone, is the real; all else is but a play, a phantasmagoria. One reaching such a state of consciousness is freed or liberated from the compulsion apparently produced by the phantasmagoria. The end of the yoga of knowledge is the attainment of this state of consciousness where he is no longer in bondage to the object. This is but a brief statement, a brief sketch as it

were, of the philosophical orientation that is peculiarly helpful to the aspirant on the path of the yoga of knowledge.

Aurobindo has supplied another philosophic basis in his book on *The Synthesis of Yoga*, but I do not find it anything like as helpful or trenchant as that presented by Shankara. And it may well be that the critique of Aurobindo with respect to Shankara's point of view may be largely answered by the image provided from our modern theoretical physics; namely, that *maya* means, not a non-existence in the sense of being nothing at all, but rather in the sense—is to be understood rather in the sense of a phantasmagoria that has no essential substance back of it. In other words, the object as it is in itself is without value; that's the psychological meaning of the statement. In other words, the libido is drawn away from its projection into the object. And this must be done in the yoga of knowledge in a very radical way. We are in the habit of valuing the object very highly; one might say it is the great sin of the extraverted West, and more or less a sin throughout the world. To attach to the object, of any sort whatsoever, a great importance, a commanding importance, is to be guilty of the supreme sin; it is to find oneself eternally bound and helpless. It is because of our over-orientation to the object that the world has gone through the stormy periods of many wars, of many cruelties of man to man, because we feel that in the object lies our source of security, and also in the object lies the threat to our security, so we fight and struggle.

And if we go the other way, if we are moved by compassion at the human level, we think that the office for us is that of merely a human service to other forms of the object; but we get nowhere, we arrive at no radical solution of the problem. The path of yoga, and especially the path of knowledge, is oriented to a radical solution of the whole problem of suffering in the world. First, for the individual aspirant, it may appear as a solution simply for himself. And for a time it may be necessary for him to withdraw from—completely from association with the multitude until he arrives at such point where he himself is free, is in command of the bondage producing forces; and then, if he is moved by generous impulse, he may become for the first time an effective instrument working for the redemption of mankind as a whole. Brotherly practice in the ignorance has its value, but it is a practice without the support of real wisdom; it is simply a case of the blind attempting to lead the blind, and they may, as well as not, lead their followers into fatal pitfalls. If thou would'st help humanity, seek Fundamental Realization first and then, and only then, can you really be of help.

Having established a basic philosophic orientation, the *sadhaka* is now admonished to find the permanent in the impermanent; or, in more modern terms, the invariant in the midst of all variation or becoming. This involves a directing of the attention and aspiration away from process, away from changeableness, and a directing of it to that which is persistent, and seeking there security.

Now for our second step in the discussion of *Jnana* yoga, we will proceed to consider attitude, the use of code, and certain other elements. Fundamental in the attitude are two features: first, a strong *vairagya* with respect to the world about, to all external things, including one's own body. The meaning of *vairagya* is disgust. Feeling disgust for the world about and all tangible things, acts as a negative propulsion away in some other direction; secondly, there must be the strong aspiration for the attainment of the real. We thus have a kick and a pull, as it were, working all in the same direction. The *vairagya*

tends to break the attachment for the object. And by object, bear in mind, I mean all things whatsoever, including one's own body, all persons as tangible existences in bodies, all things that are part and parcel of sensuous perception, first of all; later, we will consider the relationship to ideal or ideational concepts. This tends to loosen one's roots in the external, and this is highly important, and, in fact, a very difficult thing to achieve. On the other hand, there must be an all consuming aspiration for the attainment of the real, whatever that may be—an aspiration so strong that one would sacrifice readily anything that stands in the way even including life itself, all of one's ambitions, all of one's love of possessions, all of one's desire for human relationships, all of one's enjoyments governed by the play of things; all of this must be offered up and abandoned if it stands in the way of the fundamental aspiration. It is, as it were, a stripping for the race; something that at times is taken well nigh literally. However, the fundamental thing is the attitude of mind and the actual, literal abandonment of things, the literal stripping down to the buff as it were, is only necessary in some, in the case of some temperaments; the mental detachment is the essential thing.

Then we have to consider the code by which the aspirant lives. And this may be defined, I would suggest, in the following form: to be very considerate of all other creatures, human and non-human, even though he treats himself harshly, yet, to treat gently all others, to respect their rights, to remove from them such suffering as he may be able to alleviate, to be concerned about their good, to be gentle, to obey the codes of the society in which he lives—the codes including the laws as well as the customs, except when they come into conflict with more important features of the code of the way. And the code of the way, I think, has been very well formulated by the Great Buddha. It consists of non-killing, non-lying, non-stealing, non-concupiscence, and non-intoxication. These simple rules have an obvious meaning, but also subtle meaning and become very exacting as one penetrates into their deeper ramifications. These should be maintained at all times, except under those rare situations where there may be a conflict between different parts of the code as, say, a situation in which telling the truth might lead to the death of somebody and one's wisdom is not sufficient to work out the course that would save performance with respect to both features of the code. These govern the life, the moral orientation, as it were.

Now we come to a third factor which we may call the discipline. And this, though not as fundamental as what we have covered heretofore, still is of very great importance indeed. The discipline in *Jnana* yoga may appear to be quite severe. We find that our libido, or psychic energy, tends to run out toward objects—human and otherwise. This must be restrained and old habits must be brought into subjugation and transformed. This may be a discipline occupying not only many years but many decades, and even more than one lifetime. Let us take, for instance, one of the strongest tendencies in the human nature; this is the tendency called sexual activity or sexual attraction. It's a very fundamental tendency in nature; nature has designed it to preserve the species. And nature in her system cares only for the preservation of the species, only incidentally is concerned with the individual, and seems determined to sacrifice everything in order that the species may be preserved. This is manifested through what is known as the very powerful sexual drive. But if one is to break away from the bondage to the object, this drive must be mastered and transformed. There is no way around this necessity; there is no yoga of knowledge, and in the last analysis, no successful yoga anywhere, if this drive

is not brought into subjugation. Therefore, the *sadhaka* should, through all of the critical period of his discipline, live at least under a condition of sexual restraint; in fact, all of the manuals on the subject require a state of complete continence. But it may not be so exacting as this would make it appear. I would say that for the first twenty years or so after puberty, it would be most desirable that there should be a practice of unconditional physical continence. When once the drive is brought into subjugation where it becomes relatively weak and subordinate, then there may be relaxation; but, in so far as it is imperative, it must be mastered. There is no other course possible.

More important than the conservation of the physical substance connected with the sexual drive is the purification of the psyche. Fantasy development in sexual directions, smuttiness of thinking or speech in this direction, are to be absolutely eliminated or there is no hope of yogic attainment. This is more important than physical celibacy alone. I cannot emphasize this too strongly. Purification is fundamental, but this is purification primarily of the psyche, and sexual fantasy and sexual polluted speech is as great a barrier as exists in the field of yogic attainment. The tendency today in the direction of permissiveness in this field is very adverse to the attainment of liberation. Hardly can one imagine any tendency more adverse. It is for this reason that the influence of Freud is to be regarded as preeminently evil, as a dark, degenerating influence, and must be completely expurgated.

Sigmund Freud took the position that all culture, all religion, all art, and, by implication, all pure science, including mathematics, is a perversion of the sexual instinct. And he appears to imply that one should become like unto a pig, or a goat, and nothing could be more evil than that. Sigmund Freud is to be viewed as a dark and evil force working against the regeneration of humanity. What matters it if one must pass through a neurotic state, or even touch the edge of psychosis; these are hazards that can be mastered. They have been known in the history of the way; but, one can rise above the pig-pen consciousness that marks the greatest depth of degeneracy in this humanity. There can be no trifling on this point. There must be an incisive excision of all tendencies in this direction. Mark as evil all those who include in their usage and practice polluted speech and imagery. There is no good whatsoever in this.

Again, anything that is in the nature of a predominant craving that possesses one, such as a craving for drink or a craving for food beyond what is necessary for the preservation of the organism, is also to be excised. No outgoing into a great interest in outer activity beyond what is necessary; all of this is a diversion from the end to be sought.

Now, with respect to the sexual discipline, this point is important. We do not imply that the Puritan attitude that sexuality, as such, is a sin and that therefore man is born in sin; this we reject, although the Puritan discipline runs parallel. The reason for conserving this energy is what you might call psychical dynamics. Let us suppose we had a boiler for the development of steam, with a fire under it, and that there was a conduit to certain machines that we wished to operate, but that in the side of the boiler there was an open valve through which the steam could escape. Let us build up the fire as high as we please, and cause the water to boil, yet we would never drive the machine so long as the steam escaped through the open valve. It is necessary to close the valve in order that the force or energy contained in the steam would build the pressure necessary to drive the machine. It is in something like this sense that the discipline of

continence is understood in yoga. There must be a building up of potential until other doors are forced open by the driving power of the psychical energy that is conserved and built up in pressure. No doubt the life that is involved throughout the many years of the discipline is austere and difficult, but the goal is worth infinitely more than anything that is demanded of the *sadhaka*. And if one would know the liberating Realization, he cannot avoid this discipline.

Now, some have gone to the extreme of applying to themselves flagellant austerities. This generally is not necessary and is not recommended. There may be instances where the nature is so rebellious that something of this sort may have to be applied to it, but, in general, that is not the case. We do have the instance of Suso, who lived about the time of Meister Eckhart, who, in order to get control over the waywardness of his nature, is said to have placed in his undershirt brads that pointed inward and he lived under the condition of the pain produced by these brads; and that then he built for himself a bed, in the form of a cross, consisting of sharp, pointed, needle-like spikes on which he lay and placed upon his hand gloves with extensions on the fingers that were sharp so that if in his sleep he sought to ease some of the pain, he would be aroused to wakefulness. It's a little hard to understand how a person so treating his body avoided serious infection, but, this practice he continued, it is said, for eighteen years and discontinued it only when the inner voice told him to do so. However, he wound up as a very gentle, mystical figure in his day being as gentle in his treatment of other people as he was harsh in the treatment of himself. There are also the stories of Indian yogis who have deliberately sat upon either upright nails or thorns, or lain in beds of thorns, thus treating themselves with an added harshness. There's also the story of the flagellants in New Mexico, who literally put one of their members through the experience of the crucifixion.

Now, none of this do I recommend. It is a misapplication of the principle of austerity. Rather does one take the circumstances of life that are painful in his stride, and they supply all of the austerity that is ordinarily necessary. There is a practical reason back of all of this and going to an extreme is not the valid course. If I were asked, "How much austerity should one apply?" The answer would be, so much as will not arouse the unconscious against one, and that may involve a certain gentling of the discipline.

Now that is enough for today. I shall go on with this subject in the discourse for next Sunday.