

## Identity: the Meaning and Purpose of Life

‘The way to the Divine is through your Heart’.

Adyashānti, retreat, Holland 2013

This chapter explores the true purpose of Yoga and peace. If we are unwell or stressed, or if we have experienced some form of suffering - or simply as we get older and realise the nature of being mortal - then we may feel a sense of emptiness inside, despite our material successes. This may cause us to ask: ‘Why am I here and what is life about?’ For some people, the idea that Yoga might be spiritual is very off-putting and they may only practise for the health benefits. For others, Yoga can be an effective path for discovering meaning in life. But what do we mean by the word ‘spiritual’? Is it about living life in a way that incorporates certain ethics? Does it mean God or religion? Is it about inner-peace - or even some abstract idea of ‘union’? Could it mean understanding the true nature of reality? Or are these just words and mental constructs and does any of this have any relevance to us, or to our wellbeing?

Do I have to be ‘spiritual’ to practice Yoga?

Words like ‘spiritual,’ or ‘God’ can turn people off completely. But the great thing about practising Yoga is that we can have a religion or not. We can believe in God or not. There is no conflict. For many of us nevertheless, Yoga is an intensely spiritual way

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of being, which doesn't necessarily have to involve either God *or* religion. Yoga is just about realising what is really true.

Because language is always conceptual, a word may end up taking us further away from what is real. A flower, for example, describes something but it isn't the flower itself. On a retreat Leah and I were on with our teacher Adyashānti (who has a Zen Buddhist background), it was explained that 'Truth' is neither non-dual nor dual: it is neither spiritual nor secular. What Adya means is that Truth is beyond any concept, word or thought and that the answer to this lies within every one of us in this very moment. Life is unfolding in each micro-second, which in itself, is a miracle. This micro-second then dies to the next. If you can, open a window right now and just look out and explore with all your senses. Listen to the birds sing. If you can see a garden from the window, look at a flower unfurling its petals. Feel the breeze on your skin. Notice and smell any scents that you may be aware of. Really be here with this. Can you see that there is something amazing and miraculous about life when the mind is not interpreting and judging and when there is real clarity? And from this understanding, do you think you are separate from life or not?

Is there any meaning or purpose to life?

Most of us have some vague notion that there might be more to life than how we currently see things. We appear to live in a conscious universe where events seem to happen for a reason – even if we can't always work out what the explanation is at the time. The philosophy behind Yoga answers these questions. *Yoga is a resolution of*

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*our identity – it is about who we really are.* The so-called ‘spiritual’ (we don’t have to use that word if you don’t like it) search is an inner-journey and is not something to be found externally. This is about the freedom that we described in the last chapter. So we can start by asking: ‘Am I the body, or the thoughts and the emotions – all of which are subject to change – or am I something else as well?’ To really understand this, we need to contemplate: ‘Who, or what am I?’

### **Honest self-inquiry**

With the help of a peaceful mind, we may begin to see that our thoughts are, a bit like the weather systems, always changing. We may also realise just how much our thinking and emotions colour our ideas about the world, thus compromising our clarity about how things really are. This inquiry requires us to be present and truthful with whatever arises and to not run away or cover anything up. It means that we align our thinking, speech and behaviour at all times - so that we act with integrity - from the heart - rather than from our conditioning. (And we need to have some understanding of the difference between the two). This means that we do our best to not fixate around any particular idea or opinion or distract ourselves when times get tough. We see that our opinions are just that – opinions: they are not Truth. When uncomfortable stuff arises, we stay with it, even if it is terrible fear, without going into a big drama around it. We live life fully and bravely in all its guises - even during sickness, pain and loss. So, whatever is unfolding, we remain as present as we can. As our inquiry and contemplation deepens, we may begin to get a sense of something else as well -

*something about us that is more spacious. It is a kind of background feeling of an ever-present Presence.*

### **What is the ego?**

In Yoga the ego is called *ahamkāra* and is sometimes referred to as the ‘false self’ because it is coloured by our likes, dislikes, fears (*abhiniveśaḥ*) and conditioning. We think that we have an idea about who we really are, but once we really start to inquire within, we find that there is nothing much there at all. Just a few thoughts and feelings which keep changing. There may be the idea of this sense of the false self, or ego, which is much talked about in modern Yoga circles. Can you actually find your ego though? Conceptually, your identities and your defences describe the ego. The ego is the ‘I’ thought; that something is ‘mine’. This comes from the sense of being a small, separate self that feels alone and apart from everything else (*avidyā*). It feels so alien and threatened by the world that it must keep defending itself. As we have seen, it does this by controlling, competing with, owning, adding to, avoiding and identifying with ideas and opinions, because this helps to make it feel a bit bigger and safer.

Our ego is fearful for much of the time. It needs attention and it likes to feel that it is ‘right’ or even ‘superior’. How we deal with criticism shows us how powerful our ego is. For example, if you strongly identify with your job and it describes who you think that you are, if someone then accuses you of not being very good at what you do, you may feel threatened or distressed. This is because there is an attack upon the conceptual ‘idea’ that you have of yourself. Or if someone disagrees with your political opinion

and you consequently feel anxious and under attack, or get angry and have to defend your point of view, of this is the ego, which has identified with a position. In modern society, we are all trying to be a *something*. But to be *nothing* - to be free of any binding identification - is what we really want to come home to.

### **The ego and fear**

Because the ego is fearful of change, it is always on the look-out, to see how it can defend itself from any attack. The ego wants to 'know' what is going on so that it can take some kind of control - even though this is impossible. The fact is, life is a great mystery and we don't actually know what will happen, even in the next minute. But to an ego this is terrifying, which is why it likes to shore itself up with 'adding' something new all the time such as (say) activities or shopping. The ego *loves* drama and struggle – because this is what makes it feel alive. Powerful dislikes and likes, strong judgements or obsessive thinking are always a clue that thoughts have got sticky and that we have identified with and contracted around an idea. These are all actions of ego. This helps to reinforce the idea of 'me,' strengthening the small, separate self, which thinks it is apart from everybody and everything in the world.

How the ego causes us to suffer

We may contemplate on the idea that there are actually very few truly evil people in the world, just those with extreme attachments to a point of view. They have invested their whole sense of self in a concept and may even take to killing others in order to defend their position and to reinforce their identity. It is incredible to think that humans will actually *kill* and do terrible things to other people in order to defend an idea in the mind

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that they think is right! This causes endless suffering in the world as we all act from and react to these mental points of view. All any ego is really doing though, is looking for unconditional love to heal its fundamental sense of lack. This can get horribly twisted into the pursuit of attention, money or power ad infinitum - but it is the same motivation, the search for love to cover up the feeling of separation and incompleteness. It is helpful to bear in mind that there is always a back-story to anyone's behaviour and that no-one causes another to suffer unless they themselves are in place of suffering, consciously or, more likely, unconsciously. This is encapsulated in *Yoga Sutra* 1:33 where we are encouraged to develop understanding and equanimity towards the unpleasant actions of humanity. If we can understand ego for ourselves, we can understand it in others. This then helps us to have empathy, forgiveness and love for all beings. When we understand our enemy, they are no longer our enemy.

Ego and spiritual identification - teaching point (open box)

One of the things that happens quite a lot in the Yoga world is the identification of being a 'spiritual' being. People take on a whole lifestyle in pursuit of their spiritual selves. They dress the part, buy the music, incense, mala beads and jewellery and hang out with the Yoga nobility (ie the coolest teachers). We have been there and worn the T-shirts ourselves! Eventually however, the intense attachment around such an identity can cause yet more suffering, because it is still a false idea about who we really are. It is another trick to make us feel separate - my gang (spiritual) versus your gang (not-so-spiritual). It's a kind of game of 'my ego is smaller than yours' or even: 'I am more enlightened than you', in which individuals are actually reinforcing, rather than seeing through, their ego. It is considered 'bad' to have too much ego in the Yoga

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community and there are many teachers walking around claiming to not have one at all. (Of course, this is the ego which has formed yet another identity around the idea that they don't actually have one!) This shows how subtle the ego is. In certain traditions in India, students are encouraged to 'surrender' to their guru. This is meant to dismantle the ego. The problem with this however, is that the guru usually has some ego too - some unresolved shadow stuff - which is all the more dangerous because it is unacknowledged. (close box)

### Inquiring into identification

So, how do you deal with your ego? Bill Feeney, one of my first Yoga teachers, gives the helpful advice of thinking of your ego as being like a large parrot on your shoulder. You do need some ego for motivation and for survival but, if you can, he advises, try to shrink it down to the size of a small sparrow. This is a great analogy, although really, if you think about it, the ego doesn't really exist, other than as a conceptual idea of 'self'.

When we investigate into what our ego actually is, it's helpful to look deeply into our most strongly held opinions and beliefs. These have the potential to cause anger and violence - especially if we think that we are right and someone else is wrong. But our more forceful ideas also have the power to liberate us, because they show us the attachments and identifications that we have. How can we have an opinion about something when we never know the full story - or understand all the motivations and conditioning behind someone else's action? If there is judgement or a feeling of being superior, then there is always ego - something that is not accepting of 'What Is'. This is

why it is important to have a peaceful mind, so that we are not reacting from our shadow-side and consequently passing our own suffering on to the world.

**Ambition - the root of stress. A note for teachers** (open box)

In recent times, Yoga has become commodified and is often seen as something to be marketed to make lots of money. If Yoga teachers buy in to this – and it can be hard to resist - we may become ambitious or even competitive about our teaching role within the Yoga community. But ambition also comes from the ego and that feeling of: ‘something needs to be added to me’ because we don’t feel whole and complete, and are not satisfied with what we have right now. Remember - this feeling of lack is the basis of suffering. It drives us to push for some concept about how our life should be in the future, rather than accepting the present moment. It comes from expectation – wanting things to be different from how they are. It also comes from being more attached to the importance of the material rather than the spiritual. I realise that some teachers may find this irritating – but the inquiry is: ‘do I want to achieve and do well because this is a feeling from my deepest heart and because I sincerely want to help others?’ Or is it really: ‘I am ambitious because I crave attention and respect, because I don’t actually accept myself as I am right now?’ This is ego. Some teachers may be driven to achieve because, in truth, they are chasing status through a barely-acknowledged feeling of insecurity. This is not to judge anyone, but it is rather to point out the true motivation for this action. The problem is, ambition may also oppose any true creative joy or peace. For example, a few years ago when I started writing this book, I was very driven to succeed. I felt I wanted to prove something. I was attached to what the outcome might be, and I hoped for attention. But I got stressed

looking at deadlines and chasing publishers and I had to stop writing anyhow once my husband became ill. After two years of quietness and contemplation, my insight was that I wanted to write this book from my heart. I am now writing for its own sake - for the joy of being creative (and it makes it more fun to do it with Leah) and because I sincerely hope this book will help people. I have more inspiration and the writing flows more easily because I am not trying to achieve anything. *It is almost impossible to act from the heart and to also be ambitious, because ambition is something that comes from the ego.* To be motivated by the heart is a much more instinctual way of going with the flow of life. Ambition is a trap that all of us can fall into however. We may become busier and busier and more competitive as we seek prestige and security. The truth is though, the true Yoga journey is the very opposite of ‘ambition’ and any pursuit should be to cultivate peace through stillness, reflection and simplicity.

There is absolutely nothing wrong, of course, with wanting to do well, wanting to help people or needing to provide support for your family - and in this sense ambition can be a positive force. However, check that your motivation is not from a feeling of lack or the need to prove something, or because you care about what others will think of you. These are motivations of the *ahamkāra*. To have a goal isn't a problem, as long as it is something that you are flexible about (things can change) and as long as it is something that truly nourishes you and which makes you and others feel good and peaceful. The right intention in this context is very important.

(close box)

Making space around thoughts and feelings

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We are not trying to get rid of our ego - it is enough to see through it with its games and tricks. Developing genuine empathy, humility, love, gratitude, peace and a sense of unity with all of mankind is a much more effective way of dealing with the ego, because then the binding identifications naturally fade away. As we become more spacious and expansive, our tightly-held ideas about 'me' and the need to protect and defend this concept will melt like snow in the sunshine. As we know, Yoga sees the cause of most of our suffering as being the misperception of the impermanent as permanent. In other words, there is really no external reason to be distressed, although it appears otherwise. Awareness of our thoughts and feelings helps us to discriminate between the seer from the seen and helps us to unlink from our suffering. For this type of honest self-scrutiny, we need a stable and pure mind.

If I am not the ego, who am I?

The reality is that the true 'I' is always here. In making this investigation, as you slowly see through the identities you have and understand them as temporary, you may come to the realisation that who you really are is the deep stillness and silence which is ever present, action-less, quite ordinary and which never changes. It is your very Presence, the background to your thoughts and experience. It is also the unmanifest space upon which you touch when you are being creative. From this stillness, something arises which is always authentic and genuine and much greater than the small, separate self. Actually, the sense of who you really are can't be described so these words are just an attempt to point towards this.

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If your thoughts and feelings are like the changing weather systems, then your real identity is like the sky - the unchanging backdrop to those climate fluctuations as they pass through. If, for example, you remember your last meal, you will agree that the experience of that, although it happened, has now passed and is no more. Therefore, its only reality is as a memory. How real or reliable is that? Likewise, if you contemplate tomorrow, or even the next hour – you will also agree that this is just an idea or a thought. It hasn't happened yet. Then, if you consider what you were thinking or feeling a week ago, a year ago or ten years ago, you may also agree that all of your thoughts and feelings have changed and are always changing. You probably have forgotten most of them. Situations come and go. Even your appearance, health and energy are constantly changing. But you haven't changed – there is something permanent about you, some is-ness that was present both then and now. It has been there for the whole of your life and even before that. This simple recognition is the portal to the understanding of your true nature. Yoga calls this the Self, *ātman*, *puruṣa*, Brahman, cit or consciousness and this was first described in Chapter Four. Close your eyes now, be still and see if you can sense into this. Drop into the silence. Watch the spaces between your thoughts. See how thoughts come from the silence but then disappear again. Take some time.

### Who I Am

Of course we are all human beings living a human life and we also want to embrace this side and show up in life. But the background of nothing-ness is who you really are. It is helpful to focus on this ever-present being-ness – this something of you that is conscious, watchful, loving but also uninvolved whenever you do some quiet sitting or

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meditation. Some describe this as Spirit, or even God. Again, these are just words. Love is the quality of what we all really are. This consciousness that is you, is the same as the consciousness that is me – it is everything and everybody. When the ego (the ‘I’ thought), dissolves through inquiry, you see that there is no separate you at all – just Being. Then you start to become more spacious and your heart opens with genuine love and compassion for life itself. This is not an intellectual understanding, (although knowledge is part of it), because insight always comes from the heart and never the mind. But when we are very quiet, there may be a visceral sense that is felt in the heart area and even the whole body of this Presence and love for everything. From this, you see others as yourself - there is no separation.

Spiritual, or not spiritual. It doesn’t matter. It’s just about identity.

I asked my Vedanta teacher once if it was possible to be completely secular and to still make this inquiry into one’s true nature and he confirmed that of course it was. You don’t have to give any name to this permanent sense of self - you don’t have to call yourself spiritual. Neither is it something that makes you different or better than anyone else - that would be just more ego - the ‘I’ that wants to be ‘special and ‘enlightened’. Experientially, it is about being fully here in each moment as spacious awareness as a human being and loving what is in front of you, without too much mind stuff getting in the way. It’s just appreciating each second of this human life. If the mind does become noisy, you see it for what it is: a bunch of thoughts passing through that probably don’t matter as much as we think they do.

This realisation of who you are brings great energy. When you are no longer attached to an identity or to a story, such as what happened in the past, or what might happen in future, then you can let go of any stress and worry that might be exhausting you because there is no big ego who feels threatened or who is trying to control an outcome. Or, as a former student of mine, Miriam puts it:

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‘When I had ME, I would worry when I had a relapse about how I would cope over the coming days and weeks. My memories of how ill I was in the past would colour my mind like a twisted prism, making me anxious and stressed, even though it was just a memory. The burden of holding onto that idea and the fear of how the illness would continue in the future affected me terribly and sucked away all of my vitality. I was seeing life as if it were something continuous and solid and always painful. I was also seeing life as something that I thought that I could control. I thought I was my illness and I saw myself as a victim. Once I let go, stopped worrying about tomorrow and just became more present and understood that the illness was not who I was and that I was not a ‘sufferer’, then there was a great release. Now I see everything in life as just a play of energy fluctuations.’

Your true identity is free and unlimited

With this knowledge of who you really are comes freedom. This realisation of your true identity engenders a feeling of great security as you realise that whatever happens, you remain the same. From this, you may begin to see that your relationship with others is

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dependent on the relationship that you have with yourself. If you love life and who you are; if you are peaceful because you genuinely accept everything about yourself; then you will naturally love and reach out to everyone around you. You honestly know that the solution for happiness is always inside you and is not something that is external. We are living in challenging times and the world needs more of us who can spread genuine love and unity. We can only help with this however, when we have cultivated real peace for ourselves, so that we are less disturbed by external circumstances. The micro reflects the macro. Then we can be a light unto the world. When things that you may formerly have perceived as being 'bad' happen, you understand that this is just the nature of reality and that if you can accept things as they are, you are not creating a war inside yourself by limiting your thinking around an idea. Sometimes you may feel sad or anxious, but it passes. It is simply how things are. Just life doing its thing. Fluctuations of energy. Situations can come and go - but they are just like the weather systems and don't disturb you, because you are the beginning-less, endless, ever-present, changeless space of the sky.

Key point:

You are not your thoughts or feelings or the every-changing circumstances of your life. If you see yourself as the one who is always present, then you will discover endless peace.

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