

Socrates and Svadhyaya

II.44 Self-study leads towards the realization of God or communion with one's desired deity.

The Ancient Greeks believed Delphi was the center of the universe. They constructed an elaborate temple complex, dedicated to the sun god Apollo, on this sacred site. People would travel from all over the ancient world to ask advice of the Oracle who resided there. As supplicants would approach the temple, they would see a cryptic injunction carved above the door, "Know Thyself." Why might the keepers of the temple offer this advice to a spiritual seeker intent on receiving insight from God? One particular sadhaka, Socrates, took this advice to heart. On trial for his life, he told his fellow Athenian citizens that "the unexamined life is not worth living." He said he would rather be put to death than give up his philosophical quest for self-knowledge and that nothing is more important than understanding the nature of the soul. He fervently believed that this inner quest would lead him to communion with God.

In our contemporary culture, which is deeply informed by the Judeo-Christian tradition, we often think of human beings and God as radically distinct. We are likely to ask Socrates and the Delphi oracle the same question: What does self-knowledge have to do with knowledge of God? Happily, as Iyengar Yoga practitioners, we are also part of another cultural tradition, a tradition that offers a very different perspective on the ultimate relationship between self and God.

In the second Pada of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, three sutras deal with svadhyaya, or self-study, directly. Patanjali begins this pada on sadhana by defining the acts of yoga. He writes, "Burning zeal in practice (tapas), self-study and study of scriptures (svadhyaya), and surrender to God (Isvara pranidhanani) are the acts of yoga" (II, 1). He also lists svadhyaya as one of the five niyamas (II, 32) and later defines svadhyaya specifically; "Self-study leads towards the realization of God or communion with one's desired deity" (II.44).

These three sutras give us three important clues to understanding svadhyaya (self-study). First, it is an action, a *kriya*. We must pursue *svadhyaya* actively, diligently, with persevering effort. How might we go about doing that? Surely, we can study the self in everyday contexts, in our jobs, in relationship to people that we love, in terms of our likes and dislikes, our fears and aversions, but B.K.S Iyengar's commentary on this first sutra makes clear that the study of the self must have a larger spiritual context; "Svadhyaya is the repetition of sacred mantras and the study of spiritual sacred texts in order to comprehend one's own self" (102). So we must study texts like the *Sutras*, the *Gita*, the *Bible*, and the *Koran*. All sacred texts are worthy of study. B.K.S. Iyengar describes yoga as "true religion. It is eternal, and has no denominations or boundaries" (137).

The second mention of svadhyaya occurs in the context of listing it as one of the five niyamas Iyengar explains, “As yama is universal social practice, niyama evolves from individual practice.” The yamas and niyamas are the backbone of yoga. Without them, “mastery of yoga would be unrealizable” (137). Svadhyaya has a vitally important role to play. It is rigorous self-examination; it “is checking oneself to see if the principles of yoga are being followed” (137). Svadhyaya insures that the backbone of our yoga practice is in place.

Though svadhyaya demands a constant involvement with the principles of yama and niyama, one should not overlook asana practice as a source of self-study. At a recent workshop in Austin, Joan White led us through a “svadhyaya practice.” She sequenced the Saturday afternoon class through a continual revisiting of Utthita Trikonasana. We did a series of twists (Bharadvajasana I, Marichyasana I, and Marichyasana III). After each twist, we returned to Trikonasana. Joan asked us to observe ourselves in Trikonasana, to observe the effect of each pose on Trikonasana and the effect of Trikonasana on the other poses. After the twists, came a series of chest openers and backbends. After each pose, we returned to Trikonasana. Each time, more and more knowledge and awareness went into our Trikonasana. Each Trikonasana revealed a different aspect of self, a different opportunity for self-study. Then, Sirsasana. We brought the mental calmness that comes from Sirsasana into our Trikonasana and then we did Salamba Sarvangasana and Savasana.

Asana practices like this one offers us the occasion to use the body as a vehicle for consciousness. It also presents us with the opportunity to see the body as a vehicle for spiritual practice, so too Svadhyaya. In fact, svadhyaya is a “bridge to connect awareness of the body with the core and vice versa” (148). Svadhyaya is the “connecting intelligence that brings harmony of body, mind and soul, and intimacy with the Supreme Soul (*Istadevata*)” (148). When we experience our true self, the core of our being, our *atma darsana*, we also experience God. When we experience this vital unity, we see why the unexamined life is not worth living. We see why we must know ourselves to know God.