

Yoga in the 21st Century

by Neville Cregan



Any of us who have practised Yoga for any length of time inevitably become more curious about the origins and nature of what we are doing. Most modern day Yoga in the West is a child born of a sprawling ancient esoteric Indian tradition conjoined with western health and fitness professions.

Historically, the development of many of the styles Yoga we practise today in the West has been stimulated by an odd box combination of influences including colonialism, the advent of mass travel, human creativity and historical accident (in the sense that it has depended to a large degree which teachers happen to have been 'noticed' as to which ideas have caught on.)

In addition to the historical story, much of what we do now has essentially developed as a creative response to an old Eastern tradition transplanted into a modern culture. This process has led to an interesting cross fertilisation of ideas, a re-evaluation of some aspects of the practice and a sorting out of which elements of the tradition are universally relevant and which are cultural and religious baggage from India.

At its simplest, we could say Yoga is a deep inner vision of the oneness of all of life and that all Yoga practices are designed to uncover this vision. Related and running parallel to this are health and healing focused therapeutic models of Yoga.

Whilst there are traditional core Indian texts that form the philosophical and theoretical basis of Yoga, there has also always been great diversity of practice in India ranging from strictly scheduled and regulated ashram regimes through to the wilder borderlands of some traditions of tantric Yoga, with plenty in between.

The arrival of Yoga in the West led some western health and fitness professionals to analyse and describe it in their own terms. As a result most western Yoga teachers are now trained in an interesting, if at times seemingly inconsistent, combination of western anatomy, physiology and health care as well as Indian philosophy, healing, esotericism and spirituality.

Western teachers have met students with a changing range of mental, physical and spiritual needs created by a secular modern

lifestyle. Importantly, the on-going exchange between teachers and students is in large part what reinvigorates the practice for each generation in their particular culture and time.

Sri Krishnamacharya, the 20th century Indian source of much modern Yoga, said that Yoga was India's gift to the world, suggesting that the teachings of Yoga apply universally and need not be entwined with Indian religion and culture.

None the less, his life offers a good example of how some Yoga practices evolve creatively in relation to prevailing cultural influences. In his book 'The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace', the Dutch writer N E Sjoman describes perfectly the creative processes of Yoga practice and teaching that went on in Krishnamacharya's Yogashala. According to Sjoman, it seems that as well as being influenced by a variety of traditional Indian sources and his own teachers and experiences, Krishnamacharya also borrowed ideas from British military training and western gymnastics.

So what has happened to Yoga since its large scale arrival in Europe and America? That the West has analysed Yoga in fresh ways through the lens of western anatomy, physiology and neuroscience, and thereby reaffirmed in new ways many of the health benefits of the practice has generally been a good thing. Importantly this has also allowed Yoga to be introduced to new western students within their own framework of understanding.

Perhaps more complex has been the sifting through the Indian

material life are viewed as being of no ultimate value and are therefore to be transcended, can cause problems. While this view can provide a balance to an overly materialist view, arguably it can lead to a neglect of outer responsibilities. If ultimately all is one, then that surely includes the body and material life too.

Western approaches to Yoga are sometimes accused of being overly concerned with the asanas, which might at times seem to be the case, but, on considering the above potentially negative aspects of both Western and Indian spiritual and secular culture, there may be reasons why this is a necessary approach to start with.

For us in the West, a balanced asana practice that can develop a healthy, strong body which you properly inhabit, but are not dominated by, or obsessed with, or disgusted with, is arguably essential. We can reclaim our bodies, instincts and energies, and embrace them as part of the means to transform ourselves. The proper meaning of Hatha Yoga – the unification of opposites – whilst specifically referring to esoteric energetic rebalancing – encourages us to integrate all aspects of ourselves. Whether we look at the body through the lens of neuroscience or the energetic language of the East, it's clear that the body opens windows to many aspects of ourselves.

All of this begs the question of what could be an authentic practice in the modern day that goes in deep enough to be transformative in understanding the underlying forces that determine our lives, but not

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tradition to shed what is perceived to be culturally alien and arguably relevant only to Hindus (such as devotional practices to gods). Some people wish to transplant elements of the Hindu religion into their western Yoga practice and some don't.

On the positive side, the sifting process has arguably helped streamline the practice to what is universally relevant. On the negative side it can lead to the tendency in some to set their own agenda and just take what they want from the practice to support the mores of a scientific materialist consumer society. Similarly our tendency towards reductionist science, with its insistence on linear proofs, may at times have led some to too easily reject more esoteric yogic ideas that require practice rather than analysis to understand.

A related issue for westerners is that of patient persistent practice. Yoga is a lengthy apprenticeship for most of us and there is much in our culture that does not encourage this. That said, some historical Indian traditions of Hatha Yoga can appear overly lengthy, prescriptive and dogmatic making them almost impossible to practice within the demands of a modern lifestyle (and still have a life!)

The West has also had some historical religious/cultural negativity to shed. Some aspects of western religions have tended to denigrate the body and its instincts and energies as defiled and to be suppressed. The tragic results of this in some branches of Christianity are well documented.

Add to this modern day obsessions with image, youth and beauty combined with our 'heady' education system and many people in the West have been left out of touch with, or in a false relationship with, their embodiment.

Similarly some Indian interpretations of Yoga, whereby the body and

so deep as to get lost and neglect our outer responsibilities? There is no one answer to that, but the task for many western Yoga teachers has been to try to create models of Yoga that offer a realistic practice whilst paying respect to timelessly relevant aspects of the Indian tradition.

It could be said that the interface where different approaches, philosophies and cultures meet, and perhaps even seem inconsistent with each other, produces a creative tension out of which the most interesting developments can happen. Tie that in with individual temperament and needs and you get the flowering of different expressions of Yoga each of which will speak to different people.

If Patanjali's statement "Yoga is the stilling of the thought waves of the mind" is what the practice is ultimately about, then perhaps how we get there may not matter too much. What we all must ultimately do is reinvigorate and reinvent the practice within ourselves and within our own culture and time so that it truly makes sense to us. This will surely lead to the flowering of a truly 21st century discipline. Whatever is truly of universal value, beyond cultural trends, will become part of the tradition. Namaste to that.



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