



## Isvara Pranidhana: A Practical Approach Given in Mukunda Mala

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### Abstract

The term 'Isvara Pranidhana' is made up of two words; Isvara, which translates as 'Supreme Being' or 'God', and Pranidhana, which means 'surrendering'. The term Isvara Pranidhana has been used in two contexts in Yoga Sutra of Patanjali. It is included as one of the five niyamas (Chapter 2, sutra 32), which are basically personal observances by the yoga practitioner. In a different context, it is one of the tools under kriya yoga (Chapter 2, Sutra 1) and other being tapas (austerity) and svadhyaya (self-study). To state briefly, kriya means action or effort and yoga means the process of acquiring a calm and tranquil mind; the absolutely still state of mind. Thus, together kriya yoga means an action plan for acquiring a calm and tranquil mind; an action plan for reaching an absolutely still state of mind.

**Keywords:** Isvara Pranidhana, Mukunda Mala.

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### Introduction about Mukunda Mala

The term 'Isvara Pranidhana' is made up of two words; Isvara, which translates as 'Supreme Being' or 'God', and Pranidhana, which means 'surrendering'. The term Isvara Pranidhana has been used in two contexts in Yoga Sutra of Patanjali. It is included as one of the five niyamas (Chapter 2, sutra 32), which are basically personal observances by the yoga practitioner. In a different context, it is one of the tools under kriya yoga (Chapter 2, Sutra 1) and other being tapas (austerity) and svadhyaya (self-study). To state briefly, kriya means action or effort and yoga means the process of acquiring a calm and tranquil mind; the absolutely still state of mind. Thus, together kriya yoga means an action plan for acquiring a calm and tranquil mind; an action plan for reaching an absolutely still state of mind. In other words, kriya yoga means to put the theory of yoga into practice; the schematic practice of yoga. The schematic plan of yoga comprised of these three elements—tapas, svadhyaya, and Ishvara pranidhana—helps us detoxify the body, nurture the senses, and purify the mind. These three together help us cultivate a higher degree of endurance and fortitude. Thereafter, obstacles such as disease, procrastination, laziness, and doubt begin to lose their grip on us. The practice of yoga that leads to the stillness of mind then becomes natural and spontaneous. Before we go further, let us look more closely on the three components of Kriya Yoga, namely, tapas,

svadhayaya and isvara pranidhana. Tapas means to heat; to purify; or to transform. Generally tapas refers to austerity, penance, and undertaking the practices that require putting the body and mind through hardship and thereby expanding one's endurance. However, in philosophical and spiritual literature, tapas refers to the practices and disciplines leading to acquiring clarity of mind; At a practical level, tapas entails gathering the fire within—overcoming sloth and inertia, becoming active, not being dependent on others for one's salvation, taking charge of one's own destiny, and putting one's intellectual knowledge into practice. Just as when putting a wheel into motion, one has to face the resistance caused by inertia; in the beginning stages of the practice, a great deal of energy goes into overcoming resistance. This causes discomfort. Enduring this discomfort is tapas. When one commit oneself to this discomfort without a true understanding of the higher goal and purpose of the practice, the mind perceives it as torture. Sooner or later, it becomes unbearable—and eventually one drops it. However, if one knows why he is undertaking a practice, what its goal and objective is, how it can help him remove the inertia of body and confusion of mind, how it can infuse his heart with the light of higher reality, and, therefore, why enduring any hardship your practice may bring is a great opportunity, tapas can become a source of lasting joy.

How do you practice tapas? The first level of practice involves restoring one's body to health. For those with an unwholesome lifestyle, adopting a healthy diet, proper exercise, and bringing regularity to their sleeping pattern is a big tapas. Deeply rooted habits do not like change. One should summon the willpower, stick to the decision, and adopt a healthy lifestyle. That is

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the beginning point—spiritually enlightened austerity. This level of tapas brings the ecology of the body to a state of balance. The practice of pranayama takes tapas to the next level. The classical texts consider pranayama to be the highest form of tapas. The Yoga Sutra clearly states that the practice of pranayama destroys the veil that hides the light. In other words, the fire of breath burns not only physical but also mental impurities. The practice of pranayama helps purify and strengthen the nervous system, awaken the dormant forces of consciousness at different chakras, and ultimately roast the seeds of karmas deposited deep in the mind field.

The word svadhyaya is made up of sva (self or one's own or pertaining to inner reality) and adhyāya (study). Together, svadhyaya means study of the self; study by oneself; a thorough study of oneself; thorough study of the scriptures. The practice of svadhyaya includes reflection on who we are, what our true nature is, where we come from, our purpose in being here, how we relate to others, what our duties are in relation to others, what we did in the recent past and the consequences of that, what we are doing now and what the future consequences may be, how fulfilling life and its gifts are, and whether or not we will be able to leave this world with grace and dignity. This self-reflection finds a purpose and flows in the right direction with a definite goal when it is accompanied by japa of a sacred mantra. Without mantra japa, self-reflection can degenerate into an intellectual exercise. It is the spiritual energy contained in a sacred mantra that infuses self-study with purpose and meaning. It is important that the mantra chosen for this japa is sacred. The selection of mantra is crucial as not all mantras have spiritually illuminating energy.

Self-study is also to be accompanied by the study of the right kind of scriptures—those which have ultimate freedom of the soul as their focal point. Such scriptures are called moksha shastra and include the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, the Yoga Vasishtha, and the Yoga Sutra itself. These scriptures set the guidelines and ensure that the direction of our self-reflection is correct. This kind of self-study helps us expand our mental ability and refine our intellectual grasp, which in turn empowers us with the conviction that the path we are walking on is straight and legitimate.

Isvarapranidhana as we have already mentioned in the beginning means surrender to God. Isvara pranidhana as propounded in Kriya yoga is the first sutra of chapter 2, and as such, it is a continuation of the last sutra of chapter 1. The first chapter is known as Samadhi Pada, the chapter that expounds on samadhi. According to Patanjali, samadhi is the heart of yoga. Samadhi grants ultimate freedom—the freedom from all known and unknown causes of sorrow. Samadhi is the foundation of lasting joy, for it is free from all fears and doubts. In samadhi, the mind stands still and regains its ability to see reality as it is. The prerequisite for attaining samadhi, however, is to make ourselves completely free from the charms and temptations of the world and keep our focus

on only one single reality—the inner self. This prerequisite implies that those who are not established in the virtue of dispassion (vairagya) are not fit to practice yoga as described in chapter 1. The commentator Vyasa clearly states that a disturbed, distracted, and stupefied mind is not fit for reaching samadhi. It is reachable only by aspirants who have cultivated a one-pointed and completely still mind.

The charms and temptations of the world agitate our minds, and an agitated mind is bound to be disturbed and distracted. When it meets failure in worldly endeavors, the mind gets frustrated and tired. Such a mind is prone to laziness and becomes stupefied. As living with a disturbed, distracted, and stupefied mind has become the norm for most of us, reaching a state of samadhi as described in the first chapter of the Yoga Sutra is beyond the scope of most people. Hence, the solution to them is to follow kriya yoga. It is specifically for those whose minds swing from disturbed to distracted to stupefied to one-pointed to perfectly still and back again.

According to Patanjali, putting together a plan to discover one's core strength and executing that plan systematically is called kriya yoga, the schematic practice of yoga. With this kind of yoga, one can start practicing from wherever he is. This schematic practice of yoga guides one to assess one's current physical capacity, intellectual grasp, and emotional maturity, and, based on own findings, determine the scope and intensity of one's practice. Thereafter, one walks one step at a time. This way, regardless of whether one's mind is focused or relatively dissipated, whether it is sharp or relatively dense, he can start practicing yoga compatible with his current level of development. Knowing how to assess your ability and design a plan is the crux of this schematic practice.

Ishvara pranidhana helps us assess how mature we are in our beliefs, how resolute we are in our decisions, and how strong we are in removing ourselves in favor of God. There cannot be a more active way of performing one's duty than Ishvara pranidhana: work hard with a surrendered attitude in the full realization that we are simply an instrument in the hands of the One who is almighty, omniscient, and the Lord of all that exists.

The concept of Isvara pranidhana is the essential philosophy in the Vaishnavite sect. It simply means prapatti, which overwhelmingly accepts total surrender to God. Let us understand surrender (saranagathi or prapatti) as used in Vaishnavism. The term Prapatthi is derived from the root words Pra-Pad; Pad means to move on and Pra implies in the best manner. In the context of the upaya (tools), the term implies total self-surrender to God as the sole refuge. A more appropriate Sanskrit term for Prapatthi is Atmanikshepa, that is to place the burden of protection of the Self in the care of the God. It is also known as Saranagathi or seeking God as the sole refuge. The doctrine of Saranagathi constitutes the most important

subject of Sri Vaishnava religion. The concept of Saranagathi in the sense of seeking God or some other higher being as the sole refuge is universally accepted in all religions. All other religions except Sri Vaishnava religion do not admit Saranagathi as a direct means (upaya) to the liberation of the soul from bondage. The nava vidha bhakti in Hinduism is a time-tested ladder to reach higher goals spiritually. The nine forms of bhakti too include surrendering oneself completely before God. Lord Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita Chapter IX Sloka 27 as:

*yat karoṣhi yad aśhnāsi yaj juhoṣhi dadāsi yat  
yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruṣva mad-arpanam*

**Meaning:** Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer or give away, and whatever austerities you perform—do that, O son of Kunti, as an offering to Me.

It is thus clear from the above that Isvara Pranidhana is the key to liberation. Isvara Pranidhana involves quite a few practices. Namaskaram is one of the important practices accepting God as the only saviour. When one prostrates, he surrenders his body as well as his ego. His mind is filled with satva and he is able to meditate or recite japa in that posture. In yoga too, sun salutation is considered to be very beneficial both physically as well as spiritually. It is supposed to invigorate the mind and gently take it towards satva.

Isvara Pranidhana in asana practice: At first glance, the word 'surrender' may carry the notation as weak, and something one shouldn't be working towards in the asana practice – isn't all this practice on the mat supposed to make us strong and flexible?

Surrendering in asana practice is in no way weak at all, it is in fact perhaps the strongest thing we can do. To surrender is not to 'give up' at all, and we can look at the aspect of surrendering in two different ways in our asana practice:

### **Surrender and Rest**

When one tries to overdo the practice beyond his capacity, he should stop and reflect. This is where the practice of ahimsa and satya come into play. If we continue to push *past* our edge – instead of leaning into it – our Yoga practice is no longer serving our bodies, and isn't sustainable. Knowing when we need to rest shows a huge amount of understanding of ourselves, respect for our bodies, and allows our practice to support us for a lifetime.

### **Surrender to the Posture**

Sometimes asana practice is about finding comfort within discomfort, leaning into one's boundaries and learning ways in which to deal with difficult situations. Yes, Yoga makes the practitioners feel *good*; it heals them when they are hurt, and it helps them find light when all they see is dark, but it also shows us them what they are made of when things get tough. Approaching a difficult arm balance or even holding virabhadrasana for 10 or more breaths can be

demanding – but it's when one surrenders to the discomfort, the strength and the power of the posture that one really feels and experiences oneself growing and transforming in that very moment. Staying in a posture for another few breaths and surrendering to how it feels *right now* shows one just how strong he can be in that very moment, and how even when the mind says he *can't*, the body shows him he *can*. The idea of 'surrendering' can also be applied to the intention one sets at the beginning of practice; *Isvara Pranidhana* can be thought of as 'offering up the results of one's actions to the divine', or perhaps to humanity. In this way, the asana practice becomes less about what it can do for the practitioners, but how it can help the practitioners stay healthy enough to help the world around them.

### **Isvara Pranidhana in one's work and 'dharma' or 'life duty'**

Surrendering one's ego and selfish desires is very closely linked to the concept of 'letting go of the fruits of one's actions' and 'non-attachment', which is a focal point of the Bhagavad Gita. If one has put a lot of effort into something which is important to him, he often worries about what might happen as a result. All this worrying about things one has no control over is a main cause of 'dukkha' or 'suffering', which means one is never fully engaged in the action one is doing because his mind is already thinking about what might happen *after*.... The practice of surrendering here requires one to acknowledge that one can do his very best in each situation, but he can't really do any more than that; realising this essentially allows one to fully engage and be *present* in what he is doing, bringing all his energy to that moment and experiencing it fully just for *what it is* – what happens after, happens *after*.

### **Isvara Pranidhana in day-to-day life**

In the normal daily life, *Isvara Pranidhana* can be seen as remaining open to experiencing life as it unfolds. Remaining fixed and rigid in one's conditioned patterns, habits and limitations only leads to a limited life. *Surrendering* is hugely challenging, because it means transcending the ego, and the ego will do everything it can to hold on to some control. Without the conditioning, worries, perceptions and judgements that one falsely holds so closely to him, the ego would not exist, and therefore it tries desperately to cling on when he works on quietening it. Surrendering to what *is* requires trust in one's deepest Self, his intuition and the courage to express himself for who he is, as he is, with all of one's perfect imperfections, which ultimately leads to freedom. How could one apply the practice of Isvara Pranidhana to his life?

Whether it's surrendering to a moment of difficulty or a moment of joy, surrendering the results of one's actions, or simply learning to trust in the Higher Consciousness; each time one *does* choose to surrender, he moves closer to freedom. An important tool in the path of Isvara Pranidhana is bhavana. *Bhavana* is an

intentional meditation technique used in yoga practice. In bhavana, the practitioner visualizes attaining a particular characteristic or becoming the Divine. Bhavana encompasses yogic vision during meditation, and is often used to set a tone or feeling for an individual or group practice. The practice of bhavana within meditation can be used to invite and visualize more compassion or kindness within the self, and can often be used to shape or influence the self to acquire positive characteristics or create positive change.

In addition, the power of the mind is used to imagine not only feelings, but occurrences in one's life. Doing this can influence the individual's life path. For example, the practitioner may choose to visualize that there is more room for healthy relationships in his life and then frequently meditates on this occurring. Eventually, the outcome will be that he sees fresh relationships appear as he makes time for them. Bhavana is also used by yoga teachers to set a specific feeling or mood at the beginning of a practice in a group setting. Satvika Thyagam is another concept in the furtherance of Isvara Pranidhana. The Satvika Thyagam (sacrifice) is the secret regarding performance of Karma by Karma Yogis. It is elaborately dealt with in Shree Bhagavat Gita and other scriptures. It consists of three thyagams. They are

1. Kartrutva Thyagam (Sacrifice the ego "I am the Doer of Karma")
2. Bokrutva Thyagam (Sacrifice the ego "I am the enjoyer of its result")
3. Phala Thyagam (Sacrifice the thought that "The Result is mine")

If all the karma is done as above for the satisfaction of the Lord and by the order of the Lord, then it fetches the mercy of the Lord which surely makes the man to go to higher levels. Otherwise, the karma binds the man and he suffers in the material world again and again. The above tools help greatly in the path of Isvara Pranidhana and the practical approach will certainly take one to the higher level.

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