Dhyana – Part 1



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We are all aware about Yogacharya T.Krishnamacharya being a pioneer in using yoga (specifically asana and pranayama) for therapy and well-being. But little did we know that he was a great scholar of our sacred knowledge and traditions. One of his long-standing students, Raghu Ananthanarayanan, has put together an interesting note about what is dhyAna and the interconnected nuances around it.

He has used the device of an innocent conversation between a young, curious child, Chiku who is Gayatri Iyer, and an elderly teacher Rita, just like the dialogues that used to take place between student and teachers at ashrams. In my discussions with Raghu who is Rita in the writings, I learnt how symbols and rituals of our Hindu culture have been misinterpreted for long, and once you know the real meaning, you can only marvel at the profundity of the entire meaning and how it is part of the larger divine order.

The number of wellness and meditation camps or retreats going on these days is quite mind boggling. Each of them talks about *dhyAna* and concentration being the central way to kill stress and take care of all your worries. One of the *angas* of yoga is *dhyAna* and the *Asana-prANAyama* are geared towards helping you to be in the state of *dhyAna*. But what *is dhyAna*?

Rita: The word *dhyAna* is getting interspersed with many terms like meditation, mindfulness etc. But I want to go back to my parent's generation or even before that when they used to go to the little mandapam at home to sit quietly, or perhaps focus their mind on their *ishata deva* and even have a conversation with their *deva*. It is quite poignant because there are many thoughts that one cannot speak about to anyone and only to the Lord. Once our thoughts die down and we let a deeper intelligence come through, we can experience deep healing. We can seek divine guidance if we choose to. This is what *dhyAna* meant at a very simple level. It was taken for granted that this quiet time with oneself is an integral part of the day.

Chiku: I see, so the relaxation techniques on apps that help you focus and meditate is also called *dhyAna*?

Rita: As I said there is a huge gamut of techniques under this heading and even J. Krishnamurti has talked about meditation from his direct experience. But for simplicity we will restrict our discussion to what does the *yoga sUtra-s* say about the practice of *dhyAna*.

Chiku: So, what do the *yoga sUtra-s* say?

Rita: The simplest of all definitions is given in the 3rd chapter, the *vibhUtI pAda*; saying once my mind has been pulled back in *pratyahara*, where no external trigger can influence my mind, I have a choice to direct my mind to something. The first step is to direct the mind towards an enquiry of my choice. This enquiry deepens into *dhyAna*.

Next, if I stay with this enquiry the sense of self slowly fades away and becomes non-existent. Though some of self remains, it is silent. This then deepens the state into *samAdhi*, where my mind is completely absorbed on the object that I am without any disturbance whatsoever.

Chiku: But what do the *sUtra-s* say about the object of enquiry?

Rita: The *sUtra-s* recommend several areas of focus. Starting with an enquiry into it, then

goes on to recommend paying attention to objects, understanding the world around and delving into one's dreams in the first chapter. The second chapter clearly states that you enquire into your *vAsana-s* and *samskAras* i.e., the seeds of erroneous perception and action. By this continuous enquiry and attentiveness you will burn these seeds. The second chapter also encourages you to be attentive to your body and breath, to the way you relate to food and your sensory engagement with the world. The third and fourth chapter go into many more esoteric and transcendent areas of enquiry.



Chiku: What are seeds, the *samaskAra* and *vAsana* you referred to. That seems to be a very practical recommendation?

Rita: *samskAra* are the habitual patterns that emerge out of the *vAsana-s*. The analogy used in the *sUtra* is that of a tree that grows out of a seed and becomes a huge beautiful sight. One's conditioned patterns are like the seed. They are latent but wait for the right time to

unfold. Like the tree that gives seeds to keep perpetuating itself, every time the *vAsana* manifests as action, it reinforces the seed. The seeds become entrenched and the expression that comes out of this seed develops deep roots. So, if the seed is burnt through the attentiveness of *dhyAna*, then I am free of all these old patterns and disturbances. This is the central practice of *yoga*. By burning away the seeds that cause erroneous perception I gain a mind which becomes clear and undisturbed. And therefore, I can then direct this powerful and unconditioned mind to anything I want. This mind will be capable of accurate perception.

Chiku: That's great. So I can understand science and math better! I can even play games or appreciate art more deeply. Then what do these meditation apps and so on do?

Rita: Before you take to the field and play a match don't you do some warm ups? *yoga* looks at the common person and says "this mind needs simple exercises to become capable of the more intense practices like *pratyahAra, dhAraNA and dhyAna*. They technically fall under the category of *bhavanA*. For e.g. if you want to become a strong athlete, you will practice some specific exercises for various sets of muscles. You will then practice your favorite event, like high jump for instance. Similarly, *bhavanAs* are mental practices or visualizations to relax yourself and train your mind to be attentive. Krishnamacharya said that the object of *dhAraNA* must be real and not any *vikalpa* (imagination). Most of the practices recommended in the apps, or through guided meditation are forms of visualization to help take the mind off something. So, it is important to distinguish between a real object of enquiry and a fantasy. Thinking that visualization is real *dhAraNA* is a mistake.

Chiku: I remember a *sUtra*: *svAdhyAyAt ishta devatA samprayogah,* so is *ishta devatA* an object of imagination too?

Rita: No, when I do *svAdhAyA* I get an insight into my deepest gifts and profound capabilities. The *ishta devatA* that really evokes me will be deeply connected to these gifts. *devatA* is not a mere image painted by artists like Ravi Verma! They are my inner energies and in a light form which I experience through my *svAdhAayA*. I get closer and closer to my true self and my inner processes, which are usually vague and dreamlike, get clearer. Contemplating on the statements one finds in the *darshaNa*, the writings of true Seers is a great help too. Through cultural conditioning we will tend to give these things, certain specific forms. We know many people who go into a deep state of *dhyAna* talk about seeing a light in the form of *Krishna* etc.

Chiku: I see, I have experienced some of it when I sit quietly after *prANAyama*.

Rita: Yes, after *prANAyama* if we sit quiet, we can sense our *prANA* in an energy form, or

some feeling of lightness or sensations etc.



Chiku: It is more experiential rather than descriptive, no?

Rita: Yes, you begin to feel elevated or are at least in a different state of mind. Sometimes even *Ananda*.

Chiku: If we do *dhyAn*a on an object of enquiry, the grip on that object or the *vAsana* that makes me drawn to the object will burn away right?

Rita: No ChiKu, the seeds burn away only if the object of my enquiry is my *vAsana*.

Chiku: Then what are *samskAra*?

Rita: A *samskAra* is the habitual pattern in which my *vAsana* expresses itself. The seeds push me to act in a certain way or habitual pattern. This conditioned action pattern is *samskAra*.

Chiku: But how does the hold of the *vAsana* or subtle pattern reduce through *dhyAna?* What

happens?

Rita: Chiku, are you asking me for a scientific explanation?

Chiku: No, I have experienced some reduction on certain patterns, new patterns being formed etc. But to explain it to someone is very difficult because one only experiences it or observes it.

Rita: It is very simple, let me try and explain it through a Sufi statement which is used to explain *dhyAna. dhyAna* is just like the cat watching the mouse hole waiting for the mouse to come out.



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There is a focused attention which the cat is doing on that hole, that attention is *dhAraNA*. *dhAraNA* will take you to *dhyAna*. *dhAraNA* is the only activity I can do. I do not "do" *dhyAna*, I do the choosing of the focus area. The depth of the focus keeps increasing as I "stay with" the enquiry. The intense observation has energy, it is called *dhyAna agni*. Because this observation is subtle, intense and like a laser beam it reveals the entire action of the seed as it unfolds. This seeing thus causes profound insights. Finally the *prANic* energy locked inside the seed is released.

Chiku: Like the cat is getting ready for action?

Rita: Yes, but very quietly. Now, if I watch my own patterns like the cat watching the mouse, not to catch it or do anything, but just to see how it unfolds. From that very quiet space, if I observe very carefully, won't it change?

Chiku: Hmm..Yes, it will. I will have a deeper understanding of myself

Rita: True, like the triggers of certain patterns, the origin of it etc. will become clear to you. The more I become conscious of it, it does not become an 'unconscious compulsion'.

Chiku: So, the strength of the *prANA* on that pattern that is marred by compulsive feelings, actions and thoughts associated with a seed will vanish.

Rita: Yes. Just close observation itself will burn the seed, the *dhyAna Agni* will burn it.

Chiku: So, the potency of the seed will reduce. But what if the seed has grown into a full-blown tree?

Rita: You cannot watch the patterns when it is a full-blown tree. When the patterns are full blown, you can only at best control it because it has taken over the psyche at one level. Then I can become aware of the consequences of the action and merely control myself. This actually means I am at conflict with myself. However, after the situation has passed, I can take up the whole experience for *dhAraNA* practice. I can see what propels me to act in a particular manner, what external triggers cause compulsions to act in a certain way and so on. If this enquiry is intense and subtle and not just seeking explanations and justifications, it will penetrate the deep layers of conditioning, what is often referred to as the unconscious. No other action is called for, this intense and insightful seeing will end the pattern.

Chiku: What if I am acting out the inner patterns?

Rita: Then be an adult and take responsibility for the action. Let me use the language of the

yoga sUtra to go over this again. Ordinarily we become conscious of our actions at the *manas* level (the level of the mind that is planning and is engaged with the sensory world) and when my triggers are full blown or the *udAra* level, I am swept by a surge of emotions like a ship in a storm. Then it is tough for me to get a measure of myself, but later as you reflect deeper you would understand the process in your body first and how did I respond etc. This seed has grown and unfolded in the world through your responses.

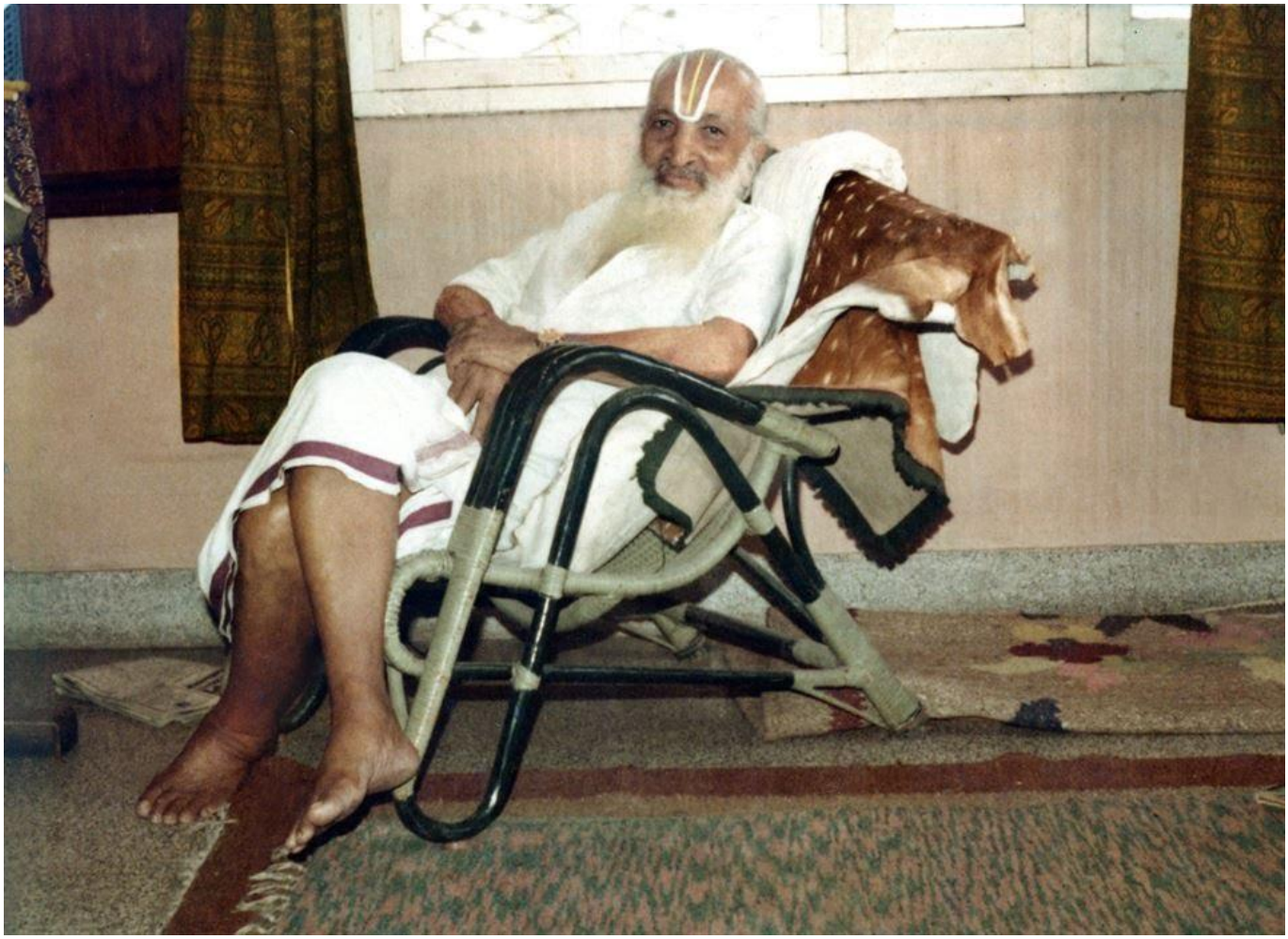
Chiku: But how can I start observing these patterns?

Rita: Simple, start with your body! You will start experiencing tensions in your body, because these emotions lodge themselves in the body first. If you become more and more sensitive to the body, then you can trace back to the trigger. The whole process starts to become clear, because the next time you can be aware of your bodily responses earlier. You are ahead in the game this way and there is no need to get into a conflict with yourself when the reaction is full blown. Once you have a complete insight into the whole process, the energy of that process is finished.

Chiku: How is *nidhIdhyAsana* different from *dhyAna*, is it closer to *dhAraNA* ?

Rita: *nidhIdhyAsana* is doing *dhAraNA* on understanding the words that are being told to you by somebody. So, it starts with *shravaNam*, *mananam* and *nidhidhyAsitavyam*. So, *shravaNam* is to listen very carefully to what your teacher is saying.

Chiku: Why should I listen so carefully? So many people say so many things



Rita: The potency of the meaning is not only in the words being spoken. Listen to a person who is an Aptavachana like Krishnamacharya, an embodiment of yoga. When he spoke, his words were not mere words but carried the energies of the *sAdhana* he had done. The words were a wholesome experience for me, in the sense that it impacted my mind, body and senses; this is *shravaNam*.

mananam is when I take in some of these things; for e.g. if I took the meaning of a *sUtra* that Krishnamacharya has explained then *mananam* for me is a process where I contemplate on what it may mean for me, some things will happen to me and I will remember oh this is what was said. So, some part of my mind is constantly engaging with discovering the *artha*, *artha* means the actuality of what this word refers to in my life. *nidhidhyAsitavyam* is when the meaning starts transforming me and I can embody the meanings of the statements that I have understood. I have internalized the meaning and it has become embodied knowledge.

Chiku: Must the physical body also change for the learning to be complete?

Rita: Yes. The *yoga sUtra-s* clearly say so. Remember we are speaking about ourselves, how we create our own *duHkha* and how we can end it.

Chiku: What are the other qualities of the object for *dhAraNA*?

Rita: The object you focus attention on will impact your mind, so that is why all our deities are sculpted with balance, proportion, aesthetics etc. Even if you focus on a lamp, the lamp should not flicker and so on. If I want to quieten my mind, then I cannot go to an ocean side with rough waters. The object along with the space where I am placing the enquiry etc. are equally important. All of it is ensured so that only *sAtvika guNA* is evoked in me. That is the key, the object of enquiry has to be *sAtvic* and *preeti*; balanced, calm, and joyous. Thus, an *Aptavachana* becomes so important. So, the same words coming from Krishnamacharya and coming from someone else will have different impacts on me.

Chiku: So, the choice of teacher is so important.

Rita: Yes, you can even choose nature, music, dance, literature etc. as your teachers.