

## **The Cave of the Heart**

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The Cave of the Heart is the name of a famous work by modern dance pioneer Martha Graham. As a former dancer myself, this phrase always brought to mind Graham's intense dance piece and its psychological drama, rather than an image of peaceful abiding within oneself. After my first trip to Pune to study with the Iyengars, this phrase has a very different meaning for me. In one of Geeta Iyengar's classes as we sat and prepared for the Invocation to Patanjali she said, "Be in your cave." She explained that the ancient yogis went to a cave to be undistracted. In the same way, Geeta said that our body is our cave when we turn inward and quiet our minds. She reminded us to keep the eyes and head still. When the eyes move around, the brain is busy with thoughts. When the eyes and the head become still, Geeta explained, then we are in our cave.

At the end of the invocation, we bow the head and salute the light within. At this moment, the head is humbled to the heart, and the ego sublimated to the soul, *atman*. Geeta's words still resonate within me – "Let the head be empty and the heart full." When the brain becomes quiet and consciousness rests in the heart center, it is possible to experience peace and freedom from mental fluctuations, *vrttis*.

In Sutra I:36, ***visoka va jyotismati***, the practice of awareness in the heart is given by Patanjali as a method of stilling the mind (*citta nirodhaha*) and establishing a diffused, favorable consciousness (*citta prasadanam*.) It is illuminating to study various translations of the sutra in order to contemplate the subtleties of its meaning.

In *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, BKS Iyengar translates as follows:

**Or, inner stability is gained by contemplating a luminous, sorrowless, effulgent light.**

Mr. Iyengar writes that "concentration is on the innermost core of the heart, wherein alone the sorrowless, effulgent light glows." He goes on to explain that the effort of stilling the consciousness (*citta*) brings forth the sorrowless effulgent light of the soul. Studying this translation and commentary led me to the question: does the stable mind come from focus on the inner light, or does the experience of inner light emerge once the mind is quiet? From the translation and explanation, it seems that both approaches are valid.

The translation of Chip Hartranft offers a slightly different perspective.

**Or when experiencing thoughts that are luminous and free of sorrow.**

This translation implies that the practice involves not only the placement of awareness in the heart, but also monitoring the content of the thoughts and quality of the emotions. Hartranft suggests that positive thoughts that are free of grief can take the place of distracting ones.

Yoga scholar Georg Feuerstein also implies conscious direction of thought in his translation and commentary.

**Or restriction is achieved by mental activities which are sorrowless and illuminating.**

Feuerstein writes that this mental activity follows concentration on the 'lotus of the heart' or the 'heart center' in which various light phenomena can be experienced in the state of meditation.

Another translation comes from Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood:

**Concentration may also be attained by fixing the mind upon the Inner Light, which is beyond sorrow.**

This commentary quotes the Kaivalya Upanishad, saying "The supreme heaven shines in the lotus of the heart." The heart center is said to be the abode of the soul or *atman*. With consciousness steadily placed here, we may experience a state of bliss, free from desire and grief.

This beautiful and inspiring sutra offers instructions for establishing a steady, quiet mind. The attention is placed in a physical location (*desa*,) the heart center. We are told to contemplate a sorrowless inner light in that area. The commentaries also teach that more profound experiences of this sorrowless inner light are results of the practice.

I find that this practice can be done in a formal way, and also in a spontaneous way in every day life. For formal practice, I may sit quietly and place my attention in the center of my chest. This is a quieting and joyful practice. I may attempt to keep the mind silent, or may recite the sutra, silently or aloud. Another approach is to consciously cultivate a positive inner state. I may recall a deeply relaxing Savasana or focus on my feeling of gratitude for having the teachings of yoga in my life. With this joyful feeling within, I return to silence. This type of practice really pays off in every day life in what I think of as informal practice. In a tough moment, I may place my hand on my heart to bring my awareness to that area. This immediately calms me and helps me deal more patiently and lovingly with the situation at hand. The ability to use this method in the moment is based on the practice time that it has been given on the mat. Another lovely time to put this sutra into practice is during our last conscious moments in bed at night. Putting attention on the heart helps to quiet thoughts about the day, and creates a calm state that brings deep, refreshing sleep.

While in Pune, I had the opportunity to study more commentaries on this sutra in the RIMYI library. Often Mr. Iyengar was present, writing or meeting with individuals. It was an amazing feeling to be in his presence while studying the deep wisdom of Patanjali's work. Commentaries on this sutra describe the experience of this focused placement of attention in the heart as being like a waveless ocean, vast and peaceful. In this state, the practitioner is free of sorrow and the mind becomes lucid.

Pandit Arya writes: "As one practices concentration (*dharana*) in the heart lotus, the apprehension of *buddhi* (intelligence) there is such that the *sattva* (illuminated quality) of *buddhi* is luminous and clear like the sky." He goes on to say that the mind becomes "pacific and infinite like a great ocean without any waves and is identified only as 'I am' (*asmita*.) The *buddhi* is experienced "like a clear illuminated sky or space." He further describes appearances of "lights and radiances like the sun" which the practitioner may experience. In his commentary TS Rukamani also describes sense activity which assumes the brilliance of the sun, moon or gems. He reiterates the experience of a waveless ocean, unlimited, with only a sense of "I am" remaining.

The effects of various yogic techniques, such as focusing on the heart, are being scientifically confirmed through current research on meditation and the body-mind connection. One research and educational organization that has focused on the brain-heart relationship is the HeartMath Institute. In the Introduction on their web site, they explain their mission:

"At the Institute of HeartMath (IHM) Research Center, we are exploring the physiological mechanisms by which the heart communicates with the brain, thereby influencing information processing, perceptions, emotions and health." Through scientifically rigorous research, the HeartMath Institute has found that positive emotions create increased harmony and coherence in heart rhythms and improve balance in the nervous system. They have learned that when attention is brought to the heart, people experience shifts in perception and improved ability to deal with stress. They believe that the heart has a profound influence on how we perceive and respond to the world. "The heart is, in fact, a highly complex, self-organized information processing center with its own functional "brain" that communicates with and influences the cranial brain via the nervous system, hormonal system and other pathways. These influences profoundly affect brain function and most of the body's major organs, and ultimately determine the quality of life."

The HeartMath Institute has developed a number of techniques that help people to bring the heart and brain into a synchronized rhythm that they call coherence. The first of these, which they call Freeze-Frame, is remarkably similar to Patanjali's teaching in Sutra I:36. "Freeze-Frame, the most basic of the HeartMath techniques, in essence allows people to disengage from draining mental and emotional reactions in the moment by shifting their attention from the mind to the area around the heart and self-generating a sincere positive feeling state such as appreciation, love or care. This process prevents or reverses the body's normal destructive stress response, and changes the bodily feedback sent to the brain, thus arresting physiological and psychological wear and tear." The HeartMath Institute uses this technique to teach people to change their perceptions and reactions through conscious placement of awareness in the heart and by cultivating positive emotional states. It is encouraging to learn that ancient teachings and modern science agree.

Most of us who are committed to yoga practice don't especially need scientific validation of its effectiveness. Our experiences speak for themselves. Yet it is fascinating and deeply confirming to learn that science is acknowledging the power of consciousness, the brain-heart relationship, and the profound shift that occurs in consciousness and experience when we focus on the heart.

### **References**

Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sutra of Patanjali*

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Pandit Usharbudh Arya, *Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali with the Exposition of Vyasa*

Institute of HeartMath Research Center, [www.heartmath.org](http://www.heartmath.org)