

## A YOGIC PERSPECTIVE ON HEALTH AND DISEASE

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“Health and happiness are your birthright! Claim them!” thundered the “Lion of modern yoga” Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj. “You are born to be healthy and happy. But, the goal of life is moksha – freedom!”

We live in “topsy-turvy times”, when ancient values have been flipped onto their heads. One rarely meets a truly “healthy” or “happy” person. In fact, for the vast majority of the human race, health and happiness are distant dreams. Illness, depression, conflict, sorrow, stress, tension and frustration are the “birthright” even of young children in modern times. Billions of dollars are expended by the health industry. Medical science can put pig valves into human hearts and transplant vital organs. Super specialty hospitals abound. The pharmaceutical industry produces a huge amount of life-saving drugs. Why, then, is a truly healthy, happy person such a rarity?

Modern man, like the Biblical Essau, has sold his birthright for a “mess of porridge”. Like Judas, he has betrayed his Christ consciousness, his cosmic consciousness, for less than “30 pieces of silver”.

Swami Gitananda has put before us a simple reason for this sad state of affairs. He advised. “If you want to be healthy, do healthy things. If you want to be happy, do happy things.” People cry, “I want to be healthy.” Then, they indulge in bad habits like tobacco and alcohol, spend late-hours watching television, do not exercise properly, do not drink enough water. Others moan, “I want to be happy!” but they fight, they gossip, they quarrel, they criticize, they delight in conflict, in violence, in defeating others, and crushing competition under their feet. It is irrational to expect that by doing unhealthy things, one can be healthy. It is irrational to believe that by doing unhappy things, one can be happy. Yes, man is an irrational animal indeed!

Yoga is the ancient science of India which shows man not only how to claim his birthright

of health and happiness, but also to obtain the goal of life – moksha. Any scientist worth his salt begins his career by studying the laws of nature and the basic theorems and tenets of his science. The yogic scientist is no exception to this rule. The physicist studies the physical laws of nature - gravity, momentum, etc. The chemist studies the chemical properties of matter. The biologist studies life forms, the doctors, anatomy and physiology of the human body. This is the “field” within which they will work, observing the laws of action and reaction, the laws of cause-effect relationship, within that limited spectrum.

For the yogi, the entire universe and everything in it is his “field of research.” He studies the Universal laws which operate within this field. The law of karma, the law of cause-effect, is an important Law for him. The yogi knows that the laws which govern the microcosm also govern the macrocosm, and so, he understands that by studying himself, his “small self,” his “own self”, his own body, mind and emotions, he can understand the “big self”, the Atman, Brahman. This process in yoga is called “swadhyaya” or “self study” and it is the fourth niyama of Patanjali’s Ashtanga Yoga. The rishis, cosmic scientists, have taught, “Without moving out of one’s own cave, one can comprehend the universe.” They realized that universal truths lay within one’s very own heart. “Man, know Thyself” is the admonition which was written on the entrance to the Greek temple at Delphi. This is the starting point of all endeavors. This is the starting point in the long journey to claim one’s birth right. Alexander Pope, the great 18th century English poet, wrote, “Man, know thy self / presume not god to scan / the proper study of mankind / is man.”

Through this “self study” the yogi discovers that human nature is governed by an inexorable law - and the very law which governs his nature - is the very law which governs the universe. This law is called “Sanatana Dharma” or “the eternal law” and is unbreakable. One has no choice but to discover it, and then, live in harmony with that eternal

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law. Only then will one be entitled to enjoy one's birthright - health and happiness. The Christian Bible teaches, "The wages of sin is death." "Sin" is nothing more than defiance, rebellion and disobedience to the eternal law. Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri taught his students: "you cannot break the law. You can only break yourself over the law." How do we know if we are "breaking the law"? The results are there for all to see: sickness, suffering, unhappiness, conflict, stress, and tension.

One might retort: "But I am unhealthy! I am unhappy! I am not breaking law! I am not an outlaw!" Look again! Indeed, such a person must be breaking the law, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Remember, even in human jurisprudence, "Ignorance of the law is no excuse." No court on earth will excuse a law-breaker who pleads "ignorance of the law". All citizens are expected to not only know the law, but also, to abide by it, so that the society may flourish in a harmonious manner. But, who wants to be unhealthy? Who wants to be unhappy? If these are the result of breaking natural law, then why do people do it? The answer is pure and simple: ignorance. The Sanskrit word for "ignorance" is "avidya". Patanjali, the sage who codified the principles of yoga 2500 years ago in 196 magnificently concise sutras, calls "avidya" or "ignorance" as the "Mother klesha". A klesha is a hindrance, an obstacle to spiritual growth. Basically, klesha is the root cause of all human problems. There are pancha klesha or "five hindrances". Sometimes "klesha" is translated as "a knot of the heart". It prevents the human being from further spiritual advancement and drags the human into the mire of misery. The other four kleshas are: asmita (egoism), the sense of separation, the sense of I, raga (attraction due to pleasure), dwesha (aversion due to pain) and abinivesha (clinging to life, the survival instinct). These are the "obstacles" which stand between man and his desire to claim his birthright of health and happiness. But the root of all obstacles is avidya (ignorance), ignorance of the law, and hence, the constant attempt to "break the law".

What is ignorance? Look at the word. It is composed mostly of the word "ignore". "Ignore" implies "a refusal to see". If we "ignore" someone, it implies a deliberate attempt to cut this person

out of the field of our awareness. If we attend a gathering and find someone we have aversion towards (dwesha) present, we usually "ignore" that person, literally, turning "our back on them" so that we do not have to "see" or "acknowledge" them.

But, if ignorance of the universal law causes us to break the law, and hence, results in disease and unhappiness, why do we as humans continue on this path to death and destruction? Because we are taught, and we willingly accept this falsehood, that we are not responsible for our own health and happiness. We have given over the responsibility for our own health to the doctor, and have asked him to find us a pill, or cut something out of our body, or stick something into it, and make us healthy again. We have given the responsibility of our happiness to the government, the society, to the media, to the entertainment industry, to anti-depressant medicines, and asked them to "please us, to give us about we want, to make us happy."

We have sold the most precious quality we possess as humans, "manas" or conscious awareness, and its twin virtues, independence and self-initiative, to the various powerful lobbies which govern our lives. And they in turn, most benevolently "put us to sleep", sedate us, put us under anesthesia, so we no longer feel the pain inherent in breaking the law. We are hypnotized into a fitful sleep from our childhood to our old age, and into the funeral pyre itself. We are lulled into a somnolent state in order to make our life's journey bearable, with a minimum of pain - we are neither healthy nor happy, but blissfully numb and anesthetized.

Why should our entire social, political, educational, business, commercial, media and entertainment structure be geared to keeping us numb and dumb? For a simple reason: there's plenty of money and power in unhappiness and disease. But, there's no money in health and happiness. How would doctors and the huge drug industry support themselves if all were healthy? Would we watch mindless violence and sex and vulgarity in cinemas and television if we were truly happy? Would the manufacturers of weapons of mass destruction flourish financially if all were happy and healthy? It is beneficial to all the world's

commercial interests that the five billion people on the planet are kept sick and unhappy, in a state of unfulfilled desire and thus, in constant frustration.

As an example close to home, look at the field of dentistry. When I came to Pondicherry in 1968, there was one dentist in town. I did not know anyone who had problems with their teeth. Cavities were rare. On the contrary, I was struck by the beautiful, white healthy teeth of our Indian people. Even villagers had dazzling smiles! Life was simple. Processed foods were a luxury. Natural food was the norm.

Cut to the present scenario. The number of dentists in Pondicherry numbers more than 500! Children as young as four years of age have cavities and dental problems. I don't have to tell you professionals where the problem lies. It is obvious! The abundance of refined foods, sugars, sweets, soft drinks, ice creams, lack of oral hygiene has destroyed the nation's teeth! The good old neem stick has been discarded as "old fashioned" and we now spend Rs.20 on a toothbrush and Rs.50 on toothpaste which is not one-hundredth as effective as the old neem twig! Is this progress? Is this the obedience to natural law? Is this health? The villager cannot afford to buy toothbrush and toothpaste – this would cost him one day's wages. This "progress" has not only taken his health, but also his happiness. He will "become unhappy because he does not have the money to buy such items!" Should not the emphasis in social dentistry be on spreading awareness of the horrendous damage caused to the teeth by these modern junk foods and drink? But, emphasis seems to be more focused on cure, rather than prevention. Lip service is given to these ideas but the powerful commercial lobbies are quick to squelch any effective activism on these subjects. This is not only in the field of dentistry. It is the fact in every single aspect of life. There is no money or glory or power in prevention, but plenty of it in cure! Instead of educating people to "obey natural law", the modern trend is to repair people who have "broken themselves over that law."

Avidya, ignorance! It is a disease, which is more deadly than an atomic bomb. It has already burst upon the earth and is enveloping all mankind in its black, poisonous mushroom cloud. It is the root cause of all unhappiness and disease.

"Vidya" – wisdom, knowledge – is the opposite of "avidya" or ignorance. It basically means "to see". The rishis were "Men who saw Reality as It Is." If we wish to claim our birthright of health and happiness, we must "Arise and Awake." We must open our eyes to see and our ears to hear. When this "Awakening" occurs, one will be drawn to the yogic science. It is the start of the long spiritual journey.

The "Core Concept" in accepting yoga as a way of life is embedded in the word "responsibility". One must be prepared to accept "total responsibility" for one's own life, total responsibility for one's thoughts, words and deeds, total responsibility for one's own health and happiness. This is, in essence, obedience to the "eternal law" which states, "all karma – all action – has its reaction and that re-action will always rebound on the one who committed the action." Just as the sudarshan chakra (celestial discus) of Lord Vishnu followed the sage Durvasa wherever he ran as he tried to hide until he made amends to King Ambarish for harming him, so also the "reaction" of our "action" will follow us wherever we go, until we "pay out" the karma in consciousness. In short, if we do unhappy things, we will be unhappy. If we do unhealthy things, we will be unhealthy. There is no "breaking" this law and even the best doctor, the best dentist or the best entertainer cannot keep our karma forever at bay. The sign on the yogi's door (whether the door leads to his palace or the door leads to his cave) reads. "The buck stops here." That is, the yogi takes total and complete responsibility for himself and everything which happens to him and makes a conscious choice to "live within the law", rather than choosing to be an "outlaw."

The word "responsibility" also has another aspect. Broken into two parts it reads "responsibility", or "the ability to respond". The yogic way of life cultivates and values consciousness and awareness. Hence the yogi develops the "ability to respond" correctly to any given situation. The correct "response" will produce a "positive effect" and the result of such a positive action-choice is overall health, harmony and happiness.

Yoga is the science of consciousness, becoming aware of universal laws and obeying those laws in

thought, word and deed. Obedience to the law produces health and happiness. Disobedience produces disease and suffering. As a scientist, the yogi employs all the tools of any great science: he possesses an elaborate terminology which helps him define and understand the problem; he possesses equipment and tools for his search – asanas, pranayama, concentration practices, mantras, cleansing techniques, etc.

He/she enjoys access to a great body of theoretical concepts, accumulated through hundreds of generations of “spiritual experiments” conducted by the great rishis who have preceded him. This “theory” is recorded in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Yoga Sutras, the Gheranda Samhita, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and other ancient scriptures. His laboratory, his field of research, is his own body, emotions and mind and his relationship and correspondence to the Universe. The yogi is a detached observer who carefully records his data and comes to his own conclusions based on his own direct observation and experiences.

He begins with this primary hypothesis – the universe is cosmos, it is not chaos. “Cosmos” implies “order”, and “order” implies “laws”. He sets out to discover those laws and to observe the working of those laws in his own life and in the lives of others. The yogi then attempts to “apply” his findings in a practical manner – in his own life, coming to the same “realizations” as those enjoyed by the rishis of old. Health and happiness manifest automatically in such a life, which attunes itself to cosmic law. Health and happiness are automatic byproducts when avidya or ignorance is dispelled and vidya, seeing reality for what it is develops. The yogi follows the “great law of virtue” which is elaborated in the yogic tradition as the pancha yamas or moral restraints and the pancha niyamas, the ethical observances. These maha vratas, the mighty vows of virtue, reflect the Sanatana Dharma or the eternal law. The yogi develops a love for virtue, a love for the law. He realizes “virtue is its own reward.” He attunes his own microcosm to the rhythm of the macrocosm. He moves with Nature, not against it. Nature is his friend, with whom he lives in harmony, and not an enemy to be conquered or exploited.

“Sanatana Dharma” is difficult to translate. It can be called “the eternal law”, “the cosmic law”, even “the structure of the universe as it is”. “Sanatana” means “eternal” – That which was, which is, and which shall always be – unchanging, self-created, unborn, undying. “dharma” takes its root meaning from “dhar” which means “stability, even-ness, balance.” The English word “durable” has come from “dhar” – that which endures. “Dharma” is hence that which gives stability. Stability is an essential component of health. As any good doctor knows, the best news he can give anxious relatives is that the patient has “stabilized.” Stability is also an essential component of happiness. Nothing creates more misery than an unstable family, unstable romantic relationships, unstable work or social environments. Sanatana Dharma sometimes is more loosely defined as “the law of virtue”. Virtue creates stability. Clean, pure, restrained, controlled, conscious aware living is the basis of all virtue. Such qualities create personal, interpersonal and intrapersonal stability. Hence, one becomes aware of the necessity of obeying “the law of virtue”, if one wishes to be qualified to claim one’s birthright as health and happiness. As Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda put it so succinctly: “Following yama–niyama, obeying the cosmic law is “No-Option Yoga” for those who wish to spiritually evolve themselves in health and happiness.”

Our ancients linked particular diseases to certain lapses in character. These linkages can be found in many Puranas. Arthritis is linked to greed, refusal to let go, or to share. Digestive problems were linked to hoarding, excessive, selfish accumulation. The old idea that diseases were caused by a moral lapse had much truth. Interestingly enough, modern medicine is also coming to a similar conclusion, though by a different route. Research findings have enabled medical men to draw up “personality profiles” for cancer patients, heart attack patients, diabetics, AIDS patients and so on. Character creates circumstances. Character is composed mostly of the word “act”. The manner in which we habitually “act” forms our “character.” Our actions determine whether we are healthy or unhealthy, happy or unhappy. This is the essence of Sanatana Dharma. We create our own destiny by our thoughts, our words and our actions. There is no such thing as an “innocent victim” in the universal Scheme of Things.

The yogi grows in consciousness and spirit till he becomes an “adhikarin” a “fit person” for “realizing reality”. He becomes competent to “claim his birthright of health and happiness.” But, that is only the beginning of his journey. He has arisen! He has been awakened! And now it is his duty to “stop not till the goal of moksha” is reached. But, though the pilgrimage is long and arduous, the universe herself/himself/itself grants him his birthright – health and happiness as the reward for obeying natural law. He has the health, strength and good cheer to make

his cosmic journey and he has the happiness to enjoy his travels in space and consciousness. Buoyed by this spiritual legacy, the yogi now has a raft to cross the ocean of samskara. “Avidya” or ignorance of universal law is banished by “vidya”, the light of conscious awareness. His eyes are opened. He sees! Happily and healthily he realizes that he lives not on a small planet, in a small galaxy, tiny as a grain of sand. He is a universal being, a universal citizen obeying the laws of the cosmos. And the Universe is his own, his native land!