

THE HIMALAYAN YOGA TRADITION

The Himalayan Mountains have been the home of sages for millennia. These great sages have lived and passed on knowledge of the yogic teachings to disciples who then became masters passing on the teachings in an unbroken lineage since the Vedic period. Twelve hundred years ago Shankaracharya organized his teaching into five centers of the Himalayan Tradition. As one of those five, our tradition is the *Bharati* lineage connected with the Shankaracharyas at the Shringeri Seat. *Bha* means “the light of knowledge,” *rati* means “a lover who is absorbed in it,” thus, *Bharati* indicates one, who as a lover of knowledge, becomes totally absorbed in its light. The methods and philosophies of the Himalayan Tradition have withstood the test of time. Generation upon generation have followed this path and a huge reserve of knowledge has been built.

The student can study the writings of the Tradition and read about the experiences of the great masters of the past for him or herself. The Himalayan Tradition is not a tradition where a teacher proclaims himself a guru and students are expected to believe whatever he says, rather, the teachings come from the Tradition and the student can look to the Tradition to support and make sense of what the teacher says. The initial purpose of the tradition is to awaken the divine flame within each human being and the goal is for each student to become a master of the Tradition in coming to know his or her true Self. It is the task of the teacher, through the Grace of the Guru to selflessly help his disciples on the way of highest enlightenment. Passing on of knowledge is done experientially through the transmission of a pulsation of energy.

The Himalayan Tradition of Yoga Meditation combines the wisdom of Patanjali’s *Yoga-sutras*, the philosophy and practices of the Tantras, and the specific oral instructions and initiatory experiences passed on by a long line of saints and Yoga masters whose names may or may not be known. The Tradition is not an intellectual combining of three unrelated elements, but a unified system in which all the parts are integrally linked.

The principal tenets and practices of all known systems of meditation are included in the Himalayan Tradition and, for the most part, these systems have arisen out of it. For example: *Vipassana* emphasizes breath awareness and Transcendental Meditation concentrates on repetition of the mantra, whereas most *Hatha* practitioners pay attention mainly to posture. The Himalayan meditator, however, learns to sit in the correct posture, relax fully, practice correct breathing, and then combine breath-awareness with the mantra.

When one reaches the end of the practices prescribed in any one part of the Himalayan system, continuity is to be found in the system as a whole. This statement may be explained this way: rare is the disciple who can master all of the components of the Himalayan system, but s/he may master one or two aspects and be sent out to teach. S/he will draw students who are at the level of development where they can benefit from the portion of the system s/he has to offer. In this way various schools of meditation have branched off from the central one. When students have reached the ultimate end of the methods taught in any one

particular subsystem, their next steps will be in other aspects of the Himalayan system. This is termed the divergence and convergence of the meditational systems.

Here are the chief components of the Himalayan system.

Purification of thoughts and emotions: to prevent internal disturbances from extraneous thoughts and sentiments arising during meditation one needs to practice purifications such as:

(a) the five *yamas*: non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, abstinence from sensual indulgence, non-possessiveness, and the five *niyamas*: purity, contentment, practices that lead to perfection of body and mind and senses, study that leads to knowledge of the Self, surrender to the ultimate reality,

(b) the four *brahma-viharas* or right attitudes: friendliness toward the happy, compassion for the unhappy, delight in the virtuous, and indifference toward the wicked. (YS.I.33),

(c) the antidotes to disturbing thoughts, *prati-paksha-bhavana* (YS.II.33) to ward off the thoughts (*vitarkas*) opposed to the *yamas*, *niyamas*, and *brahma-viharas* (YS.II.34), and so forth. The practice of these leads to:

- (i) ethical behaviour,
- (ii) thereby loosening the bonds of karma, and
- (iii) *chitta-pra-sadana*, clarity and purification of mind, making the mind pleasant and clear, and thereby
- (iv) *sthiti-ni-bandhana*, firming up the physical and mental stability and steadiness in life and during meditation.

It is not as simple as it appears. For example, the preceptors in the Himalayan tradition state that they are able to sit in one posture for long hours because:

- (i) they are emotionally stable and undisturbed, and
- (ii) they have practised certain special mantras and tantric concentrations after having been initiated into states energizing the *muladhara-chakra*. Just reading a scholarly commentary on the *Yoga-sutras*' sutra on *asana* will not help the disciple accomplish such a state; the entire integral system must be followed. For example, if one has mastered a meditation posture through *hatha* practices and can keep that posture for some time, this will not prevent him from feeling a sensation of moving and swaying etc. (YS.I.31) that many meditators suffer.

(d) Another aspect of purification is the conquest of the *vikshepas*, nine disturbances in the path of concentration: sickness, mental laziness, doubt, lack of enthusiasm, sloth, craving for sense-pleasure, false perception, despair caused by failure to concentrate and unsteadiness in concentration (YS.I.30), and their five accompaniments: grief, despondency, trembling of the body and irregular breathing (YS I.31).

Without such a conquest one will remain bound to the first three states of mind: turbulent (*kshipta*), stupefied, (*mudha*), distracted by the *vikshepas* (*vi-kshipta*) and will not be able to move to the next ground (*bhumi*), being one-pointed (*ekagra*) and then totally controlled (*ni-ruddha*) in *samadhi*.

For the conquest of these distractions special methods are employed in the Himalayan oral traditions. For example, the involuntary physical movement or swaying, or sensation of swaying even without a perceptible movement is overcome by:

- (i) purifying the emotions,
- (ii) certain mantras, and
- (iii) meditating in the preceptor's presence which helps steady the *sadhaka's* mind.

Mindfulness. As taught in YS.I.20, the practice of *smrty-upa-sthana* (Buddhist *sati-pathana*) takes many forms, the details of which are taught in personal instruction. For example, the Himalayan tradition teaches the method of *asanas* coupled with full awareness of the states of the body, breath and mind in a detailed methodology¹. In fact a major component in the practice of postures is self-awareness, a deep self-observation, in all states of body, breath and especially the mind.

Breath Awareness. It starts as part of mindfulness and becomes specialised as the very first step in the practice of meditation (YS.I.34). Here, it is essential to learn diaphragmatic breathing that is slow, smooth, without jerks and without a break between the breaths. The living Himalayan tradition of meditation does not encourage practices like *kumbhaka*. It teaches the disciple simply:

- (a) to breathe correctly in a manner conducive to meditation,
- (b) to observe the breath flow, which has many variations,
- (c) to do it for a long time without changing the technique, and
- (d) wait for *kevala-kumbhaka* to occur naturally when the mind, woven with the very subtle breath, comes to a standstill and thereby brings the breath itself to a suspended state.

The practice of breath awareness branches off into many other modes of meditative experience. For example :

Nadi-shodhana or purification of subtle energy channels. At least seven different forms of this category of *pranayama*, together with:

- (a) preparatory exercises such as seven different kinds of *bhastrikas* or bellows, and
- (b) a number of variations to each of the seven channel-purifications may be practised.

Pratyahara is the least understood of the components (*angas*) of yoga. In YS.II.54, if we understand the *sutra* correctly, it means:

- (a) first calming the mind,
- (b) then merging the senses into the calmed mind, and thereby
- (c) calming the sense faculties. In actual instruction it is done through certain breathing practices in which the awareness is centered in *pranamaya kosha*.

Under a capable preceptor, one feels the movement of the subtle wind of *prana vayu* moving from one point to another in the body in a systematic progression from point to point, until:

- (a) the physical body is forgotten,
- (b) the awareness of *pranamaya kosha* deepens, and then
- (c) as the *prana* begins to merge into its source in the *manomaya kosha*, the mind is calmed and the senses are stilled. From here, *yoga-nidra* (not to be confused with simple *shavasana* practices that sometimes pass for *yoga-nidra*) is the next step. From here one may move towards the next steps in *yoga-nidra* or towards deeper meditations, or may be allowed to practice both if one has the time for them.

Kundalini breathing. This is the first step in the tantric path, the awareness of an energy flow in the spine, imagining and then feeling it, as though the breath is flowing through an imaginary hollow in the spine.

- (a) Many uninitiated teachers nowadays try to teach *chakra* awakening without having first mastered this *sumeru pranayama*. Also, if one is not

initiated by a master into this method, s/he cannot induce the experience of *sumeru* breathing.

(b) If it is done without the appropriate preparations, such as the correct way of maintaining the spine, it can lead to harm, and

(c) if it is done without using the appropriate mantra – not just any arbitrary mantra – it may be futile, or worse, in that without the proper mantra one may not be able to channel the energy, resulting in possible disturbances and diseases.

Sa-garbha pranayama. It is commonly understood to mean the practice of *kumbhaka* with mental concentration on a mantra. The Himalayan system of *pranapana-smrty-up-sthana* means the awareness of a mantra along with the awareness of the breath flow in all its various stages. Again, this is taught in an initiatory process. We shall include it in our description of *japa* also.

Japa. This is not simply a mechanical recitation of a randomly-chosen mantra. The science of mantra is based on an understanding of sound vibrations which are primarily centered in the various stations of the *kundalini* and cannot be grasped without initiation. The ultimate purpose of *japa* is to go into supreme silence. One first absorbs the articulate level of speech (*vaikhari*) into the mental level (*madhyama*). Then one silences even that and enters the realm of *pashyanti*, the vibration of revelation, such that oneself may become the channel for revelation. From there one goes into the supreme absorption in the *para*, the transcendent, which is knowledge as it exists in the Divine Principle. A preceptor trained in the Himalayan tradition leads the students into further and further refinements through nine major stages of mantra practice as taught in the tantric systems.

Some of the variations of *japa* practice are as follows:

(a) Practising the mantra with the awareness of the breath flow.

(b) Practising the mantra while performing daily tasks such as cooking or reading or writing.

(c) Listening to one's mantra in the mind or in the *anahata chakra*.

(d) Practising the mantra with the *sumeru* breathing.

(e) Merging the mantra into the dot of the *bija* of a given *chakra*, and then observing it emerge from there again.

(f) Taking the mantra into the mind's chamber of silence, and observing it emerge again from that silence.

(g) Merging the mantra into the interior sound in the Cave of the Bees, *bhramara guha*, again experiencing its re-emergence.

(h) Using the mantra in the mental worship in the interior temples (*manasa-puja*).

(i) Contemplating the meaning of one's mantra, and unifying that contemplation with

(i) *manana*, or the Vedantic contemplation of the *maha-vakyas*, and

(ii) internal dialogue, a special process of self-purification.

(j) Using the mantra as a *bhakti* experience, of devotion and silent prayer, thus merging the path of *bhakti-yoga*, *japa-yoga* and *dhyana-yoga*.

There are many other methods of using the mantra which need to be taught by an experienced preceptor who not only teaches the method but also leads the disciple's mind and energies through his own power, that is, he initiates him into the practice.

Shavasana practices serve as ways of entering one's own subtle body. The interior exercises are detailed and complex and go far beyond mere relaxations. They may be practised at the levels of *annamaya kosha*, *pranamaya kosha*, or *manomaya kosha* in a logical progression. The last of these in *shavasana* is, as stated above, *yoga-nidra* at several different levels. For example, one may use it:

(a) to replace sleep,

(b) to heal oneself,

(c) to learn languages, to effortlessly memorise *sutras*, to discover sciences, to solve problems of philosophical as well as of a personal nature, to compose instant poetry, or to develop plans (YS.I.38),

(d) to master the art of dying,

(e) to enter *samadhi*.

For all of these both the method and the initiatory grace are required.

Dharana or concentrations (YS.III.1) and *pra-vrttis* or resultant experiences (YS.I.35, 36). A proficient preceptor in the Himalayan tradition is trained in various methods of concentrations,

- (a) on various focal points in the physical body,
- (b) at the *chakra* points,
- (c) in the *tattvas*, and so forth.

The *Vijnana-bhairava* Tantra teaches a hundred different ways in which an altered state of consciousness may be triggered, and the *Malini-vijayottara-tantra* enumerates nearly thirteen hundred *dharanas*. And these lists may not be exhaustive. A preceptor trained in the Himalayan tradition needs to know the basic ins and outs of all of these concentrations even if s/he has not practised them all personally.

Dhyana or meditation proper. All the methods described above are integral parts of the approach to meditation, but meditation proper begins at the level of *manomaya kosha*. One may enter that *kosha* in many ways, such as through:

- (a) refining the art of *japa*,
- (b) subtler steps in breath awareness,
- (c) concentrations,
- (d) initiation, or
- (e) in the case of a more advanced disciple a guru may simply pull the disciple's mind into a higher degree of meditation. How high one may go through such a conferring of grace depends on the degree of the preceptor's own advancement. If one has guided the student as far as one himself has reached, he passes the student on to the higher preceptor.

This list of the methods in the Himalayan tradition is only illustrative and is by no means exhaustive.

A qualified preceptor in the Himalayan tradition fulfills at least the following requirements. S/he should:

- (a) have the knowledge of the major yoga texts;
- (b) have practised, and been initiated into, all the major paths of yoga such as *mantra-yoga*, *kundalini-yoga*, *shri-vidya* and so forth, with proficiency in some and familiarity with the others;
- (c) be able to see the association between the Himalayan Tradition and other paths, such as those of the Sufis, the Tao, Ch'an, Zen, *thera-vada*, Tibetan, Christian and others – together with their basic texts and historical backgrounds.
- (d) be able to assess the personality type to which a given student should be designated so that the student can be:
 - (i) led on a complementary path (*bhakti*, *jnana*, etc.),
 - (ii) assigned the proper mantra, or *chakra* concentration, and
 - (iii) given progressively appropriate practices.
- (e) have at least a certain degree of the power of transmission.

Transmission. This is the central point of the Himalayan tradition. From times immemorial the tradition has been passed on experientially in an unbroken chain of master disciple relationships. A meditation guide in this tradition must have at least some degree of the power of transmission, to transfer *shakti* to those being taught. S/he should be able to create a common mind-field when leading a class or a group in meditation and be able to induce a meditative state by her/his mere presence and voice. One may do so only up to the degree to which s/he is qualified and authorized. One cannot advise a concentration on, for example, the heart *chakra* unless one can trigger the experience of the energy configurations there at least to some degree. Advanced preceptors teach meditation through such a transmission, while using their voices to gently guide their students into a meditative state.

The Himalayan Tradition of Yoga Meditation is distinguished in that it:

- (a) is the first meditative tradition,
- (b) is the most comprehensive, integral and all-inclusive,
- (c) has given birth to the major meditative traditions of the world and has continued to enrich them all,

(d) does not require adherence to a belief system but experientially helps verify metaphysical reality,

(e) has an unbroken lineage whose continuity is ensured through transmission of *shakti* in meditative and initiatory states.

Swami Rama of the Himalayas has presented this tradition in its scientific format in his lectures and writings and has initiated the disciples to continue a certain degree of transmission.

May the reader receive the Grace of the Himalayan lineage and aspire one day to become a vehicle for such transmission.

End Notes

1. For further details read this author's *Philosophy of Hatha-yoga*.

Suggested Reading in the Himalayan Tradition

- Swami Rama, *Living With the Himalayan Masters*, Honesdale, PA: Himalayan International Institute, 1978.
Swami Rama, *Meditation and Its Practice*, Honesdale, PA: Himalayan International Institute, 1992.
Swami Rama, *The Path of Fire and Light II*, Honesdale, PA: Himalayan International Institute, 1988.
- Swami Veda Bharati, *Superconsciousness Meditation*, Honesdale, PA: Himalayan International Institute, 1974.
Swami Veda Bharati, *Mantra and Meditation*, Honesdale, PA: Himalayan International Institute, 1981.
- Justin O'Brien, *Walking with a Himalayan Master*, Saint Paul, MN: Yes International Publishers, 1998.

Yoga-sutra Commentaries:

- Purohit Swami, *Aphorisms of Yoga*, London: Faber and Faber, 1987. (for beginners)
Hariharananda Aranya, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1981. (for intermediate to advanced)
- Dr. Usharbudh Arya (Swami Veda Bharati), *Yoga-sutras of Patanjali*, Honesdale, PA: Himalayan International Institute, 1986.

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