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Yoga for Public School Teachers

Background

Throughout the latter '70s my wife and I taught yoga under Swami Sivalingam, along with others of his experienced students, and managed much of the practical operation of the Prana Yoga Ashram, which he had founded with our help as a nonprofit corporation based in Berkeley and having branches in other towns and countries. (*Prana* is the vital force, associated with the breath, and *pranayama* is breath-control practice.) The teaching and managing—the service—are an important part of studying under a spiritual master. Besides such valuable experience, this article reflects, above all, direct acquaintance with Swami Sivalingam and the benefits of his teachings. To him it is dedicated. The more schools could teach what we privileged ones learned from Swamiji, the better they would fulfill the real purposes of all learning.

With another educator working under Swamiji, I started teaching extension courses around the Bay Area in yoga just for teachers. To regular class time we added another half hour to talk about how we might apply yoga to our classroom and our teaching life. (One sign of the times was that school districts quit allowing credits to teachers who took these courses.) Much of this article is based on what I learned from teaching this course.

Part of the operation founded by Swamiji was publication of a journal called *Prana Yoga Life,* which published this article in its first issue, Fall, 1977 (Prana Yoga Ashram, Box 1037, Berkeley, CA 94701).

Yoga can help teachers in four main ways that are independent of particular subject matter or age of students.

Self-Development of Teacher

The first way is by improving the personal capacity of the teacher. Staff development is self-development. Yoga practices—meditation, postures, and breathing exercises—relax, integrate, refine, and liberate the practitioner. The emphasis of prana yoga on breathing intensifies these practices. Through them a teacher gains, for one thing, some survival techniques to preserve sanity and serenity. Yoga affords also a spiritual

perspective. Preserving the deeper self intact within a spiritual perspective allows the teacher to do new things with his mind and body and to discover how to help children do the same. Liberate yourself, then you can liberate others—from the artificial limits that biological and human conditioning place on the divine potentialities of the spirit, which is by definition limitless.

Teachers who practice yoga increase their energy, expand the range of their physical dexterity, stay steadier through classroom trials, think of more creative teaching ideas, get more insights about their students, deal more effectively with colleagues and administrators, enjoy their work more, and radiate a positive, heartening atmosphere for their students. The evidence for this comes from testimonials made by teachers in classes given by the Prana Yoga Ashram especially for educators.

People in the so-called helping professions have to help themselves if they are truly to serve others. We have to clear up our own physical ailments and mental problems. Otherwise we drain, instead of aid, students. We must feel good on our own. For several thousand years before the advent of psychiatry, yoga stressed knowing oneself, what we call today "consciousness-raising." Real learning starts at home. A good teacher should be self-aware and self-governing. If we have learned how to learn, we can transmit this capacity to those in our charge.

Putting Oneself in the Place of the Learner

Practicing yoga entails learning new things. This puts the teacher in the position of his students. Yoga's special emphasis on self-awareness enables a teacher to make use of his own new learning experiences to get insight about what is going on in his students as they attempt what he proposes.

Learning to control the breath can challenge the ego, raise issues of will, and draw on unused resources the same as learning to read and write. Getting into a new posture can stretch one over into a triumphant state of increased power the same as solving a hard math problem. Sticking to a daily discipline raises the same problems of procrastination and motivation as doing home work or following through on a course project. What do we feel, what do we do, when we can't accomplish the task as described or demonstrated? Do we give up, compare with others, put off, manage a compromise, accept the failing, ask for help, get angry, etc.? With what other aspects of our lives do the ups and downs of our practices seem to correlate? What seems to determine success and failure, good or bad feelings?

Practical teaching strategies can come out of this personal insight. We get a sense of what works and what doesn't, what student behavior means, what different students need for success. Above all, we learn how

success depends on spotting negative thinking and converting it to positive. This is the key to learning. If we can become alert to how our own learning efforts relate continually to habits of mind, attitudes and turns of thought, we will understand what our students are doing wrong and how to set them right.

Relaying Yoga Practices to Students

Allowing for differences in stages of growth, we can teach to our students the same practices we learn ourselves. What is self-development for the teacher is basic education for youth—how to relax, focus, integrate, and refine. Children can learn some forms of meditation, breath control, and postures.

Yoga lays a base for all learning because it teaches control of mind and body. Without relaxing and concentrating, for example, no one can learn well either academic subjects or sports and artistic skills. The learner has to relax and let go useless motion so he can conserve and channel energy. He must concentrate his attention so he can focus selectively on some activity or subject. He must center himself so he can line his will up behind the activity (be "motivated"). He must balance and integrate himself so he can summon all his resources and can experience the learning activity throughout his whole organism. So learning requires a holistic state of full access to memory and feeling, to all sensory modalities, to both halves of the brain (intellectual and intuitive), to head and heart, mind and body. This enables the learner to draw on the past and to store for the future. "Yoga" means "union," after all, and it has stressed for millenia what is only now creeping into U.S. education—full, integrative functioning.

The body is a model for subtler planes of life. What one learns through the body transfers to mental, emotional, and spiritual levels of existence. Balance the body, steady the emotions. Stretch into a posture hitherto impossible, open up hope for willing other changes in behavior. Sensitize kinesthetic awareness, discriminate finer degrees of perception and thought. Isolate muscles, zero in on an idea. Because it is obvious and grossly perceptible, the body makes a good medium in which to work simultaneously on higher levels. Children intuitively understand the body as a metaphor for their invisible, intangible life of thought, feeling, and spirit. They master matter first through gaining control of their own bodies. This level of self-control implies for them the possibility of regulating all the aspects of their life—mood, health, social relations, state of consciousness—and hence of achieving happiness. Success with bodily skills sets off a chain reaction of power. Thus children learn the basic lesson of mastering matter by mind.

Applying Yogic Learning Strategies

Veteran teachers will recognize a practical shrewdness in yogic learning strategies once they perceive certain general principles emerging from the practices. We can generalize a few here as instances that with a little imagination can be applied to any sort of learning at any age.

The less you rely on other people and other things, the more you learn. One strategy can be stated this way, as a matter of self-reliance or independence. To the extent you depend on others, Swamiji says, you remain stupid and incompetent. Dependence and knowledge are in a direct inverse relation. The overprotective mother and the "chivalrous," sexist gentleman enslave the child or woman they purport to serve. This strategy is naturally nonsexist. Swamiji is a far better cook and shopper than most housewives, and he insists that women disciples master machines and finances. Endurance and skills belong to all.

Such an approach to learning implies great change in American classrooms, which tend to infantilize students and to prolong the dependence already protracted by most parents. Letting children work out things for themselves interferes with the standardized, technocratic systems of management currently in vogue in institutions today. Television induces a crippling passivity. Adults themselves depend so much on technology and complex social organization that when shortages of energy, water, or food occur, or when delivery systems, transportation, communication, and manufactured products fail, they cannot care for themselves. We have a product or specialist for every need or desire, from stimulating pleasure to relieving pain. Unable to control our own minds and bodies we depend on someone or something outside. By contrast, yogis learn to regulate their own temperature or temperature tolerance instead of using outside energy to cool and heat their whole surroundings. Instead of taking vitamins, hormones, drugs, and other external chemicals, yogis tune their endocrine system so that it produces these things itself. (Postures are a kind of self-massage that increases, decreases, and balances glandular secretions.)

Most often, outsiders do not understand how much the austerity of yoga serves this learning strategy. Doing without things and other people forces the yogi to learn more. Special trials build knowledge and power. Most teachers and parents in our culture today do far too much for youngsters—so much that children grow up relatively helpless and feeling powerless. Instead of putting activity directions in writing, for example, so that students will have to read (on posters or activity cards) most teachers give directions orally. An education for real self-reliance will require schoolroom methodology based on tough independence—that is, on peer collaboration in small working parties and on true individualization of the open classroom sort whereby youngsters learn to do for themselves, make decisions, initiate projects, and use adults only as periodic aides to finding ways and means.

This independence, fostered early, works well only if school learning tasks have obvious real-life value. This realism will become increasingly easy to bring into schools as technology continues to pull back in the face of energy shortages and economic crises and as such social systems as medical and health care continue to degenerate. Doing for oneself is rapidly shifting from an aristocratic philosophy, as it may have been in Ralph Waldo Emerson's time, to a stark matter of survival.

Another yogic learning strategy is to suspend some normal part of one's life to see what difference the loss makes. Fasting teaches what food really is, what one's relation to food is, what oneself is. The learner gains knowledge of subject and object by means of each other. Holding the breath teaches not only a lot about breath but about oneself. Like Christian monastics, yogis sometimes suspend speech (a practice called *mouna*). A fine way to learn the role of language in our lives is to do without it for a while. This suspension is the main rule of charades; limited to gesture, one fairly bursts to speak. Other folk games are in fact based on this strategy of withholding a familiar condition. Consider, for example, blindfolding games like Pin the Tail on the Donkey. Periodic solitude reveals one's social nature and interdependence. The meditator suspends inner speech, that is, the whole culturally acquired filter system of conceptualization/verbalization.

Suspending a familiar condition constitutes only a special case of playing with variables to see what happens. Children enjoy playing around this way with normality (which explains their love of novelty). This is the essential play of science. Experimental research consists of setting up unusual circumstances to see what happens. The aim is to understand better what is normally happening. Yogis are naturally scientific in this regard. Swamiji constantly urges his disciples to alter their routines and to do things differently from time to time. The spirit is playful, as with a child, but the aim is to keep learning all the time.

Sometimes this yogic playing with variables focuses the learner on fine contrasts, as in slight variations of a posture. Doing the cobra with elbows straight instead of bent, or the plow with one leg straight at a time (in half-lotus), amounts to systematically "controlling" for one variable at a time. What difference does each variation make in breathing, in organs affected, in balance, etc? The yogi may work with extreme contrast, as when he does the "trembling pose," deliberately tensing his body to the point of shuddering then completely relaxing. So we learn relaxation! Nuanced discriminations, on the other hand, subtilize the organism, creating a spiritual movement, like the shifting progression of sounds in the words and tunes of the God-songs called bhajans, where sometimes the words are held constant while the tunes change, and sometimes both keep varying in ways to tease attention. Playing the variables—suspending or altering—makes one attend and attune and gradually refine. This is the real alchemy. Child development as charted by Western scientists pro-

gresses from lumping to discriminating thence to simultaneous perception of similarity and difference, unity and multiplicity—as in mandalas. Moreover, suspending a normal condition gradually de-conditions—that is, liberates—the learner from his cage of physical and social incarnation.

The main yogic learning strategy is to assume ever and always the primacy of mind over matter. You become what you think, Swamiji insists, so it is critical to think positively and to quickly nip off negative thinking as soon as it starts to crop up. The "bad self-concept" of our educational circles is only one case. Yogic training constantly alerts the learner to the myriad subtle ways in which negative thinking insinuates itself into our behavior. If the mind rules, then life consists of endless possibility. Controlling the mind becomes extremely important. To control the mind, the self must assert the will. Concretely, the strategy is to remind the learner constantly of the power of the mind for good or evil and to help him affirm the will by leading him into challenging action that will temper it. He is told tales of "supernatural" power as truth, and given increasingly difficult tasks that imply limitless power. At the same time, all the practices combine to put him in touch with the transpersonal part of himself, the divinity within, that will in fact enable him to make this truth true.

Practice and study of yoga suggest an educational future founded on a curriculum of rhythm, on different vibration rates or frequencies. It would encompass arts, sports, and crafts as well as language, mathematics, and physics. Everything in this life comes down to pulsation and periodicity, ratio and rhythm, staying and changing. In such a curriculum the learner would ascend from grosser to subtler frequencies in various spectra, progress from simpler to more complex rhythms and measures. But that is an idea for another time.