

Yoga for Liberation

by Pierre Bélisle

In a previous article (Tone, October 2004), we looked at some of the foundations behind the practice of yoga and examined how to make yoga part of our busy life. This article will look at the deeper aspects of yoga that can liberate us from pain and suffering and bring conscious happiness in our everyday life.

Yogic Tradition

As indicated earlier, in the Indian yogic tradition, you were either a householder having social or worldly obligations and you practiced the path of social action (*Pravritti*) or you had renounced it all to live in a monastery or a cave on the path of renunciation (*Nivritti*). These paths were mutually exclusive and had different yoga practices.

Pravritti Path

The objective of the *Pravritti* path was to release physical and mental tensions, to weed out false concepts about yourself and to build a strong sense of self, a strong container (*Ahankara*) so that you could be effective in the world. This was done by focussing on the first three limbs of yoga according to Patanjali:

1. the ***Yamas*** (abstention from harming others, from falsehood, from theft, from incontinence and from greed),
2. the ***Nyamas***. (Purity, Contentment, Discipline, Self-study and Devotion to God) and
3. ***Asanas*** (the yoga postures).

Nivritti Path

Having built a strong container of unified Mind, Body and Spirit and achieved worldly success, some people would then embark on the *Nivritti* path. They would renounce the world to focus on dissolving that strong container (*Ahankara*). Their goal was to free themselves of all conditioning, connect with their True Self and achieve liberation (*Moksha*).

The fact that Moksha is often translated as “liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth” can lead to some confusion. Some people interpret that very literally to mean that, if they work hard enough (e.g., suffer enough), they will not have to re-incarnate and can spend the rest of eternity in yogi heaven.

I believe that, while this might be true, the real challenge of *this* life time for all of us is to find Heaven on Earth by learning to be happy here and now as we live in harmony with our True Self without hopes, attachments or desires. This is often described as the path of “desirelessness” (*and you cannot desire that either!*).

The focus of this path is mostly on the last 5 limbs of yoga:

- Life Force control (***Pranayama***),
- Withdrawing inwards (***Pratyahara***),
- Concentration (***Dharana***),
- Meditation (***Dhyana***), leading to
- Cosmic union (***Samadhi***).

A Different Perspective

On the *Nivritti* path, the first 3 limbs of yoga are still practiced but from a very different perspective: rather than being strict rules to adhere to, the first three limbs become tools for personal inquiry to weed out tensions and false concepts or beliefs from the body/mind. For example:

- On the *Pravritti* path, the emphasis is very much on:
 - Observing the letter of the Yamas and Nyamas without any question (e.g., it is wrong to lie, so just don't do it!), and
 - Practicing the asanas with the exact alignment that your teacher showed you (e.g., there is one Right way of doing the Triangle!).
- On the *Nivritti* path, the emphasis is on personal awareness of the deeper processes. For example:
 - If you catch yourself wanting to lie, you would still refrain from lying and you would also seize the opportunity to inquire into what is behind that urge and would then address the underlying issue(s), and
 - Your asana practice would become a dialogue with your body to help it release tensions through subtle modifications of asanas to respond to your moment to moment needs (e.g., in Triangle, firmly planting the feet and gently tucking your tailbone under to explore tensions in the adductor muscles of the front leg) without any expectations.

A New Responsibility

As you gain more freedom from automatic conditioning through the *Nivritti* practice, there is a growing responsibility to use the power of this new consciousness "appropriately". By way of example, let's look at the simple act of crossing the street at an intersection controlled by a pedestrian signal:

- A person on the *Pravritti* path, would always wait for the little white man to show before crossing and would never enter the intersection when the orange hand is showing (it would be Wrong to do otherwise).
- A person on the *Nivritti* path, will look to see if there is any traffic coming and, if it is safe to do so, would feel totally free to cross the intersection regardless of what the signal says with one exception: that person would **absolutely** obey the

signals if a child was there at the corner because not obeying the signs would not be appropriate since it may confuse the child and endanger him/her.

(Note: A similar case can be made for the inappropriate and irresponsible use of intimacy and sexual energy by therapists and would-be gurus with their clients or followers.)

Bridging the Paths

Traditionally, these two paths were done strictly sequentially. Householders needed to be on the *Pravritti* path for at least 12 years before even thinking of embarking on the *Nivritti* path: anything else would be considered “premature transcendence”.

In a follow-up article, we will see how householder yogis and yoginis can use Kripalu yoga to bridge these paths and work towards *Moksha* while still being active in the world.

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