

The Elusive Breath: Soham

The Yogic path for Healing and Enlightenment

Part – 1

In our perceptions and understanding, something always eludes us. Are we always conscious when we breathe that we are taking in oxygen and exhaling toxics? Even we who know the science seem to be unaware of this hidden truth almost every time we breathe. What to speak of the majority of humans who do not know it! Even in our scientific understanding something eludes us. The greatest mystery, what we are and why we are here, always seems to escape us.

In our pursuits of our dreams, in our craving for pleasures, in our seeking after the ideals that we hold so dear to our heart, even in our pursuit of the “Highest” what we call philosophy and religion we are oftentimes led by opinions; there also the truth seems to elude our understanding. Shall we relinquish all our pursuits in favor of our “seeking” for the “elusive truth”? We need not. But we have to prioritize our pursuits and discard, when and where the need arises, them that are hostile to our “seeking”.

But is this seeking difficult? The answer may be positive or negative depending on our circumstances, our perception and the manner we seek to know and to be. However the truth is very plain and the method is quite easy. Difficulties creep into it when we try to seek it through our sciences, philosophies and religions. Even here we need not discard all our scientific, philosophic and religious pursuits. We only have to appropriate them. We need stop philosophizing, scientificizing (coined word) and religionizing (coined) the seeking. Though these three, by themselves, are not antagonistic to our seeking, we are really responsible for their disorientation. The paths of seeking after the truth are various and infinite. There is actually no path or it can be termed as a “pathless path”, which is the same as innumerable paths.

Breathing is a path. Understanding breathing, the truth of life and controlling it is a very simple method of seeking. Understanding is more important for ascending higher levels of consciousness, while “controlling” in an easy and spontaneous manner, comes on through the practice of pranayama or by itself through deeper absorption. The yogis prescribe different methods of controlling the breath which may or may not lead to enlightenment depending on the way we practice them. They also involve risks if not properly practiced. But the technique of “Breathing in Awareness” of “Soham” “I am That” is a very prolific path, prescribed by the ancient yogis, which can be followed by the beginners as well by the most advanced seekers. For the beginners it is a method of seeking; for the enlightened it is a truth more real even than the world we perceive.

Vijnanabhairava, a great work on Tantric yoga and wisdom (It is to be noted that in the highest level there is no contradiction between the Vedantic and the Tantric methods.) describes it in a very cryptic manner- “The breath is exhaled with the sound ‘sa’, and is inhaled with ‘ham’. Thus the individual (soul) recites the mantra ‘hamsa’ ‘hamsa’ always. All through the day and the night, he (the individual self) recites this 21600 times. This is the japa (recitation) of the Goddess as it is mentioned, which is quite easy though difficult for the ignorant to accomplish”. The syllable ‘sa’ means ‘That’ in Sanskrit. The syllable ‘ham’ when construed with the grammatical rules becomes ‘aham’ meaning ‘I am’. Thus it implies the meaning “That I am” or “I am That”.

The word “soham” is the combination of two words “sa” and “aham”. When in extreme proximity the syllables ‘a’ and ‘a’ in the end and beginning of them fuse to become ‘o’, thus giving rise to the sound “soham” which means “That I am”. When ‘s’ and ‘h’ sounds are dropped, it becomes ‘om’, the primordial sound of creation. This “soham” is said to be the greatest mantra which expresses the oneness of the individual and the Supreme Reality. Breathing is thus the combination of the life-vibration and the highest knowledge, the knowledge of oneness of the individual and the Cosmic. The beauty of this mystic formula in Sanskrit lies in the fact that it is so much nearer, not only in meaning but also in its vibration, to the original cosmic rhythm that expresses itself in the form of breath in the individual. So its recitation is only prescribed in the same sound pattern as it is given in Sanskrit, namely, as “soham”.

This recitation is known as “ajapa” the “unrecited” mantra, as it is recited without any effort. It is the effortless method of Self-realization. Breathing is spontaneous; it is the work of the automatic nerve system controlled by the medulla from the physiological point of view. But seen from a higher dimension, from the standpoint of the yogis, it is the work of “prana”, the cosmic principle of life expressing itself as breath in the individual. Its importance not only lies in its indispensability for living, it is also the link that unites us with the Cosmic. Unknown in its real nature it binds us to the body just as an animal, but properly understood it unites us with the Divine which is our true nature and destination. Becoming aware of the process with its inner meaning is the yoga of “breathing with awareness”. What pranayama means is not the mere retention of breath; it is the expansion of our consciousness with the all-pervading prana, consuming the whole body, the environment and even the entire universe.

Why is it said to be the recitation of the Goddess, the Mother of the universe? The Ultimate Reality, what we conceive as Divine in our religious mode of understanding, is neither male nor female. It is neither human nor non-human. But in our human context, we perceive it as God or Goddess till we discover it as our own reality. In the Tantric parlance, the Divine in its static and unmodified nature is conceived as the Male and in the dynamic aspect as the Female. According to the yogis, the dynamic Cosmic Principle is lying dormant as Kundalini in the individuals, which makes the cosmic sound vibrate through their body, both the subtle and the gross. This is what expresses as 'prana' in the subtle level and as 'breath' in the gross level. Thus the force which is breath and prana in different levels is the same as the dynamic consciousness known as Kundalini. The recitation of the 'unrecited' is, therefore, called the recitation of the Goddess.

Part – 2

We have already seen that the sound produced through breathing seen from the gross standpoint is the combination of ‘sss...’ and ‘hhh...’ which conjoined with the vowel-endings give rise to the spontaneous mantra ‘So’ham” expressing the highest spiritual realization, the individual’s identity with the ‘Universal’. A mantra is a word, a letter or a combination of letters that has some spiritual potency which may be produced with conscious efforts or without them.

Through words we enter the realm of ideas and through ideas we enter the realm of the ‘reals’. Since ‘reality’ is itself indefinable in our empirical level of existence, our perception of reality is totally dependent on our words and ideas we are predisposed with. Our words and ideas, in the ordinary level, are somehow or other conditioned to a certain frame-work of perception which we cannot escape. Thus, in the ordinary human predicaments, we are just like slaves to our words, our ideas, our mental capacities, our empirical and rational belief-systems.

When sounds or words are freed from these limitations they become ‘mantra’. In the mantric level the ‘word’ escapes the limitations of the empirical and rational frameworks and enters new dimensions of realities giving rise to higher and subtler perceptions. The more a word attains freedom from the limitations, the more it acquires the status of the mantra till it becomes totally free. Thus, the spontaneous expression of a mantra is the sign of its freedom and, as such, nothing can be more spontaneous than “so’ham’ the mantra of breath. (For understanding the nature of “mantra”, see my article “The Heart of the Mantra” in this site.)

The importance of rhythmic and deep breathing from the physiological and psychotherapeutic view is now well understood. Deep inhaling gives rise to sufficient intake of oxygen which is not possible in our ordinary manner of breathing. Retaining the breath for a little facilitates its better absorption by the cells and its complete exhaling exhausts maximum carbon dioxide and other organic wastes. Yogic breathing improves circulatory, respiratory, digestive and nervous systems. It lessens heart beat rates, blood pressure and stress. It relaxes and rejuvenates the entire nervous system and cures the psychosomatic disorders. A balanced life with moderate practice of yogic postures and pranayam with a combination of right food habit and herbal medicines can work wonder to cure all the physical ills of man; it

only needs a change in one's attitude and life style. Right breathing gives rise to right living.

However, the mystery of breathing not only lies in its physical dimension; its control is not only intended for a healthy living; its elusiveness lies in its mantric level, being the expression of "soham". The expulsion giving rise to the sound 'so' (which means 'that' or the 'cosmic' in Sanskrit) and the inhalation giving rise to the sound 'ham' (which means 'I' or the individual) combined, imply the oneness of the 'cosmic' and the 'individual', which is 'lost sight of' in the ordinary states of living making him bound to the body. The mystery of the throb of life, the irresistible breath remains hidden not in the body, but in that which causes the body to encase the soul. It is the 'cosmic throb' that expresses itself as the 'individual throb' which is alone to be understood by any yogic practice. "This is that power of Siva, the form of cosmic activity, existing in the bound individual, which causes his bondage when unknown, leads him to success (liberation) as the way of approach to his essential reality on being realized." (Spandakarika, Verses on Divine Pulsation)

The space between the breathing in and breathing out is the mysterious split, the abyss of the reality which lasts only for some forgetful moments. By retaining the breath we expand the gap so that its mystery is reflected in our consciousness. The more we remain in that silent still the greater we become aware of our true nature. The great yogis can remain there for hours; however, we remain only for some minutes. Though the Hatha yoga system gives importance on its voluntary practice, the higher systems of yoga hint at its spontaneous occurrence. It is natural that the more one becomes concentrated the shorter he breathes. Our real nature manifests when the vagaries of the body, the senses and the mind are conquered. In yogic science, the mind is as much external as the body. When we forget the body, the mind and the senses, there only we realize our true nature. It happens only when the breath is almost lost and forgotten. There alone the 'so' and 'aham' become one.

Our situation is replete with difficulties. We do not know why at all we are brought into the world. We either suffer from poverty or from affluence. Knowledge, as much as ignorance, has become a burden for us. We need transcend this duality and seek our reality. For a higher life, we have to correct our vision, reset our relationships, reorganize our wants, examine our potentialities, and fix our priorities. We need some time everyday when, withdrawn, we remain within our own self. Simply by becoming aware of or by looking at the breath, we experience a stillness which reminds us of our forgotten nature. Then we can have a humble start for our eternal journey with our familiar 'breath', which every moment hums the rhyme of oneness of the cosmic and the individual.

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