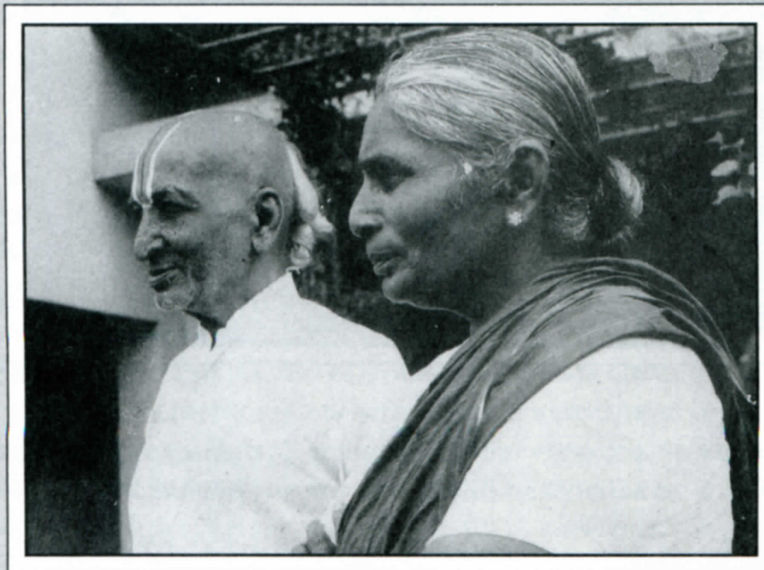
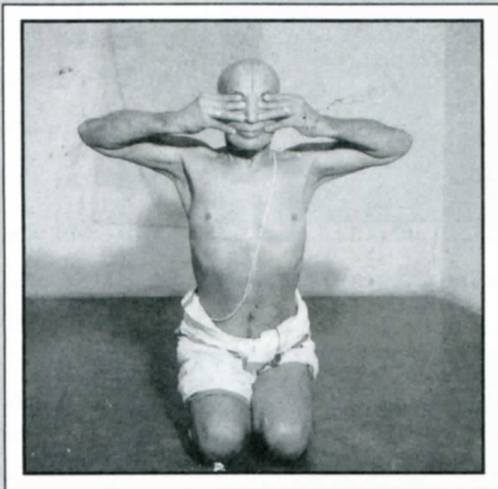
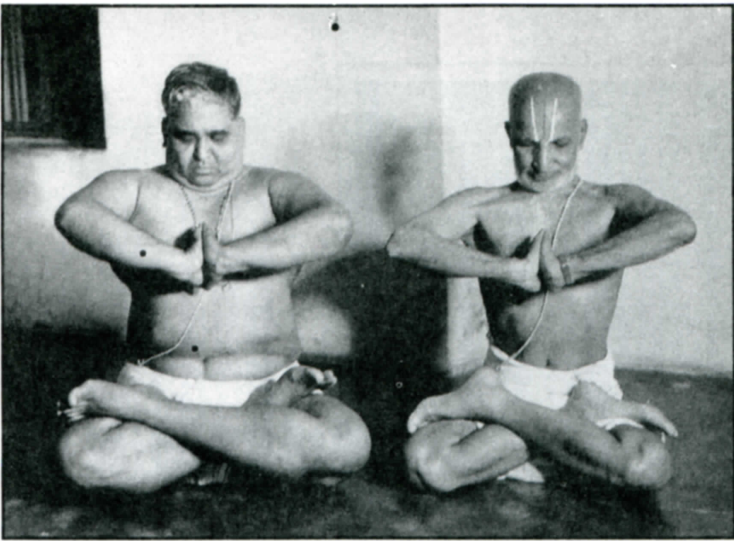


# PART II

## The Understanding of Yoga

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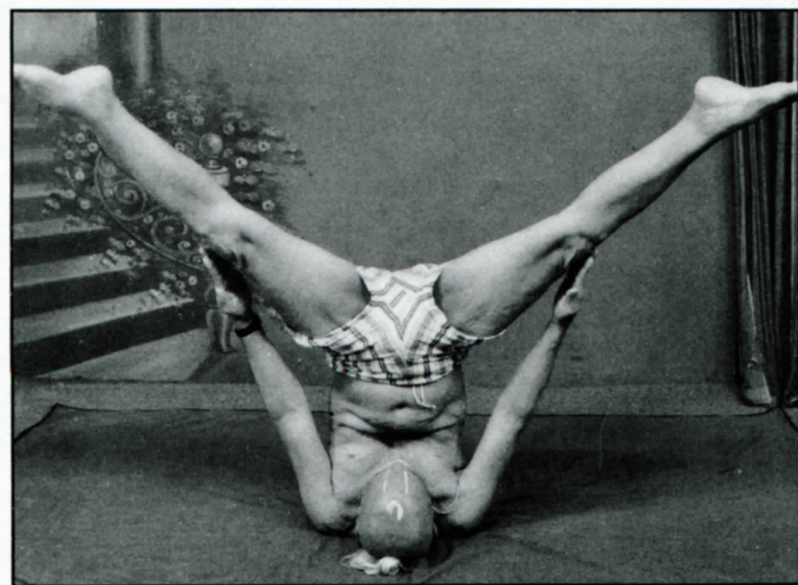
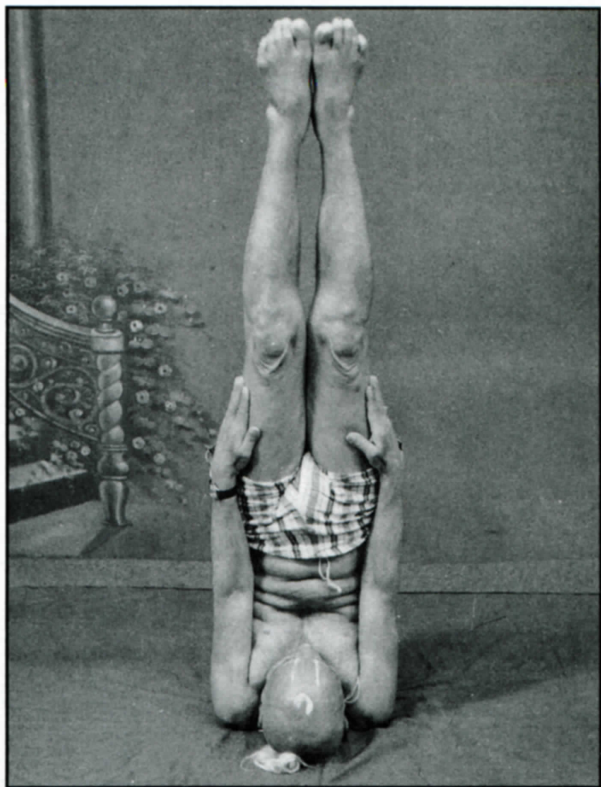
*Top: Krishnamacharya  
teaching padmāsana.*

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*Center: Krishnamacharya  
demonstrating  
sanmukhī mudrā.*

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*Bottom: Krishnamacharya  
and his wife,  
Namagiramma.*



*Krishnamacharya  
in two variations  
of niralamba  
sarvāṅgāsana.*

# The Things That Darken the Heart



There are many definitions of yoga, and I have already mentioned some of them:

- yoga as the movement from one point to another, higher one
- yoga as the bringing together, the unifying of two things
- yoga as action with undivided, uninterrupted attention

These definitions of yoga have one thing in common: the idea that something changes. This change must bring us to a point where we have never been before. That is to say, that which was impossible becomes possible; that which was unattainable becomes attainable; that which was invisible can be seen. One of the basic reasons many people take up yoga is to change something about themselves: to be able to think more clearly, to feel better, and to be able to act better today than they did yesterday in all areas of life. In these endeavors yoga can be of great help, and it requires no prerequisites that must be fulfilled before we set out on this path. Just because yoga originated in India does not mean that we must become a Hindu in order to practice it. On the contrary, it is not even expected of a Hindu that he or she practice yoga. Yoga does not require a particular belief system and, if we already have one, it is not challenged by yoga. Everyone can begin, and the point at which we start is very personal and individual, depending on where we are at the time.

Why do we set out on this journey at all? Because we sense that we do not always do what might be best for ourselves or others. Because we notice that we often do not recognize the things around us and in us clearly enough. And why does this happen? Because the veil of avidyā clouds our perceptions. We can, in any given moment, be right or wrong in our assessment of a situation, but this is something we cannot tell at the time. If our view of a situation is false, then avidyā is present and the ensuing action will be clouded by it. In this way

avidyā influences both our action and the results of our action, which we will sooner or later have to confront. We have already talked about the fact that from the yogic point of view everything is real and there is no illusion. Even avidyā, the source of so many problems, has a value and is real. Everything we see and experience is accepted. This concept is called satvāda. Yoga also claims that everything is in a state of change and flux. We will not see things tomorrow in the same way that we saw them today. This concept is called *pariṇāmavāda*.

If we follow yogic thinking further, we find that there is something that can perceive this constant change in things because it is itself not subject to change. This is puruṣa, something deep within us that is really able to see and recognize the true nature of all things, including the fact that they are in a state of constant change. But puruṣa is also cloaked with the same veil of avidyā that covers the mind.

I have already described how avidyā is expressed and experienced in four different ways. One way is asmitā, the ego: “I am right”; “I am sad”; “I am a yoga teacher.” These are statements of asmitā. We identify completely with something that might possibly change, and may no longer belong to us tomorrow. Another form of avidyā is rāga, the desire to have something whether we need it or not. A third form is dveṣa, which manifests as refusing things and having feelings of hatred. And finally there is abhiniveśa or fear—afraid of death, we cling to life with all our might. These are the four possible ways in which avidyā is expressed.

The essential purpose of yoga practice is to reduce avidyā so that understanding can gradually come to the surface. But how can we know whether we have seen and understood things clearly? When we see the truth, when we reach a level that is higher than our normal everyday understanding, something deep within us is very quiet and peaceful. Then there is a contentment that nothing can take from us. It is not the kind of satisfaction derived from gazing at a beautiful object. It is much more than this. It is a satisfaction deep within us that is free from feeling and judgment. The center of this contentment is the puruṣa.

Yoga is both the movement toward and the arrival at a point. The yoga that we are practicing and in which, through practice, we can make progress is called kriyā yoga. The *Yoga Sūtra* defines kriyā yoga as being made up of three components: tapas, svādhyāya, and īśvarapraṇidhānā. Tapas does not mean penance or castigation, but is something we do in order to keep us physically and mentally healthy. It is a process of inner cleansing: we remove things that we do not need. Svādhyāya is the process of gradually finding out where we are, who we are, what we are, and so forth. Our āsana practice begins with precisely these questions. We take the first step by observing the breath and body. We do this over and over again, hoping that we will with time develop a deeper understanding of ourselves and our current state. In this way

we also learn to recognize what our next steps will be. If we follow the *Yoga Sūtra*, this close connection with svādhyāya holds true for every kind of yoga practice. The literal meaning of īśvarapraṇidhānā is “to yield humbly to God.” In kriyā yoga there exists the free choice of accepting God or not. The meaning of īśvarapraṇidhānā in the context of kriyā yoga relates much more to a special kind of attention to action: we place value on the quality of the action, not on the fruits that can develop out of it.

Our normal course of action is first to decide on a goal and then, bearing it in mind, start working toward it. But it can easily happen that our goal changes or even disappears. For instance, someone thinks it necessary to make a million dollars and spends two or three years working toward this end. Suddenly this person discovers that this goal is really of no use; the goal loses its meaning and is replaced by another quite different goal that is much more important. We should remain flexible so that we are still able to react to changes in our expectations and old ideas. The more distanced we are from the fruits of our labors, the better we are able to do this. And if we concentrate more on the quality of our steps along the way than on the goal itself, then we also avoid being disappointed if we perhaps cannot attain the exact goal that we had set for ourselves. Paying more attention to the spirit in which we act and looking less to the results our actions may bring us—this is the meaning of īśvarapraṇidhānā in kriyā yoga.<sup>1</sup>

Avidyā changes according to whether it is manifested as asmitā, rāga, dveṣa, or abhiniveśa. Sometimes it will manifest itself as anxiety; other times it will appear as attachment, rejection, avarice, and so forth. The four aspects of avidyā are not always present in the same proportion. Although they are normally all there, generally one or two are dominant and the others are lurking in the background.

If we feel modest for a while it does not mean that we have overcome our self-seeking tendencies. We never know when a particular form of avidyā will appear even more clearly. It is like sowing seeds; as soon as they receive water, fertilizer, and air, they begin to grow. Every seed grows best under different conditions and at different times. So it can happen that a desire (rāga) drives us to do something that our pride, our ego (asmitā), had forbidden. Or our desire to be noticed (asmitā) may become so great that it overcomes our anxiety (abhiniveśa) because we have to prove what great heroes we are.

We should never sit back smugly when it seems as though we are free of avidyā. Because the four faces of avidyā do not always appear on the surface, we must remain aware of the fact that their power and intensity can go on changing. Sometimes avidyā is scarcely visible in any of its forms and sometimes it overwhelms us. Because there are so many levels of avidyā we must remain watchful and alert in our actions, and maintain our efforts to lessen its influence on us. If somebody enjoys a clear mind and spirit for years on end, that certainly shows great progress. But suddenly avidyā can hit him or her

<sup>1</sup> The question of the attitude we adopt toward our action is central to the definition of īśvarapraṇidhānā given in the *Yoga Bhāṣya*, the oldest commentary on the *Yoga Sūtra*. There it is written: “īśvarapraṇidhānā is the yielding of all action to God, the renunciation of the desire for the fruits of all action.”

again like an earthquake. That is why we emphasize that our practice of yoga, the striving for a deeper understanding, must go on until avidyā is reduced to a minimum.

A few days' yoga practice and contemplation may help for a short time, but the benefits will not last forever. We have to place one stone on another; it is a gradual process. We have to engage in these practices constantly because, although we may be further on today than yesterday, tomorrow we may slip back a step. We are required to be constantly active until the seeds of avidyā are burned and cannot germinate any more. As long as the seed is there we can never know if it will sprout or not. The practice of yoga helps to prevent these seeds from germinating and growing again. Avidyā is as closely related to nonaction—even nonaction has consequences. The *Yoga Sūtra* claims that whether our actions have positive or negative effects is determined by the degree of influence avidyā has over them.<sup>2</sup>

The *Yoga Sūtra* makes a distinction between two kinds of action: action that reduces avidyā and brings true understanding, and action that increases avidyā. We increase avidyā by feeding it and reduce avidyā by starving it; our actions encourage or discourage the growth of avidyā. Everything we do in yoga—whether it is āsana practice, prāṇāyāma, or meditation, whether it is attentive observation, self-searching, or the examination of a particular question—all have as their goal the reduction of avidyā.

## Nothing We Do Is Without Consequence

Each of our actions shows its effects either immediately or after a period of time. Every action has a consequence. This can take the form of a residue left behind by an action, which in its turn influences the following action. For example, someone toward whom we have behaved in a friendly manner will take something of our friendliness into his or her next encounter. It is a continuous process: the first action influences the next and so on, ad infinitum. That is the reason why it is best for us to remain alert in all our actions.

What possibilities are there for preventing actions with negative consequences, actions that we may later regret? One possibility is *dhyāna*, which in this context means “reflection.”<sup>3</sup> Reflection can take many forms. For example, when faced with an important decision, you could imagine what would happen if you did the exact opposite of what your instincts suggest.<sup>4</sup> Try to make the consequence of your decision as real as possible in your imagination. No matter what it is or what you feel, before you make an important decision and take action you should give yourself the opportunity to consider the matter with an open mind and a certain degree of objectivity. *Dhyāna* in this respect is a quiet, alert consideration, a meditation. The aim is to free yourself of preconceptions and avoid actions that you may later regret and that may create new troubles (*duḥkha*) for you.

<sup>2</sup> *Yoga Sūtra* 2.12 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Yoga Sūtra* 2.11.

<sup>4</sup> *Yoga Sūtra* 2.33 and 34 present this idea as *pratīpakṣabhāvana*.

Dhyāna strengthens self-sufficiency. Yoga makes us independent. We all want to be free, although many of us are dependent on psychologists, gurus, teachers, drugs, or whatever. Even if advice and guidance are helpful, in the end we ourselves are the best judge of our own actions. No one is more interested in me than me. With the help of dhyāna we find our own methods and systems for making decisions and better understand our behavior.

There are other ways of distancing ourselves from our actions than reflecting on how it would be if we were to act differently from what we intend. We might go to a concert or go for a walk or do something else that calms the thoughts. All the while the mind goes on working unconsciously, without any external pressure. In the pursuit of other activities we gain a certain distance. However short it may be, time becomes available to cast the mind over everything surrounding the decision that has to be made. Perhaps with ease and distance we will make a better decision. Stepping out of a situation in order to get a better look at it from another standpoint is called *pratipakṣa*. The same word describes the process of considering other possible courses of action.<sup>5</sup> The time spent in dhyāna is extremely important. Through self-reflection our actions gain in quality.

Another notion closely linked to avidyā is that of duḥkha. Sometimes terms such as “suffering,” “troubles,” or “sickness” are used to explain the meaning of duḥkha, but it is best described as a feeling of being restricted. Duḥkha is a quality of mind that gives us the feeling of being squeezed. It is not to be compared with physical pain. There does not need to be any physical pain to experience a feeling of great duḥkha. The level on which duḥkha works is the mind. Duḥkha is nothing but a certain state of mind in which we experience a limitation of our possibilities to act and understand. Even if we do not have a need to express our feelings in tears, somehow we feel disturbed deep within ourselves, painfully bound and restricted.

When we feel a sense of lightness and openness within, then we are experiencing the opposite of duḥkha, a state that is called sukha.<sup>6</sup> The concept of duḥkha plays an important part not only in yoga but in every significant philosophy of India. There is duḥkha at different times in the life of every human being. We all have the goal of eliminating duḥkha. That is what the Buddha taught. That is what Vedānta strives for. That is what yoga tries to achieve.

## Duḥkha Arises from Avidyā

What is the relationship between duḥkha and avidyā? Every action that stems from avidyā always leads to one or another form of duḥkha. It very often happens that we do not see our avidyā as selfishness, desire, hate, or fear, but can only perceive the result, the duḥkha. Duḥkha can be expressed in many different forms; we never know how before it besets us. Sometimes we might

<sup>5</sup> *Yoga Sūtra* 2.33.

<sup>6</sup> A literal translation can help us understand these terms, which are used again and again in the *Yoga Sūtra*; *kha* means something like “space,” and *su* translates as “happy,” “fortunate,” or “good.” A graphic metaphor for duḥkha is the opposite of sukha is a dark room.

literally feel as if we are choking; other times we only notice duḥkha in our thoughts and feelings. Irrespective of what form it takes, however, duḥkha will certainly occur whenever our actions have arisen out of avidyā. An action that is supported by a clear mind cannot conceal any duḥkha within it. Consequently, there are actions that somehow never have any negative aspects, and there are others that we thought would be good but later on we recognize that they brought us duḥkha.

Duḥkha can even arise out of our efforts to progress along the path of yoga. When we see something that we would like to have, there is no duḥkha initially present. Duḥkha begins to take hold when we cannot get what we want. People often feel that they suffer from this kind of duḥkha precisely when they are in the process of improving their lives. They become so thirsty for real insight that they cannot reach this new quality of understanding and action as quickly as they would like.

In the great spiritual literature of India there are many stories of people who strive to become better but are in such a hurry, and therefore achieve so little, that they develop duḥkha and are unhappy. And this happens despite the fact that they have tried to change something for the better.

We also talk of duḥkha when we cannot make ourselves comfortable in a new situation. Duḥkha can arise from being used to certain things and insisting on nothing else. When our habits are disturbed we feel unwell. If we cannot continue life in our habitual way, we experience it as a disturbance. This form of duḥkha arises from our own actions, which have brought to us a feeling of satisfaction.

Duḥkha can also be generated from the other direction. Sometimes the process of leaving an old track that we realize is not good for us is painful and can cause duḥkha. That is the reason why it is sometimes difficult to lay aside a certain behavior that we recognize as unproductive. The separation from a pattern we are used to can be very painful. It is up to us to find out why so that we can overcome the situation.<sup>7</sup>

## Duḥkha Arises out of the Guṇa

To understand duḥkha we must understand the three qualities of mind described by yoga. These three qualities—tamas, rajas, and sattva—are collectively known as the *guṇa*.<sup>8</sup>

Tamas describes the state of heaviness and slowness in feeling and decision. Let's say that a feeling of great lethargy comes upon you when you are supposed to give a speech. You would suddenly have great difficulty in remaining alert, your audience (and you yourself) would be discontented, and finally you would experience duḥkha. This kind of lethargy is what is meant by tamas. A different situation exists when it is really time to go to sleep but the mind says, "Come on, let's go! Let's go to the movies! You must go to the movies! How can you want to go to bed now?" This quality of mind would like action, would like to dance. This quality is called rajas, and also produces

7. The different aspects of duḥkha discussed here are thus distinguished: from the inability to perceive or accept a change arises *pariṇāma-duḥkha*; from the situation where a need cannot be fulfilled arises *tāpa-duḥkha*; from the difficulty in giving up habits arises *samskāra-duḥkha*. A discussion of the various causes of duḥkha can be found in the *Yoga Sūtra* 2.15.

8. The concept of the three *guṇa* is not presented in detail in the *Yoga Sūtra*, but is referred to in 2.18, and presupposed in the *Yoga Sūtra* constantly. It is explained in the texts of the Sāṃkhya, where the *guṇa* are comprised of those three qualities that are peculiar to everything material (to which also belong our thoughts, our feelings, and the whole range of our mental activity), but not *puruṣa*. Even the movement of the three *guṇa* can be reason for duḥkha. See the *Yoga Sūtra* 2.15.

duḥkha. The third quality of mind describes the absence of the other two. There is neither heaviness and lethargy nor raciness and restlessness, but only clarity. This is called sattva, and from this quality of mind alone can arise no duḥkha.

These three qualities are subject to their own cycles—sometimes one prevails, sometimes another. Only sattva, clarity, is totally positive in the sense of leading to a reduction of duḥkha. Rajas and tamas can both lead to duḥkha. For instance, if I really need sleep and want to go to sleep, then my mind is tamas, and that is good. But if I am to give a lecture or would like to listen to one, a state of mind that is predominantly tamas causes considerable difficulties.

All the factors that lead to the occurrence of duḥkha work in us as forces that reduce our space and freedom and ultimately limit us. If we are alert enough we can be aware of the play of these forces within us all the time. Through our yoga practice we are attempting to become more aware of these movements within, to reduce the limitations that result from them and to avoid the occurrence of duḥkha in the future. When we become aware of duḥkha and see it as something to face, we are also able to find a way to get rid of it. That is why becoming aware of duḥkha is the first step toward freeing ourselves from it.

Finally, yoga claims that there is a state called *kaivalya* in which someone is free of the external concerns that cause such disturbances and generate duḥkha.<sup>9</sup> Let's say I have a radio that means a lot to me. One day my son breaks it. I am furious and become angry with him even though he did not do it deliberately. Actually I should not have become angry—it is only a radio after all. While I should not actually encourage my son to be careless, I must also be flexible enough to see what really happened. A little flexibility always reduces duḥkha.

<sup>9</sup> *Yoga Sūtra* 2.25. The concept of kaivalya represents a central concern of yoga. The last chapter of the *Yoga Sūtra* bears the title “Kaivalya” or “Freedom.”

