

WHAT ARE WE REALLY TEACHING IN A YOGA CLASS?

by *Muktanand Meannjin*

The following is very early part of a full transcript of a teacher training course run by Muktanand in Brisbane in 1995. Those of you who knew Muktanand will recognise her fluent and accessible teaching style. It has been edited for print by Sakshi.

Essentially when we are teaching yoga, what we are trying to convey is to teach people to be aware. So the essence of what we are teaching is awareness - in all of these manifestations.

One of the key things about developing awareness is that we must be relaxed. When we are teaching people to be aware of their bodies, to be aware of their breath, we're usually doing it in the context of being spontaneously relaxed, being natural and relaxed about it. So it's the relaxation that allows for the expansion of awareness. This is something maybe you'd like to think about, just to look at your experience.

What happens when you get tense?

Listen to the words "tense"; "under pressure"; what happens when you're getting "wound up" about something or you're getting upset. What's your experience of that?

- you become smaller and more defensive.
- closed
- awareness diminishes
- narrow down your focus
- become self centred
- become cut off from larger parts of yourself

This is exactly my experience too. And I feel we can summarise this as a form of contraction. Our awareness contracts to whatever it is that's the focus of our preoccupation at the time; or the main source of our suffering or distress. And that's actually what causes our distress. We feel it in the body, we feel it in our emotions, we feel it in the mind. We contract on all those levels. And so yoga

is the opposite of that. In order to counteract that, all we have to do is relax. When we think about relaxing.....just think about relaxing as opposed to being upset ... and automatically we have the sense of "opening out", of expansion. We talk about people 'being in an expansive mood' when they're feeling more relaxed.

So when we're suffering and distressed, we contract. And when we relax we are expanded. There are different ways that we make that step.

This is essentially what we are teaching in yoga practice. You're teaching people how to relax enough to expand their awareness. We tend to have an idea that relaxation has a limit, that there is a kind of floor or a ceiling, that relaxation happens only within a certain band. But part of what we're really exploring in yoga is

how far, how deeply can we relax.

What is an enlightened person? An enlightened person is just thoroughly relaxed about life. That's it. That's all. It's not that they don't react and that they don't 'contract' as well but they have a perspective on life that allows them to be relaxed and it includes being independent and accepting. The shortest way to be enlightened is to be as relaxed as possible. When we go on retreats for instance, we begin to see the boundaries of the depth of our relaxation. Ordinary people will start to see it; they'll say wonderful things to you about your classes, about how great they feel in doing the classes, because they've relaxed more deeply than they normally do. Now when you're doing yoga for a longer period of time and on a regular basis, then you have a commitment to it as a way of growing. You're pushing back the boundaries of how deeply



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you can relax. But there *are* boundaries. And how long we can sustain that expanded awareness; what does it take to 'contract' us?

Like for me for instance, during this illness. At first it was all the physical stuff; I was just physically incredibly sick, but what really got to me was that I couldn't think straight, I couldn't concentrate, and I began to feel really irritable and vulnerable to other people's feelings and easily freaked out because of the illness. So that's all it took, just getting sick, for me to contract down in some areas of my life, in a way that I don't normally do. For some people it takes a major life upheaval, like a death or a divorce, but for most of us, when we have a look, it just requires that the boss walks in with a bad look on his/her face. Whatever it is, it's a question of how we sustain that, and it's not that we don't react, but how quickly we bounce back.



I think these are interesting issues to have a look at generally, but in relation to teaching, we are teaching people to be more aware, to expand their awareness. And when I look through this list of the things you want to incorporate in your own teaching, there are also personal qualities; doing it ourselves, relaxing as much as possible in ourselves and incorporating this into our own lives and allowing it to have its effect.

We can't be totally responsible for what people learn, but we can do our best, remembering that this is ultimately what we are trying to teach. And that will influence *how* you teach. Yes, it's very important to be precise, but when it comes to the question of what's more important - precision or relaxation - then you have to decide. So you've got to have a basis for deciding. Not that you can't have both, but sometimes we do have to choose.

What I would like to do is to give you a quick outline of a framework that you might want to use to envisage this process.

One thing that you can keep in mind is the five-dimensional model of the person that yogis have. Yogis see a person as having five dimensions, five aspects of existence and the most obvious of these is the physical body, **annamayakosha**, then beyond the body - although yogis maintain that it is usually the same shape and dimensions as the body - is the energy dimension of the person, **pranamayakosha**. It's here that Ayurveda, yoga therapy, chinese medicine and acupuncture operate, in the energy dimension. Beyond the energy dimension is the level of the thinking mind, **manomayakosha**. This dimension of "mind" is made up of thoughts and, to some extent, feelings, and it has to do mostly with our conscious thinking experience.

Then there is a dimension beyond this, which yogis call the wisdom dimension or **vijyanamayakosha**, and which psychologists would call the unconscious mind or the subconscious and unconscious mind. This is the dimension of ourselves that our dreams come from, and it is dreamlike in the way that it operates. Instead of thinking in words, as the mind does, it operates in symbols and it speaks the language of myth and poetry.

And then beyond this again, there is a dimension that yogis call the "bliss body" the **anandamayakosha**. We normally only contact this dimension of ourselves in deep sleep; I mean, that's our daily experience of it - in deep sleep; but if we can contact it consciously, say through meditation or through other radically altered experiences, then the experience that people report is of profound peace. And the experience that everything is perfect as it is. The word "bliss" denotes euphoria, and there is euphoria, there is ecstasy in this experience, but not as we might commonly project that in our normal state of awareness; a lot of what makes up the "bliss" is the sense of completeness, of wholeness. The word "anand" which is the sanskrit word for bliss, has connotations of balance

and harmony and completeness; wholeness, that there is nothing missing, there's nothing else that we want.

Then what lies beyond these five dimensions, known as **kosha** (which translates as sheathes or coverings)? These five dimensions of the person are usually perceived as covering our essence. If our essence is like a light, these are like different thicknesses of lampshade that are placed over it - we're hiding our light under a bushel so to speak. You could conceive of them as filters for our essential nature. Yogis describe our essence (they call it **atman**) as **satchitananda**. "Sat" means "being" - it "is"; our essence "is". "Chit" is from the word **chitta** for awareness or knowing. And "ananda" means bliss. So **being, knowing and bliss** are the qualities of our essence. In short, what yogis tell us is that our essence is awareness, it "is" and it is "aware", and the nature of that awareness is blissful in itself.

One way of looking at the practice of yoga is that we are expanding awareness from wherever our awareness has contracted to. So if our awareness is contracted to the body, then yoga is a process of expanding our awareness to our energy, to our thoughts and feelings, into the mythological and symbolic experiences that we have behind that, into the bliss dimension, and ultimately expanding our awareness until we come in touch with our essence, and recognise it's all just awareness. This is one way of describing that process.

Mostly we are contracted or trapped at one of these levels of being, one of these states of consciousness and my contention is that we're mostly trapped in the mind. We're not so much trapped in the body despite our materialistic orientation; most of us are hemmed in by our minds. So one way to look at yoga is that we are then expanding awareness, from the mind back into the energy dimensions and into the physical body, and beyond the mind into the wisdom dimension, beyond thinking, and into the bliss dimension, until we get in touch with our essence, until we get in touch with **atman** or soul.

We are expanding from where we are trapped in the mind.

Mostly people come into the class thinking about what's gone on during the day, what's going to happen at home; all the things they didn't have time to process during the day are floating around in their heads. We're talking about students, we're talking about me; teachers we walk into the room perhaps with that, depending on how much practice they've just done. What do you take into the room when you go in to teach?

And so yoga is a matter of expanding beyond that into the other dimensions of our being until we can include the whole of our being in our awareness. Teaching yoga is about teaching techniques, the context and the unspoken about expanding awareness until ultimately we become aware of the whole of what we are. So that's one way of looking at it and it's an important way.

Another way of looking at this is that what we're trying to do is to bring more spirit into our bodies (we normally think of *our essence* as spirit); spiritualising the rest of our lives if you like. We'll bring more spirit to the body, more spirit to the mind, more spirit to our energy dimension. What spirit really means is awareness. Awareness is spirit, our spirit is awareness. So it's just another way of saying that we're bringing more spirit into every dimension of our being. And then there is the process of integration, we become aware and then we have to integrate it. And that's what yoga means, yoga is from the root word "to yoke" and it means to bring together, to unite, to yoke together, to bind tightly together. But it also means integrating. Integration is another word for bringing it all together. There are other issues around that including integrity; from integration comes integrity.

So we have this model; this way of looking, of envisaging what's happening; a kind of map to guide us. But if we keep this model in mind, we'll come back to it again and again in relation to the practices. So for instance, on the basis of what you

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know now:

What practices would you suggest would be helpful for bringing awareness to the body?

- asana

What would bring us in touch with the energy dimension?

- pranayama
- asana
- bandha
- mudra

These are not separate, these dimensions are all awareness to some degree or another; nothing that we do in yoga is actually limited to one dimension. Each practice has multidimensional ramifications. There's nothing in yoga that we do that is only for the mind. There is nothing in yoga that we do that is only for the body. It has ripples and implications. It's like growing nerve endings that move through all the dimensions. But we can say that some practices are more targeted than others to a particular dimension. And that helps us to know where to begin with teaching.

So all of these things help and there are other practices that help with the energy dimension too...like *kum nye* practices which are forms of mudra, *taichi* which could be regarded as a form of mudra in some ways. The cleansing practices *shatkarmas* put us in touch with our energy but they're also very good for body awareness. The other thing that puts us in touch with more body awareness is yogic or ayurvedic diet.

So what are the practices that primarily make us aware of the nature of mind?

- meditation
- asana
- pranayama
- pratyahara practices

Another way of translating pratyahara is relaxation. Pratyahara practices are really about relaxation.

What puts us in touch with the wisdom dimension?

- All the meditation practices....pratyahara, dharana...etc

And the bliss dimension is **samadhi** which is the sense of union that can come out of our meditation.

So when we look at this, what we have here is a summary of Patanjali's *Eight Fold Path*. Patanjali is one of the great codifiers of yoga. "Patanjali's Yoga Sutra" consists of a number of very short statements about yoga; they are like encoded statements. People have written whole books not just on translation but on commentary so one line becomes multiplied by one thousand in trying to explain what it means. They're very compressed. He said that those eight steps consisted of *yama* and *niyama* (which are the ethics of yoga), *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyaana* and *samadhi*.

Where do we start, out of all the things that we know?

Well we start with the understanding that what we want to teach people is relaxation. We want to teach expansion of awareness. It's not possible to expand awareness if we're not relaxed, if we're tense, awareness contracts. If we become fearful or upset in any way our awareness contracts. And we're trying to convey the relaxation and expansion of awareness at every dimension of our being: mentally, energetically, physically and symbolically (the wisdom dimension) and beyond. Then if we can expand our awareness enough we can get in touch with our essence, with what we really are.

And that's what yogis mean by enlightenment, or self-realisation, self actualisation.



Muktanand Meannjin was a Yoga Acharya who trained in India with Swami Satyananda. Muktanand was a highly respected teacher in India and Australia, a registered psychologist and the author of the book "Nawa Yogini Tantra".