

## THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE SELF

Like Western scientists, yogis have been probing our world for hundreds of years. But where our scientists depend heavily on human-made instruments to delve deeper into matter and see farther into space, the yogis rely only on the finely-tuned instrument of their own consciousness. They conduct most of their research in a rarified state of mind called *samadhi*, which literally means “putting together.” In their meditations, the yogi-scientists mindfully enter into their object of scrutiny and so come to know it, as it were, from the inside out.

It’s common knowledge nowadays that matter is composed of tiny energy packets or wave systems called atoms. This isn’t news to the yogis; in fact they might justifiably wonder what took us so long to figure it out. For several thousands of years they’ve known that our world is essentially a vast, shimmering energetic field. The yogis’ equivalent of the scientists’ atoms—though the analogy is crude at best—are three qualities (*guna*) called mass or inertia (*tamas*), activity or energy (*rajas*), and lucidity or beingness (*sattva*, from *sat*, “to be”), the subtlest and nearest in essence of the three to the immaterial self. According to the *guna* view of the world everything that exists—including our body-mind—is a coalescence of varying proportions of these three basic elements.

You don’t need to be a high-minded yogi to get a feel for these qualities. Simply look around you. The solidity of things, their resistance to change, reveals their tamasic character, while all movement and change is generated by *rajas*. So a rock, for example, which just sits there lumpishly like, well, a rock, has a predominance of *tamas* and only modicum of *rajas* (in the activity of its constituent atoms), while everything in motion, whether the wind in the trees or the current of electricity in your computer, is impelled by *rajas*. *Sattva*, though the finest of the *gunas*, isn’t hard to grasp either—recognize that without its light, you wouldn’t be able to apprehend the world, nor could the world reveal itself to you.

The *gunas* are inextricably bound to one another, and though one may be dominant in any particular aspect of the world, the other two will always be on board to some degree. Aptly they’re often pictured as the twined strands of a rope, and since they work together to precipitate the world-body even though they have contrary behaviors and effects, they’re also equated with the fire, oil, and wick of a lantern, which, though of different attributes, must cooperate with one another to produce light.

This study of the world-body raises some interesting questions for the practice of yoga: What’s the relationship between the world-body and the self? What role does the world-body play in spiritual endeavor? What happens to the body after the liberation of the self? In general the yogis approach these questions in one of two ways.

TRANSCENDENCE: to climb beyond (*transcendere*)

We’ll label the first approach the way of transcendence, characteristic of some schools of Vedanta, Jainism, and Patanjali’s classical yoga (on which the following discussion is

based). For the Transcender there's an unbridgeable gulf between the world-body and the self. Unlike human consciousness, which is continually agitated by thoughts, feelings, memories and the like, the self is pure consciousness, unruffled by any content. It's eternal, immutable, and seamless, without distinguishing marks or features. Accordingly, because it's never-changing and always self-sufficient, the self is *sukha*, an evocative word that literally means "having a good axle hole," and which can be translated as joyful.

The world-body is the exact opposite of the self. It possesses no consciousness of its own—remove the presence of the self, and the gunas would be totally insentient. By its very nature the world-body is impure because it has guna-parts that are perpetually moving and changing. Any happiness we manage to wring from our world or body is fleeting, inevitably followed by sadness and pain. In the Transcender's estimation happiness that isn't permanent isn't true happiness at all. To this view of the world-body, comments Patanjali, "all is but sorrow." The Sanskrit word rendered here by sorrow, *duhkha*, you might guess, means "having a bad axle hole."

Nowadays self-change is highly prized. Bookstores have whole sections of self-help books on the subject. People who refuse to "change with the times" are often frowned upon. Many of us took up the practice of yoga specifically to change this or that about ourselves. But the ultimate Transcender value is changeless perfection, while change is an earmark of self-ignorance and a source of sorrow.

The Transcender world-body exists solely for the enjoyment and emancipation of the self. It's merely a tool, a means to an end. The Transcender aims to disengage the self from and then abandon the world-body, to climb beyond its unremitting sorrow and realize the aloneness (*kaivalya*) or isolation of the self, unsullied by the gunas. Once this aim is realized, the Transcender sheds the world-body like a snake sloughing off old skin, and achieves what's sometimes called disembodied liberation.

For many, this oil-and-water relationship between the self and world-body isn't altogether tenable or satisfying. They cross-examine our transcendently-oriented friend: If the world-body is so dumb, how can it evolve in an orderly fashion? And how can it serve the enjoyment and emancipation of the self? And why, if the self is perfect, does it want to get entangled with the world-body in the first place, especially if its overriding goal is to rid itself of the gunas as expeditiously as possible? Others also bristle at our Transcender's outwardly pessimistic angle. Surely there's enough sorrow to go around, they declare, but that doesn't mean our world-body is sorrowful to the bone.

Various yogis and scholars have stepped in to defend the Transcender's stance. One points out, for example, that genuine pessimism would lead to apathy, without offering any hope of salvation, proving that the Transcender is, at bottom, an optimist. Another insists that sorrow isn't inherent in the world-body, but instead results from our limited and limiting self-identification it, rooted in self-ignorance. We don't need to reject the world-body at all, but just realign ourselves with who we authentically are, the eternal

self.

In the end the Transcender doesn't seem bothered by these objections. The traditional answer to this storm of protest is that there is no answer—it's just the way things have always been and always will be. You might as well ask why the Sun rises in the East and sets in the West, instead of the other way around.

INTEGRATION: to make whole (*integrare*)

Our second approach is the way of integration, represented by Hatha Yoga and other schools influenced by Hindu Tantra. If transcendence is the negative pole of a yoga-battery, then integration is the positive.

The Transcender-self is unwaveringly passive, observing but not participating in the creation of the world-body and its evolution. The Integrator-self is a bird of a totally different color. Where the Transcender sees an irrevocable split between quiescent self and dynamic world-body, the Integrator instead sees them as two sides of the same coin. In fact the self and the world-body are often personified as the spouses in a divine marriage, the husband named Shiva, the wife Shakti (and while we speak of them as though they were two separate principles, keep in mind that they're forever wedded as one indivisible self and can never be divorced).

Shiva is root-consciousness, the uninvolved witness who stands above the hurly-burly of the world. His better half, Shakti (literally "power"), is the feminine heart and soul of the world-body. Unlike the Transcender's senseless Nature, the Integrator's world-body is the playful self-expression of the immanent Goddess, the overflowing luxury of her spirit, infused with her intelligence, creativity, and joy.

The two dimensions of her creation, the world or brahma egg (*brahma-anda*) and the human body or lump egg (*pinda-anda*), are perfect copies of each other. This idea, that the body replicates the world, is found in many wisdom teachings, both ancient and modern. The well-known Western maxim, "As above, so below," is echoed in a Hindu Tantric text: "What is here [in the human body] is there [in the universe]. What is not here is nowhere." The anonymous author of the seventeenth-century "Shiva's Compendium" (*Shiva-Samhita*) writes that in our body

there are rivers, seas, mountains, fields . . . seers and sages; all the stars and planets as well. There are sacred pilgrimages, shrines . . . All the beings that exist in the three worlds are also to be found in the body . . . He who knows all this is a Yogi.

The *pinda-anda* is the temple of the self, the crown jewel of all living bodies. Our microcosmic egg is an energetic continuum of three interpenetrating bodies, the gross outer body of skin and bones, the ethereal psychic body of ego and mind, and the transmigrating causal body, the repository of our karmic seeds and so the cause of our birth, whether as a human or some other life form, our life expectancy, the number of

years we can expect to live, and our life experience, whether it will be marked generally by delight or distress.

The Transcender's practice begins by reforming moral behavior (with the *yamas* and *niyamas*) and focuses on human consciousness—recall Patanjali's frequently cited definition of yoga as the “restriction of the fluctuations of consciousness” (*Yoga-Sutra* I.2). It may seem strange to us but Patanjali proposes that consciousness itself is a material process, a bubbling *guna*-stew, that must eventually be brought to a screeching halt.

The ascetic Transcender is likened to a dieter who gradually starves all desire for anything related to the *gunas*. The practice prescribes discernment, the painstaking separation of the invariable self from the transient world-body, dispassion, the unblinking renunciation of the latter, and perseverance, a steadfast singleness of purpose until the goal of self-liberation is achieved.

While sharing much the same philosophy of consciousness as the Transcender, the Integrator focuses practical attention instead on the body, since by deeply knowing the *pinda-anda* the secret of the *brahma-anda* becomes an open book. Tremendous import is placed on possessing a body as the indispensable first stepping stone to liberation—it's said that without practice there can be no liberation, and without a body there can be no practice. In the mid-fourteenth century “Light on Hatha Yoga” (*Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika*) by the sage Svamarama, one of the foundation texts of the school, the liberation-program for the most part bypasses the groundwork of right moral behavior (there's a brief mention of 10 *yamas* and 10 *niyamas*, but they're not much emphasized), and begins straight off with posture or *asana*, directed toward the strengthening and purification of the body. And rather than forsake the body, the Integrator bakes it the fire-oven of yoga to preserve it for as long as possible and transform it into an indestructible adamantine vehicle for fully incorporated liberation.

Instead of stopping something in its tracks, the Integrator seeks to stimulate something that's dormant, the tiny spark of the Goddess resident in each of us, traditionally envisioned as a coiled, sleeping serpent. Every day is Thanksgiving for the Integrator, a magnificent celebratory feast of world-body calories. The practice encourages the open-hearted intensification and expansion of our involvement with the world-body through a myriad of exercises, such as posture, controlled breathing, recitation of mantras, hand gestures, vivid visualizations of gods and goddesses—the list goes on—all in the service of rousing the slumbering serpent, which symbolizes our own spiritual unconsciousness and awakening.

It's important to remember that neither one of the two ways outlined here is better than other. Both are valid spiritual paths, the one emphasizing renunciation and the supremacy of the self, the other the inclusion and the power inherent in the world-body. Now there's only one more pressing question to be pondered from all this: How about you, are you a Transcender or an Integrator?

## SUGGESTED READING

- Georg Feuerstein. "The Subtle Body and Its Environment," in *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy*. Boston: Shambhala, 1998.
- Georg Feuerstein. *Wholeness or Transcendence?* Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992.
- Patanjali. *The Yoga-Sutra*. Recommended translations:
- Bernard Bouanchaud. *The Essence of Yoga*. Portland: Rudra Press, 1997.
- T.K.V. Desikachar. *The Heart of Yoga*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1995.
- Georg Feuerstein. *The Yoga-Sutra of Patanjali*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1979.
- B.K.S. Iyengar. *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. San Francisco: Aquarian, 1993.
- Barbara Stoler Miller. *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1996.
- Swami Sivananda Radha. *Kundalini Yoga for the West*. Boulder: Shambhala, 1981.
- Svatmarama. *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, with a commentary by Swami Vishnu-devanananda. New York: OM Lotus Publishing, 1987.