

## Yoga: A Theosophical Perspective

Yoga has become a popular, even fashionable, activity in the West. Yet, many people believe it to be merely a form of physical exercise that might require standing on one's head, twisting the body into various postures, or practicing breath control. That is like supposing that theoretical physics is just a manipulation of the information in the periodic table of elements or that performing a Mozart concerto is just a variation of playing scales.

Yoga may also seem to be a strange cultural import from the East with no practical value for the Westerner. But in some ways, Yoga is similar to traditional Western spiritual practices. Essentially, it is a technique of self-discovery, and in that sense, is neither Eastern nor Western, but universal.

Western popularizations of Yoga have tended to center on one system of this great science. That system, which uses various physical exercises, including controlled breathing, is known as *hatha yoga*, but this system—like all the other systems of Yoga—also includes the practice of meditation. Although hatha yoga emphasizes the training of the physical body, that training is for the purpose of rendering the body subservient to the spiritual Self within. In this way, it is not unlike the traditional Western positions of worshippers in liturgical churches, which include standing, kneeling, prostrations, and sitting.

The physical disciplines of hatha yoga provide definite health benefits, but without an understanding of the essential purpose of Yoga itself, they have little value beyond a method of physical culture. Practiced without proper preparation and guidance, they may even put a strain on the body. For this reason, other methods of Yoga may be more suitable for many Westerners.

Another system of Yoga that has been popularized in the West is *mantra yoga*, which involves the repetition or chanting of sacred phrases or words with concentrated attention. Mantra yoga involves a knowledge of the esoteric potency of sound, for its aim is to tune the personal nature to a subtler keynote than the ordinary waking consciousness, so that ultimately the individual may hear the inner Divine Voice.

Mantra yoga is similar to a number of Western practices: plainsong or Gregorian chant, the saying of the rosary, the recitation of a litany, or in Eastern Christianity, the "Jesus prayer," which is the repetition of the name of Jesus. All of these are techniques for focusing the mind and concentrating spiritual awareness.

From this brief reference to two systems of Yoga that have claimed some attention among Western students, it is apparent that the goal of Yoga is to alter the personal

nature, to make it more responsive to the inner Self. The word itself gives us a clue to what Yoga is really about. *Yoga* is a Sanskrit word that comes from the same ancient root as English *yoke* and Latin *jungere* (which we have in words like *junction*, *junction*, and *join*). That root means “union.”

The union that is Yoga’s aim may be experienced at various levels. The forces of our body and mind, which are often tugging at each other in different directions, need to be united—to be brought into harmony. The united body and mind in turn need to be connected with something still deeper, which we may call Spirit, or the immortal Self, our real identity behind the evanescent personality. And, finally, there is the ultimate union of our individual Spirit with the Universal or Supreme Spirit, which is both imminent and transcendent.

Union with the Infinite is the highest goal of Yoga; the various forms of this ancient science are designed to lead eventually to that supreme union. Because of this identity of aim in all the forms, the word *yoga* is used to designate all the methods by which union is achieved. Each method is a technique of self-exploration, involving a system of self-training that leads toward the goal.

Many methods of Yoga overlap in their use of certain techniques, and all of them recognize the validity of certain basic disciplines. The latter include right physical discipline, right breathing, right moral behavior with respect to others and with respect to oneself, and the practice of meditation. The attunement and integration of every aspect of one’s nature—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual—is the goal of Yoga as well as the foundation of all the disciplines taught by the various systems.

The practice of real Yoga is no easy task, for it involves a harmonization of one’s whole being. It also requires that one’s motive for self-realization must be selfless, without thought of self-aggrandizement or the achievement of power over others. Yoga is a means of altruism or *agape*, a term used by the early Christians for divine love expressed in our lives.

Among the various forms of Yoga, four are especially valuable for Western students. They are appropriate because their successful use requires less guidance and direction than some of the other methods. These four systems are all interconnected and are by no means exclusive of each other. Each focuses on one aspect of our total being and therefore supplements the others.

*Karma yoga* is the path of action. It is suitable for those who are moved by a passionate sympathy for suffering, and wish to do something about it. Those who follow this path of action purify their motives, removing all taint of self-interest. It is the path of Mother Teresa and others like her who devote their lives to service.

To practice karma yoga, however, we do not need to join a religious order or move to India. Every helpful act, every unselfish thought or word, is a practice of karma yoga. Through simple concern for the welfare of others, we can all be practitioners of karma yoga and come to an ever-closer union with the Divine Life, which is in all things and all beings.

*Bhakti yoga* is the way of devotion. It places the emphasis on love, not just as an emotion, but as a dedication and self-surrender to the Supreme Reality, in whatever form it may be conceived. That form may be an incarnation of the Godhead, such as Christ or Krishna. It may be a great sage, a God-realized or enlightened person whom the devotee follows. It may even be a mental image of the divine, such as the Divine Mother.

This is the yoga on which Christianity and some other great religions are based. It is a path that helps many people to begin their climb to the mountain peak of spiritual union—the way for those with devotional natures, whose joy is to lose themselves in adoration of the Divine. But we can all follow it by honoring the sources of wisdom and compassion, wherever they appear.

*Jñāna yoga* puts emphasis on knowledge—not just ordinary factual knowledge, but insight into the eternal truths that lie beneath the surface facts of life. The word *jñāna* is related to the English “to know” and the Greek *gnosis*. It refers to knowledge resulting from a direct experience of reality.

H. P. Blavatsky said that *jñāna yoga* is especially suited for Westerners. One who follows it continually strives for a fuller and deeper understanding of the meaning of life. Like a good scientist, the practitioner of *jñāna yoga* is not afraid to discard outworn theories or views of reality, but ever seeks an undistorted vision of the whole. We can each practice this Yoga by viewing with critical discrimination all ideas around us and reserving judgment on what we do not understand.

*Raja yoga*—the kingly science—incorporates the main features of all the others. This royal road includes disciplines to order one’s life, purify the emotions, expand the intellect, and unify all the constituent parts of one’s being with a single intention. It aims at disentangling one’s self-identification from the fluctuating personality and realizing oneself as something more, a divine immortal being identical with the universal Divine Life.

Those who follow the system of *raja yoga* often turn to the *Yoga Sūtras* of the great Indian sage, Patanjali, who lived in the second or third century B.C.E. The aphorisms in the *Yoga Sūtras* set forth the preparatory steps for the practice of Yoga and then describe the actual practice itself. The preparation involves right action in

thought, word, and deed—living by the ethical principles found in every religion—and the physical discipline preliminary to Yoga proper.

The actual practice involves regular introspection by which the Self within may be realized. It begins with finding a quiet place, relaxing the body, and closing the windows of the senses, shutting oneself off for a time from the distractions of the world, and preparing oneself to take the transitional step of consciousness from external to internal states of awareness. It is not a practice to be undertaken sporadically but needs to be followed day after day, year after year, if it is to be done properly and to achieve results.

Patanjali laid great stress on the control and stilling of the mind. He even defined Yoga as “the restraint of the modifications of the mind,” and for that purpose he prescribed three steps—concentration, meditation, and contemplation. Each merges into the other in practice, but they are described separately for the purpose of study.

It is necessary to begin with concentration because the mind does not want to settle down—it becomes filled with memories, desires, and all kinds of inconsequential reveries; it is disturbed by worries and details. The purpose of concentration is to help this restless mind focus on an object or idea and thus shut out all irrelevant and distracting thoughts. It is helpful to begin with some simple object of attention, physical or mental, and become completely intent on and absorbed in it.

From that state of concentration comes the next step, meditation, which is a regular flow of thought with regard to the object—whether it be a flower, an intangible quality, a great teacher, or an abstract idea. Meditation is a deeper process than concentration and leads to a state in which one enters into and realizes and becomes that upon which one is thinking. In this way one goes beyond mere images and forms and identifies with the life within.

Then comes the climactic state of contemplation, when one is no longer concerned with an object or idea or being, but passes beyond it to a state of utter stillness (a dynamic, not a passive state). Then—from the spiritual Self into the mortal mind—there may come a flash of illumination and insight, or a deep sense of unity and oneness.

The experience of contemplation is much more than an emotive feeling or perception of the sort that can be artificially induced. It brings the realization of wholeness and dynamic peace. It does not bypass consciousness or self-control, but transforms the person and brings an illumination and inner certainty that can be of great practical help in daily life.

The ultimate goal of Yoga—union with the Supreme Spirit—is called *samadhi* or (in Zen Buddhism) *satori* or (in Christian mysticism) “God-consciousness.” Regardless

of the term used, it means the liberation of the individual spirit from the prison house of earthly limited consciousness. The experience of that state of unified bliss has been described in *The Light of Asia* as, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea." Paradoxically, it might also be described as the sea slipping into the dewdrop.

### **More Information on Yoga**

*Glimpses Into the Psychology of Yoga*, by I. K. Taimni.

*Introduction to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (audio CD), by Ravi Ravindra.

*An Introduction to Yoga*, by Annie Besant.

*Raja Yoga* (audio CD), by Radha Burnier.

*The Science of Yoga*, by I. K. Taimni.

*Seven Schools of Yoga*, by Ernest Wood.

*Yoga Beyond Fitness*, by Tom Pilarzyk.

*Yoga for Your Spiritual Muscles*, by Rachel Schaeffer.

*The Yoga of the Upanishads* (audio CD), by Ianthe Hoskins.

*The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (audio CD), by Renee Weber.