SPIRITUALITY & YOGA

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Abstract: Every event in life offers glimpses of spirituality. This presentation explores what it is that we call spirituality and how it relates to yoga. The meaning of yoga and how it helps people experience spirituality are discussed.

The starting point for a discussion on spirituality and yoga ought to be a statement of what these words mean. This presentation will mainly focus on the interpretation of seers and sages of ancient India. People here connect yoga with a regime of physical exercises that may or may not include breathing techniques. This is not really yoga as we understand it. Physical exercises are just a small step on path to yoga. Some people may think of it as yoga. Similarly, people may have different concept of spirit and spirituality. Among the Western thinkers, Hegel seems to come closest to Indian concept of Spirit. According to him, Spirit is the divine, rational soul of the universe. It puts forward the world of material things and finite (individual) spirits as parts of its development. This concept is in essence what Indian seers declared even before the time of Buddha, about 500 BC. The Indian thought with focus on the world soul has its origins in the Vedic literature. It accepts Brahman as the ultimate reality. Purush (consciousness) and Prakriti (source of material world) are two aspects of Brahman. Prakriti is the female force that provides the body and Purush is the male force that provides the enlivening seed of the entire universe. The universe is merely an expression of the ultimate reality.

Hegel’s statement that knowing experience is a unity of subject and object is in fact a description of yogic experience in meditation. According to the methods of knowledge described in Yoga philosophy, the process of learning begins with connection or yoga between subject and object. The process finds fulfillment in knowledge.

During a typical working day, one comes across many people, objects and events. Yet, people find it difficult to remember all of them. Absent-mindedness is normally the reason given for inability to remember all that happens in a day. This does not mean that the events did not occur before their eyes, it simply means that the images of the events did not leave an impression that they can recall. Many times people say that they did not hear a statement or saw an event because their mind at that time was somewhere else. Mark this: They did not notice things they were supposed to, but they did notice that their mind was somewhere else. The one who notices the state of mind, what it did or where it was is a witness or a subject to the events in mind. The act of observation requires focus and creation of a connection between the subject and the state of mind. This connection is called yoga or unity. It is in this state that a subject notices thoughts in mind. Science explains how the visual image of an object is created. For an object to create an image in mind, light coming from it must pass through the eye lenses to create an impression on
the retina. This impression is passed on in the form of electro-chemical flashes and presented to mind as an image of the object. There is thus a connection between an object and its mental image. One who sees and notices this image is its witness or observer. The process of seeing connects or unites the object to its image, and image to the subject. The entire process is in fact yoga between the subject and the object with mind working as intermediary.

People study for knowledge. Many times, their eyes run through the text of a book they are reading only to find later that the mind has strayed. They did not read the written text even though the book stayed open and their eyes were directed at it all the time. It seems reasonable to assume that the eyes remained on the text. Yet, their attention was not focussed on it. They were witness to some other thought created in mind. The time meant for reading has thus been wasted. This happened because people or subject failed to unite or be in yoga with the text. It is necessary to achieve yoga or union between them and maintain that connection to make productive use of the time. In fact, all of us practice yoga in part when concentrating or focussing on an assigned task. This is the first step that in sequence leads to contemplation, meditation and at the end, to knowledge. Concentration, contemplation and meditation are also the three steps that end in yoga. If concentration is the act of focussing on the object, contemplation is the rational analysis of all aspects of the object present as image in mind. Inference based on rational analysis is one of the methods used to acquire knowledge. In absence of rational analysis, inferential knowledge is impossible. In absence of contemplation, rational analysis is impossible. In absence of concentration, contemplation is impossible. Concentration and contemplation are essential parts of yogic practice. Once we begin to appreciate what yoga really is, it is not difficult to adapt to its practice. In fact, students serious about their study unwittingly use yoga technique. They are more focussed and are more efficient in use of their time. Because they exercise greater discipline over mind, they can keep it directed at the allotted task and make more use of time by preventing it from straying to unnecessary thoughts. The usefulness of yoga lies in creating oneness between the subject and the object, and in the process, it provides a clear picture of both. It is therefore an ideal method to explore spirituality.

A person has three features: physical, mental and spiritual. In the west, mind is regarded as non-material and hence it is categorized as spiritual. Indian thought considers mind as material and part of Nature. Here, the Indian viewpoint is adopted.

Of the three features, the physical refers to the body and includes the organs of action and the external terminals of the organs of knowledge that help see, hear, feel, taste and smell. The intellectual and emotional sides are part of mental feature. Spiritual feature is the source of life and as such it is the basis for the other two. Glimpses of all three features can be seen in every day experiences of life. Physical appearance, mental reception and response to them reflect one’s real identity.

People spend their time either awake or asleep. In the waking state, people use the sense organs to see, hear, smell, touch and feel objects around them. This form of experience is called perception. Inference reached on the basis of data received by mind through senses
leads to knowledge of the objects of observation. In this phase, mind is an active participant and the spiritual self is a silent witness to activities of mind and senses. It observes and stores the facts of observation in memory. Meditation is a mental activity performed in the waking state. In it, the spiritual self is a witness to the thoughts and the process of thinking taking place in mind. When a person fails to respond to an enquiry or responds in an absent-minded manner and admits that his mind was somewhere else, he is indirectly saying that he observed his mind and found it occupied with something else and hence inattentive to the enquiry. This shows that observer or the spiritual self is different from mind. Without the self, there would be no observer. Without the thought in mind, there would be nothing to observe. These two exist as observer and observed, or seer and seen.

In the other state of existence, people either dream or fall fast asleep. Mind is active in dream state. What happens in dream appears real at that time. It is considered a dream only after waking up and in comparison to events observed in waking state. Spiritual self observes events in dream and stores it in memory. In the waking state, it recalls the events from memory and declares it a dream. All mental activities are suspended in deep sleep. Yet, on waking up, people remember this state as the one in which they were sound asleep. It is fair to assume that the spiritual self witnessed the deep sleep state and stored its memory to be recalled later as an experience. This spiritual self observes and stores in memory what it sees during waking, meditating, dreaming and fast asleep states of existence. Mind is a tool it uses for its purpose. If the mind is disciplined, it does what the spiritual self tells it to do. If it is not disciplined, it runs wilds like a horse out of rider’s control or a car sliding out of driver’s control.

Spirituality is at times defined as a concept. Even if it is a concept, it must exist in some form for it to be known or understood. To elaborate the statement, consider the relationship between a subject and an object. The object must exist if it is to be observed and comprehended. The subject must exist to observe or comprehend the object that exists in mind in the form of a concept. An object must exist for its image to be created. A subject obviously cannot see a non-existent image nor can one think of a non-existent subject seeing any thing. Thus, existence is a common feature shared by all three. Subject, object and its image in mind are merely elements in the space of existence. There are infinite subjects, infinite objects with perhaps as many images. All of them are elements or part of universal existence. Therefore, existence must be a reality. Without it, there can be no existence for the subject, the object or its image. But, there is a common tendency to separate them, isolate one for study, consider them real, and forget or ignore the others. This has led to many theories. Philosophers who think that only mind as subject is real are called idealists. Those who accept only the objects as real are known as materialists. Once the existence is separated into parts, subject and object for example, it brings about a viewpoint that drives an insuperable wedge between subject and object. It also leads to one-sided belief. Idealism is a subjective viewpoint that rejects the idea of existence of matter as independent entity. Materialists accept the matter as the only independent reality and promote objective viewpoint. This type of division creates a feeling of me and mine, you and yours. Such thinking makes it difficult if not impossible to think of existence as the only entity that is ultimately real.
Knowledge is another factor that may involve subject and object. People think of themselves as subject and make statements like my knowledge of an object. Where does the knowledge lie? If it belongs to the subject, it is subjective. If it is about the object, it is objective. The same knowledge is thus classified as objective because it describes an object and it is at the same time subjective because it presents the viewpoint of a subject. Indian thinkers consider such division arbitrary. For them, knowledge is merely that, pure, total and infinite. People talk about knowledge of Language, Science, Medicine, Humanity and so on. These are in fact elements in the infinite domain of knowledge. For convenience, this infinite knowledge has been split into parts and for some reason, the parts are at times considered more important than the whole.

People feel happy when they get the object of their desire or accomplish their wish. If an object makes people happy, it is pertinent to enquire about the location of happiness. Is it in people who are happy, or is it in objects that make people happy? Or is it a universal feature that is assigned sometime to subject and sometime to object. Because of this split, people look for happiness in one object at one instant and in another object at the next instant. Indian thinker used the word bliss and said that it is a universal feature like existence and knowledge. Existence, knowledge and bliss are the essence of ultimate reality. This is *sat-chit-anand* (existence, knowledge and bliss) of the Vedas. Subjects and objects are elements in this universal reality. Recall Hegel concept of Spirit: *Spirit is the divine, rational soul of the universe. It puts forward the world of material things and finite spirits as parts of its development.* Spirituality consists in experiencing this universality. Using Indian terminology, spirituality consists in experiencing and living in oneness with *Brahman,* the basis of every being and every thing in the universe.

People have glimpses of the universal reality every day. People’s pride in their physical feature is a reminder of their own existence. When people talk about their knowledge, they are presenting a part of universal knowledge. A joyful pride in personal achievement is in fact part expression of infinite bliss. Physical observation, knowledge and joy due to achievement in action are elements of human experiences in every day life. They occur when people become conscious of them. If the experiences provide glimpses of reality of total existence, entire knowledge and infinite bliss, consciousness must be the key that opens the door to those experiences. It is not possible to have experience of anything or any event without being aware of it. People become aware only when they are conscious. Let me suggest that human consciousness is an expression of spirituality. What is human consciousness?

Consciousness is the source, light and power of Spirit. Spirit manifests or appears in the form of consciousness. The theory of evolution of the Sankhya philosophy sheds some light on how consciousness works within each individual. It considers two aspects of Ultimate Reality. One is *Purush* or Universal Consciousness, and the other is *Prakriti* or primordial Nature. *Mahat* or Universal Intellect is the first product of *Prakriti* during the evolutionary process. Individualized or personal intellects are elements of *Mahat.* Individual intellect gives rise to mind, and mind to senses. *Purush* pervades individual intellect, mind and senses and gives them an appearance of being conscious. Even though they are classified as non-conscious and material in *Sankhya philosophy,* they appear
conscious and non-material. Intellect when enlivened by Purush (consciousness) becomes intelligence consciousness that gives people power of reason and understanding. Mind activated by Purush becomes mental consciousness that makes people aware of things around them. It is used as a tool to analyze sense data passed on to it by senses. But, senses can collect data only if energized by Purush. It is the continuous flow of consciousness originating from spiritual self and reaching out to objects that makes people aware of events and people around them.

Yoga philosophy emphasizes the concept of universal unity. Its method involves experiencing one’s own reality and recognizing that the universal reality is no different. Yoga practice begins with people focussing on their mental activities. Thought seems to arise, stay for a while to be replaced by another thought. At times, thoughts seem disturbing. At times, they are pleasant. Meditation of Yoga requires people to become conscious of the thoughts in mind. Analysis of the consciousness of shifting thoughts makes one thing clear. Consciousness endures, thoughts change. Thoughts are therefore like waves in the ocean. Ocean remains the same, waves appear and disappear. In fact, Indian seers define mind as waves of thought. This consciousness appears to split into two: at one moment as thought and the next as a witness of thought. Consciousness of being a witness makes one a subject. Consciousness of things witnessed relates to an object. Yogic meditation must now shift into a higher gear. It must identify consciousness as a field in which subject and object are two elements. In meditation, as in real life, objects may change but people as subject remain the same. Subject and objects are elements of existence. Seer and seen in meditation are elements in consciousness. Consciousness like a witness remains the same, thoughts and objects change. The focus must be on pure consciousness, neither on the subject nor on the object. Recall Hegel: knowing experience is a unity of subject and object. The ultimate form of spirituality is in the experience of pure consciousness. It opens the door to field of knowledge in its entirety. The practice of yoga provides the key of the door to spirituality.

How does a regime of physical exercises fit in this picture? It leads to physical well-being and freedom from suffering. The immediacy of bodily needs is very distracting. It can distract people from focussing on mental activities, especially when the body is not well and is suffering. Thus, physical wellness is necessary for spiritual growth. Yogic exercises are designed for achieving a physical condition that allows people to focus on the experience of universal unity without any distraction.