

# Viveka: Attending to the Presence of the Self

## The Power of Discrimination in Hatha Yoga

As a hatha yoga teacher, I've seen it often - the perplexed look of one who is intent upon doing a pose, yet feeling somewhat lost. "Is this right? I don't get it. What am I supposed to feel in this pose?"

The face is quite familiar – I recognize it as my own as I glance at the studio mirror. I'm surprised at how quickly I can get caught up in the body and lose myself. Is this what my yoga is about? Take a breath and smile.

Discrimination provides a homecoming for lost yogis like me in such moments. Discrimination, or *viveka*, is the awareness by which we tell the true from the false, which in yoga means discerning the perishable and temporary from the eternal. More to the point, discrimination is the ability to distinguish between the ever-changing person that I commonly identify as "me," and my true essential Self. Only when through discrimination I actively experience the difference between the two do I come home to the real point of my yoga as a lived experience of the Truth.

In hatha yoga, discrimination between body and Self is a challenge. How can I not be caught up in the awareness of my own body as uniquely "mine" or "me" when "I" struggle with a pose? How can such a physical practice as hatha yoga take me beyond absorption in my own physical being? This is a real question; it greets me every time I step onto my yoga mat to begin my practice. How does this practice teach me the kind of discrimination that takes me beyond my ego conducting its business as usual?

I was treated to a lesson in discrimination recently when practicing the Shoulderstand in a hatha yoga class. I thought I was doing pretty well; I was focused on the teacher's instructions and was working hard. The teacher gave us time to settle into the pose, and after a while he came over and sat down next to me. Then he leaned back against a nearby pillar and watched me. Although I couldn't see his face, I sensed that he was puzzled. This of course puzzled me. I shifted my weight, trying not to let on that I was adjusting in an attempt to look good. It didn't erase his puzzlement, and it only increased mine.

"What do you feel on your left side?" he asked, and then paused. "Do you feel how your hands are different, and how one elbow is light and the other heavy?"

Now, this was subtle. But once he brought my attention to the feeling of dullness, of an almost existential emptiness in the whole left side of my body, the truth of it was plain. It had happened because my right shoulder had gone inert, and the weight of my body was bearing down upon it, collapsing my left side. Once he drew my attention to feeling the problem from inside, I understood. I recognized the problem as *me*: "I" wasn't awake in the pose.

But what to do? The problem wasn't just on the outside. Shifting the hands and pressing the lazy elbow down more hadn't helped. Yet, now things were different: he was directing my attention to the feeling first, and only then to the details of hands, shoulders, and so on. Until that moment, I hadn't inquired beyond the details, the sensations in the limbs that only described the problem. The problem was with my own inner state of awareness. I was out of touch with it.

He made an adjustment by placing a prop under one elbow, and the feeling of the pose changed dramati-

cally. It became surprisingly light and strong: I was *seeing* myself in the pose, as if scales had fallen from my eyes. The prop did no more than support my body where it needed it most, taking some of the struggle away so that I could truly *feel* the pose from the inside out.

Though the help might seem to have come from the outside, the manner in which the teacher pointed out the problem to me urged me to realize that this was something I could have discovered from the inside. His lesson was not really about how to correct the pose; it was about practicing discrimination. When I attend to the inner feeling first, the outer problems of the physical body become easier to handle and far less perplexing. Through discrimination I can come to know myself as I am by being a witness to my inner as well as outer state first, and the 'doer' or accomplished practitioner second.

This **witness awareness** is the key to experiencing true discrimination, because discrimination is the act of *being* a centered, still and thoroughly aware Self who can watch the antics and efforts of the ego-self as it gets so caught up in the practice as to become lost in thought and emotion.

Our practice is our devotional offering to God, and it is this offering alone that makes the practice spiritual – otherwise, what is it but an exercise and stretch routine? Yet the question at the heart of *viveka* or discrimination is always, what is it that is being offered? Are we offering our actions, *or* are we offering *ourselves*, letting go of our ordinary self-awareness and letting God be God in our hearts?

To offer our actions, our practice, doing a number of Sun Salutes or an extended headstand is indeed a devotional act, just like the sacrifices of old in Vedic times, yet the ego all too easily retains authorship of those acts, like a child offering a drawing, a concentrated burst of self-expression, to her parent. That offering is *one* level of devotion, which in spiritual practice brings God and devotee close. But in that offering, an awareness of the act remains between to separate them, since there is some expectancy of love in the form of recognition or acknowledgement.

A deeper level of devotion and offering is possible, and even more fulfilling. How much more of an offering it is to lose yourself in God in your practice, simply to cease to feel separate from God, letting Him breathe and work through you so fully that, really speaking, there *is* only God?

Becoming a witness to your own practice – to your thought and feeling as well as your actions – is the first step in this offering, because it is the return to and recognition of the presence of God as the Self, the true Witness to the play of the *ahamkara* or ego. It is a step away in one's awareness from the ego, who wants to *do*, and toward the Self, who wants to *be*.

This is the greater self-sacrifice that is the offering God wants through devotion. Nothing we do, think or intend can add to God, nor do the fruits of our actions touch Him, since He is the power behind all action in the first place, and doesn't seek anything through action since He is already the All. This is the essential message of the Bhagavad-Gita – for what has God to gain or lose through action or offering?

From early in Vedic thought, there was a very true sense in which God is somehow yet completed through our offerings – not an offering of acts, but of *self*. Devotional offering in yoga is not the destruction of the ego, but its *completion and fulfillment* by merging into the Self through recognition of God as the heart of all action and awareness that flows through us. Again, the true offering in yoga is, as Meister Eckhart put it, to 'let God be God in *you*.'

My own dissatisfaction with my practice came from forgetting that and looking for results and signposts

– of progress. ‘Offering’ your practice as a spiritual act is a fairly comfortable idea *until* you take seriously the most burning question of all in hatha yoga - the question of **progress** in our practice. At one point or another, every student asks at least one of the following questions: How do I make progress? How do I *know* I’m making progress? And what is progress anyway?

As soon as the word *progress* comes up, it’s natural to get caught up in ideas about my own process of becoming the judgments, aspirations, victories, and disappointments that describe my restlessness and searching. When we wonder about our progress, we look to results, to an increase in our abilities as a sign that our efforts are true and bearing fruit. Does that become irrelevant when we offer our practice in devotion?

As with nearly everyone, in my own practice I first began by working with the poses that I could remember and do, with all the freshness and enthusiasm of a beginner. My practice was full of striving and focus, and a rewarding effort it was, and progress came slowly but surely. But practice is by nature repetitive, and with progress came a certain amount of drift and distraction. What comes more easily doesn’t hold your attention as well, and practice can become mechanical as the mind drifts to the many other things that need attention in a busy life. On the one hand I kept myself more sharp and focused by concentrating on the next step, the next pose, the next level of difficulty. On the other hand, I had a growing sense that I was missing – or losing – the point of it all, and was substituting outer progress for inner wisdom and growth.

The needed shift came with the dawning realization that, whether a posture is easy or challenging, what matters is that I make myself *at home* in the posture. When you’re at home, there’s nowhere else to go: you’ve finally arrived, and can be yourself. The measure of yoga lies in how much you have arrived home in your own heart. Yoga is not a question of what you *can* do, but what you *do* do, simply *being* fully and wholeheartedly in the pose. For me it is precisely in those genuine moments of being “in” the pose, I recognize *myself* in it. I recognize the silent, essential, content and enduring “me” that has been present throughout the process of change and growth, directing the process.

That knowing Self is the One from whom I have always derived the wisdom to learn from my experience, and have received the courage to forge ahead. I can’t help but think that this is the essence of yoga as a spiritual practice - to clearly perceive the beauty and worth of my own inner being here and now. With this moment of coming home to your Self comes the dawning of *viveka* or discrimination: the recognition that you already *are* that which you are seeking. It’s the ability to distinguish between my experience of the person I am, through my efforts, always in the process of *becoming* and my connection with who I already *am*, the here-and-now truth of my own being.

The question of discovering what I already am, and by the same token how to be, has never been abstract for me; much of my process of growing up has been concerned precisely with how to *be* - how to be with myself, with others, with God. Understanding my yoga practice has helped me with this. The point of practicing a hatha yoga asana is learning to be in the asana. The word *asana* does not simply mean “posture,” and an asana is certainly not just a stretch: in its most fundamental meaning, ***asana*** means “a **comfortable way of staying.**” *Staying* means **staying put** long enough - and firmly enough - to be fully present to myself: aware of my mind, my emotions, and sensations. Yet the point is to go beyond these thoughts and sensations to find and express the essential “me” through the asana. Asana is a comfortable way of staying, not in the sense of physical comfort, but in the sense of freedom from inner restlessness that comes with the tempest of thought and feeling.

The steadiness of a hatha yoga posture is a taste of this inner freedom, a doorway to that most profound sense of inner truth. I know this moment in myself well enough to recognize it in others too, I see it happen in students whom I assist in hatha yoga classes: all it takes is a subtle shift in the shoulder or a turning and

firming of the thigh, and what seemed difficult and perplexing is suddenly light and easy. The students' breath releases and deepens, and the pose seems to shine from the heart with a blossoming of almost primordial joy. I see in the faces of my students my own experience, which says, "I can stay here - I *want* to stay here" - even if the body is not quite up to keeping me there for long. Like them, I come back to the practice again and again to find once more, and to deepen, that feeling of openness, steadiness, and ease.

The reason why a hatha yoga practice is so refreshing is that it does connect us with our inner purity. In this respect hatha yoga is like other practices such as meditation, though the outer *form* and the kind of effort required is evidently different. The point is to learn discrimination through the practice, to go beyond the world of sensation and appearances and to feel completely, if only for a moment, the purity of the presence of our innermost Self. There is a divine alchemy in that, inasmuch as that experience begins to permeate all other moments of our lives.

The classic symbol of discrimination in yogic tradition is the swan, which as it drinks is able to separate milk from water through its beak. The point is clear: the milk of the presence of the divine is not hidden or unseen - only unrecognized. It is as fully manifest and all-pervasive as the water with which it is mixed. Discrimination is attending to the presence of the divine Being - our own inner Self - and drinking it in, feeling it fully and profoundly within ourselves, while leaving the water of ordinary sensation and experience aside. Thus nourished, we can truly *be* in this world, because we know its innermost sweetness as our own Self.