Swadhyaya: Viewpoint of the Yoga Sutras

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All the techniques of raja yoga mentioned in the Yoga Sutras “existed long before Patanjali, even if in a latent seed form within the collective unconscious mind. The Yoga Sutras are probably a compilation of previously known verses handed down from guru to disciple by word of mouth. It was the genius of someone called Patanjali who put the system into a comprehensive written whole.”

In fact, the identity or date of Patanjali are not important, for he is one of the greatest “spokesmen for the timeless wisdom that is the heritage of all mankind . . . (the text) contains wisdom which is eternal and which belongs to no specific era. It is applicable to all ages and all people, no matter what the background. It is the content and application of the Yoga Sutras that is important.”

The Yoga Sutras provide a practical philosophy and an applied science of life with all the necessary concomitant processes, tools and techniques. They offer very sound guidelines for a harmonious material life and also a solid launching pad for higher, spiritual, transcendental life. There is a wonderful operational correlation between the ultimate aim, and the ways and means prescribed to attain it.

The eight limbs of raja yoga, beginning with the yamas and niyamas and culminating in dhyana and samadhi, present a systematic and sequential approach for the all round evolution of the individual personality. The five niyamas – shaucha, santosha, tapa, swadhyaya and ishwara pranidhana – constitute a very high order of personal code, and therefore they are concerned with the “personal discipline of the practitioner. They are intended to prepare the spiritual aspirant for the arduous yogic path that lies ahead . . . The niyamas reduce mental and emotional conflicts and render the individual’s mind tranquil for concentration and meditation.”

The word swadhyaya has been mentioned at three points in the Yoga Sutras (Sadhana Pada, chapter 2, sutras 1, 32 and 44).

Swadhyayayat ishtadevata samprayogah. (2:44)

Tapa, swadhyaya and ishwara pranidhana constitute kriya yoga. (2:1)

Swadhyayah kriyadarsham (2:32)

Tapa, swadhyaya and ishwara pranidhana constitute kriya yoga.

Swadhyaya is one of the five niyamas. According to Vyasa Bhashya, swadhyaya is: (i) japa, or repetition, of purifying mantras such as the sacred syllable Om; and (ii) the study of scriptures on liberation. It is further said that (iii) deities (devas), sages (rishis) and adepts (siddhas) reveal themselves to one who becomes naturally inclined towards swadhyaya. Thus it becomes one’s nature or character and one remains occupied in performing their works. This is the meaning derived from the three sutras. Other widely accepted meanings given to swadhyaya include: (iv) study of one’s own personality in its totality; and (v) some form of meditation practice involving self-observation, such as antar mouna.

Thus the following five points emerge regarding the meaning, sadhana and outcome of swadhyaya:

1. Study of scriptures

The study of sacred scriptures such as Srimad Bhagavad Gita, the Bible, the Ramayana, the Koran, and Srimad Bhagavata constitute a great aid to sadhana. A broad intellectual background is necessary for achieving success in any sphere of scientific endeavour. Since yoga is a science par excellence, this is also true of yoga. This part of swadhyaya, however, is only the first step. Constant introspection on the fundamental truths and deeper problems that have been studied is more important. This constant reflection gradually and imperceptibly begins to take the form of meditation in the ordinary sense of the term, i.e. the mind becomes increasingly engrossed in the object of the search. Thus it slowly becomes ready to receive real knowledge from within and the aspirant begins to obtain a deeper insight into the problems of yogic life.
The scriptures are meant not only for rational, intellectual, logical understanding. The value of their teaching lies in being able to apply what we have understood in everyday life. Our study will have no benefit if we do not make an effort to live up to the teachings. Practical application of material suitable for our temperament and relevant to our mode of life is necessary if we wish to derive any permanent, substantial benefit from our study.

Studying the scriptures does not mean just scanning the pages, but trying to understand every word, studying with heart. The more often we read, the more we understand. We see things in a new light. That is the greatness of the holy scriptures. We gradually rise upwards. This implies elevation of the mind and expansion of its horizon, which further implies a better understanding of everything within and around.

We are attuned to the authors who were realized souls, great saints, seers and gurus who trod the path of truth, and encountered and removed difficulties. Thus they give us hope and vigour.

Such study provides a direction and keeps us on the right track. Sometimes we are on the wrong path and sometimes bluffing ourselves or pretending that we are doing tremendous sadhana. These illusions are kept away by a regular and systematic study of spiritually uplifting texts. The fields of non-understanding that often appear before us are then illumined.

Daily reading is one of the most powerful methods of keeping the mind fully alive to one’s ideal. A host of powerful, positive ideas rushes to the mind and the mental powers are at once sharpened. The reader is inspired and uplifted, and enabled to conquer the lower forces in everyday life. Therefore, a sadhaka should not give up swadhyaya, even for a single day.

By reading inspiring sentences over and over again, they become indelibly engraved in the heart and a part of one’s inner nature. Such repetition gives strength and pushes an idea into the innermost chambers of the heart and mind. Then the idea percolates into the subconscious mind.

As a result, the negative thoughts lurking there are gradually annihilated. In the inspiring words of Swami Sivananda: “Spiritual books act as consoling companions under all vexing circumstances, ideal teachers in all difficulties, as a guiding light in the nights of nascence and folly, as a panacea for evils and as shapers of destiny.”

2. Study of one’s own self

Studying one’s own personality is another equally valid and widely accepted view of swadhyaya. This implies the ability to read one’s life like a book, to be aware of each and every page. In other words, it is the analysis of our own personality, being aware of our individual qualities, strengths and weaknesses, in order to know what and who we are. Thus, it means efforts to perceive our own self in different perspectives. This includes the detailed study of the entire structure of our personality, i.e., the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects. In this way, swadhyaya becomes a process of seeing our own consciousness.

Swadhyaya implies continually watching our actions and reactions in different situations, circumstances and events with more awareness. We should try to know the reasons for our happiness and sorrow, anger, greed and attachment. As a result, we will gradually find out how our mind works and will become more aware of the things that disturb our mind. With an understanding of our weaknesses in particular, we can chart out a multi-faceted program to weed them out, and thus prepare the ground for our gradual upliftment. Thus this type of self-analysis is of great value in our life.

3. Mantra japa

Mantra repetition must be an important part of our daily sadhana. If we enquire into the nature, the composition, the why and the wherefore of the sound picture of the mantra, then it becomes swadhyaya. Routine and mechanical repetition of any mantra cannot be said to be swadhyaya.

For an aspirant who has been initiated into mantra by the guru, regular practice of the guru mantra is regarded as swadhyaya because it helps to explore the inner recesses of consciousness. Such a sadhana harmonizes the lower vehicles of consciousness, makes them sensitive to the subtle vibrations, and ultimately brings about a partial fusion of the lower and higher consciousness.

Each mantra has a deity, or a name and form. Mantra sadhana done with faith and intensity leads to ishta devata samprayogah, which means that the ishta devata appears before the sadhaka in a human form, a sound vibration or a light.

Mananat trayate iti mantrah is the definition of mantra. It means that as a result of regular and intensive mantra sadhana, the distractions, deviations, fluctuations, turbulence and disturbances of the mind slowly cease. The mind is relatively harmonized, calm and quiet. Such a mind is capable of focusing, looking within, and communing with the inner nature.

4. Meditation practice

Another relevant view of swadhyaya relates to meditation experiences. Accordingly, if an aspirant sees visions in meditation, he should let them come. They should not be suppressed as they will tell the aspirant a lot about the things that are embedded in the subconscious mind: memories, deep-rooted problems, etc. Many may be causing persistent problems without the aspirant’s knowledge.

By conscious observation, the aspirant may easily face them and get rid of them. In the context of meditation, swadhyaya also means closing the eyes and observing one’s own self, as is done in antar mouna practice. This gives rise to a faculty by which one is able to focus deeply on the god or goddess of one’s choice. Meditation, as understood in the usual sense of the term, may also be regarded as swadhyaya. When we meditate on a mantra, an image or a thought, an abstract form or the formless, this is swadhyaya. This type of meditation deepens our understanding and brings us closer to our nature.

5. Attainment of the ishta devata
Each of the above viewpoints on swadhyaya is important in itself and also complementary to the others. For example, study of the scriptures is a sadhana of bhakti yoga as well as jnana yoga. It purifies the emotions and also brings about mental clarity. Mantra japa is a bhakti yoga sadhana as well as a raja yoga sadhana. Similarly, dhyana is the most important tool of raja yoga. In the same way, self-analysis is a great tool of jnana yoga. It can be concluded that if these approaches and techniques are practised with faith, sincerity and regularity, and under the right guidance, they will lead to mental peace, emotional harmony and bring the aspirant closer to the inner nature. Ishta devata darshan, or experience of the self, may not remain too distant a goal.

References

20. Swami Satchidananda, op cit, p 149.
22. Ibid Four Chapters on Freedom, p 206.