

PARAMPARA, THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY AND TRADITION TO A YOGA PRACTITIONER, AND WHY THE LYRICISED SUTRAS

FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH PRASHANT IYENGAR

Prashant was interviewed by Lee Sverkerson and Kristin Chirhart

The taped interview was transcribed by Lee Sverkerson and edited by Francie Ricks.

First Prashant was asked about *Parampara*:

Parampara is basically owing gratitude to all the causes and reasons which have worked for us. In our culture, our civilization, and our religion, expressing this indebtedness is primary. That's the principal of *yajna*. *Yajna* is sacrifice. What is sacrifice? Sacrifice is doing something out of indebtedness. If you feel like you are indebted to someone, you develop a sense of sacrifice.

We recognize three things, first, that we owe something to nature. Because every one of us is like a VIP. Suppose the President of the country happens to come to your city. What happens? He is treated as a VIP and so many things take place. Every individual, every human being is a VIP in this world. Because when each individual takes birth, nature is ready; with food, air, water, whatever is required to support that individual. Nature is bountiful, so we must be indebted to nature. We owe something to nature. Everyone owes to nature. And that's why we have a sense of sacrifice. Because we believe that every force is controlled by a celestial force. So river is a goddess, sea is a goddess, wind is a goddess, air is goddess, god. So we have deities for all these things, we don't consider anything as inert. We have agni devatta, vayu devatta, surya devatta, fire, wind, sun, mountains, seas and everything. In everything there is a deity, a celestial force behind everything and we worship these deities. That is our sacrifice. So basically we owe to nature.

Secondly, we owe to society. Because before we are born, already there is the health service, educational service, public transport service or whatever. Everything is ready for us. Imagine if we took birth in a place where there was no society, no hospitals, no schools, and no services. What would be the plight? So there is no point in blaming society. The present trend is to blame society for everything. 'Society puts limitations on us. Our freedom is thwarted. What is society doing for us? Why should we pay heed to society?' So we break the social etiquettes and we go against the social conditions and regulators and we want to rebel, we want to be individually free persons. We consider society as an antagonist. That is not proper. Because society provides so many things, so many services, before we are even born. So we need to do something for society.

Thirdly, we owe to our parents and family members. In absence of father, mother, sister, brother, aunties, uncles, what would be our plight? They give us a certain education. They give us a

certain cultural level. We definitely owe to them for that. So our parents, our fathers, our forefathers — they all contribute. Just imagine ourselves in absence of parents, in absence of forefathers. Where would we be? Who would we be? We get so much from our forebears. We inherit so many things. So inheritance definitely contributes mightily in our making. That's the concept of heritage. That's the *parampara*. We are as we are because of all that has proceeded us. So we owe to our fathers, forefathers and the previous generations. So, when we owe something to society; it is not only the present living society. It is also the society gone by, because they too have contributed. So people of the previous generation, previous generations, they have all contributed. In absence of those people, we would not have had these conditions. So that is the sense of gratitude and we owe them something and that's why this *parampara*, this heritage, is held in high esteem. Because we recognize that without our heritage, or if our heritage had been different, we would have been different. Do you follow? And that's the concept of heritage, that we definitely owe something. So we revere them, and we prostrate before them, we pray to them. We pray to all those previous generations, people who have contributed. And to our fathers, forefathers and the whole lineage, and whatever, whatever has contributed.

This is unlike your Western culture. Because Westerners tend to feel that, 'We are civilized, we are better than our parents, and if you go back generation by generation you ultimately end in savages.' Even in India today modern man tends to feel that 'we are better than our parents. We are more educated. We are well mannered, well behaved. Whereas our forefathers and our parents and forefathers were relatively unevolved.' So we think that we are evolving, decade by decade, century by century, millennia by millennia. So we think we are better off than those who came before. That is not true.

Our history tells us that we had a glorious past. Our ancestors were far better than us. In wisdom, in conduct, in civilization, in culture and in humanity. When we realize that, we realize that we are more and more selfish, we are more and more self-centered, we are more and more petty minded than our ancestors. Now this idea is opposite to the modern faith in modern civilization where modern man feels that, 'I am better than them. I am evolved. I am more educated. I am more cultured than they were.' A modern boy says, 'I am better educated; I understand better than my father; I have more intelligence, I have more judgment and discretion and whatever.' But our history tells us that our predecessors were not savages, unlike the Western view of history.

We owe lot to our heritage; the heritage is important and that's why we revere our *parampara* so much. For example, maybe my father is not great, but my great-grandfather or great-great-great-grandfather was very great and I definitely inherit something from him. We understand today's genetics. Certain things come in the third generation or fourth generation. So even if our father, our parents are not great but maybe our grandparents or great grandparents were very

great. So comparatively one can say, 'I'm better than my father in every sense.' But that doesn't mean that I'm better than all my forefathers. Because certain things come in the third generation or fourth generation. Even if my father is unimportant, he is an important instrument because he took that buffer state, that place where he was unimportant but he transmitted something which he got from his grandfather. So if I did not have my father there as that middleman, I would not have received it. So you cannot just compare person to person. Someone might say that, "I am far better than my father." Maybe my father is a rogue or whatever and I am far improved. But my great-grandfather was perhaps religious. And therefore in the third generation I am religious minded. Even if my father was profane or intemperate, he was a middleman there to transmit something to me. So I cannot disrespect him in any way. So that's why we revere the heritage — for that reason. It's not that we take pride in that. It's a reality. They have transmitted something to us. And the society of the last millennium has contributed to us. Although they may not be related to me genetically, they have contributed to us.

There was a recent development, the comet "Schumacher". Three or four years back there was a great danger that Schumacher might collide with the Earth. But Jupiter, being a huge planet, it has such a gravity that it attracted the comet and absorbed it. In the absence of Jupiter, we would have faced a catastrophe. So we definitely owe something to Jupiter, because Jupiter has gravity; it is a larger planet and it is therefore doing something in the cosmos. In absence of it, what would have happened to us? So it's the same with every planet, Mars or Jupiter or Venus. In absence of Mercury and Venus we don't know what would have happened to us also? That's why in our astrology we revere all those planets. We know that they are contributory factors. The astrophysics only knows the planets as physical body existing in the Solar System. Now it is as if you understood me only as the physical Prashant. I am much more than that. Do you follow? Suppose my psyche is ejected from this body and Hitler's psyche enters into this body, are you going to treat me as Prashant? I am not just my physical existence. It is not your consideration to revere me or like me or dislike me or whatever. It's not just physical Prashant. The astrophysicists only know the planet as a physical body in orbit. It's much more than that. We do not know what it radiates. For you I appear as Prashant. But I could be spy or something. Now you do not know that I am radiating information as a spy, you do not know it. You just think 'well, Prashant, Guruji's son, yoga teacher.' I could be doing a thousand and one things. Do you know that? So we know Mars as a planet, a physical body. We do not know what it does. What good things it does. What bad things it does. We do not know anything. And in cosmology, nothing is here for bad. Everything has a purpose. If you are student of metaphysics you will know why that planet is there, why the sun is only ninety-three million miles from us. It is for some good. All things exist for good. This is the lesson of philosophy. But if you don't identify the good from that object, if you only identify the bad from that object — you can't just say that it's a bad object. You have not identified, so you may not know. You know me as a yoga teacher and Guruji's son and whatever. I might be doing extra-curricular activities which you do not know about. I might be a spy; I might be doing some nasty things. Or I might be doing more

good than you think I am. Do you follow? So this is only a physical radiation that you see me as yoga teacher and Guruji's son and whatever. I might be doing more good things than this — which you will only realize when I am gone. Only when I am no longer, you will realize.

Manu, the lawmaker of Vedic times, has mentioned the pancha maha yajnas which every Hindu is supposed to observe. And that is to express gratitude, a sense of sacrifice. Sacrifice for men, sacrifice for creatures, sacrifice for the priestly, the Brahmins and the wise ones. So they are all our gurus. There are so many gurus to us. If Krishnamacharya did not have his five, six, seven, eight Gurus [Prashant names the gurus] he would not have been Krishnamacharya. Then in that case what would have happened to Guruji? So we just cannot have a sectarian view that I am B.K.S. Iyengar's student and he is Krishnamacharya's student and he is Brahmacharya's student, Ramamohan Brahmachari. We can't just go by that. So many have contributed. So many people have contributed for Ramamohan Brahmachari, and then for T. Krishnamacharya, and then for B.K.S. Iyengar. Do you mean to say B.K.S. Iyengar is only made up from T. Krishnamacharya? He had his ancestors, he had his homely atmosphere, the civilization, the culture, the people around him, the education that came to him. Everything contributed for him. I also, I cannot say I am only Guruji's. So many things have contributed to my making because I have my own history. I have not been all the time Guruji's son in all my manifestations. I have been sons of different fathers in different manifestations. So they have all contributed. How do I know? It is not only B.K.S. Iyengar who has made me. Because I have inherited certain things.

Prashant was asked about his saying that to progress in yoga, one must become a philosopher. He says that he intended to give a talk about this for Guruji's 80th birthday. The following passages express another way in which our upbringing, education and tradition is important for a yoga sadhaka.

Why do we fail in *astanga* yoga? Why do we fail miserably in *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *bramhacharya*, *aparigraha*, etcetera, etcetera? Because we have lost the heritage, we have lost the tradition, the Indians as much as the Westerners here. It's as if you put a child of seven straight away into college and then complained, the child is not doing well, he is failing. So there should be something, a kindergarten course before *astanga* yoga. Something is to proceed *astanga* yoga which is not taking place. Basically it is the values in life. In the Bhagavad Gita it is said, *yajna*, *dana*, *tapa*. These are the three things which purify the man. None of these is practiced today. And those who are taking up yoga are not at all aware of *yajna*, *dana*, *tapa* as the foundational thing. *Astanga* yoga is not a foundational course; it's not foundation. It's a superstructure. Before that *yajna*, *dana*, *tapa* are the three things required for man. I have just explained *yajna*; it is a sense of indebtedness. The second is *dana*. Man is so self-centered, so possessive that he doesn't like to dispense with something he wants. He will dispense with something he doesn't want but will not like to dispense with something he wants. *Dana* teaches that, how to give. So that we overcome our selfishness, possessiveness. So the *dana* aspect, gift,

gifting away, is very important. In the Bhagavad Gita *dana* is classified as *rajasic*, *tamasic*, or *sattvic*. So *sattvic dana* is what one should be practicing. So I should dispense with something that I want the most. Do you follow? That is the higher form. Now, there are two parties to giving. One is the benefactor and the other one is the beneficiary. The beneficiary might want it least or might want it most. OK. Now suppose I give something that is least wanted to the beneficiary. I want it most and she wants it least, I give it. It is a great *dana*. Because I can find an escape. She doesn't want it or she wants it least, why should I give it? So greatest *dana* is that where the benefactor wants it most and the beneficiary wants it least and still it is given. It is the greatest *dana*. Now juxtapose: I want it most and she also wants it most. I give it. And in return I get reverence; I get more thanks. So she'll be ever indebted to me and I will have joy in being revered by her, being thanked by her profoundly and profusely. Usually we don't understand this, the benefactor wanting it most and the beneficiary wanting it least. Give it to the beneficiary. Now there it is more magnanimity on my part. But suppose I want it most and she also wants it most, magnanimity is a little less. That's how the mathematics of *dana* has to be understood. Then we realize what *dana* is. So *dana* is an important thing because we have this possessiveness, clinging to our wealth, clinging to our attainments, clinging to our properties. And that makes us more and more selfish, which we have to overcome. So with *dana* one will overcome selfishness, possessiveness, the tendency to hoard the things, *parigraha*. And that is the second aspect.

Tapas is the third one. Because the tendencies of the flesh are our major foes. So we need to practice certain austerities so that the mind can be controlled, the senses can be controlled. The body needs some sort of heating. Otherwise the body has a tendency of cooling after comforts and a happy go lucky way of life and enjoyments. So there has to be some austerity practiced for the body, mind and senses. We cannot allow them to be licentiate. That's not good democracy, giving freedom to the body, giving freedom to the senses and giving freedom to the mind, 'do whatever you want,' laissez faire policy. It's not good. Because they need austerity. Otherwise they will go astray. So *yajna*, *dana*, *tapa* are three principles which need to be practiced. Now when these three principles are practiced, *ahimsa* will not be a difficult proposition. *Satya* will not be a difficult proposition. Do you follow? Those things are very difficult because of the tendency that we have, the tendency of the flesh. Because of the tendency of the flesh, *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *bramhacharya*, *aparigraha*, they are all difficult. So that's the culture for a *yoga sadhaka*. Because we don't have the proper culture, basically the ingredients are not there. So naturally we are going to find *ashtanga* yoga a very difficult endeavor. So before *ashtanga* yoga these are the three principles. Which was implied instruction in Patanjali's time. It was implied. He was speaking at that time to the whole universe, the whole world of all those whom he addressed. They were all in the culture of it. So certain things were assumed. Rightly. *Yajna*, *dana*, *tapa* are basic principles. And when you launch yourself from that pedestal, then your spiritual path is going to be proper.

A time will come when society, when the children will be uncle-less, auntie-less and cousin-less. Do you follow? Because we are going for the one-child family, gradually. What does this mean? We will turn out a generation where there are no uncles. The whole clan of uncles will be extinct. No uncles, no aunties, no cousins. Now, also we dispense with the grandfathers and grandmothers. The younger clan, the married couple doesn't want the crippled old people in the house. So they are sent to the old people asylum. But children not only require the love of father and mother. They also require the love coming from grandfather and grandmother. That's their nourishment. And modern parents are depriving them of that nourishment. So also for their own health the old people need to give something. If they don't find the outlet of loving the grandchildren, they don't get that health component. Do you follow? A grandfather feels joy and happiness when he has a grandchild on his lap. And the love coming from a grandfather is different than a father's love. Love coming from a grandmother is different than a mother's love. The child requires both. The child requires mother's love as well as grandmother's love. The child also requires auntie's love, uncle's love. Each one is a different thread in the fabric. And the child will be deprived. Also today the child will lose the sense of sharing. Because he is only one child. So whatever the father brings, it belongs to the child. The father brings a box of cookies, it belongs to the child alone. Nobody to share with. So it will develop that mind, not to share anything with anyone. But suppose there are four children in the house. Then he develops the nature, 'well, father has brought a box of cookies; I have to share. I have to give to my brothers also. So the nature to share will come if it is such a family. But now we are stopping such a family. What will happen? The children will become self-centered; they will become egocentric; they will become proud and arrogant because they do not know how to behave with others. Because after all, the home contains only father and mother, so the child can be nasty, haughty, whatever whatever. But suppose in that house there are uncles, there are cousins, there are older people, there are younger children, smaller than them. See how a child of four years will look after the child of two years; he will take care. And the child will learn something. To take care of a smaller child than itself. But today there is no chance. It could also be a cousin. A child of four years has a cousin of two years. In the house. But that will be gone. So taking care, loving others, all that will slowly be gone. And we are really turning out a jungle for the next generation. Anyway. That's how so many things are to be taken into account. *Yajna, dana, tapa*. That's how important it is. The nature to share our wealth with someone else. So we overcome selfishness. Why do we practice *himsa*, violence? There is blatant selfishness in *himsa*. Why do you speak the untruth? There is blatant selfishness. There is blatant passion. Why will you practice *asatya* if you are totally dispassionate, non-possessive, non-selfish. In that case there is no question, there is no difficulty in practicing *satya*. The difficulty is because we are selfish. Therefore truth becomes difficult. It's a hindrance. If restraint is a major component in you, where is the difficulty in practicing *bramhacharya*? When there is no component or a very scanty component of restraint, *bramhacharya* becomes a very difficult proposition. So yoga has a culture.

It should not be considered as Hindu culture. It is a human culture. A culture for man. Everybody's a human. What is the importance of *yajna, dana, tapa*? And what do you gain by that and how much do you lose and what do you lose? And you will not regret what you lose. You will be happy for what you lose, out of *yajna, dana, tapa*. Because you might say, I will lose some money. But the dividends that it would pay, you will realize that it was an investment, not an expenditure. And when you lose some selfishness, ultimately you will be happy that you dispensed with it. So *yajna, dana, tapa*, you don't have to have the mode of worship we have, the *mantras* that we say for *yajna*, or whatever. It's a principle, sense of sacrifice. What should I do for society? I should do something for society. I should do something for my parents and forefathers. What do I give to my forefathers? That's why we have the ceremonies, what is called *sraddha*. For the dead. Every year we observe that. So that we do something for them, we remember them. So at least on that day we remember them.

Then Prashant was asked where the idea came from to do the lyricised yogasutras. This also relates to the benefit of traditional ways in our modern culture.

In our educational system in earlier days, our temple was not merely place of worship. The temple was also a place to disseminate knowledge and wisdom. In the evenings we used to have discourses there. Now these discourses used to take place in a lyricised way, with music, tabla and drone instrument and harmonium and whatever. Because the saints have not written theses. Usually saints have made their compositions in poetry form. Because poetry and song are more appealing. The Ramayana is a poem, The Mahabharata is a poem; they are epic poems. Because man is attracted to rhythm, and the melody and rhetoric which come in poetry. If the last word of every line is identical, then it gives you a flow. Do you follow? Or if the first letter of every line is identical, then it gives you a rhythm. You feel like chanting it, reciting it. What is chanting? Chanting should end in enchantment. *Mantras* are chants, and what are chants, what is chanting? The chanting must have a spellbinding effect; enchantment should be there. That is what a *mantra* is. So poetic compositions have that effect. Now as regards the *yoga sutras*, you have heard the cassettes, the recitations. There is a melody, it's a poetic exposition. So when the *sanskrit* text itself is that way, it is not prozac. Do you follow?

[In sanskrit, Prashant chants and then speaks the first two or three sutras to compare the effect.] Then [speaking] it has no appeal. When I'm reciting *yoga sutras* like that, then it becomes a chant and it has some aspect of enchantment. So when that is there in *sanskrit*, I thought, why not do that in English also? Because if I had done the *yoga sutras* discourses in the temple, I would have done it with a drone instrument, to create atmosphere, ambiance. Perhaps I would have taken some rhythm instrument also. As it is with *kirtans*, temple *kirtans*? It's a form of music. So I thought, if the *yoga sutras* are recited that way, why not make the translation also poetic. And that's how I thought of doing it. So I composed it in a poetic way. And that's why I did it live. Lyricised. It's something that has to be, because poems are meant to be recited.

That's how we feel it. Poems are not meant for books. And one who is reading it should have a certain skill. To read poetry is an art. You can't read poetry like you read a novel. It doesn't give meaning. You have to give proper pauses, proper intonations. Then only the effect will be there. That's why I did it lyricised.