

Insight and Wisdom

by Swami Nishchalananda

(This article is based on the plenary speech which Swamiji delivered at the annual British Wheel of Yoga Congress in April 2010 at Warwick University.)

*I will explain to you insight and wisdom, which having been known, nothing more needs to be known.*¹

Insight and Wisdom are fundamental aspects of yoga and of all mystical paths. Insight can be defined as intuition or realisation of the hidden dimensions of our being whilst wisdom is applying what we know on a deeper level in our lives through our acts and relationships with others.

In modern society, many of us are blessed with a reasonable education and easy access to knowledge. Let us be thankful for this. Yet little value is given to insight even though scientific discoveries, for example, depend on it. Our social structures and cultural mores depend almost entirely on individualism and our highest aspirations are based on intellectualism. Because of this we seldom find the happiness that is our birthright – we are like headless chickens desperately looking for meaning. Failing in this, and not able to face the mundanity of everyday life, we often lose ourselves in meaningless pursuits, uninspired behaviour and ultimately dull ourselves through booze, or blow our minds with drugs.

Yet, if only we start to explore the inner dimensions of our own being, life can be full of inner discovery (insight), joy and wisdom. This allows us to live our daily life, whilst simultaneously awakening to our inner potential. Through insight we can see into the mysteries of our being and of existence, and this leads to more happiness and fulfilment.

Definitions

The English word 'insight' has a significant meaning: 'in-sight' – inner vision, which exactly conveys its meaning in the context of yoga. Furthermore, the word 'intuition': 'in-tuition' – inner learning, to learn from within – also conveys the same sense and implication. The equivalent word in Sanskrit is *vigyana*. It is also interesting to note that the Sanskrit word for philosophy is *darshana*, which literally means 'vision'.² This gives us the clear indication that yogic and other philosophical-mystical systems that have been developed in the subcontinent are based not just on verbal speculation, but on vision, or insight.

The difference between thought and insight

It is important to appreciate that whereas discursive thought is based on individual mental conditioning, insight is not. We can explain this by looking at a yogic paradigm of human nature known as the *pancha kosha* (the five envelopes). This comprises the *anna-maya kosha* (the physical body), the *prana-maya kosha*, (etheric or energy body), the *mana-maya kosha*, (mental body or individual mind), the *vigyana-maya kosha*, (the insight-ful realm) and the *ananda-maya kosha* (causal body, or realm of bliss). These represent five energy levels of our embodied being, moving from the physical and energy sheaths, through to the individual mind and then to most subtle levels of our being.

Thinking and conceptualisation arise from the third level, the individual mind; they are dependent on conditioning, be it familial, social, cultural, religious, or scientific. Despite what we may feel, original thinking does not arise from this level. Insight, on the other hand, arises from the fourth and fifth levels. At the fourth level we access the transpersonal level of our being, widely known as the collective unconscious; whilst at the fifth level, the causal body, we realise our essential nature, representing as it does the threshold between the individual consciousness, or Awareness, and the total Consciousness.

¹ *Bhagavad Gita*, verse 2 chapter 7. In fact, this chapter is entitled 'Gyana Vigyana Yoga' – the Yoga of Wisdom and Insight.

² *Darshan* also means to sit with a sage and imbibe his/ her aura, thereby encouraging insight and wisdom.

When the mind, the third level, becomes quieter, automatically we have access to insight in the more subtle levels.

Insight, science and paradox

Humans have this unique capacity of insight (other creatures on this small planet earth, as far as we know, don't). It is the source of subtle, incisive intelligence and is part of our human nature. In the western world, however, insight has somehow been neglected or diminished in importance. Since the time of Aristotle, physics was separated from metaphysics – what can be proved logically from what can be felt and lived intuitively. The French philosopher Henri Bergson³ was rare among western thinkers in that he attempted to reconcile intuition with science and philosophy.

Insight is the faculty which functions when someone gains understanding of some new phenomenon, whether in science, art, yoga or mysticism in general. A scientist discovers a new law of nature through insight. It is said that Archimedes leapt out of his bath and an apple fell on Newton's head. These are historic, though probably apocryphal, examples of the suddenness of insight. They both had an insight which had enormous impact on our understanding of the world we live in. We are not them, but we all have the possibility of insight, whether concerned with the outer affairs of the world or with our own being.

Life as far as we understand it is full of paradoxes, though it is said that there are no paradoxes in Reality, only in our limited understanding. Niels Bohr, one of the pioneers of quantum physics, said that we only make scientific progress through paradoxes. And yet, paradoxically (!), western thinking has never really been comfortable with paradox and has always tried to wrap everything up with logic.⁴ Eastern philosophical thinking, on the other hand, has always been more comfortable with paradox, even introducing paradoxical logic into their ideas.⁵

With the limited capacity of our conditioned mind, we are incapable of understanding life's paradoxes. Is light a wave or a particle? This is a scientific paradox that even now, after eighty years or so, mystifies quantum physicists. Does memory exist in the brain at specific centres, or is memory of a diffuse, holographic nature? Our very nature as humans is based on paradox. Do we choose to act in a certain way or are we obliged to act? Do we think or do thoughts happen? Are we makers of our destiny or does destiny happen through us? In fact, depending on our perspective, both can be taken to be true. This indicates the paradoxical nature of our lives.

Yet, paradox and diversity exist only on the surface. There is a non-dual, transcendental principle which unifies all opposites and all paradoxes – that unifies being and non-being, life and death, the microcosm and the macrocosm. At the heart of things there is oneness. Insight can reveal this principle.

Let us remain open and humble, being uncomfortably comfortable or comfortably uncomfortable with paradox, but always enquiring.

The nature of insight

There are many levels and types of insight. Insight happens when we suddenly and intuitively realise why someone is angry with us, why someone spoke to us in a certain way, or where we lost our front door key. Insight can be into anything: the body, the breath, energy, movement, life and death, philosophical concepts, nature, food – anything and everything. We may have insight about the earth, its fauna and flora.⁶ We may have an insight into matters of the heart, or into the inner motivations and secrets of people we know or don't know. As such, insight, or intuition, can be invaluable for a yoga teacher in understanding what is going on in the lives of their students and what is appropriate practice for them.

We may receive specific insight to complete a task, to assist another person, or to create an entire workable plan for a business. No matter what our focus is on, insight is always available if we are

³ 1849-1941.

⁴ Mainly the system of deductive logic expounded by Aristotle and developed in the Middle Ages based on syllogism, a form of reasoning in which a conclusion is drawn from two given or assumed propositions.

⁵ For example, things are; are not; both are and are not.

⁶ For example, see *The Cosmic Serpent* by Jeremy Narby, which tells how South American shamans gain understanding of the pharmacological properties of plants through insight: the plants 'speak' to the shamans when they are in altered states.

sufficiently receptive. Often we can grasp what we need to in an instance; at other times, we have to stay open and listen closely for several days, weeks or even years.

In yoga, and in other mystical sciences, however, we are specifically concerned with gaining insight into the innermost essence of things by asking fundamental questions such as 'What is this world?' 'What is the Reality behind all this?' Moreover, in relation to our own existence, we ask 'Who am I?' From intense enquiry into these fundamental questions comes insight, a flash of inspiration that shakes us in our existential boots, bringing understanding that transcends all the conditioned thought-based knowledge that we have accumulated since our birth.

Through insight we realise that each of us is far more than the embodied personality that we tend to identify with. We realise that the fundamental basis of our embodied nature is not the body, nor the mind, but a far more comprehensive and inclusive quality or principle, which for the sake of a better word, we can call Consciousness. This Consciousness reflects into our personality as Awareness, or individual consciousness. Having realised this, we start to identify more with this Awareness and live life more wisely. We also realise, impossible and improbable though it may seem, that Awareness is not essentially something different from the wider field of Consciousness: they are coextensive and non-dual.

Insight shows us that the Awareness in a human being is something beyond birth, life and death. Due to the limitations of the human mind, however, we are not able to grasp this essential fact. Only when the mind is stilled, so that it becomes transparent, are we enabled, through insight, to realise this fundamental truth. Each of us has the potential to realise this in our own being.

The obstructions of the conditioned mind

Realisation of the fundamental dimension of our Being requires a transformation of our mind. Whilst the mind is full of conditioned stereotypical ideas, misconceptions, obsessions, blockages and prejudices, we are not able to 'see' clearly; fundamental insight is not possible. Certainly, we may have premonitions and hunches, but these tend to be coloured by self-interest and intellectual interpretations. At times, the mind may be filled with fascinating dream-like hallucinations. Recently my mind was filled with extraordinary multi-coloured film-like images which continued for many hours. Though absorbing, I can't really say that these brought any real insight.

No one would doubt that the mind is an instrument of perception, either through the senses or by discursive thought. However, in yoga, the mind is also regarded as an instrument for limiting perception and understanding. If the mind was totally open to all that is, it would be overwhelmed with information; the mind therefore shuts out most of this information, whether sensory or extra-sensory. This is necessary for biological survival. The mind is so designed that it acts as a funnel or a reducing valve.

Insight allows us to see beyond the limitations of logic and the senses; not to supplant them, but to complement them. The mind is circumvented so that one taps into the higher dimensions of knowing and being. William Blake referred to this in his famous statement:

If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is ... infinite.

Yoga in all its forms helps us to become free of conditioned mental and emotional patterns or, rather, to be free of our unquestioned identification with them.

The ego-sense, though necessary for living a normal life, is also an obstruction. Whilst we are totally identified with it, we are less available to insight. After all, insight or realisation cannot be achieved – it is not something to be done. It happens when the ego-sense fades into the background, albeit temporarily.

The ego depends on identification with what we think we are. Through practice, our sense of 'self' changes and becomes wider. Through insight, one is able to integrate previously hidden aspects and potentialities into one's own 'concept' of 'self'.

It must be said, however, that the word 'ego' tends to have negative connotations, especially in yogic circles. One is endlessly bombarded with the admonition to become 'egoless' (whatever that is!). In fact, only a healthy ego can go beyond itself (otherwise we are always obsessed by our limitations and hang-ups, which re-enforces our sense of inadequacy and 'ego'). On the path of yoga, one has to awaken one's innate capacities so that the 'ego' becomes more comfortable with

itself, not in the sense of arrogance, conceit and vanity, but in the sense of becoming more encompassing and mellowed with a sense of humility. Insight allows us to expand our sense of self-esteem, self-respect and self-worth, so that we can soar beyond the fetters of total ego-identification.

Through insight, our blockages, egoism, attachment to concepts, doubts and fears, all start to dissolve. We cease to be addicted to concepts and dogma and we open up to the Infinite.

Two anecdotes

Insights are often difficult to discuss or explain to others without seeming rather banal. However, the following are two examples of insights that have arisen within me.

The first seems mundane, but it had enormous implications for my mind and personality. It happened in 1975 when I was living in an ashram in India.⁷ One afternoon I was sitting on a high wall about three storeys up. But first of all I have to relate that when I was aged between ten and fifteen I used to go fishing with friends in the lakes and rivers around my family home. As bait we used little white maggots called gentles (strange name!), the larvae of the common blowfly or bluebottle. Horrible little wiggly things! We would buy them from a fishing shop by the hundred, storing them in a little metal box. After a day's fishing it was customary to empty the box by throwing them away in the river as feed for the fish. On one occasion, the maggots were kept for an intended day of fishing the following day. But for some reason we didn't actually go.

In time, maggots transform into flies. And, of course, this is exactly what happened within the confines of the box. Being otherwise preoccupied, I totally forgot them. The following Friday I prepared myself for the next day's fishing. I idly opened the box with the intention of taking it down to the fishing shop to re-stock. What a shock! Hundreds of black flies flew out of the box into my face and into my eyes. Though it may seem unlikely, that seemingly insignificant event left some kind of emotional shock in the mind. A fear was somehow imprinted in the subconscious mind and must have remained there.

Somehow the shock was suppressed and forgotten. Until, that is, one day twenty years later in India when I was sitting on a wall. I had been just been practising hatha yoga and meditation. I was feeling very calm and very spacious. The feeling of spaciousness was augmented by the fact that I was sitting on the wall which gave me the feeling of being suspended in space. Below me I suddenly spotted about twenty black pigs – all sizes. Suddenly there was an explosion in my mind and I had a vision of the hundreds of black flies flying into my face. I re-experienced the whole event, including the associated fear and shock.

Stimulated by the pigs, the spaciousness and receptivity in my being allowed the memory to surface. Not only this, the spaciousness also allowed me to re-experience the memory without total self-identification. I had an insight as to how this childhood experience, albeit minor, had left a mark on my mind. Somehow, this brought about a quantum change in the quality of my mind: I noticed that from then on there was a lightness and calmness in my mind which continued as a 'normal' state of my personality. Had my mind been tense and reactive, seeing the pigs would probably have brought about some mental reaction, possibly some inexplicable feeling of disquiet or depression, without actually knowing the reason for the sudden mood swing. The trauma would have remained hidden. It was the litter of pigs that stimulated the memory and gave me direct access to the subconscious, but it was the relaxed spaciousness in my being that allowed the memory to surface and the insight to arise on how it had impacted on my life.

The second anecdote is more philosophical and mystical. Ever since my arrival in India I had been fascinated by the concept of the *bindu* (the transcendental point) that is familiar to those who practice kriya yoga⁸ and who work with the chakras.⁹ I read various books on tantra which often refer to the bindu, but somehow its deeper meaning eluded me. Then one day, after some meditation practice, I idly picked up a book in which I saw the hermetic statement: *Reality is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere*. Suddenly there was an explosion of

⁷ At the Bihar School of Yoga, Munger.

⁸ A form of kundalini yoga which awakens energy as a means to open up dimensions of our being.

⁹ The energy centres in the human being.

insight and I realised that this centre is the bindu, I am the bindu and that indeed it is everywhere. For many days I was in a state of bliss.

Insights can happen anywhere – walking the dog, stroking the cat, lying in the bath, or washing the dishes. Every moment can be an opportunity to ‘see’ – with ‘in-sight’. See for instance the teachings of the *Vigyana Bhairava Tantra* which encourage this process in daily life.¹⁰ It prescribes a wide range of practices that encourage us to be present (i.e., totally in the present moment) in all kinds of situations, and thereby more open to insight. As such, the whole of our life is transformed; each moment is seen as full of potential and able to reveal deeper aspects of ourselves, others and the world in general.

Nature or some natural phenomenon can prompt insight; hence the function of Zen koan-s. Insight can arise through asking questions, by meditation or by any practice, yogic or otherwise, which renders us more receptive, including hatha yoga. Generally, however, there needs to be a burning need to know, so that our mind is filled with enquiry and reflection.

Most afternoons, I put baby Daniel in a sling and walk around the ashram grounds. As you can imagine, this has slowed me down enormously and because of this, I am less busy and more open to insight – not earth shaking ones but nevertheless of some significance (at least for me!). Insight gives us the capacity to see meaning in even the most mundane events.

Agya chakra – conductor of insight


The agya chakra is the sixth chakra,¹¹ located in the centre of the head. The Sanskrit word *agya* is etymologically related to two other Sanskrit words: *gyana* (wisdom; also scriptural knowledge) and *vigyana* (insight; realisation; direct knowledge), which are widely used in the yogic, tantric and Vedantic texts. It also has the same root as the word *gnosis* (Greek, *gnoscere* – to know; direct, revealed knowledge or perception).¹²

The agya chakra is the faculty which allows us access to insight – a glimpse of the higher possibilities and realities of life. The awakening of agya chakra gives us a peep, so to say, behind the scenes, where we see the unification of duality on a deeper level. Through insight, we see that dualities are like the waves of the sea, different on the surface, but unified below. All of life, all physical and mental phenomena, which seem to be different and even mutually opposing on one level, are seen to be integrated on a deeper level by an all-encompassing energy and Consciousness.

The agya chakra has many different names, including the eye of insight, the eye of wisdom, the third eye, the eye of Shiva (the eye of Consciousness).¹³ In fact, in Indian myth, many stories are told of the opening of the eye of Shiva, who in this context personifies the yogi who has access to insight. Moreover, a wise person or a sage is often called a ‘seer’, who having awakened the agya chakra, has access to insight.

Symbolism

Insight is at the heart of all systems concerned with spiritual awakening. Therefore, the agya chakra and insight are symbolised in many traditions. In India, a dot (*tilaka*) of sandalwood, vermilion coloured powder, or saffron (*kumkum*) is placed at the eye-brow centre, not only to symbolise the awakening of the agya chakra, and access to insight, but to stimulate and make one constantly aware of this centre. This was, and still is, the real practical purpose of this custom: to remind us to be open to insight.

The mantra **OM** is the *bija* (seed, resonant) mantra of the agya chakra and is inscribed at the centre of the traditional agya chakra symbol. Besides symbolising the energetic and vibrational nature of all things manifest, from material objects to thought patterns, OM is also a symbol of the insight which leads to realisation of what is beyond. In the glyph , the crescent moon above

¹⁰ A classical text of Kashmir Shaivism, a form of tantra.

¹¹ For details on the chakras see the author’s book *The Edge of Infinity*, chapter 2.

¹² In the Oxford dictionary ‘gnosis’ is defined as ‘knowledge of spiritual mysteries’. Gnostics were those who gained insight and who followed the path of wisdom.

¹³ Many yoga practitioners will know of, or even use, a *rudraksha* mala (rosary) when chanting mantras as a means to meditation and insight. The beads are made from the pips of the blue marble tree (Latin, *elaecarpus sphaericus*) which grows in the Himalayas; *rudraksha* literally means the ‘eye of Rudra’ (Rudra is another name for Shiva; *aksha*, eye).

the main body of the symbol (known as the *raj*) represents insight into the underlying mystery of existence, symbolised by the point at the top (known as the *bindu*).¹⁴

A hawk, eagle, or a solitary bird in an open sky, is often used to symbolise insight. In fact, in a number of traditions, a hawk or an eagle is believed to be able to fly up to and gaze on the sun without flinching. This suggests that only with insight can we know the essential Being. Also, in ancient Egyptian mythology, Horus, the hawk-headed son of the god Osiris, symbolised insight; in fact, the 'Eye of Horus' is widely mentioned in Egyptian myth. Moreover, Egyptian priests wore a headdress on which was depicted the *uraeus* (a serpent) emerging from the eyebrow centre; the uraeus is also known as the 'Eye of Ra (the Sun God)' and is another symbol of insight.

The itarakhya lingam is the name of a phallic¹⁵ symbol placed in the centre of the agya chakra symbol. Literally, the Sanskrit word *itarakhya* means 'that which announces another' (*itara*, another; *akhya*, to announce, inform, behold), or 'that by which we can behold the other' – that is, the insight, by which we can 'behold' or 'know' Reality.

In the tantric tradition, the goddess Hakini is placed in the middle of the agya chakra symbol.¹⁶ She symbolises qualities or potentialities that we all have, albeit usually dormant, including insight. She has six hands which hold:

- ⇒ a skull, indicating that though death, decay and destruction are inescapable aspects of the manifested universe, insight reveals that one's essential nature lies beyond it.
- ⇒ a drum (*damari*) that symbolises the vibrational nature of the universe and everything in it. It also symbolises that we are continuously being called, through insight, to enter into inner contact with the fundamental ground of our being.
- ⇒ a rosary (*mala*) indicating the importance of practice in encouraging insight.
- ⇒ *abbaya mudra* the 'symbol of fearlessness', a quality which comes through insight.
- ⇒ *vara mudra* – 'the symbol of benediction'. Whether we know it or not, and though it may not always be evident when we are suffering, we are continuously being blessed. Insight reveals this as a fact of our own experience.
- ⇒ book – symbolising knowledge that arises out of insight.

The **empty circle** (black, white or transparent) represents the clear mind which is open to insight. This clear mind is often called the void (*shoonya*) not because it is a nothingness, but because it is void of concepts. The open sky signifies the uncluttered, non-conceptual mind which is open to insight. Realisation takes place in the 'vacuum' of no thought and no concept.

A single eye symbolises receptivity to insight. Many Hindu deities, such as Shiva and Shakti, are depicted with three eyes: two fleshy eyes to perceive the outer world and the third eye of insight. The third eye may be open or closed: when it is open, it symbolises that the agya chakra is awake, and therefore that the faculty of insight is functioning; when the third eye is closed, as in for example statues of Buddha, it indicates inwardly directed attention – also open to insight.

Jesus said:

*If therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.*¹⁷

And the medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart wrote:

*The eye with which I see God is the same as that with which He sees me: my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing and one love.*¹⁸

Both of these references to the single eye indicate fundamental insight (in-sight) into the ground of being.

The unicorn, a mythical figure of Western mysticism, is unquestionably a symbol of insight. The long horn emerging from the centre of its head represents the piercing power of insight to

¹⁴ For more information on OM see the author's booklet *The Mantra OM – Symbol of Primordial Vibration* and for information on the bindu see ch. 2 in his book *The Edge of Infinity*, both published by the ashram.

¹⁵ Though of course a phallic symbol has sexual connotations, here it indicates that the entirety of the universe is fecundated by Reality.

¹⁶ Described in verse 32 of the *Sbat Chakra Nirupana* (Description of the Six Chakras), a classical tantric text written by Purnananda Swami and translated into English by Sir John Woodroffe in *The Serpent Power*.

¹⁷ Matthew 6.22.

¹⁸ Sermon IV: True Hearing, in *Meister Eckhart's Sermons* as translated by Claude Field (c. 1909).

penetrate and remove ignorance. Remember that the horse is a widely used symbol for the intellect. The horse-shaped body of the unicorn thereby indicates that the intellect (the horse) and the intuition/insight (horn of the unicorn) supplement each other to bring wisdom.

According to Roman mythology, Mercury is a psychopomp (soul guide to the beyond), the messenger of the gods, the son of heaven. He symbolises many different things, including insight. The following are my interpretations: he wears a winged hat (symbolising the freedom that arises from insight) and winged sandals (indicating that on the evolutionary path one should walk lightly on the planet earth, thereby becoming available to insight). Among other things, he holds the caduceus (the symbol of hatha yoga, healing and the medical profession¹⁹), the club (mastery of oneself), the turtle (from whose shell he is said to have created the first lyre, but from a yogic viewpoint, representing the capacity to withdraw into the deeper dimensions of one's being) and the lyre (symbolising the subtle sounds and vibrations which one can tune into to awaken insight). He is often accompanied by a cockerel (symbolising vigilance). Hermes is the Greek equivalent of Mercury (in fact, the Romans borrowed him from the Greeks). Hermes gives us the word "hermeneutics" – the art of interpreting hidden meaning; that is, through insight.

There are many other symbols of insight, but now we move on to how we can actually awaken insight.

Opening to and awakening insight

First of all, insight arises more easily when we consider the inner as important as the outer. Everyone has the ability to access insight: it is merely a question of being receptive.

There are many ways of awakening insight. First of all, we should understand that insight does not arise through a process of cause and effect. We can make ourselves more available and open, as we do by practising yoga, but we can't make it happen. It arises from a level of being that is not determined by our personal machinations. This being said, yoga in general makes us more available to insight.

Becoming more sensitive. To open up to insight, we need to become more sensitive through yoga practice. Most of us commence with the practice of hatha yoga, which when combined with other forms of yoga, including kriya yoga, slowly and progressively make us more sensitive.

Meditation. To encourage insight, introspection is essential. Meditation practices of all types are extremely useful. One method is to become more attentive to the 'mind screen' or 'mind space' (*chittakasha*), which is the space which we see when we close our eyes and look inwards at the forehead or behind the closed eyes. This enables us to become more familiar with how we function on an inner plane, reduces obsessive thoughts and blockages, and brings inner clarity and calmness. Group meditation also helps us to become more perceptive and open to insight.

Meditation also inspires us to become more present in the *now* and more spacious in the activities of our daily life; this alone, allows us to be more available to insight. From time to time, we should sit quietly for a few minutes or seconds — even if we are tired or fed up. Initially, even if we stop physically, the mind still continues at its usual pace. It is only through sustained practice that we can just stop, sit and be open to stillness and spaciousness. Then insight can arise, and as a result we start to tune into a deeper level of being.

Aspiration (*mumuksha*) to go deeper and realise. Without this, we are not motivated to spend time and energy in practice and in investigation.

Sharing in truth (*satsanga*) is an important aspect of our efforts to bring about insight and wisdom. Contact with sages or spiritual teachers, who have gone deeper in their understanding, helps to shift us from our complacency, indifference and false beliefs. They can show us where we are blocked in our thinking, assumptions and presumptions. Otherwise we tend to go around and around in our conceptual daydreams. Moreover, they can inspire us as living examples of our own potential. Although insight must arise from within, external prompts are useful, if not essential.

¹⁹ For more details on the caduceus, refer to the author's book *The Edge of Infinity* p.74.

At first, there may be resistance or doubt. I remember well when I first met Swami Satyananda in Belfast in 1971.²⁰ He was saying things that I could not accept; every part of my personality and understanding resisted. What he was saying put many of my precious concepts into doubt. But somehow, what he said hit me on a deeper level and I started to reflect, unconsciously, on what he had said. In time, this opened many doors and dimensions in my being which were previously hidden.

Hearing (*shravana*) the words of the sacred texts in satsanga, or reading them, helps us to start to consider alternative possibilities to what we have been taught, especially on existential questions.

Enquiry and reflection (*nichara*). By becoming more sensitive and introspective through meditation and other forms of yoga, we are enabled to ask meaningful and fundamental questions. We may be prompted by our own inner aspirations or follow the texts by asking such questions as ‘Who am I?’, ‘How is this world created?’, ‘Who is the creator?’, or ‘What is this world made of?’²¹ Or you may ask as does the *Kena Upanishad*:

*By whom, and by whose will, does the mind perceive objects? What is the intelligence which permits the eyes and ears to perceive? By whom does the life force (prana) function? By what intelligence are we enabled to utter speech?*²²

Deep reflection on these kinds of questions opens us up to the quality or principle underlying all processes, whether sensory, emotional or mental. What is this principle? The following verse from the same text gives us a hint, albeit indirectly:

*The eyes cannot see It. Words cannot express It. The mind cannot conceive of It. We cannot describe It. It is different to the known and even different to the unknown.*²³

The essential starting point for gyana yoga – the yoga of enquiry and insight – is to question everything and to doubt what we have been taught to believe. This doubt need not be dogmatic (which implies that we are not really open and available), but an open-ended doubt which encourages enquiry. Let us question the validity of our present understanding. As Sri Aurobindo once reminisced:

*The capital period of my life was when I could clearly see that what the intellect said might be correct or incorrect, that what the intellect justifies may be true and that the opposite is also true. I never admitted truth in my mind without simultaneously keeping it open to the contrary of it ... the result was that the prestige of the intellect was gone.*²⁴

Because of our conditioning and thinking, we perceive in a certain way. This is the price we pay for being born as embodied humans, and the result of education which teaches us to perceive and understand in a particular, socially accepted way. Though necessary, education, in a sense, teaches us ignorance – for it passes on to us the collective illusions, superstitions, mores and beliefs of past generations. Learning and thought, with all their fine distinctions, are only more subtle forms of ignorance. Words, as expressions of thought, are not Reality but its shadow. Once we know the innate insufficiency of words, descriptions and concepts, then we can open up to the insight which reveals that which is beyond, and yet encompasses, words.

In essential matters, we should believe only what we know from our own firsthand experience and insight. We should take stereotypical and conceptual knowledge with ‘a pinch of salt’. Only then are we available to the ‘knowing’ that takes place in the vacuum of the non-conceptual or non-thinking mind.

Awakening to our innate freedom

Insight leads us to freedom; this is the promise of yoga. This doesn’t mean that we can break all the laws of society or get up to all kinds of mischief; it means that the fundamental basis of our embodied being is innately free. By gaining insight into it and identifying with it, we become free. As Jesus said:

²⁰ Subsequently he became my spiritual teacher, or *guru*.

²¹ These are given in verse 12 of the classical text *Aparoksha Anubhuti* (‘Direct Insight’), which is ascribed to Shankaracharya.

²² Ch. 1 verse 1.

²³ Ibid, ch. 1 verse 3.

²⁴ As quoted in ch. 3 *The Adventure of Consciousness* by Satprem. See Sri Aurobindo website.

*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*²⁵

Whilst we are totally attached to material objects, we can never be free. Let us appreciate our possessions and use them as necessary, but once they have served their purpose we need not obsessively hold on to them. Even whilst having possessions, it is foolish, or misguided, to expect them to give us deep fulfilment. We need not get possessed by possessions. Let us reflect on that which lies behind and beyond all material objects.

The same applies to people: no one belongs to us, and we don't belong to anyone. Let us relate to others with love and respect. No husband owns his wife, and no wife owns her husband. They are (hopefully!) loving partners, for some time; that is all. Let us respect our relations and friends; in fact, in our hearts let us respect everyone and everything. But let us also know that all relationships, profound though they may be, are transient. Let us reflect on that which makes all relationships possible and in which there is only one non-dual, all-encompassing relationship.

When we change our place of habitation, let us do it without tears or anguish. After all, at the time of death, we will have to make the biggest change of habitation of all! Let us reflect on that which transcends all habitation.

Freedom means freedom from compulsion. And how do we become free of compulsions? By realising that everything and every embodied being is temporary, but most importantly, that the source of everything is one total Consciousness. Our Awareness is a reflection of this Consciousness. When we identify with this, then we can be free. In fact, this is our innate, natural state. This quantum shift in understanding comes through insight.

What is wisdom?

Essentially, wisdom means, having had direct insight into the essence of our being, that we live our lives accordingly. Knowing that one's real identity is Awareness – a holographic projection of Consciousness – we start to remain centred even among the multifarious activities and dispersions of life. We know that there is unity in duality.

Wisdom means knowing that the ego is just a pattern in Consciousness and, as such, it is transient and fundamentally unreal. Wisdom means that whilst knowing that ultimately nothing matters, we nevertheless care passionately for everyone and everything. Wisdom means knowing that as an embodied being, we are but reflections of the transcendental Consciousness in the mirror of the world.

Wisdom means that we know that Consciousness is the only Subject. All things in the universe, including human beings, are objects – mere appearances in Consciousness. Moreover, objects cannot be and need not be liberated.

Living with wisdom

Living wisely means that we have to 'walk our talk'. Our life should become an expression of our insight. And this is a cyclical process: opening up to a wider picture, releases us from ego-obsession. Then we become more available to insight, even in our daily affairs.

Wisdom means we learn from our experiences in life, knowing that situations and events can help to free us from our ignorance. As one of the characters in the classical *Mahabharata*²⁶, Vidura, says:

A wise man gleans goodness from whatever he can, from every side, and the whole world is his school.

Indeed, one of the prime purposes of yoga is to live our lives in this way, so that every moment is a revelation. We may say that yoga helps us to de-stress, to improve our health, physically, emotionally and mentally, and it does. But this is not the prime aim. The core aim of yoga is to open us up to the roots of our being. Nothing less.

Wisdom also means that we feel compassion. We have all suffered in some way or another; therefore, let us feel compassion for the suffering of others. Suffering may even have a positive aspect: pushing us to change and to reach out to that which is new and unexplored, whether within our own being or in the outer world. Compassion implies that we do our best to

²⁵ John 8:32.

²⁶ Literally the *Mahabharata* means 'the Great India', which, with over 100,000 verses, is the largest scriptural text in the world. It includes the *Bhagavad Gita*.

ameliorate suffering, in ourselves and in others, whilst knowing that suffering and frustration are inevitable in embodied existence.

Wisdom means we care for the world we live in. We care about the environment and the quality of life. We do our best to help others. But, at the same time, in the depths of our heart, we would not be upset if the world or even the universe blew up here and now. After all it has to go sometime! This is not indifference, because an essential part of wisdom is compassion and caring, but acceptance of the inevitable. Rather, we should reflect: what is it that lies behind this incredible universe in which we live? What is it that lies behind this universe that has arisen like a bubble in Eternity?

When insight becomes a fundamental part of perception, we start to see the deeper aspect of all things and all situations. We realise and see that all people, even the most cruel and small-minded, have their place in the scheme of things. One becomes constantly open to the inner voice or Guru (*antaryami* – the Inner Being).

Out of wisdom arises joy. Some people associate wisdom with solemn, unsmiling faces. But the sages I have known have exuded joy and have laughed at every opportunity. Why? Because they have tapped the depths of their own being and this can only make them laugh – with a great belly laugh – at the world that we take so seriously. Their laughter is a spontaneous expression of their insight and wisdom.

All of the paths of yoga help us on the path to wisdom. The following is a simple meditation-cum-introspective practice to encourage insight.

Meditation: know the Knower

You know the world around you.

You know your body, your thoughts, emotions, personality, possessions, your house ...

Who is the Knower of these aspects of life?

In fact, you can never know the Knower.

It is not an object to be known, but rather that which allows you to know.

It is the background – the ever lasting stillness.

Reflect that the Knower is one, whilst the known is many.

Let us be humble

Know that:

It is Reality that realises Itself, not the individual.

and let us adhere to the following advice from the ancient *Kena Upanishad*:

*If you think, 'Now I know', it is certain that you don't. The reality that you know is merely the mind and its concepts. Therefore it is better to always feel that what you want to know is still to be known.*²⁷

Texts:

There are numerous texts in traditions worldwide which encourage us to open up to insight and live a life of wisdom. The following are a few in the yogic and tantric tradition:

Bhagavad Gita (The Song of God?); numerous translations.

Kena Upanishad (The Esoteric Teachings which Ask "To Whom") – chapter 1 and 2.

Vigyana Bhairava Tantra (Insight into Reality) – practices (dharanas) which open us to insight.

Ishavasya Upanishad (Teachings on the Indwelling Presence).

Ashtavakra Gita (The Teachings of the Sage Ashtavakra).

Yoga Vashishta (The Teachings of Yoga according to the Sage Vashishta).

Ribhu Gita (The Song of the Sage Ribhu).

Aparoksha Anubhuti (Direct Insight or Experience) by Shankaracharya.

Uddhava Gita (The Teachings of Krishna as given to His Disciple Uddhava).

Shiva Samhita (Treatise on Hatha Yoga).

Yoga Sutra-s (Verses on Raja or Ashtanga Yoga) by Patanjali.

²⁷ Ch.2 verse 1.