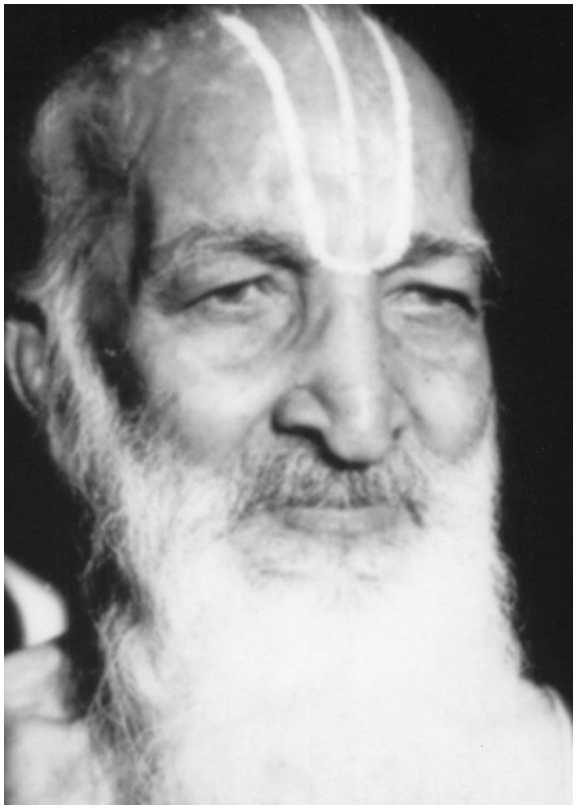
The ABCD of Self-Mastery



Posted on June 23, 2024 by Raghu Ananthanarayanan

My guru Yogacharya Krishnamacharya's expositions of the Yoga Shastras are simple, profound and pragmatic. When giving a gist of the Shrimad Bhagavad Geeta he emphasised four teachings that form the essential practices of self-mastery for a person facing a crisis: Awareness, Breath, Curiosity and Distance.

A for Awareness

When Arjuna turns to Shri Krishna and asks for help he states his condition with honesty and acuity. He states his bodily reactions, emotional agitation and mental confusion accurately; He eloquently states his lack of conviction and feelings of inadequacy, he stands vulnerable and open. This according to Yogacharya is the starting point. Recognizing that one is *duḥkha*, and being able to look at it is difficult. We stand on prestige, on compulsions or are afraid to look at ourselves. Without a simple and clear observation of oneself as one is the way to

become the best that one can be is blocked.

This is perfectly in line with modern research into “stress”. When one is stressed, the usual response is one of the three: fight, flight or freeze. Fight means one tries to overcome reality through compulsions- I must/ I should/ I must not/ I should not. This inner friction not only makes one lose energy, it also increases feelings of distress and inadequacy. Flight is simply a denial of what one is feeling. One therefore becomes blind to the reality, the danger that one is facing. Pretence takes over and often one escapes from facing reality and lets the problem fester. Freeze is to become inarticulate and indecisive to the extent that one is overwhelmed by the situation. Flow is the way to end the dysfunctional response and flow starts with honest self-awareness leading to self-appraisal. The more one is in touch and self-observant, the more one will be aware of the body and emotions as they respond to the signals of danger and opportunity.

To illustrate, negotiations are often very stressful. There is a situation of opportunity and threat; one must deploy one’s resources in optimal ways. If one is not self-aware, one can get caught in Fight/ Flight or Freeze and the other person is given the advantage:

· Fight- ‘I must prove myself/ I should not feel stressed’: so one takes an aggressive stance, and puts the other person’s back up, while one is becoming increasingly brittle

· Flight- ‘I am afraid to feel the danger so I remain unaware of it’: so one stays cool, misses important cues and weakens one’s negotiating position

· Freeze- ‘I hide my head in the sand, become non-responsive’: one goes through the motions of the discussion ritualistically and completely misses the point

· Flow- ‘ I am aware of the danger, but I am not afraid to feel the fear’: I can remain anchored in myself, face the challenge and make appropriate choices. Maybe I reschedule the meeting for another time if I don’t feel anchored enough! Flow means to be in touch with one’s *gunas*, one’s propensities and not fight them

B for Breath.

When one senses danger/ stress many bodily changes occur, chemicals like adrenaline are produced, and one is ‘bracing up’ for fight or flight. The first indicator of this internal change is the change in breath. If one is sensitive to the signals without succumbing to them, one is not only capable of acute observation of one’s state, one can do something to prepare to face the situation. The first thing to do is to quiet one’s breath. We find this constant

recommendation in Buddhist texts too.

Excessive stress chemicals make one's focus narrow, one's memory is impaired, one's ability to access learning is reduced and one is on "auto pilot", one's body becomes taught and ready for action and one's emotions are locked into sensing threat. If we were in the primitive days when immediate explosive action was called for in situations of danger, the fight/ flight response may have worked. Even there, the calm and observant warrior has a much better chance of acting rightly. Getting in touch with one's breath immediately kicks off the process of balancing the inner chemical state. One can think appropriately, and remember lessons and preparation, one can feel and sense oneself and the other person's reactions, one's body comes to a neutral state of readiness. Autopilot means thought, feeling and action are locked into old habits that are completely out of touch with the here-and-now challenge.

What happens at the negotiation? The person whose breath is balanced and therefore whose pulse rate is lower has the advantage; It is as simple as that. Theatre personalities, athletes and public speakers know the importance of breath and how to be optimally ready.

That brings us to C for Curiosity

When we are honestly in touch with ourselves and have regained calm, we are ready to understand, to enquire into what is happening to us, what is the reality of the situation and therefore decide what is the right action. Yogacharya was clear that it was only after helping Arjuna do some *prāṇāyāma* that the rest of the teaching started. One cannot listen, think and absorb anything when one is in tension. Arjuna is helped to reexamine the context, the larger consequences of his actions, and his assumptions about man and the world.

To illustrate, let us observe our protagonist encountering her first interview, with every question, his/her stress is mounting. Unless the A and the B of self-management (described above) are internalized, the chances are that a vicious cycle will get established, soon all the symptoms that Arjuna recounted like the throat becoming dry, the muscles becoming tense, memory deserting our bright student will come in the way of her engagement. The interviewers will become enemies, and innocuous signals will trigger unconscious reactions. Let us say our protagonist is self-aware and regains calm (i.e., her breath is even), she can now look at the interview that was becoming a do-or-die situation as a learning situation, view the interviewers as people to pay attention to, have a conversation that helps her respond appropriately and confidently while she gains a first-hand understanding of how interviews are conducted. She might even ask questions to have a sense of the kind of organization it is. She will come through as friendly, self-assured, open to learning and cooperative, and land the job. In any case she now has the choice of saying yes or no!!

One is now ready for D for Distance

Sankhya emphasizes the idea that unless one is at the right distance from an object of enquiry, one cannot comprehend it. A mind that is not stressed, and senses that are sharp among other conditions like having an unobstructed view and being able to distinguish the object clearly are also important.

The more one can be self-observant, balanced and calm the more one can be at this optimal distance, listen and learn. The alternative is to get consumed by the situation just get buffeted about and be none the wiser for the experience. The position one takes when one is curious, inquisitive and exploratory is already one of middle-distance from what is happening. One is not too close, nor too far away.

It is now possible to say “my identity is not defined by the situation, I am not my feelings or thoughts.” This optimal engagement sets off a very positive cycle. Not only is learning possible, but open and vulnerable listening makes it possible for one’s hidden potential and deeper insights to bubble up. The voice of one’s meditative core, Shri Krishna’s voice can come through.

Modern research has identified the symptoms and consequences of stress that Arjun articulated as the critical measures of vagal health. An immense opening up of capability and hidden power flows when one is in *dhyāna* — dynamic mindfulness. Awareness, Breath, Curiosity and Distance create the ground for action that is contextually intelligent and impactful.