

Yogic Purification

Franklin Merrell-Wolff

February 5, 1975

We shall not here consider the problem of yogic purification in its wider application to all forms of yoga, but only with respect to one form. We shall not, therefore, discuss this preparation in its relationship to those forms of yoga which I have elsewhere called aesthetic yoga, and which included *Tantra* and *Zen*.¹ Nor is it a consideration of the purification peculiar to either *karma* yoga or *bhakti* yoga, but only that which is essential for *jnana* yoga. And I shall here assume as the basis of this particular discipline the position maintained by Shankara in his *Crest Jewel*, namely, that the candidate is a *Brahmin* and is a male human. The problem in its broader sense has to be considered ultimately, but it's in this specific sense that I shall deal with it here, as it is the domain in which I am more familiar with the subject. There is the zone of discipline that is valid for different candidates and different disciplines, but here we shall consider specifically only this discipline. I am not here considering the general mental preparation, which I have considered elsewhere, or the problem of self-analysis, but simply the ethical background.² And here we will start in this way.

We may divide all moral orientations and practices into two classes for our present purposes, namely, those moral preparations that are applied to the individual as an individual, and those which are other-oriented. For our present purposes, it is the discipline that applies to the individual candidate rather than in his orientation to other creatures. We will designate the discipline that applies to the individual as orientation to purity, and this will stand in contrast to the moral orientation related to other creatures, and that we will call the orientation of compassion. For the purposes of attaining that breakthrough which results in Liberation, the one aspect which is of supreme importance is that which we here call purification. This is necessary to the path which in *The Voice of the Silence* has been called the path of *Dhyana*—the path which leads to the level which has been called the threshold to *Nirvana*. The discipline that is in addition to this, that leads to what is called the *Arya* path, involves the renunciation, or the acceptance of the *Kwan-Yin* vow. This is another subject which we are not here considering. We are considering only the orientation which we will call purification.

Supreme in the demand of yoga is the demand for purity in so far as the yoga is oriented to the yoga of knowledge, specifically. And here, too, I wish to deal specifically with the case of a candidate who does not have a personal guru who is visible upon this plane, or an invisible guru with whom he has not developed the capacity of specific determinate communication. It is, therefore, primarily a self-determined yoga without benefit of visible guru. The distinction here is important for it is possible for the guru, if he has the spiritual capacity, to assist in the general purification of the *sadhaka*. But

¹ See the audio recordings, "Tantra and Zen," parts 1-6.

² See the audio recordings, "Yoga of Knowledge," parts 1 and 2.

without that direction, much that the guru could do must be done by the *sadhaka* himself; and we will assume this case which, in a way, is particularly an exacting case.

Purification consists of three aspects primarily. These are: purification in the physical sense; second, in the vital sense; and third, in the mental sense. These three are of ascending importance. The physical purification is of least importance; the mental purification is of greatest importance; but all are significant and essential.

Now, purification in the physical sense may include the following features: a consideration of diet; a consideration of the impact of physical environment. In general, there are certain foods that are most favorable for yogic purification. It is probable that a diet of fruit alone would be the most ideal if an individual was able to endure the physical subtilizing that is effected by such a diet. Now, it may be that by using a purely vegetable or fruitarian diet, the individual will become so sensitive that life in this world would become impossible; and in such a case, the diet would have to be modified in such ways as are necessary for rendering life in this world possible because we are approaching yoga as something to be effected here and now—not only for the advantage of the individual involved, but in the sense of establishing a way from this outermost physical zone into the inmost zones—and compromise may be necessary on this point. For myself, I found that a vegetable diet produced too great an increase of sensitivity, so that it threatened to render it impossible to hold this organism alive and effective in this world; and under direction received from one who knew, I abandoned the effort to maintain a vegetarian diet.

There is the question of contact with physical spheres of influence. In general, the setting of city life is most unfavorable because there is the impact of physical disturbance of all sorts. I found, in general, that the contact with the mineral kingdom has no adverse effect; second, that the contact with the vegetable kingdom, in most cases, has no adverse effect, but there are exceptions to this. There are some plants and possibly some trees that carry a malefic physical effect. I have noticed this particularly with certain members of the nightshade family, where one feels as though he were in the midst of something very obnoxious indeed. I have felt it to some extent in the contact with water hemlock, and I suspect it is a valid rule to say that one should avoid contact with all those plants or trees which produce poisonous alkaloids. But this is a minor matter. The contact with the animal world is more questionable; and, in general, I would say that one should reduce all contact with the animal nature, even in the relatively innocent form of the animals themselves to reduce this as much as possible.

So much for the purely physical side. There is the subtle-vital side which is a matter of a great deal more importance. Here, the first rule is that substantial celibacy is necessary and complete celibacy desirable. This is for two reasons, one of which is ethical, the other may be said to fall in the field of dynamics. In the first case, the sexual relationship tends to be impossible, if not quite so, without a prurient state in the feelings of the individual, and all pruriency is to be eschewed as a major barrier. The second consideration is that of dynamics. The breakthrough calls for concentration of energy, and this cannot be attained unless the energies that we call sexual are conserved and transmuted upward, so that this becomes partly a moral rule and partly a rule connected with dynamics. But, in general, we deal with the impact of cravings of all sorts, and all craving must be mastered without question: craving for food, craving for sex, craving for the experiences of the gambler, or any other craving whatsoever. This must be mastered

for the reason that the central being must be in command and no quality whatsoever should be able to take over the organism and lead to action on its part without the consent of the central being. This is an absolute necessity.

Let me repeat, one must master completely every craving whatsoever—for food, for drink, for sex, for any kind of experience whatsoever. It is true that most of this can be dealt with on a basis of control where craving is overcome. One eats food because it is necessary; one drinks because it is necessary; but not because of craving. The craving must be completely mastered. If necessary, to go to the extreme of saying to the vital nature, “Obey me or die!” And as I found in the face of that dictum, if fully meant, the vital nature will surrender. But this is a must, and I cannot emphasize this too greatly. It is a matter of major importance that the aspirant should not tolerate any of the thoughts or words which carry a salacious or prurient connotation. They should be eschewed completely, never indulged in, never listened to voluntarily, never thought or expressed, either orally or in written form, but rejected absolutely. Nothing of a prurient or salacious quality can be for one moment tolerated. This is an absolute must. And anyone who is unable to take this step must go back to the kindergarten, for he is totally unfit for the yoga of knowledge. I cannot emphasize this too strongly. This is an absolute in the yogic purification. No tolerance whatsoever should be indulged in anything of this sort. Any *sadhaka* that cannot meet this requirement belongs at the foot of the class. He must recognize himself as essentially inferior and unfit.

Now, bear in mind these tendencies in one can be commanded, and it doesn't require technique; it requires an exertion simply of the will. And one who cannot exert the will to overcome the craving for liquor, the craving for sex, the craving for food beyond what is necessary for nourishment, is simply a weakling! The power exists in the will to handle all of this. All that is required is that one exert the will. If he feels he cannot do this, he is not a man. He is something less than a man.

These are points which need a special emphasis because we live in a time when there is a letdown in moral discipline, when pornographic indulgence has been openly expressed and advertised; and thus we are living in a time of a very serious moral decay. All of this sort of indulgence is not only a failure from the standpoint of any decent morality, but is a major adverse condition with respect to the yogic Realization. But over and above these coarser forms of impurities, there are many that are of a subtler nature. We may say, for example, that all of the five principles laid down by the Great Buddha have a meaning that is important for purification. Thus, the rule of non-killing is important not only in the sense of concern for other creatures, but in the sense of the impact of killing upon the individual who performs the act. It is a major befouling of the character of the killer. The same applies to non-lying, for lying itself is a major impurity; also to non-stealing, for that, too, is an impurity. And this feature applies especially to the rule on non-concupiscence, which is obvious and which I have developed already. But it also applies to the indulgence in anything that causes an intoxication. This means the use of any substance, chemical or other, that causes a state of intoxication; or the use of hypnotic devices that will produce something similar. It is important that the individual shall be as nearly clean through and through as is possible in all of the vast complexities of his nature. To be sure, much of this can be only attained by the saving grace of the

force which descends ultimately. But the individual in his own self-applied discipline is under the obligation of going as far as he can in self-imposed discipline.

In strict *jnana* yoga, the employment of any agency to effect a change in consciousness which operates below the intellect has the effect of introducing an impurity. Thus, the effort to effect change of consciousness by operating upon the body or through the body, as through posture, and so forth, is using an element that lies below, in the sense that it is using the animal nature. This has the impact of a substantial impurity; or the use of any chemical substance or any manual device. The discipline, to be pure, must operate on the level of the intellect and above the intellect. This is the ultimate yogic discipline.

We come now to the third aspect of the process of purification, that which is called the purification of the mind, or perhaps more strictly, the purification of thought. Here I do not mean purification from sensual images that constitute the ordinary meaning of purification. This I have already handled on the level of the purification of the vital nature. I mean purification of thought in a much more advanced sense; it being assumed that the vital purification has been achieved or, at least, substantially achieved.

Purification of the thought is a more technical matter and one of even more difficulty than what has been handled heretofore. Before we can deal with this, we must assume that the *sadhaka* has been able to achieve the necessary purification in the physical and in the vital senses. Now he faces the task of achieving clarity, or in other words, purity of conceptual thought, and for this there are various disciplines involving concentrations and disciplined meditation. But I shall more specifically refer to a form that is available to us here in the West, and that is a protracted experience in the working with mathematical concepts, in the sense of pure mathematics, not applied mathematics. Here we have the development of the most pure type of conceptuality that has ever been achieved, and a period of years of practice in this field is the equivalent of any effect that can be produced by ordinary meditation or concentration. One can advance to a considerable distance in this field only by a supreme development of the power of concentration; and here he learns what it means to have unmixed thoughts, that is, concepts that are sharp and definitive in their nature, which are freed from all extraneous elements, all fuzziness, all confused thinking. Clear thinking is a major requirement in *jnana* yoga. This discipline is exacting, and I would say that a period of four or five years where the major concentration has been upon the development of thought on the level of pure mathematics is one of the more effective agents in the effecting of purification of thought.

There are elements, or levels, of purity transcending this. There can come a time when the *sadhaka* rises into realms of such immense purity and subtlety that even conceptual thought appears as a kind of impurity. This is a rare state; something that is far beyond the resources of body consciousness and even beyond those far greater resources of the conceptual being; something that is utterly alien to this world; something which can barely contact the consciousness that is possible in a physical world existence. These periods of super-conceptual consciousness can be attained only when in essential isolation and preferably when dwelling at as high an altitude as is possible, in the physical sense. They constitute a strain upon the organism, and I strongly suspect if they were maintained too long there would be a veritable loss of the physical vehicle itself, for

one at such times even has a distaste for any form of physical food, and a distaste for all of the contact with the states of consciousness that are normal to this world. There is here great subtlety, inconceivable purity, and an ineffable sweetness, a sense of being in the Divine Presence. Yet, one may feel that he can walk and talk with God, quite casually, speaking in a symbolic sense. I am not here reaffirming the speculations of the theologians, but I use the term 'God' simply to represent a transcendent consciousness of ineffable sweetness and purity. One returns to relationship with human beings by stepping down. One accepts life in an animal body only with reluctance. This is a touch of that which lies far above the realm of our ordinary animalistic-stained human consciousness. One feels, with Plotinus, that he is ashamed of having an animal body. He feels an immense disgust for even the best of the ordinary, mundane life. And he is tempted to shuck off from himself existence here to sail forth in the imperium of that ineffable beauty.

To abide in this state requires a stillness of all vital feeling, and a stillness of all coarse thinking, and can record values only by the subtle use of the mind. But if one is to continue with the problems of this world, he cannot long linger in this transcendent domain. To return to that world consciousness is a major sacrifice because one finds all of its cherished values essentially gross and unclean, and he feels himself immersed in an immense ugliness; and yet, there are reasons why the sacrifice should be made. But it is possible from time to time to return to this fount of the ineffable beauty and sweetness, and the great purity of understanding.

As a test of your orientation and preference, with which, or with whom, would you rather associate, and which would you rather be: a highly generous individual but who possesses a filthy mind and filthy feelings, or an individual who is highly pure but aloof? Only the latter has hope to make a breakthrough to the imperium. The former can sojourn only in the lower *lokas* of the world. Generosity is not enough. Purity is essential if one is to ascend into the realm of utter fullness, peace, and security. This is necessary.

There is, of course, a step beyond, the step calling for the Great Renunciation where he who has ascended to these heights descends again into the cesspool of outer worldly consciousness to bring to that vast filthiness something of the values of the transcendent purity. But for the purpose of attaining this stupendous release, purity is the supreme requirement.

Now, there is a further consideration that I'd like to present to you. There are certain objectives to which one may truly aspire, and there are those which are lost by aiming at them as your desired objective. One may seek *ananda*, or one may seek power, or he may seek truth for its own sake. But, he who seeks delight for its own sake, as an end in itself, attains to suffering; and he who seeks power for its own sake, becomes corrupted; but he who seeks truth for its own sake, whatever it may be, and persists in his search, will attain wisdom and knowledge, and then power and delight will be added unto him.

In the preceding discussion I have assumed an aspirant who is traveling the *way* without the benefit of a visible and competent guru, or spiritual director. If there is such a guru, the problem of purification may become considerably alleviated, for it is one of the powers of a competent guru, one who has the authentic spiritual capacity to accept from

the *chela* his offering of his guilts and of his senses of impurity. And such a guru can consume it in that Fire which flows through him so that that guilt no longer belongs to the aspirant. This is part of the process of accepting the *karma* of the *chela*, so that it is no longer the responsibility of that *chela*. And if the guru is in the Current, which in part of its meaning is a kind of subtle Fire, the impurity will be burned, consumed, and thereby transformed. And remember that the fuel on the Fire does not stain the Fire where the combustion is complete. This can ease the way of the aspirant in a great measure so that the difficulties are reduced, but the purification is essential.

I have analyzed the experience of the comfort of the Current in *Pathways*, and there noted that it has a dual character: in part it seems like a fire, and in part it seems like a fluid, like something that might be called a subtle water which flows.³ Now, when we speak of Fire in this sense, naturally we mean something very different from the chemical process of oxidation, which is the normal meaning we attach to ordinary fire. The essence of the Fire is not a physical oxidizing process, but a transforming process, whereby substances are made-over into something else, and in this case, into something that is purified and clean.

Now a word about the experience with this Current. I have known it ever since it broke through in 1936. It does not flow at all times. It would be something of a strain if that were so; but it is always available, always responds when there is need for it, either by conscious invocation of it or by a spontaneous manifestation of it on its own part. It is like a permanent companion; one immersed in the Current knows no solitude. He has with it, the richest experience of communion that is possible. He knows an undying happiness. But it can manifest at variable intensity, and if the intensity is too high, it can prove to be a strain in some subtle way upon the organism. If one opens himself up to it with full force, turns on the valve fully, as it were, he could burn himself out; but the valve can be regulated to the capacity of the bearer. In the preceding tape, the valve was opened more than usual, and I was to some degree burned.

Now, this carries me back to something said by Dr. Carl G. Jung in more than one place, where he referred to a non-canonical statement attributed to the Christ, where the Christ is represented as saying, "He who is near unto me, is near unto the fire."⁴ And I believe I know just what this means, for this indeed is a Fire, in a subtle, transforming sense. It's a delightful companion to live with, but one can be tempted to draw upon it too fully, and then could experience something like being burnt.

In an address given by Sir Auckland Geddes, a physician, to a graduate class of a medical school in Glasgow, he told of a case to which he was called with another physician, where the patient had been through a mystical experience, and it seemed as though every cell in the body had been burned out; and the doctors were entirely at a loss to understand what had happened or what to do. I think I know. The patient had been unwise and drew too strongly upon this Current, because it is an experience of great beatitude.

³ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, *Pathways Through to Space* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1944).

⁴ Attributed to *The Gospel of Thomas*: Jesus said, "He who is near Me is near the fire, and he who is far from Me is far from the Kingdom."