

The Seven Planes of Prajñā

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Brahman is Satchidananda-existence, knowledge, and bliss absolute-eternal, unchanging, without beginning or end, the plenitude of knowledge, devoid of all activity, transcending all objective categories. Through its omnipotence, Shakti, it willed its own objective manifestation. The indivisible ocean of consciousness was thrown into waves. Though every wave is part of the ocean, yet each is seen as a separate independent entity. In like manner, the individual soul, jiva-a wave in the limitless ocean of non-dual Satchidananda-conceives itself as independent out of ignorance, *ajñāna* or *avidyā*, becomes confined to the limited sphere of knowledge, and is overcome by egotism. Release from this *avidyā* alone can bring fulfilment in life. Only then is the jiva able to transcend the cycle of birth and death by being established in its own true Self. The Indian spiritual tradition has detailed different spiritual practices or sadhanas for practitioners of diverse temperaments to be established in the Self. We shall be taking a very brief look at the process of reaching the farthest reaches of insight, *prajñā*, as described by Maharshi Patanjali.

Ayurveda conceives the practice of the art of healing in terms of disease, its cause, health, and the means to health. The system of yoga, which aims at elimination of existential ills, also outlines its method under four heads: *heya*, the ill that has to be eliminated? *heya-hetu*, the cause of the ill? *hāna*, freedom from the ill? and *hānopāya*, the means to this freedom. Existence, characterized by sorrow, is itself the ill.¹ The union between the Purusha, the seer, and the mind or intellect, *buddhi*, the seen, is the cause of the ill.² Permanent elimination of this attachment or 'wrong identification' is freedom,³ and *viveka-khyāti*, discriminative knowledge devoid of all falsity, is the means to this freedom.⁴

That all worldly objects are sources of pain is a central dictum in yoga. Even apparently pleasurable objects lead to painful consequences. The identification of the Purusha with the mind is the source of the three kind of sorrows: *ādhyātmika*, physical and psychological? *ādhibhautika*, caused by other beings? and *ādhidāivika*, the natural calamities. Though eternally pure and unattached, the Purusha identifies itself with the mind or *buddhi* due to *ajñāna*. Just as a loving mother actually starts feeling the pain of her sick child and even thinks of herself a ill due to her attachment to the child, the Purusha too considers itself afflicted by the ills of the mind. So the sadhaka has to break this identification of the seer with the seen. The identification is the result of a lack of discrimination between the true identities of the seer and

the seen. Hence the sadhaka has to cultivate discriminative knowledge, *viveka-khyāti*, about the seer and the seen through the practice of the eight-limbed yoga. When this *viveka-khyāti* remains unimpeded by nescience or false knowledge the jiva attains *prajñā*, discriminative insight.

In his *Yoga Sutra* Maharshi Patanjali mentions several levels of *prajñā*, the ultimate discriminative insight derived from *viveka-khyāti*: '*Tasya saptadhā prānta-bhūmiḥ prajñā?* to that person come seven forms of discriminative insight' (2.27).

The first plane of *prajñā* marks the ultimacy of the sadhaka's knowledge. Earlier, the sadhaka had something to know about the ills that he or she was trying to forsake. Now that need is extinguished. In the next stage the renunciant is established in the conviction that nothing further remains to be renounced. On reaching the third plane the sadhaka realizes that he or she has successfully accessed all the means to this detachment? nothing more remains to be acquired. When on the fourth plane, the sadhaka is convinced that having attained *vivekakhyāti* through *samprajñāta samādhi* he or she has reached the culmination of the practices for liberation and that nothing more remains to be done.

These four forms of *prajñā* constitute *kāryavimukti*, liberation from action. They involve active practice. The next three planes involve dissolution of the *citta*, mindstuff, and together constitute *cittavimukti*. As the yogi remains established in *paravairāgya*, supreme renunciation, these three planes of *prajñā* unfold of their own accord.

The fifth form of *prajñā* brings with it the realization that the mind, having fulfilled its function, has become quiescent, and that sorrows born of *vāsanās*, desires and impulses, have come to an end. With the advent of the sixth discriminative insight the mindstuff, derived from the three *guṇas*, starts disintegrating irreversibly: 'like boulders dislodged from the top of a hill, the mind, along with its constituents, rushes unstopably into dissolution- merger in its cause, Prakriti'. On the final plane the Purusha is restored to its own pristine state, devoid of all contact with the mind and its functions which have now undergone total dissolution.

The first plane marks the end of all *jijñāsā*, desire for knowing? the second of *jihāsā*, desire for giving up? the third of *prepsā*, wish to obtain? and the fourth of *cikīrṣā*, wish to do. The next three planes are characterized by the successive elimination of *duḥkha*, *bhaya*, and *vikalpa-sorrow*, fear, and finally all mental modifications.

In the Vedantic text *Yogavasishtha*, the sage Vasishtha also speaks of seven stages of yoga:

*Jñāna-bhūmiḥ śubhecchākhyā
prathamā samudāhṛtā·
Vicāraṇā dvitīyā syāt
tṛtīyā tanumānasā.
Sattvāpattis-caturthī syāttato'samsakti-nāmikā·
Padārthābhāvinī ṣaṣṭhī
saptamī turyagā smṛtā.*

The first stage of knowledge is called 'goodwill', the second is termed 'discrimination', and the third 'attenuated mind'. The fourth stage is 'self realization', the fifth is named 'detachment', the sixth 'objectless', and the seventh the 'transcendent' .5

Renunciation of worldly attachments and activities through discrimination and cultivation of traits like restraint of the senses and the mind, abstinence from sensual thought, forbearance, faith, and meditation out of an intense desire for liberation constitute the first plane, Shubheccha. Formally approaching a guru and undertaking study of and reflection on Vedantic dicta under his or her guidance is the second stage, Vicharana. The mental capacity to apprehend subtle spiritual truths, developed through practice of contemplation on Vedantic truths, *nididhyāsana*, marks the third plane, Tanumanasa. The fourth plane, Sattvapatti, is characterized by the non-dual realization of the oneness of Atman and Brahman, resulting from *śravaṇa-instruction* on Vedantic *mahāvākyas*, comprehensive unitary statements, by a competent teacher. When the mind practicing *nirodha*, restraint, moves beyond objective or *savikalpaka* samadhi to *nirvikalpaka samadhi*, an objectless state, then it is said to have reached the fifth plane, termed Asamsakti. The permanent and steady establishment in this state born of sustained effort on the previous planes is termed Padarthabhavini, the sixth plane. When the yogi is so established in Brahman, so soaked in the bliss of samadhi as never to return to a lower plane, either of one's own accord or through others' efforts, then that yogi is on the ultimate plane, Turyaga.

The fourth plane signals Self-realization, the first three being means to it. The last three planes are but different states of *jīvanmukti*, freedom while living:

*Caturthī-bhūmikā jñānaṁ
tisraḥ syuḥ sādhanam purā?
Jīvanmukter-avasthāstu
parās-tisraḥ prakīrtitāḥ.*

Yogis happening to die while on any of the first three planes would have to be born again. They are not liberated because they are yet to attain jnana, though they have renounced karma. It is only those who are on the fourth or higher planes that are assured of *videha-kaivalya*, liberation from future embodiment.

The Bhagavata has this to say about the external behavior of the *jīvanmukta* yogi:

*Dehaṁ ca naśvaram-avasthitam-utthitaṁ vā
siddho na paśyati yato'dhyagamat svarūpam?
Daivādapetaṁ-uta daiva-vaśād-upetaṁ
vāso yathā parikṛtaṁ madirā-madāndhaḥ.*

This person of realization is not aware of the body that was an aid to realization-unconcerned if it remains by virtue of *prārabdha*, past actions that have started fruiting-just as a person inebriated with wine is unaware if his cloth is still on.6

*Deho'api daiva-vaśagaḥ khalu karma yāvat
svārambhakam pratisamīkṣata eva sāsuh?
Tam saprapañcam-adhirūḍha-samādhi-yogaḥ
svāpnam punar-na bhajate pratibuddha-vastuḥ.*

As long as the *prārabdha* karma that lead to the present embodiment lasts, the body (of the yogi of realization) will remain, together with the *prāṇas*, but the knowing one, who has attained the state of samadhi and realized the Truth, is no more attached to the body and its appurtenances, viewing them as (equivalent to) dream objects (11.13.37).

About the liberated person who has transcended all desires, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* says: '*Tad-yathāhinirivayanī valmīke mṛtā pratyastā śayīta evam-avedam śarīram śete athāyam-āśārīro'mṛtaḥ prāṇo brahmaiva teja eva?* just as the lifeless slough of a snake is cast off and lies in the anthill, so does this body lie-then the self becomes disembodied and immortal, (becomes) the Prana (Supreme Self), Brahman, the Light. ' 7 In his commentary on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* Swami Vivekananda has described this state thus: ' The Yogi (having reached this state) will become peaceful and calm, never to feel any more pain, never to be again deluded, never to be touched by misery. He will know he is ever blessed, ever perfect, almighty.'



References

1. '*Heyam duḥkham-anāgatam?* *Yoga Sutra*, 2.16.
2. '*Draṣṭṛ-dṛśyayoḥ samyogo heya-hetuḥ* (2.17).
3. '*Tad-abhāvāt samyogābhāvo hānam tad-dṛṣeḥ kaivalyam* (2.25).
4. '*Viveka-khyātir-aviplavā hānopāyaḥ* (2.26).
5. *Laghu-yoga-vasishtha*, 13.113-14.
6. *Bhagavata*, 11.13.36.
7. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 4.4.7.
8. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989? 9, 1997), 1.259.
