



YOGA AND THE SOCIETY

□ Dr. R. V. Ranade, M. D.

Yoga Vidyadham
Narain Peth, Pune (Poona)

Problems and problems ! The world, to-day, is facing several problems—economic, social and political, and also those of the basic needs, such as food, shelter and health. If we try to find out a solution for these problems, it is not one but many, and this leads increasing confusion. The need of the day is a single but perfect solution. Yoga, as a science of psychology and sociology, appears to be the best answer to all these questions. It is not a new science or philosophy to the Indians, but unfortunately, we have forgotten its importance in the near past. The situation now is encouraging, in the sense, that the whole world is looking to it as a tool that can solve many a problems of the modern society.

The Sociological Thought

The society is a group of individuals living together. They are mutually bonded by common culture, language and thought. They observe certain moral rules, so that there is least interference with the independent existence of every individual. Only such community can be happy and prosperous.

The great French philosopher Auguste Comte thought that the psychological and intellectual development of an individual was directly related to the scientific progress of the society. According to him, the social system is regulated by the laws of nature. The individuals must have unity of thought, ideals and faith, which he calls '*Consensus Universalis*'. He considers the family-unit as the basic school where an individual is taught to maintain social integrity. It is important to note his view that the temporal power in an industrial society must be controlled by the spiritual powers of the philosophers and the scientists. This statement of a modern Western thinker has a great similarity to the principle held by the learned people of ancient India, which emphasises, that the powers of the ruling and the rich must be governed by the penniless philosophers and homeless sages.

Herbert Spencer, an Englishman, was a master of Biology and Sociology. He believed that the progress of the society depended upon certain evolutionary processes. According to him, 'Individualism' has a central importance in the formation of a society. A society is formed mainly to guard the benefits of the individual. Naturally, this organization is perpetuated to maintain the progress of the individual. Emile Durkheim, coming from a religious French family, said, "A society has to remain as a unit. This unity depends upon the homogeneity of thought and behaviour." He further maintained, "the individual is born of a society and not society of individuals." This shows the important role of the society in building up the personality of an individual.

Max Weber, son of a German politician, has been recognised as the greatest of the sociologists. He related the psychology and the religious thoughts of a person to the progress of the society. Wilfredo Pareto, an Italian philosopher, clearly analysed the social system in terms of inter-relations and mutual dependence among the constituent individuals. He laid much stress on the mind of the individual in connection with the society. Ferdinand Tönnies

pointed out that the customs and habits of the individuals always maintained the bonds of affinity and retained the unity of the family. Families of common interests grows into a group, and such groups come together to form a society. The relation among the individuals are useful and durable only in the context of the individual emotions, purpose, values and ideals. These elements together frame the "culture" of the society. Charles H. Cooley, an American justice of law, looked at the society through the glasses of psychology. He argued that the "self of an individual was the most important and it always reflected the ideas of other individuals in the society around." He says, "society is an interweaving and inter-working of the mental selves."

This review of the sociological and psychological thoughts of various experts from the West, belonging to the 19th century, clearly shows, that Yoga is not only a complete science, as viewed from these angles, but also, a deeper and simpler approach to all the problems of the individual, both as a person and as a part and parcel of the society.

The Society To-day

Let us now examine the social structure of to-day and yesterday. The social framework in India has been based on certain religious and cultural values since the Vedic times. The religious customs and the duties of an individual are well defined. The changing role of a person through the different periods or Ashramas in life are specifically laid down. The general flow of social progress, unity and harmony has been steady through the ages, except for a few temporary and superficial variations caused by some inner or outer forces. Such periods have been short, if we consider the long history of our country. Let us study these arbitrary periods as outlined below :

(1) **The Ancient Vedic Period.** When the rules of the individual and social discipline, as prescribed by the Upanishadas, were followed to advantage.

(2) **The Period of Fall in Vedic Faith.** When certain religious principles were stretched too far, and rigidly applied. Due to this, the harmony and equality in the society suffered badly. Buddhism and other sects came up as a timely help to rebuild the faith of the people in good morals and the cultural heritage.

(3) **The period of Patanjali.** Patanjali further strengthened this faith, chiefly through his presentation of the Vedic principles in a simple, definite and practical manner, easy for the common man to follow.

(4) **The Historical Period.** In this period India was repeatedly attacked by the people of different cultures and traditions. During this period, the social structure did show a few outward changes, but gradually, the newer views were imbibed and became one with our original culture.

(5) **The Modern Period.** This may be conveniently divided into four phases:

- (a) The early period of the 'orthodox', who strictly followed the old religious and cultural discipline.
- (b) The period when the British rule was stabilized. The so-called 'reformists' took fancy in forgetting our cultural ties and tried to imitate the Western manners. This was probably done for gaining a false social and political status.
- (c) The period of the 'ultra-modern' is the story of the recent past. The wave of 'Individual Freedom' that rocked the world and shattered the faith in good morals also touched our society. The religions, culture and social discipline were thought to be barriers to the individual's progress. This was a short but chaotic period.
- (d) The period of realisation, is, how we can describe the situation to-day. Now the pendulum is swinging to the other end. There is re-awakening in all the corners of the world. Once more there is an interest in reaching the path of good morals and a desire to obtain the eternal satisfaction in life. The society is



aware of the disastrous detachment and the harmful heterogeneity. A generalized unrest existed inspite of the major scientific progress which brings the so-called worldly happiness. People have started feeling that *Yoga* is the real answer to the problems of our 'inner' and 'outer' life. This re-kindling of the faith is certainly a good sign and it shows that the unfortunate deviation from the path of moral was only temporary, and that, now, everybody is eager to follow the principles of our original culture.

Yoga : As a Science

We are living in a world where people have a great faith in science and scientific methods. Yoga can be more easily appreciated if looked at from this angle. Yoga is a 'complete' science. It is based upon the eternal laws of higher life, and does not require the support of any other science or philosophical system. The great theosophist Annie Besant calls it a science of psychology. This can be better realised when we study Patanjali's *Yogasūtras*. *Samādhi* or spiritual absorption means the union of human soul with the divine soul in consciousness. This, together with the mental processes and the discipline through which it is attained, is called Yoga. It is further explained in one of the initial *sūtras* as "योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः" which means that Yoga is the restraint of mental operations. Here, the word *Citta* corresponds, to some extent, to the word 'mind' of the modern psychology, but really has a more comprehensive meaning. While 'mind' is confined to the expression of only thought, volition and feeling, '*Citta*' may be considered as a universal medium through which consciousness functions on all the planes of the manifested universe. Thus, Yoga is a science of psychology in much wider and deeper perspective. It follows the laws of psychology, applicable to the unfolding of the whole consciousness of man on every plane. Yoga, with its various laws and dictums, is the most practical and scientific way to help the present society to solve its problems.

Yoga : As Applied to the Society

The peace and prosperity of a society depends upon its happy and disciplined individuals. The *Aṣṭāṅgayoga* or the Eight-faceted-Yoga can certainly achieve this goal. *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Āsana*, *Prāṇāyama*, *Pratyāhāra*, *Dhāraṇā*, *Dhyāna* and *Samādhi*, are the eight facets of Yoga. These are the stages through which one can achieve eternal peace. These stages have a certain sequential relationship. The first five practices are referred to as *Bahiraṅga* or external. These are of a preparatory nature. The next three are considered as *Antaraṅga* or internal. It is through these practices, which culminate in *Samādhi*, that all the mysteries of Yogic life are unravelled. In the modern society, it is more useful to lay stress on the first five or the external principles. Out of them, *Yama* and *Niyama* are the most important laws or rules of morality which are necessary for social harmony through personal discipline. Most of the problems of to-day's life will be solved if these rules are sincerely followed. Let us therefore concentrate here on the discussion of these two facets.

Yama means self-restraints or vows of abstention. The practices included under this heading, are, in general, moral and prohibitive. They aim at laying ethical foundation of life. Every now and then, a person is required to react to the incidents and events in his life, and this depends upon his circumstances. Thus, they are valuable for a person in relation to the society around. They are, therefore, considered as rules of social discipline.

The first moral quality under *Yama* is *Ahiṃsā*. It means non-violence or harmlessness. It denotes an attitude or mode of behaviour towards all living creatures based on recognition of the underlying unity. To-day, personal and social unrest, and the violence arising through them is rampant. We have, as if, lost our faculty of tolerance and co-existence. If we merely consider food-habits in our society, preference to non-vegetarian diet is looked upon as a sign of modernity. Does it not show total disregard for the life of animals? The principle of non-violence is to be followed not only with reference to action, but also in relation with mind, emo-

tions and words. Some thinkers interpret the word *Ahimsā* as avoidance of offensive violence. But this is a compromise with the principle. One should slowly but surely put the ideal into practice, and then only the cruelties and injustices involved in the thoughts, actions and words will be revealed and corrected.

Satya is the second moral rule, meaning truthfulness. However, it indicates much greater sense. There should be avoidance of all exaggerations, equivocations and pretences. Lack of this quality creates many complications in life. An effort to keep up falsehood causes a strain on the mind and leads to many emotional disturbances. The best policy is to remember that 'silence is golden'. Truthful persons are always trusted and respected. They can remain free from vices like bribery and evil competition, that are so common to-day. We should also be careful, not to disturb somebody else's mind by talking an unpleasant truth. It is always better to remember :

सत्यं ब्रूयात्प्रियं ब्रूयात्, न ब्रूयात्सत्यमप्रियम् ।
प्रियं च नानृतं ब्रूयात्, एष धर्मः सनातनः ॥

"One should speak out what is true and pleasant. One should avoid talking the truth which is unpleasant. However, one should not talk lie only because it is pleasant to listen."

The third moral quality is *Asteya*, literally meaning abstaining from stealing. But it should be interpreted as abstaining from misappropriation of all kinds. One should not allow oneself to accept anything which does not properly belong to him, not only in the way of cash or kind, but even as a simple credit for things he has not done ; or any privileges which do not properly belong to him. "परधनं विषम्"—'All that belongs to others is to be considered as poison'. This should be our attitude. It will avoid all the dishonesty and the uneasiness of mind arising from it. Such behaviour is valuable in these days of 'quick money' and 'easy money' when even persons, belonging to noble professions, such as teachers and doctors have been turned into money-making-machines. It is easy to follow this principle, if our needs are cut down to the minimum, and 'simple living' becomes our motto. It guards us from evil ambitions, and brings tranquillity to our mind.

Brahmacharya is the fourth and the most vital of the moral qualities. It means sexual continence. The ideal of a true Yogi is to prepare himself to give up completely, not only physical indulgence but even thoughts and emotions connected with the pleasures of sex. In a wider sense, it also means freedom from crazing for all kinds of sensual enjoyments and luxuries. This becomes possible when one gradually learns to equate them with the peace and bliss of the higher life. In practice, for the common man, it is important to remember, that lack of this quality is the root of all the sorrows. It is useful for the preservation of the health of mind and body, because it needs the restraint of all the five senses, viz., hearing, touch, vision, taste and smell. The common man must follow this rule within the framework of his routine family duties (*Gṛhasthāśrama*). The practical significance of this principle, in relation to the population control, cannot be forgotten.

The fifth *Yama* is *Aparigraha*. It means absence of greediness ; or better non-possessiveness. The tendency to accumulate worldly things may be considered as a basic instinct in human life. Of course, as long as we live in this physical world, we have to possess a few things which are essential for the maintenance of the body. There is no limit to our desire for wealth and the material things. Even looking at this moral rule from the point of view of psychology, the greed for luxury makes us spend time and energy for obtaining these things. This also involves a lot of anxiety. Further, we have to worry over maintaining and guarding them. There is a constant fear of losing some of them, and finally the regret of leaving them all behind when we ultimately leave this world. This quality teaches the sense of detachment and brings happiness. In this connection, the story of 'a shirt of a happy man' is illustrious. The poor man was happy because he did not even possess a shirt over which he should worry. The lust for



possession is the cause of all discontentment in this life. By retaining extra material things, we might be depriving somebody of them, who really needs them.

While the practices included in *Yama*, are, in general, moral and prohibitive, those in *Niyama* are disciplinal and constructive. *Niyama* are fixed observances. They pertain to the individual, and are to be practised everyday, whatever the circumstances.

Śauca is the first *Niyama*, meaning purity and cleanliness. It applies to the nature of a person, and includes both body and mind. Healthy mind and healthy body always go together. One should maintain the body clean. The food and drink should be of the right kind, moderate and simple. Meat, spicy foods and alcohol in the modern diet lead to the deterioration of the body and mind alike. The purity of body, mind, speech and behaviour can be maintained by following all the moral rules of Yoga, and also by meditation and prayer. This brings genuine tranquillity of mind, which is so difficult to obtain in present world.

The second *Niyama* is *Santoṣa* or contentment. It is achieved by keeping the mind in equilibrium, inspite of the several impacts to which it is continuously subjected. If our requirements are minimum, the frustration is minimum. *Santoṣa* is not a negative mentality based on laziness and lack of initiative, but a positive and dynamic condition of mind. It demands complete indifference to all personal enjoyments and comforts, the object being the attainment of peace that takes us beyond the realm of illusion and misery.

Tapa is austerity or penance. It is the third *Niyama*. The word *Tapa* stands for purification, self-discipline and austerity. We should discipline our mind and bring it under the control of our will-power. This builds a pure character and ideal personality. *Tapa* has three faces. The 'physical', which expects us to keep company with respectable people having good morals ; to be polite with the elderly and the like ; to be kind to everybody ; and to observe self-restraint. The 'verbal' implies truthfulness, softness of speech, and recitation of prayers. The 'mental' penance includes maintaining a peaceful and cheerful attitude, mental restraint, and having a constant desire that everybody remains happy. This *Niyama* promotes patience and tolerance, thus preventing all stresses and strains of life.

The next *Niyama* is *Swādhyāya*, meaning self-study. More clearly, it is the study which leads to the knowledge of the 'self'. It is achieved by the study of the sacred scriptures and prayers, and of the theoretical principles and practice of Yogic ideals. This faculty is useful in every walk of life. It gives us an ability to concentrate on our work by increasing mental stability. This study begins on the intellectual path and has to be carried through the progressive stages of reflection and meditation till the individual is able to gain all the knowledge or devotion from within, by his own efforts.

The fifth *Niyama* is *Īśvarapraṇidhāna*. It means dedication to God. It begins with a steady effort to bring about a continuous recession of consciousness from the level of personality which is the seat of ego into the consciousness of the Supreme, Whose will is working in the world. When we learn to forget ourselves and dedicate to God, we can easily work with dedication in various spheres of life, whether in relation with our family or our country. Unfortunately, the bonds of affection, unity, sacrifice and dedication, among the individuals of the modern society, have become weak and fragile. This weakness can be overcome by observing these moral laws prescribed by Yoga.

After the discussion of *Yama* and *Niyama* in relation to the social conditions of the day, let us have a glance at the next three facets of the *Bahirāṅgayoga*, in brief. *Āsana* or Yogic postures are considered by many as a system of physical culture. The various *Āsanās* described in *Hat̥ha-Yoga*, if practised correctly and for a sufficiently long period, promote health in a remarkable manner. They prepare the body and mind for further meditation. *Rāja-Yoga* lays more stress on the elimination of all sources of disturbance to the mind, whether external or internal, thus gaining control of the mind by will-power. One of the important sources of disturbance to mind is the body. This disturbance is avoided through practice of *Āsana* for a long

time. Patanjali narrates the technique of *Āsana* in three sūtras. (1) *Āsana* should be steady and comfortable. (2) This steadiness can be mastered by relaxation of effort, and meditation. (3) Attaining perfection in the practice of *Āsana* brings resistance to adverse conditions in the environment. The practice of these postures makes the body healthy, and then we can easily withstand the fatigue and strain of life. It also gives fitness for the practice of *Prāṇāyāma*, and helps in the development of will-power.

Prāṇāyāma is the regulation of breath or life-force. The *Prāṇa* or the life-force is the link between matter and energy on one hand, and mind and consciousness on the other. It is a vital force, a highly specialised kind of composite energy with material basis which is entirely different from the other kinds of energies working in the body. This energy is controlled to the advantage of the individual during *Prāṇāyāma*. It is useful for maintaining good health and achieving concentration of mind, thus serving as an important basis for the preparation of *Samādhi*.

Pratyāhāra means abstraction. When we are relaxed, we find that the mental images which are present and changing constantly are of three types—(1) Ever-changing impressions produced by the outer world through the impacts on the sense-organs. (2) Memories of past experiences in the mind. (3) Mental impressions connected with anticipations of the future. In *Pratyāhāra*, we completely eliminate the vibrations of the impacts on the sense-organs coming from outside. The other two types of mental images are retained and they are mastered through *Dhāraṇā* and *Dhyāna*. Thus, this facet of Yoga teaches us the control of senses by mind, or withdrawal of mind from worldly attachments. This is useful for achieving that concentration of mind which helps us to get a better performance in any field of everyday life. The detachment of mind relieves us of all the attractions and sorrows in this world.

In short, the five facets under the *Bahirāṅga* Yoga eliminate, one by one, different sources of disturbances to the mind. *Yama* and *Niyama* correct the moral defects, *Āsana* eliminates the disturbances arising in the physical body, *Prāṇāyāma* removes all the irregularities in the flow of vital forces, and *Pratyāhāra* eliminates the sources of disturbance coming through the sense-organs.

The eight facets of Yoga are usually considered as sequential stages through which one can achieve eternal peace. However, some experts of Yoga feel that these can be practised and mastered independent of each other. There is no doubt that the sequence is important and useful, especially for a common man who desires to achieve perfection by reaching the stage of *Samādhi*. To the beginner, the *Bahirāṅgayoga* is more simple to understand and practice, as it is directly concerned with every-day life. It is the desire of all those who love and preach Yoga, that more and more people are attracted to this science and philosophy. It is more convenient to introduce the people to *Āsana* and *Prāṇāyāma*, which show their favourable effects on mental and physical health, and prepare a basis for further study. Once a person appreciates the value of some of the facets of Yoga, he feels like going deeper into the study and practice of other facets. Gradually, the benefits of this study are revealed to him through his own experiences.

It is not expected that every person in the society becomes a sage or a Yogi. Keeping this in mind, I have not touched upon the three facets included under the *Antarāṅgayoga*, viz., *Dhāraṇā*, *Dhyāna* and *Samādhi*. I feel that their consideration is beyond the scope of the present discussion. The practice of Yoga will surely help to build up individuals with healthy mind and body. Such individuals will form a homogeneous society. The simple rules of Yoga should be propagated to the new generations, in the home, at the school and in the society. This will break the disharmony among various people and their different generations, and bring peace and progress to the world.

★★★

