

Swami Kailasananda, Florence 26 May 2015

WHAT IS HATHA YOGA

INTRODUCTION

Many people these days are depressed, generally not because of some metaphysical reasons, but often because of lack of energy, of prana. Yoga is very helpful and I wonder how people can survive without yoga and meditation!

When we do not know how to access resources of energy within, we depend on false energy, we have to rely on all sorts of pills, stimulants and all kinds of things that after a while take their toll on the body, and health deteriorates.

Yoga is extraordinarily helpful on all levels.

I do not know if you are aware that the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Moodhi, who is very much into yoga, was recently asked to talk at the UN. All he talked about was yoga, which is quite amazing! The Prime Minister of a country invited to speak at the UN, puts the whole emphasis of his speech on yoga! Probably not everyone in India was happy about this, but it was very interesting that he did it. He himself is a yogi, he practices everyday, has opened a university of yoga in India and is doing a lot to develop yoga in his own country and worldwide. Maybe you are aware that there is going to be an International Yoga Day on 21 June. It will be the first ever Yoga Day, it will be sponsored by the UN and 200 countries have spontaneously agreed to the idea.

In all the Sivananda Centres worldwide we will celebrate this first Yoga Day.

What is interesting about Moodhi is that he says that yoga is not just postures, it is not just the asanas, he says that yoga is a lifestyle. Actually, this is what we have been teaching in the Sivananda School for many years. We do not teach yoga just as a physical exercise but as something that can really change your life.

THE NEED FOR YOGA

Our topic today is the meaning of Hatha Yoga. Nowadays the situation of yoga is a bit confusing; many different schools, so many different practices that we no longer know what is what! So I will try to make some clarity on what Hatha Yoga really is and what it was meant for.

Yoga has become mainstream and is now very popular. It is practiced everywhere in the world, maybe a little bit differently from its original spirit, also because we are in a different age.

What characterises our age is that health is deteriorating. We have been teaching now for about 50 years in the west and if we look only 20 years back we can see how the general state of health has gone down, which is understandable because the world is as it is, with increasing levels of stress and pollution. Therefore yoga is increasingly used as a therapy and for healing.

Originally, however, it was not meant as a therapy or a healing system, rather **it was meant for people who were already healthy and wanted to attain higher levels of health, to become super-healthy, not just physically but also mentally and spiritually in order to express their full potential as human beings.** It was a different age, people were healthier and had more mind power.

Ancient yogic scriptures were usually in the form of verses, sutras, and people used to know them by heart, they were not written down but transmitted orally as people had tremendous memories and tremendous power of concentration.

But look at us now, it is such a headache for us just to learn half a page by heart. Our memory power is decreasing and as we age we get Alzheimer, and not only do we lose our memory but also the sense of who we are.

This is really a serious problem and Swami Vishnudevananda (Swami Vishnu, who left his body in 1993), our teacher, used to tell us that **the problem of the 20th century**, is not cancer or AIDS, it **is weakness.**

Everything has become weak. The body is weaker, but also the mind has become weaker and the two things go together.

Less will power: this is why we are struggling so much. We would like to change, who doesn't, we would like to develop a healthy lifestyle but it is a real challenge. Just changing food habits is very difficult, we might have tried for the last 20 years but we are not there yet, still struggling, trying to improve many things but the will is not there.

Very often we make changes in our lives only when there is a major threat like cancer, but maybe not even then. People mostly do not want to change anything in their lives.

This shows where we are standing, how disconnected we are from ourselves, as if we were looking at ourselves from somewhere else, we do not really live from inside. When this is the case the energy becomes low and when the energy, what the yogis call prana, is low, the mind becomes much less motivated for life, for taking care of oneself. Low prana means no motivation to do good to ourselves. It

is like opening the door to all addictions. It is much easier to help others, but very difficult to help ourselves.

This state of low prana is fully connected with lifestyle.

The very positive message of yoga, of Swami Sivananda, Swami Vishnudevananda and also of Prime Minister Moodhi, is that, although the problem looks difficult, there is a solution. We just need to start with one decision, then more energy will come and when we have more energy we have more hope. When we have more energy we can really make changes in our lives. Yoga is available for this and it really, really works! It is not something New Age, it is Old Age, it comes from a very distant past and it has proven to work for millennia.

Amazingly enough what yoga offers corresponds to the needs of our times.

We are in need of so much healing on all levels.

First we need to heal our bodies; of course we also need to heal our minds but this is such a big topic! When we feel depressed we can go to a specialist, they can give us some encouragement, a little bit of direction, but ultimately the main shift has to come from within.

The mind is a big topic but the body is maybe a little bit easier to tackle, at least at the beginning. **Even if our state of health is low, it is still a bit easier to start with the body, and here is where Hatha Yoga starts.**

THE FOUR PATHS OF YOGA

Just to clear the confusion around the different types of yoga practices, it is important to know that all the new forms of yoga have developed in the last 20 years or so. Actually there is a new type of yoga emerging on the yoga market maybe every week. People are very creative! One of the latest trend is flying yoga or doing yoga with your dog. In some NY studios you can go with your dog and stretch with your dog. There is also yoga and wine-tasting, yoga and chocolate and all sorts of other new trends. I do not want to discourage any of you from trying these practices since some of them may have some good aspects.

However, it is good to know where it is all coming from. One should always go back to the classical Indian scriptures. As you know, yoga comes from India and traditionally there always were 4 main paths of yoga.

In the Bhagavad Gita, one of the main Indian scriptures, we have the description of three of these paths: the Yoga of Wisdom, Jnana Yoga, the Yoga of Selfless

Action, Karma Yoga, and the Yoga of Love, of connecting to the Divine through yoga, Bhakti Yoga.

A system which developed a little later than these three is **Raja Yoga**, the kingly yoga. The first known scripture we have about Raja Yoga dates back to around 200BC. The first well-known master of Raja Yoga was Patanjali who wrote the Yoga Sutras (Aphorisms on Yoga) over 2000; as you read this scripture you can see that he is following an established tradition, although many of the older texts were lost. This yoga is also called **Ashtanga Yoga**.

People get confused since there is a new school of yoga which is also called Ashtanga Yoga and which has not much to do with this since their practice is mainly physical.

The main emphasis of Patanjali, was on how to find mental peace through meditation.

Patanjali is also very clear that, since body and mind are so closely connected, unless you have a very healthy, strong relaxed body, your mind cannot be calmed down. If the body is very uncomfortable, if you have a backache or if you feel you have not digested well, it is very difficult to meditate, the body becomes like a heavy presence.

Patanjali was very clear about this and he says that first one has to practice Hatha Yoga.

HATHA YOGA

According to **Patanjali** in the **Yoga Sutras**, **Hatha Yoga is a preparation for Raja Yoga**. It is a specialisation of Raja Yoga and it puts the emphasis on the practice of Asanas.

Asana means steady pose; the idea of an asana is to put your body in a position that you hold for as long as you can. In some positions you cannot stay for more than a few second while other positions you can hold for a long time; for example you can hold for several minutes both Paschimottanansana, the forward bend, and Sirshasana, the head stand. The idea is to make your body very calm.

The most important thing with asanas is to calm the nervous system.

Flexibility and strength of the body are important, but the strength and calmness of the nervous system are a lot more important. Because of the speed of life, the nervous system is what is mainly challenged nowadays. Hence, it is very important to relax it.

One thing that technology has brought us is the gift and the curse of speed. It is nice when everything happens fast, when we can get all our answers very quickly from the internet. On the other hand, though, this puts so much pressure on the nervous system. When you learn something, two months later it is already out-dated!

Pranayama is also very important. If you read the scriptures you will see that, actually, more importance is given to pranayama than to asanas.

The main treaty on Hatha Yoga is called **Hatha Yoga Pradipika**. It is again a late treaty, there must have been some other scriptures before it, but they were lost. It is very important because it does not talk about strength of the muscles, proper alignment of the spine, all things you hear in yoga classes, it is only talking about finding more energy within yourself and to do this the main help comes from pranayama.

If you find asanas too challenging, at least develop a daily practice of pranayama. That will pay off a lot. Even if you do not practice asanas, do 3 rounds of Kapalabhati and 10 rounds of Anuloma Viloma every day. Pranayama helps a lot both mentally and emotionally.

About 20-30 years ago a lady who suffered from prolonged and heavy depression, came to our Paris centre. She had been under all sorts of medications for 10 years and was not able to live without them. She was willing to get better but although she tried many different things, nothing was working. She came to our Paris centre and after the first yoga class she felt better, so she started coming every day, sometimes she would even take classes twice a day, and at home she would also practice Pranayama, Anuloma Viloma. After about one year she was able to stop the medications; now she is 85 and she is still ok.

What is interesting is that she told us that what helped her the most was pranayama (Anuloma Viloma).

So Hatha Yoga puts the emphasis on Asanas and Pranayama.

According to this scripture, if you practice pranayama in a systematic way not only will you feel better, but you will also be able to awaken an energy potential within us, which we would not even know that it is there.

You have probably heard about the Kundalini energy. Awakenning the Kundalini seems like something very esoteric although it isn't really: this energy is there potentially and it can be awakened with certain practices as well as with the appropriate lifestyle. This is in essence the science of Hatha Yoga.

Of course it is very important to do the asanas properly, of course it is very important to develop strength since nowadays our main problem is weakness, but in our practice of asanas there should be a balance between flexibility, relaxation, and strength. This is the way we have learned it from Swami Vishnudevananda.

Some schools have now decided to put full emphasis on strength only, practicing heavy physical exercises. This is ok, we know that it feels good after a workout at the gym, but it remains on the physical level only.

However, the true purpose of asanas is to develop balance. Actually, if you look at the body of Swami Vishnudevananda when he was young, he was very slim, but at the same time he had a lot of strength. There is something remarkable with the bodies of advanced yogis: they do not look very strong, they do not look like body builders, but they do have such amazing strength, hidden strength: their bodies are very strong and also their immune system is very strong, which is most important for health.

When you have the balance between strength and flexibility and also the aspect of connecting with the energy within, the practice becomes very powerful.

Swami Vishnu used to tell us how nobody really knew the **power of Hatha Yoga; it is much more than doing asanas, it is really touching the source of energy within.**

Everyone would like to have more energy; energy means strength and this is what is mostly lacking. People have lots of creative ideas on what to do with their lives but what is lacking is the inner fire.

We admire people who are passionate about something, who can throw themselves into something creating changes in their lives and in lives of other people, but we think we cannot do it. This is not true. Everybody can do this, we all have that same fire inside, but we need to connect to it and this is the **real purpose of Hatha Yoga: make you strong to prepare you for the next step which is meditation and peace.**

One cannot really be successful in meditation if one is too weak on the physical level and on the energy level.

This is what Hatha Yoga really is, it is the preparation for the next step, Raja Yoga.

If you read the Hatha Yoga Pradipika it may sound a bit esoteric, but you should understand what it is that they are explaining.

The word Ha-Tha is made of two syllables, Ha and Tha. 'Ha' means the heating energy, the heating principle, fire, associated with the sun. 'Tha', means the cooling principle associated with the moon. In us we have these two energies, which by the way correspond to the two aspects of the nervous system.

The sympathetic nervous system is heating, it prepares you for action. The parasympathetic nervous system on the contrary does the opposite, it brings you back to a state of balance, it cools you down.

In the nervous system itself these two aspects are working together constantly. Sometimes one is more active than the other. If there is too much sympathetic activity all the time you get overheated and finally you burn out, literally, because too much fire is constantly being activated.

On the other hand, if you have too much parasympathetic activity and not enough fire, you can become too passive. So you need a balance of these two energies.

THE SUBTLE/ENERGY BODY - SUKSMA SARIRA

The yogis have also understood that what is happening at the physical level is not the ultimate in the human being. There is something else, a hidden level, a hidden body which is not visible to the eyes, but which is actually telling the physical body what to do.

The question is always whether the brain is the real source of me or not. Is the sense of being myself in the brain? We all have this sense but the question is whether it is coming from the brain or not. If you study the brain what you find is only electrical and chemical reactions, this is all that is happening in the brain. There is no difference if I feel love or if I have a sensory perception (seeing a colour), there will be the same chemical reactions, the same transmission of nerve impulses.

So where is consciousness, where is the sense of 'I'? Is it in the brain? Materialistic scientists say yes, although they do not know yet where to find it.

The yogis say that it is not in the brain. There is something happening at a non physical level, in Sanskrit is called Suktma Sarira, which literally means 'subtle body', it means invisible, like a blueprint.

At every moment the subtle body is telling the physical body what to do. At the moment of death they separate; then your physical body no longer knows what to do because there is no one to tell it, it can only dissolve because it is no longer held together by that blue print, the Suktma Sarira, the subtle body.

The science of Hatha Yoga is focussing mainly on this level, indirectly affecting the physical. If you give the right instructions on the subtle level your body will automatically be healthy. **If you take care of the subtle you take care of the gross and not vice versa.**

Yogis always go to the subtle level, but for us it is difficult since our culture is so oriented on the physical and materialistic level and we do not feel the subtle, energy body.

Maybe in a yoga class the teacher tells you to 'feel the flow of prana' and you are lying on your mat thinking 'what is the teacher is talking about?', since the only thing you feel is pain the lower back! What is this flow of prana? Of course if you have pain in your body, you only feel that pain, not the flow of prana.

In order to feel this prana, some more practice of asana and pranayama is required, maybe also a better diet, some more relaxation, then it will come, you will be able to sense this energy. It is not esoteric, you will really feel something like a field of energy.

We can do a little exercise and usually most people feel this.

There is an electromagnetic field in and around our body and it is not actually that difficult to feel: rub your hands quickly, palm against palm, until you feel some warmth. Then close your eyes, put your hands facing each other and visualise that there is a ball of fire between your hands and that you are playing with that ball, you are making it move within the two palms, you let it roll between the two palms. Maybe you feel some magnetism between your hands, some energy field between your palms. Keep breathing with your eyes closed, relax and do not try too hard. Just feel this and let it happen.

Now open your eyes. What you have felt (and it is also ok if you have not felt anything) is what they yogis call prana, it is like magnetic or electrical energy, and even beyond this. This field of energy is all around us and through us.

THE NADIS

This energy field has a very complex network made of what the yogis call Nadis. The word comes from the Sanskrit root 'Nad' which means 'sound', 'flow', 'vibration'. The nadis are vibratory paths in the body.

The Chinese system talks about meridians; nadis are similar to meridians but even subtler. I do not know how many meridians there are, but in the yogic system there are 72.000 of these energy paths in the body. They are not physical, they are just like a vibration and the energy follows that vibration through sound, it is a sound vibration. The energy body is full of sound. Not sounds that you can hear with your ears, like vibrations, you do not hear them. The energy body, suksma sarira, is full of these sound paths. The prana follows these paths, it flows and radiates energy throughout the body.

In Australia, the aboriginal culture was actually a very advanced one; they would find their way in nature by chanting. They would chant along a path leaving the sound vibration behind, as a trail of energy so that other people chanting the same song would be able to find the path. A very advanced 'technology' for which you have to be mentally very clear and completely tuned to sound. It is the same principle that the yogis talk about: there are energy paths in the body. The body is so much more a marvel than we think. Already on the physical level it is an extraordinary marvel, but on the energy level it is even more extraordinary, very, very beautiful. So we have all these nadis and the prana is flowing through them.

THE CHAKRAS

Then there are crossroads where nadis come together and where they originate as well, and these are called chakras. Everyone has probably heard about them although there is a lot of confusion on this subject.

Literally chakra means wheel, a wheel of energy. You can also say that it is a vortex, which is spinning at a very high speed and releasing energy.

There are 7 major chakras along the spine and many more throughout the body as well.

Chakras, where the nadis meet, also produce sound vibrations. And this is why in Hatha Yoga, as well as in the other paths of yoga, many sounds are used for healing or balancing and for calming the mind. This is why we chant mantras like Om, or even more complicated mantras and kirtan. All this is really for the purpose of rebalancing the energy body. Amongst the 72000 of them, you do not really need to know what nadi needs fixing, it would be too complicated for the intellect! You know that something needs fixing when you do not feel very good, when your energy is low and when the body is not in good shape. By chanting Om, everything will be fixed.

Even if the body is healthy these sounds can only make it healthier, there is no harm in using them more often.

The use of sound is another important aspect of Hatha Yoga.

When you do pranayama for instance, students are instructed to focus at the point between the eyebrows and to repeat Om mentally. The vibration of Om is going to the 72000 nadis and it is purifying everything. We do not really know how it works but everything gets cleansed.

ANULOMA VILOMA – NADI SHODHANA, BALANCING HA AND THA

The main practice of pranayama is Anuloma Viloma. In Sanskrit is also known as Nadi Shodhana, which means cleansing of the nadis, purifying the energy paths of the body. When you do this practice regularly something is rebalanced.

The main purpose of Hatha Yoga is balance. Specifically balancing the two main energy currents going to the 72000 nadis, which, we have seen, are called 'Ha' and 'Tha', heating energy and cooling energy.

When we have a lifestyle that is not very healthy, or when our mind is depressed, usually these two energies are out of balance.

The practice of Anuloma Viloma and asanas rebalances these two energy currents.

Ultimately you can go even beyond balance, to the ultimate purpose of Hatha Yoga, which is a very high goal, but you should know that it is there.

There is more to **Hatha Yoga** than feeling a bit better or having more energy; **ultimately it is about releasing the divine potential which is in everyone of us.**

I might think that there is no divine potential in me, maybe in my neighbour, but not in me. This is not true. Everybody has this divine potential and it would be such a shame to leave this planet without even having at least tried to awaken it. Life is not just for the sake of survival. It is so depressing to think that I am only here to survive, to pay my rent at the end of the month, to somehow make it through this life. It is a very depressing thought.

Most people are depressed because they do not have a friend. I do not think this is a cause of depression. The cause of depression is not knowing why we are here, not knowing what the goal of our life is. So we look for friends to have a shoulder to cry on, but then it is two people crying. Of course it is good to have friends, but we do not have to depend on someone that loves us. This is a big illusion of life – nobody loves me so I cannot be happy.

The idea of Yoga is that you have to love yourself and this is a true possibility. If you awaken that potential you realise that it is not about getting anything from the outside world. **It is about manifesting what is inside me and which is waiting for my attention.** Maybe throughout our lives we do not pay attention to this aspect of ourselves since we are all so busy to survive.

We could also decide otherwise and start looking inside.

How free would you become if you did not depend on the outside for your happiness? So free! And if people loved you on top, that would be like the cherry on the cake! But it is still ok if no one is there to tell you that they love you, because

inside there is such a state of balance and peace. It is really beautiful because you become a full being within yourself.

By connecting the masculine and the feminine energy you become whole. It has nothing to do whether you are man or woman, you become whole inside, very balanced and peaceful.

So bringing these two energies together is the ultimate purpose of Hatha Yoga.

THE KUNDALINI

Mainly through certain practices of pranayama, something quite extraordinary happens: a release of that higher level of energy, which the yogis call Kundalini, takes place. There is a complete opening of all the channels, the mind is expanded and we experience real love, which has nothing to do with the love of one person towards another. It is the love for the universe. The universe came from love, it will return to love and this can be experienced within ourselves.

If such a possibility exists then it is really worth trying, instead of being depressed because other people do not love me. There will be no end to this, since there will always be someone that does not like me.

But once we find this strength inside, then there will be such a space of freedom. We might think that this is a high goal and that so many other things need solving before this; but we have to start somewhere!

THE 5 POINTS OF SWAMI VISHNUDEVANANDA

When Swami Vishnu came to the West in 1957, he saw our lifestyle and he thought to himself 'Where to start, how can I help people?', and **he started with Hatha Yoga.**

1. Asanas

He realised that first people should improve their health and increase the level of energy through the practice of asanas. This is how he started and this is also what we should be determined to do.

If our state of health does not allow us to practice asanas as it they were practiced in the past, if our body is weaker, we can make some adjustment. We adjust, but we have to be determined to practice on a regular basis, so that we start feeling stronger. If practiced properly, **Hatha Yoga gives such a feeling of strength:** we have much more stamina in general, but mostly **we have much more resistance to stress.** This is one of the greatest benefits of yoga.

Nowadays stress is so much part of our lives and we cannot remove it. If we have a strong nervous system we do not get so quickly exhausted and when we have to face a challenging situation we do not collapse. This is so precious!

Asanas are the first thing to start practicing and Swami Vishnu felt very strongly about this, he was very much on our back making sure that we would do our asanas every day.

One of his first disciples, who passed away when she was 94, she practiced asanas almost up until she died; at the end she used to do the shoulderstand on her bed and always used to tell us to do our asanas everyday because this was Swami Vishnu's message. Asanas make our body strong and we need this strength for whatever we do in life.

2. Pranayama

Pranayama is even more important than asanas, especially for emotional balance, particularly when we are in a low emotional state. Swami Vishnu used to tell us to practice Anuloma Viloma because by activating the flow of prana in the nadis it would make us feel immediately more optimistic. Before practicing we had no idea what to do, we were just depressed, after 10 rounds of Anuloma Viloma we'd look at our problem again and we would know what to do.

3. Relaxation

The third principle is that of Relaxation, and we will spend a bit more time on this. Relaxation is key to yoga. One of the reasons why we have so little energy is because we waste a lot of it. Just visualise a bucket full of water with big holes at the bottom; you keep filling it but water constantly leaks away. The same thing happens with our energy, we constantly lose energy because of tensions. Emotional tensions, like anger, are the quickest way to lose energy. You can be angry 5 minutes and then it takes the whole day to recover, and you might still feel it the next day. Any tension that we keep in our bodies is like the holes at the bottom of the bucket.

This is why relaxation is essential. What would be the purpose of practicing something that gives us more energy if we are going to waste it anyway because of tension? It makes no sense! No point in filling the bucket without first mending the holes. It would make more sense to relax, to start 'fixing those holes'; only then we can fill the bucket!

The first thing to do is to see where we are losing energy and to do this we have to start to observe our body. Is there tension in my body? Where is it? We may realise that, yes, there is a lot of tension in the solar plexus area, in the neck, the shoulders. Look at your face in the mirror, are there tensions in my face, in my eyes? And you know what to do: you relax to release the tension.

According to the yogis there are three levels of relaxation: 1) the physical relaxation, 2) the mental relaxation and 3) the spiritual relaxation.

If you have to remember just one thing of yoga it is this, because it is the key to the whole thing.

In Swami Vishnu's *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*, there is a whole chapter on relaxation called 'Savasana – the Corpse Pose; and Relaxation'. It is short and very clear and it describes these three levels of relaxation.

- 1) **Physical relaxation.** Swami Vishnu says that first we have to become aware of the tensions because there is no way we can relax if we are not aware of our tensions. When we are in such a habit of being constantly in a state of defensiveness, our body also reflects this: arms are bent, shoulders are slightly forward and our posture becomes almost like an armour, protecting us against a possible enemy. We think it is normal, we are not aware of it, even someone makes a remark. So the first thing is to become aware of this.

In final relaxation we ask you to contract your shoulder and then drop them – you realise that it feels different? If in the day you feel very tense you can actually do exactly this: you can contract where you feel tension and then release and you already feel the difference. Then you mentally give your body a suggestion to relax. We have to learn to do this not only in the yoga class but also during the day. You give your parasympathetic nervous system, the one that relaxes everything, a suggestion of relaxation. For instance, you mentally tell your solar plexus to relax, not like giving a firm order though, you just say it, trusting that the body will know what to do, and it will! You do not need to know the process consciously, your body knows exactly what to do, it is only waiting for a signal from you that now it is ok to relax. Usually this signal does not come because we remain in a state of constant alertness, maybe even when we fall asleep. Sometime when we wake up in the morning we are already tense, nothing has happened yet, but we are already tense. What does it mean? It means that we fell asleep in a state of tension, we did not create some space to clear out our table. As we clear our desk in the evening, in the same way we have to clear our energy body from tension. Watching a heavy movie on TV will not help much. At least 15 minutes before going to bed we have to do something very quiet to prepare for the next day, otherwise you carry the same tension into the next day.

You can also practice autosuggestion during the day, at the office for instance. You tense and relax a few times where you feel tension, then you mentally tell your body to relax, relaxing your shoulder, relaxing the solar plexus, relaxing your neck... you can do this while you type at your computer and no one will notice. You can even take a few minutes off to

do it. This is physical relaxation, and it is the best way to restore your nervous system.

- 2) **Mental relaxation.** What is it? Swami Vishnu says that what is going to induce mental relaxation is breathing, rhythmical breathing. There is something really magical about breathing. The first reflex that one has to develop when there is tension, instead of rushing to the coffee machine or to any other stimulants, is to go back to one's breath.

I had this experience once with Swami Vishnudevananda when I was at our ashram in Canada. I was in charge of the correspondence and spent most of my time in the office. Swami Vishnu would come, not every day but quite often, to find out what the news were, and I would read the correspondence to him. One day, I must have been a little tense, I do not remember exactly why, it was towards the end of his life after he had a stroke and was not in good health. Someone had to wheel him out of the office, but he asked to come back in, looked at me straight in the eyes and just told me: 'Breathe!!!'. Just this, and I still remember it after 30 years! All of a sudden I realised what it meant.

We think that we are breathing deeply but most of the time we are not. Breathing deeply means that your breath has to go down, not up to your shoulders, you must feel that you are breathing almost down to your feet. Ayurveda says this: 'Breathe into your feet'. Breathe the energy really down into the body and exhale up. Let the diaphragm go down, pushing into the abdominal cavity. This has a very relaxing effect because it is massaging everything, especially the solar plexus.

We actually have two brains: one is in the skull and the second one is in the solar plexus. It has 500 million neurons, almost like the brain in the skull, and it is connected to all the internal organs. It is an instinctive brain and it is very important because it reacts to situations even before the 'upper' brain. In a way it is an emotional brain. For example when you feel the impact of a situation in your body, first you feel it at the solar plexus; this is why the tension first comes in this area, this is why the digestion is affected and when you have digestive problems you have opened the door to all other sorts of problems. We know more and more that when the colon does not function properly nothing functions properly and it is only a question of time before we get seriously sick. It all starts by not relaxing this second brain (the solar plexus). So breathing deeply is very important to relax our emotional brain.

- 3) **Spiritual relaxation.** Finally the third level of relaxation called spiritual relaxation. What is it really? If I have relaxed my body, and my mind is calm,

is there more to relax? According to yogis, yes there is something more to relax. **We need to relax the sense of who we are.** Normally I am very convinced that I am the body, I identify with this body. The good news from the yogis is that we are much more than this physical body, much more than the energy body we mentioned earlier, we are really so expanded that we cannot even imagine it. We are this pure consciousness, which is using the energy and the physical body, and it is ever free and ever peaceful and ever loving. All this sounds good, but can it be true? When you are lying down in final relaxation, as you relax more and more on the physical and the mental level, you feel you can let go of the body, you let it be on the floor and let the floor support it. You also let go of your thoughts and then, if some time we allow it (not an effort or a technique), there is a deep sensation of peace that goes beyond all understanding. When you are in that peace, even if the whole world collapsed, it would not matter because that peace is so deep, beyond anything physical. This is spiritual relaxation. If we touch this, we feel so secure because we know that there is a place within ourselves where we can always go back. Even if there are a lot of challenging situations in my life, on all levels, I know that there is like a refuge where I can be ok. Isn't it precious to have this? Otherwise where would we go? What would we do? When you know that this place of peace exists within you, you feel much more secure and much stronger.

So this is the essence of relaxation. Swami Vishnu taught us to combine the relaxation with the asanas and the pranayama.

4. Diet

Diet is also very important but it is not the topic for today so I will not mention it.

5. Raja Yoga

This leads us finally to Raja Yoga, as we said in the beginning **Hatha Yoga leads to Raja Yoga, which is meditation.** Now we are really interested to go deeper, not only being concerned with survival but wanting to know 'Who I am'. I want to find this deep sense of peace and purpose and that comes through the practice of meditation and positive thinking.

This is the last of the 5 points that Swami Vishnu taught us.

You can see that this is a whole programme! Maybe we cannot put everything into practice right away, but whatever little practice we do will pay off, it will give results. A little bit of relaxation, a little bit of asanas, a little bit of pranayama, even just a few rounds of Anuloma Viloma will bring very positive results. The main thing is to do it regularly, make this firm decision. Results will

come and at some point you will realise that you will really want to go deeper in this. You can come to an ashram for a vacation or to the Teacher Training Course for 4 weeks and bathe into this from morning to evening and then you can really change things on a deeper level giving a push to your life, bringing more positivity. It will be the beginning of a new development. You will realise that it is not between me and the world but it is between me and me. You will reconnect with yourself on a deeper level.

Om Tat Sat