Lesson One

DEMAND TO TRAVEL BY THE ONE HIGHWAY OF REALIZATION

WHISPERS FROM ETERNITY

BY

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Our One Father, we are traveling by many true paths toward Thy one abode of Light. Show us the one highway of common realization, where all bypaths of theological beliefs meet. Make us feel that the diverse religions are branches of Thy one tree of truth. Bless us, that we enjoy the intuition-tested, ripe, luscious fruits of self-knowledge hanging from the many branches of true scriptural teachings. In Thy one temple of silence we all sing to Thee a chorus of many-voiced religions. Teach us to chant in harmony with Thy love’s manifold expressions, that our chorus of souls rouse Thee to break Thy vow of cosmic silence and lift us onto Thy lap of universal, immortal understanding.
**Why These Lessons?**

I met my Guru, Paramhansa Yogananda, on September 12, 1948, and on that same day he accepted me as a disciple. I had been with him hardly a month when he asked me to join him at his desert retreat in Twentynine Palms, California, where I got to listen to him daily as he dictated his writings.

The very first day, before beginning his writings, he declared, “I am not satisfied with the SRF * Lessons. They should be redone completely.” Later, I will touch on some of the dictation I remember, but for now let me continue this introductory saga. Hardly four months after that, he requested me to read, study, and absorb all the lessons. Once I’d gone over them carefully, he made me the examiner for students of the lessons. I should explain that, at the end of every Step or series of twenty-five lessons, there were exam questions, the main purpose of which was to help students see how much they had absorbed. There were seven Steps in all, and therefore seven exams.

Some two years later, also at Twentynine Palms, he told me that my main work in this life would be lecturing, editing, and writing.

“Sir,” I said, “haven’t you already written all that is needed?”

“Don’t say that!” he replied, his expression somewhat shocked. “*Much* more is needed!”

I have now devoted sixty-four years of my life to writing books that have expressed numerous aspects of his teachings in a clear and simple way, designed to reach as many people as possible. My writing style has always been deliberately conversational, as if talking with a friend, and I have done my best to express the deepest concepts in such a way as to make them both understandable and interesting to everyone with a clear mind, regardless of his level of education.

It was always my understanding that Master, as we called Yogananda, wanted another of the disciples to do the needed rewriting of the lessons. Years passed, however, and never a whisper came to me from anyone that this disciple had ever expected to do this work. She is now old, and her position in the organization precludes her ever attempting to do so.

My own work with the lessons wasn’t finished, however. In 1958, I went with Sisters Daya and her natural sister Mataji (as they were known then), and also an elderly nun, Sister Revati, to India. In our ashram outside Calcutta, I had the free time to reorganize the lessons: With Daya’s approval, I determined at least to do what I could with them as they were. For by then I had come to realize that this job was desperately needed.

Writing no new material (which I would have considered a presumption), I shifted the existing material about to make it more appealing to students. By this time I had shared Master’s teachings publicly for almost nine years, and had a clear idea of what it was the new student needed. Obviously, at the very least they needed drastic revision. Why?  

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* Self-Realization Fellowship, the organization he founded in America for the dissemination of his teachings.
Here are a few reasons:

1. Every student subscribed to the lessons with a view to learning the teachings of yoga and the philosophy behind them. Instead, what he got was a lesson, first, on the need for loyalty to an organization (about which he may well have known nothing). I no longer remember what followed, but it was inconsequential. Lesson four was on friendship—beautiful indeed, but a teaching wholly incidental to the reason people had subscribed to the lessons.

2. Energization—which we normally gave to the public in one evening—were given in the lessons over a period of eight weeks (if they took them weekly). Whole paragraphs were word-for-word repetitions of what had been said already.

3. The Hong-Sau concentration technique required (if memory serves) thirteen weeks—material which was taught publicly in a single evening.

4. The Om technique—again, taught publicly in a single evening—required four weeks. Not long after this, the ardent yoga student was taught how to get along with his married partner; how to succeed in business; and numerous subjects that were quite irrelevant to anyone who wanted first of all to learn about yoga.

5. The really “hot stuff” in the yoga teachings—material on the spinal chakras, on kundalini, and on the states of consciousness to be attained through yoga—was reserved for the student who had remained faithfully with the lessons for more than three years.

At some point in my work in SRF, I investigated how many students stayed with the lessons. By the end of the first Step (six months), at least 25% of the students had dropped out. By the end of the second Step, more than 50% had canceled their subscriptions. Almost no students remained with the course to the end. Almost no one, therefore, got even a hint that the lessons contained anything deeper than instruction on how to be a good boss or employee, and how to get along well with others.

The lessons had been designed by a truly devout lady disciple who had never taught anyone, and whose entire purpose was to keep students faithful to the teachings for as long as possible. This lady had gathered her material from articles and lectures that Master had given over the years. She had then assembled it all according to her own best (but untested) understanding. Her intentions had been excellent; her knowledge, however, of how best to carry out those intentions had lacked the necessary experience.

She had also wanted to include a story with every lesson. There wasn’t a large stock of such stories, however. She had therefore continued most of the stories over as many lessons as seemed reasonably possible. The poor student had to wait breathlessly for two or more weeks before he could learn the destiny of two frogs who had erroneously jumped into a bucket of milk.

I could well see why Master had wanted the lessons redone. Therefore, when I was in India, I applied myself assiduously to this task. For one year, the floor of my bedroom was covered with stacks of lessons while I rearranged their order, condensed them where I could, and put each story in one lesson even if it meant that some of the lessons would be storyless. I ended up at last with
what I considered good, considering the material I had to work with. I changed not a word, anywhere.

We introduced these lessons in India. Later, Daya Mata (as she has since become known) decided to drop the project, giving as her reason, “If a student in America should move to India, it would be better for him to continue the lessons there where he’d left off in America.” She didn’t mention redoing them in America. And thus a year’s worth of hard work was thrown casually—not, I might add, for the first time!—into the dustbin. Almost everything I did during my years as a monk in SRF was either dismissed or never even considered.

In 1953, as head of the Center Department, I wrote new, simple rules and guidelines for our centers around the world. By 1962—nine years later—the Board had not taken the time even to meet and consider those rules. In 1962 I was thrown out of SRF as “unbelievably presumptuous.” I was summoned from India to New York, and dismissed with only the money in my pocket, without a hearing, after fourteen years as a monk.

This was for me, however, a liberating act. Master had told me repeatedly, “Walter (he always called me that), you have a great work to do.” Now, finally, I could serve him as he had wanted me to.

It is now 2012, sixty-four years since I met Paramhansa Yogananda and was accepted by him as a disciple. The thought has occurred to me that perhaps I never understood Master’s wishes correctly regarding what he wanted regarding the lessons. In fact, I never heard him personally designate anyone to redo them. Any information I had was only a rumor. And I see now that, from the very beginning, he had tried to involve me in reworking the lessons.

To date, I have written 144 books, all of them dedicated to making my Guru’s message known and embraced throughout the world. I, too, at eighty-six can no longer be called young, but I still have a clear mind, and energy enough to complete this work.

Here, therefore, is my attempt at a complete rewrite—not only to reorganize the lessons as I did in India (lessons he never wrote in the first place), but to write an entirely new set of lessons.

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The Ancient Teachings of India

India’s ancient teachings contained three main approaches to truth—“philosophies,” as they are often called: Shankhya, Yoga, and Vedanta. The lessons you will be reading discuss all three of these ways. Shankhya tells why one should seek the truth; Yoga tells how to seek it; and Vedanta tells (abstractly, without of course giving the actual experience) what the truth is when one finds it.

For Truth does exist! Pontius Pilate, on posing his famous question, “What is truth?” asked it with the attitude of a cynic—an attitude that one finds everywhere today—which presumes that truth simply does not exist. It is
an attitude that precludes the possibility of ever finding the truth about anything.

Let us, in fact, ask at the outset: Is there any value in holding such an attitude? To ask, What is true? or even, What is truth? is indeed a necessary and important attitude. Asking such a question, however, with a negative expectation blocks one’s mind from ever reaching the answer.

There are two kinds of doubt: positive and negative. Positive doubt means questioning with the desire to know. Negative doubt means asking from a point of view that no answer is to be found. Positive doubt looks hopefully for an answer. Negative doubt looks for confirmation that there was no answer to be found in the first place.

For many incarnations, I myself suffered from such negative doubts. Now I see clearly that I was blocking off the very truths I sought. For I did desperately want to know truth. The Indian scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, states, “The doubter is the most miserable of mortals!” Negative doubts are not like dismissing the truth with a wave of the hand while scoffing, “Don’t bother me with such nonsense!” The negative doubter—he, anyway, who lives in misery—is one who longs to know, but cannot help challenging every answer with words like, “It’s probably only nonsense anyway!”

I went through such a period with my own guru. During that bleak period, if he had told me, “It’s sunny in San Diego,” a small, hateful voice within me would have sneered, “It’s probably raining!”

I hated myself for this tendency, but the moment he spoke I couldn’t prevent it from raising its ugly head. Yes, truly, as Krishna said, “The doubter is the most miserable of mortals.”

What helped me past this karmic test was the fact that I loved my Guru. Through that love I was able at last to dismiss negative doubt from my mind. And now, at least, I can help others to overcome their doubts as well. For, after long effort, I know the answer to virtually any useful doubt that it is possible to hold!

Devotion, not intellect, is the fast path to God. To have a clear intellect, but without devotion, is like living next door to a world-famous restaurant, but never being hungry enough to want to sample its food.

The intellect is, of course, necessary also, especially if it fosters discrimination—which is to say, the ability to discern right from wrong action, and right from wrong thoughts, as opposed to the modern tendency to use discrimination in the sense of discrimination against (other races, other nations, and so on). Devotion requires intellect, and intellect requires devotion, if one’s discernment is to follow a straight path.

In my own life—yes, let me offset all that revelation about my having been a doubter—I desperately wanted to find truth. At first I tried to find an answer that didn’t include God. I sought it in science. I sought it through social upliftment. I sought it through artistic inspiration—primarily musical. At last I realized that every imaginable way, without God, led to a dead end. Yet there had to be a solution!
At last I concluded, “There has to be a God!”

I remember the long walk I took into gathering darkness near Charleston, South Carolina. I asked myself with all the intensity I could muster, “If there’s a God, what must He be?”

First of all, I dismissed as absurd the idea of God being a divine judge waiting for us to stumble so that He could clap us into the prison of hell for all eternity.

But then I thought, “What is it in myself that is forcing me to ask this question?” And the answer came: “Because I am conscious!”

And: “God, then, must be Consciousness!”

This realization meant, for me, that my consciousness had to exist only because His consciousness existed! My awareness is a manifestation of His!

With this conclusion I realized: “My duty in life, therefore, must be to open myself more to His consciousness!”

I then thought of the times I had taken alcoholic drinks, and became relatively dull, mentally. And next I thought of those other times when I’d been not only sober, but unusually alert and aware. It was possible, I realized, to be more aware as also less so, and that it all depended on how open I was to Him. This conclusion simply had to be true. And it followed that I had to be able to open myself completely to God’s consciousness!

With this (to me) amazing realization came the perception that man’s true goal in life can only be to dedicate himself solely to seeking God—to dedicate himself to the task of becoming ever more open to the inflow of what the Christians call grace. It was not a matter only of praying for grace: It had to be possible to open oneself completely to that grace.

From now on, I resolved, I shall devote my entire life to this endeavor!

I was so ignorant that I didn’t realize how many countless others before me had dedicated themselves to this quest. As far as I knew, I was, of all mankind, the first. For a time, I wondered whether I was not going mad!

And what did I hope to gain from this quest? I imagined that the most to be gained would be peace of mind. Even such peace, I decided, would be worthwhile compared to the anguish through which I had passed. I was only twenty-one then, but I believe now that my questing had surely been already for many lives.

And then, by means which I will not describe here, I discovered Autobiography of a Yogi, by Paramhansa Yogananda. Therein, I found every answer of which I had ever dreamed. I found described in that book the supernal love and bliss that come to all who find God.

For me, this was it! I took the next bus from New York to California to meet the author. He accepted me at our very first meeting. I was now twenty-two. I was still twenty-two when he had me give my first lecture in church—and to my dismay, the church was packed to overflowing! But here I’ve been teaching for nearly sixty-four years now.
And what have I learned? I hope to share some of this wisdom with you in the succeeding lessons. I will begin with the all-important first step. I shall discuss the importance of making God the absolute priority in your own life.
Story

The Musk Deer

High in the Himalayas of India there lives an animal named the musk deer. At a certain season in every year, in a pouch in its navel, it secretes the wonderful fragrance of musk. The deer runs about everywhere to seek the source of this scent. Where can it be, it asks itself? It runs to a tree: No, the fragrance comes not from there. It runs to another tree: No, again. The fragrance has another source.

Does it arise from the streams? From one stream to another the deer rushes hopefully. But alas! from them arises only the scent of flowing water.

A breeze blows from the north. Has this wonderful fragrance come wafting over the land with that breeze? The deer faces north, but no, from there comes only the scent of snow. The breeze shifts. Has the scent been coming from the east? No, not from there. From the south? From there, as the breeze shifts, come suggestions only of greater warmth, of teeming marketplaces, and of cities busy with people. No other scent. Perhaps, then, from the west? No, only a whiff of distant desert sands!

The musk deer, in its desperation to find the source of this wonderful fragrance, sometimes casts itself off of a high cliff. And then comes the hunter who, cutting the pouch from the animal’s navel, sells the musk perfume for a high price in the marketplace.

Oh, musk deer! If only you had understood that the source of the fragrance you so yearned for emanated from your own self!

Man, too, seeks everywhere for the joy of his essential being. He finds it not in sensory pleasures. He finds it not in money. It eludes him in worldly power and fame.

No matter where he seeks for joy, it eludes him. Often, he drives himself to death from overwork. More often still, his life ends in regret and bitterness.

O blind humanity! When will you understand that the joy you seek lies within your own Self!

Affirmation

I will plumb the feelings of my heart for the joy I seek.