

The Spiritual Journey and the Distance Covered: Dualism

On the spiritual journey, how much can we take with us, and how much must we leave behind? The author Annie Dillard once wrote a short essay describing the trail left by the ill-fated Franklin expedition to the South Pole. The artifacts revealed the misconceptions they had in undertaking the journey: the sailing ships had auxiliary steam engines, but only brought a twelve-day supply of coal for what was estimated to be a two or three year's voyage. Rather than bring extra coal, they made room to carry a 1200 volume library in each, along with china place settings, cut-glass wine goblets and heavy sterling silver flatware. Rather than take special clothing for the Arctic, they wore only the uniforms of the Queen's navy. The burden of these things ultimately contributed to their failure; a later search party found the remains of those who died, including two skeletons in a boat on a sledge that had been hauled 65 miles. With the two skeletons were some chocolate, some guns, some tea and a great deal of table silver.

The successful expeditions, on the other hand, chose the right company and knew what to let go of, as well as what they could afford to enjoy. Dillard points out, "If you are an officer with the Franklin expedition and do not know what you are doing or where you are, but think you cannot eat food except from sterling silver tableware, you cannot get away with it."⁶ As with the expedition, she notes, if you want to know God, you have to know what to let go of — though God does not demand that we let go of anything at all: "God needs nothing, asks nothing, and demands nothing, like the stars... You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it."⁷

This is the paradox of the spiritual journey. God is not the taskmaster we take Him to be — but if we wish to know God, then there are some prized possessions that we cannot bring with us. The practical question for each of us to answer is, then, what do we take with us, and what must we leave behind? Yet this is not something demanded of us, only required to make the trip.

Unlike the expedition, of course, is that the spiritual journey is not measured by miles; in the end, we travel no further than our own heart, completing a tremendous journey without taking a single step. In philosophical terms, the journey is described either in terms of dualism and nondualism. On the one hand, we might ask, 'Is the 'land' of the Spirit and Absolute Reality so entirely 'other' than the land we presently inhabit in everyday life that we must ultimately leave *everything* behind through a path of renunciation?' This path of discrimination and renunciation is part and parcel of a **dualistic** view of spiritual Truth, and carries with it a certain attitude toward the world.

If on the other hand we take the view that our world and Absolute Reality are actually One, then how do we chart our journey to the experience of this Unity? What should our attitude toward the world be? If all things are really an expression and manifestation of the Absolute, what do we accept and what can we really reject? For the **nondualist**, the question is ultimately not one of discrimination (though discrimination plays an essential role) but of recognition of the Truth that is already present. The nondualist has a further question to answer: how can this Truth be 'hidden' or concealed from us if, as the nondualist holds, there is no 'other' to conceal the Truth, nor to mark the distance between ourselves and the Truth? What is it that stands in our way?

At the center of the fray for both the dualist and nondualist is the ego, and the question perhaps is really, what of ourselves and our ordinary way of understanding and experience must we leave behind, and what is

6 Teaching a Stone to Talk, by Annie Dillard, p. 26

7 *ibid.*, p. 27

the new vision to which we are called? The question of whether the world should be embraced or renounced on the spiritual path is really a question of *how we relate to the world as well as to ourselves*, and the spiritual journey is really a question of transforming how we understand and relate to both world and self, and how well we understand how the mind helps or hinders us in this.

The stage in this drama is set by the suffering and sense of limitation and alienation that comes of the ego's way of relating to the world. The terms of our engagement with the world are dictated by the nature of the ego itself, and the plot turns upon way(s) in which we must paradoxically use the mind, body and ego to *transcend* the mind and ego. The philosophical idea of a 'dualism' in yoga is really a strategy for bringing the play to a triumphant conclusion in which one side is victorious and the other vanquished. The understanding of nondualism seeks a different ending: it leads not so much to victory as it does to a resolution, a completion.

The Roots of Dualism and the Question of Suffering

Dualism in yoga classically finds its practical expression in and through the problem of suffering. This served as the starting point of Indian philosophy, recognized as an inescapable fact of life. The sages were not so pessimistic as to say that there is no joy in life; but our joy is always qualified or limited by some form of pain and suffering, if only the painful experience that all good things come to an end. The pain of endings, of separation, of old age, sickness and death force us to take a step back and examine our situation; the experience of such pain motivates us to look more closely at our perception and experience of ourselves, and even to look at how we actively participate in *creating* the suffering that we claim we want to be free of.

Their conclusion was simple: at the root of suffering lies the fact of **change**; we become attached to and identified with things as they are, and we suffer when we experience the loss that comes with change. With that suffering comes a sense of how we have become **separated** or distanced from our own happiness or joy. Change is the cause of suffering (in direct proportion to our desires and expectations); a sense of separation or alienation is the effect. The sages of yoga wished to address both in terms that help us to understand and overcome them.

This sense of separation is at the heart of dualism or a dualistic view of the world. A dualism marks a disparity, division or chasm between two kinds of experience, and these two realms of experience seem impossible to reconcile. One poet-saint of India named Tukaram sang of this predicament in his *bhajan*, asking 'Is this world poison, or is it nectar? On one side of the road I see people crying and suffering; on the other I see them laughing and joyful. Is this world poison, or is it nectar?' How does one answer this question without discounting one side or the other?

That is the predicament set by the dualist, who argues that both sides are equally and ultimately true and real. A dualist will not attempt to fix or right the problem, since the problem is accepted as a 'given.' Instead, one can only 'liberate' oneself from the dilemma, escaping from participation in it. Happiness and sadness are two poles of a single problem known as *samsara*, a loose translation of which could be 'going in circles' or chasing one's tail. One solution is to simply give up having and desiring a tail.

Yoga is the name given to the various ways of approaching and overcoming the predicament, not all of which are dualistic. One of the meanings given to yoga is 'union,' and in each philosophy in yoga, the 'union' that takes place has a slightly different meaning, depending upon the philosophy's characterization of the problem, whether dualistic or nondualistic. In all cases, yoga suggests a return to a state of wholeness, an

effort to make whole what has been split asunder. Yoga is an effort to come ‘home.’

We do experience glimpses of our own joy in our lives, and there are times when difficulties and suffering seem to distance us from our innate experience of our own joy. When we are happy, we feel ‘at home’ in our happiness; when unhappy, we feel alienated and estranged, as if in a lonely, foreign land. Yoga is a union in which we are reunited with our own joy, and tells us that that joy is an elevated and abiding spiritual state, our true home. It is a state far beyond what we briefly experience at the satisfaction of a fleeting desire.

Thus the companion to the question of suffering is the question each yogic philosophy has to answer, how or what are the ways in which we get separated from our own joy? And how is this separation to be overcome?

TWO DUALISMS

Yogic thought is marked by an awareness of two distinct (though related) dualisms, and is a response to them. The first identifies the distance between human and divine experience; the other marks the way in which we often feel divided against ourselves as we get caught up in the daily whirlwinds of activity, thought and desire.

When looking at the yogic philosophers’ explorations into this experience, we find these two dualisms coming into their sharpest focus in two distinct periods of philosophy, though the yogis were aware of both dualisms in some fashion from the very start.

Division Between Human and Divine

However much we believe in divinity or the presence of the spiritual perfection, love and benevolence of God, most of us would admit that we don’t ordinarily *experience* that presence directly from moment to moment in our lives. To the yogi, belief or faith in that presence is not enough. The yogi wants to ‘realize’ or experience that presence at every moment, and wants no sense of separation, distance or alienation from the presence of the Divine to mar this constant communion.

The issue of this separation from the Divine is first taken up in the earliest texts of the **Vedas**, which addressed through myth the gap they felt between the human and the Divine. On the surface, the life of man and that of the ‘gods’ (and ultimately the Divine itself) are so different as to be separated by a chasm, though at the same time they are related by mutual dependence. Man (who labors to produce food and wealth) and the gods (who provide the resources through the elements) must offer to and nourish one another, bridging the gap between them through sacrifice and offerings, else they both suffer.

Thus the duality or ‘split’ came from the original act of creation; man’s spiritual response is to heal this split, bringing the manyness of creation back to wholeness. He does this through building a spiritual community among men as well as becoming whole within himself. The wholeness he brings about is then offered back to God in sacrifice, thus nourishing and restoring the Divine. In this way the circle between man and the divine is completed, and the dualism is healed.

Thus on the surface, the Vedas began with the assumption of a dualism, or dualistic view of the universe. Beneath the surface of the Vedas, however, there was a more profound mysticism that was nondualistic; later traditions – especially Vedanta – sought to draw this mysticism out as the essence of yogic experience, the real ‘Truth.’

The overall question posed by the Vedas was put in terms of sacrifice and offering, and remained for each

yogic tradition to answer: what is the offering or sacrifice that we are called upon to make in order to achieve this wholeness, and how is the offering to be made? What are the means for offering ourselves back to the Divine, in order to reunite with the Divine Self?

Division Within – Between Heart (Soul) and Mind (Embodied Life)

Along with the feeling of distance from the divine, a second strain of dualism lies in the recognition that we often feel **alienated or distanced from ourselves**. We often express this alienation as the division or conflict between ‘heart’ (not just emotion, but a spiritual sense of self) and ‘mind’ (our thought, calculations and machinations revolving around the ego and its needs, desires and distractions)

This perception of a dualism was addressed most specifically in the **Classical Period**, where the dualism to be healed was within man himself – the gap between one’s physical / mental (in the most mundane sense of the ‘whirlwind’ of ordinary thought) life, and one’s innermost spirit or spiritual life. Yoga became more an attempt to overcome the division within *oneself*, and by that effort, to reunite with the Divine (since the Divine is one’s own *true self*).

The **dualistic** philosophies of the Classical Period ‘dissolved’ the problem by choosing one (the life of spirit or Purusha, the experience of samadhi) *over* (and to the exclusion of) the other (the material world of the body, the experience of the ‘fluctuations of the mind’ in the world of samsara). Patanjali gave detailed advice on how to make that choice in one’s yogic practice in his famous Yoga Sutras.

The **nondualistic** philosophies of the later, Postclassical Period argued that there was never really a ‘choice’ to be made, except in one’s own attitude, feeling and perception – one’s *bhava* or way of relating to and feeling toward self and world. There are not really two separate ‘worlds’ of spiritual and egoistic self, except in our ideas and perception. One does not realize the Truth by turning away from our ordinary world of experience – our experience of our own mundane self, but rather by looking more closely and seeing through the veil of ‘otherness’ by which we ordinarily relate to our ego-self and world. The world – and we ourselves – are an ever-changing expression of the Divine itself, and is never truly ‘other’ than this one divine creative Consciousness. Realization does not come about through exclusion of the material, limited aspect of our own being, but rather an awakening to the Truth that the Divine Self dwells within us *as us*; it is we, in our bound state, who perceive the Divine Self as other.

Yogic Practice and the Two Dualisms

The two dualisms are also quite obviously distinct and yet closely related – when alienated from self, we are at the same time alienated from God or the Divine; when alienated from God, we are also isolated within the ego and alienated from our deeper, truer, more ‘connected’ and spiritual self. The philosophies of yoga attempted to understand how and why we arrived at – and got stuck in – the experience of this separation, and it is mainly through their treatment of the very materiality of our embodied existence that they arrived at and began to refine their answer.

Yet the sages were very practical people; the ideas they presented in their philosophies were never enough by themselves (though some are always happy to settle for discussing them to their intellectual satisfaction), for ideas and concepts are as much a part of the problem as they might be of the solution. The yogis wanted to bridge the gap experientially. Mere belief or faith was not an answer, since ‘belief’ in something that is not one’s present experience simply reaffirms the gap. They were not satisfied with expressions of mere belief or faith.

The sages sought a means, an experiential bridge by which to fully realize their understanding and fully awaken to the realm of Truth. In general, of course, that bridge was the practice of yoga. And within that practice, the experiential bridge is the *prana*, the energy contained within the experience of the breath and

all of its subtle energies. By means of the prana, every moment of our ordinary experience offers an open door into the experience of yoga, of union. The prana is always in one way or another the bridge between the merely physical/mental experience of the body/mind, and the state of perfect and full Self-awareness that is samadhi.

The experience of prana is thus always at the heart of yogic practice, and yet the character and significance of the practices of pranayama (yogic practices centered around the experience of the breath) is different at different times in the development of yoga, according to the character of the philosophy of the time – especially whether dualistic or nondualistic. The *practices* of pranayama throughout the history of yoga are pretty straightforward and uniform; but the *experience and meaning* of the practices – the philosophical interpretation of the transformation that takes place through the power of pranayama – varies a great deal. And so an account of the evolving understanding of yogic philosophy needs to include an account of prana and the significance of the practices relating to the prana at every stage. In its full bloom in the Postclassical Period, these teachings evolved into the refined and experiential appreciation of the Prana as Kundalini, the divine force of Grace.

In order to move further in our account of this great evolution, we need first to set the context by identifying the ‘periods’ of yogic thought, which we’ll do in the next section.

The Historical Context

A Timeline for the Evolution of Yogic Thought

When we look at the overall history of the literature of Indian philosophy (as it relates to yoga), we can distinguish four broad historical periods or categories for these works.⁸

1. **Vedic Yoga** – the Vedic and non-Vedic teachings
2. **Preclassical Yoga** – the teachings of the Upanishads and those found in the epics, principally the Mahabharata, which contained the Bhagavad-Gita as its crown jewel.
3. **Classical Yoga** – in which Samkhya assumed its ‘classic’ or most familiar form, and in which Patanjali systematized the practice of Yoga in his Yoga Sutras.
4. **Postclassical Yoga** – which principally includes the nondualistic traditions that came after Patanjali.

Here we can give a sense of the time frame for each period, as well as the key ideas that were fundamental to each; then we can go more deeply into each period with a sense of how their understanding evolved.

It’s important to remember that this is a live and ongoing conversation – the line of evolution of thought is not like the historical line of evolution of the species, in which the dinosaurs died out and were succeeded by other new species. The oldest teachings of the Vedas remain a live part of the discussion, as do the teachings of the Samkhyas, though the ‘spin’ on them may have changed. Few ideas have been entirely discredited; all remain part of the mix, though aspects of the philosophies come in and out of favor in different periods (for instance, the emphasis on love and devotion, which is sometimes more, sometimes less prominent in different periods). Nevertheless, a clear evolution of understanding did take place, as the ways of expressing and comprehending yogic experience became more and more refined with time.

⁸ Here we follow the divisions made by Georg Feuerstein in his work *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga* and elaborated upon in his book *The Yoga Tradition* – while admitting that the cake can be sliced in other ways.