

Chapter 14 The Spiritual roots of yoga

There are many forms of yoga, ranging from the yoga practiced by Indian yogis, steeped in occult practices, mantras and traditions, to the popularized yoga for the Western consumer.

Yoga as practiced in the West has the image of being healthful, giving us control over mind, body and spirit. But true yoga can never be separated from its spiritual roots.

The word 'yoga' comes from the Sanskrit root, 'yui' which means 'to unite' with the infinite and supreme, universal consciousness. It is a system of self-realization and self-perfection. A yogi's ultimate aim is to be able to attain this 'union' with the Eternal Self with the help of certain mental and physical exercises. Yoga is a strict spiritual discipline involving "the mind-body complex". This means both mind and body are inseparably interconnected in the disciplines and practices (or exercises) of the yoga student. As the body is a source of distraction to the progress of the true-self, it has to be mastered by the mind. By quietening the mind and looking within, one can discover the true-self and so unite with 'god'. Yoga is one of the six great spiritual teachings of Hinduism, with its own distinct interpretation of the Hindu sacred scripture, the Vedas. Hinduism came into being about 6000 years ago.¹

Most Westerners see yoga as a purely practical tool for the balancing of body, emotions and mind through postures, breath techniques and meditation. Although the spiritual aim of yoga is difficult for Westerners to comprehend, it is nevertheless vital to grasp. Not to do so is to remain ignorant of the essential and foundational aim of yoga, and thereby start on a serious journey with unforeseen implications. As previously stated, the aim of yoga is to unite with the infinite and supreme, universal consciousness. What is not readily conveyed through words is that this "union" involves the loss of identity.

Jeevah, explained it this way: "Imagine a water droplet about to drop into the ocean. As the droplet enters the ocean, although it disappears, it is still there but now in a merged form, indistinguishable to the infinite number of other water droplets. So it is with you Paul. You are that water droplet. When you go to be with 'god', you merge with the infinite 'ocean' of consciousness. You will exist in another form, indistinguishable from 'god'. You have become one with 'god'."

I can't help feeling that when identity has been lost, a person ceases to exist! Yet unaware of this dire prospect, most people in the West see yoga today as nothing much more than a series of physical exercises. For the Western consumer, yoga is presented as a technique to master the mind and the body, devoid of spiritual consequences.

Yoga that is supposedly devoid of religious dogma is known as Hatha yoga. However at the roots of Hatha yoga, physical processes and spiritual power

are closely linked. In all styles of yoga, the spiritual and physical cannot be separated. All forms of yoga have their roots in mystical Hinduism.

Through physical strengthening of the body, some believe that they develop a deeper sense of who they are as a person, leading to improvement of self-esteem. It is believed that as the body becomes more flexible, so the mind becomes more open to deeper things. Yoga is seen as a balancing tool that relaxes when feeling stressed, and inspires when feeling dull and unmotivated. Through relaxation techniques and guided meditation, not only physical benefits happen, but also the person gains the strength to be himself, and so follow his heart. Popularized Western yoga is attractive because there is no dogma to embrace. Most Westerners see it as just another form of exercise, and a good one at that – a form of exercise that does not strain or over-exert the body, and one which offers great health benefits.

Some of the claimed benefits of yoga are:

- Strengthening of the heart and circulation;
- Dissipation of stress through controlled breathing;
- Increased vitality and clarity of thinking through improved lung function and increased oxygen flow;
- Strengthening of the hips, spine and legs through controlled exercises;
- Toning of the whole body;
- Relaxation of the nervous system;
- Improved flexibility and relaxation of the muscular system;
- Release of toxins and the calming of the mind.

The list of health benefits is impressive, but regardless, I would advise people not to practice yoga. Instead I would recommend pursuing health benefits through lifestyle, nutrition and some of the practices outlined later.

The foundation of Jeevah's organization was Patanjali yoga. Patanjali was an early Hindu scholar, who was believed to be reincarnated in human form to help humanity. He wrote 196 statements, or 'sutras', covering all aspects of life, including a code of conduct by which a noble and honourable life can be lived. Each sutra contains an idea that is supposed to guide the student towards knowledge of their true self.

For example, "Everything around you is constantly changing. However there is something within you that is not changing. Inquiring into and observing this 'something', brings one closer to the truth of existence, the truth of what we are."

While Patanjali yoga seems to be free of religious practices, it is subtly entwined with religion, that religion being Hinduism.

Patanjali yoga, stripped of mantras and ceremonial rites that are integral to Hinduism, was the version of yoga taught at our school. It was a synthesis of

all yoga forms, a distilled methodology, freed from extraneous, religious non-essentials. Patanjali taught eight disciplines that were necessary in yoga:

1. Abstinence from harming others, from theft and greed
2. Physical and mental purity
3. Physical posture exercises designed to bring about such mastery of the body that one's concentration is not distracted
4. Breath control, in order to gain mastery of the vital energy by which we live
5. Withdrawal or mental detachment from desire
6. Fixing the mind of a single point, the spiritual energy centre of the body
7. Meditation; being able to direct a steady, unbroken flow of thought towards the point on which one is concentrating
8. "Self-collectedness": being able to see the object of concentration as it really is, without mental distortion. In this final discipline, one could experience "bliss", in losing consciousness of the body, breath, mind, intelligence and ego. ²

Common to all forms of yoga is the attention to breathing and the cultivation of stillness within. Meditation is a practice of withdrawing from the busy world for fifteen to twenty minutes each day to take part in a procedure for releasing stress. Meditators must avoid concentrating on anything in particular. Concentration holds the mind at one level and will not allow it to submerge into a deeper level. The aim is not to direct your mind in any specific direction. The purpose is supposedly to give the meditator deep rest, making him more energetically active. Meditation is meant to bring about a state of consciousness, which allows the mind to be awake while the body is in a state of deep rest. By allowing the mind to go into neutral the person is supposedly brought into tune with the universe. ³

With meditation comes the cultivating of the power of the mind over the body. The progressive steps are firstly the observation of the breathing, and then the emptying of the mind by focusing on rhythmical or controlled breathing. Secondly the physical movements or exercises. The emptying of the mind places the person in a state whereby he becomes susceptible to unknown spiritual "forces" or entities beyond his experience. This is because his thinking power has been suspended, and his free will to choose what is right and wrong is not operating. At this point supernatural powers of the darker side may enter his mind. In our yoga school, this practice of emptying the mind was performed as preparation for the physical exercises. The stilling of one's mind was known as 'conditioning', and had an integral part to play in the practices to follow.

In traditional Indian yoga, mind and body control can produce some remarkable effects. Some more experienced yoga practitioners can sometimes consciously control what are normally involuntary functions of the human body including pulse rate, digestion and kidney activity. Alpha brainwaves, which correspond to a state of serenity and peaceful alertness, can be measured. An experiment on a Hindu doctor in 1963 showed the rhythm of

the alpha brainwaves to be so regular and monotonous that they were difficult to interrupt, even with distractions such as strong light, loud noises and the immersion of the hands in iced water for forty-five minutes. ⁴

Jeevah too confirmed that indeed great feats were possible when the yoga adept had mastered his own body, thereby exercising complete control over normally involuntary functions. One such feat was to stop breathing but not die. This brought the person into a state of hibernation where breathing is suspended. According to Jeevah, a person in such a state had once been placed into a sealed chamber without air. The person remained in the chamber beyond the time limit for human survival, yet the person came out of the chamber unaffected. Another feat that showed the degree of mind over body was the ability to mentally track the passage of something swallowed, through the digestive system. If a rose petal was swallowed, a person could have control of the rose petal's exit from the body.

The traditional Hindu yogi was able to choose when to leave his body and this world. Yogis believe that when the mind is so perfected and has reached such an exalted level of purity one can leave the physical body and end one's life. According to the author of "Death of a Guru", this actually happened. Rabindranath Maharaj, son of a renowned yogi, describes his father's death after a progressive life of meditation. Rabindranath was only five years old at the time. ⁵

Kundalini yoga is the darker side of yoga. Kundalini is the word used to describe an immensely powerful energy force believed to lie, coiled and dormant at the base of the spine. Kundalini yoga involves various techniques for awakening the energy force and making it rise slowly up the spinal column. As it rises, it passes through the seven psychic centres of the human body, with the highest one at the top of the skull. As it contacts each psychic centre, various psychic experiences take place. When eventually the practitioner becomes skilled enough to raise the kundalini to the highest centre, he receives the ability to perform miracles. These miracles, which do occur, are made possible through occult powers. ⁶

In the West there is a predisposition to rubbish things spiritual, that is, phenomena resulting from the activities of spirits, which can enter our dimension of the five senses. This skepticism is a deception, resulting in the acceptance of a lie. What is this lie?...that the "world" of spirit forces, both angels and demons, is always a figment of the imagination.

Yoga tailor-made for the West therefore downplays the spiritual, but this is not to say that it doesn't exist. Jeevah's yoga teaching didn't overtly display the use of the miraculous through the use of spiritual power. We did not practice kundalini yoga, with its obvious occult base. However like all genuine yoga groups we did practice pranayama (breathing combined with movement). These practices stimulate energy centres (chakras) and open up powers and energies that may be asleep in the individual. I do believe that

such powers influenced Jeevah. He had an uncanny ability to read minds. He had seemingly supernatural control over individuals who succumbed to his authority. Did Jeevah alone inspire two hundred people into unswerving loyalty? Or was he assisted by a supernatural power? It is my belief that spirits did in fact assisted him, even if he was unaware of their presence. Why would Jeevah openly admit to spiritual assistance anyway when he could claim the kudos for himself? Nor would spirit beings "break their cover", knowing full well they ran the risk of being acted against thus losing their power over the individual.

Westerners deny the Hindu roots with its obvious unattractive ceremony, by pointing to the good outcomes and benefits from the "cleansed" version of yoga so often practiced in the West. But does offering healing from physical ailments like asthma and drug addiction mean that yoga can only be good? My experience has shown otherwise. Denying the existence of the spirit world out of fear or skepticism doesn't prove anything. Seeking truth will eventually resolve the matter one way or the other.

End notes

1. Allan, J., Yoga – A Christian Analysis, U.K. 1983, p.12
2. Ibid, p. 15
3. Burrell, M.C., The Challenge of the Cults, U.K., 1981, p.99
4. Allan, J., op. cit., p.9
5. Maharaj, R. R., Death of a Guru, U.K 1978
6. Allan, J., op. cit., p.6