

Yoga....just add water

The History of Yoga

Rarely is much said about the history of yoga in today's yoga world, except perhaps that it comes from India and extends back long ago...

To most, the history of yoga remains veiled in a mystical culture of an ancient and far-off land. Yes, the roots of yoga do lie in the ancient culture of India, where they remain firmly planted even till this day.

... But yoga's history is not only for the academically minded. Understanding where yoga has come from, how it evolved, and the culture from which the teachings come is an important part of getting the most out of your yoga practice...

Why Learn About the History of Yoga?

I suppose that the average person who 'practices yoga' now-a-days would have little more than a mild interest in the history of yoga.

Though I've studied yoga for quite some time, I can honestly say that I never really had a deep grasp upon this profound science until I began to look more closely at the culture from whence it came.

Learning yoga without touching on its traditions, to me, is like learning to cook without ever tasting the food. The ancient teachings are as much a part of yoga as any system of stretches, breathing practices or chanting of 'Om' could ever be.

But though a trip to India may not be 'in the cards' for everyone, yoga practitioners of all levels and backgrounds would certainly stand to benefit by taking the time to learn a little about Indian culture and the history of yoga... because...

... It is in the history of yoga and the exploration of historical Indian culture itself is where many untold gems of wisdom and understanding lay hidden.

Obviously, this is no small field of study. To start, here's a brief summary outline of the history of yoga...

The History of Yoga - A Summary

You might have a sense that the yoga of today has changed considerably from its ancient origins, and you'd certainly be correct... However, there have been more than just recent alterations to this ancient science. The long history of yoga has seen its practice undergo many transformations over the ages...

The origin of yoga extends back thousands of years. Historically, its teachings were transmitted in the Guru-Chela tradition, an intimate, one-to-one personal manner from Guru (teacher) to disciple (Chela).

... In these earliest times, the sole purpose of yoga was the attainment of the highest spiritual goals: self-realization, enlightenment, and the liberation of the individual soul.



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Yoga remained in this relatively pure and altruistic form for thousands of years, until as late as around 500 A.D. when many 'other forms' began to emerge under the inspiration and direction of several influential masters.

The start of this period marks a significant departure in the history of yoga, as the ambitions of yoga began to concern themselves more with social needs, and the teachings began to be transformed into movements for not only the highest spiritual attainment of the individual, but also for the betterment of society as a whole.

But from about 1500 A.D. onwards, the lofty spiritual aims of yoga had already started to become more and more mundane. Teachers began to shift their primary emphasis onto the physical practices of Hatha Yoga, such as asana (postures) and pranayama (breath control), quite often overlooking altogether the higher spiritual aims and the deeper aspects concerned with personal transformation and self-awareness...

... Eventually, developing a flexible, strong and healthy body became the primary aim of yoga.

Yoga, Then and Now

"In most recent times the materialist; consumerist ethos has almost completely enveloped the ancient spiritual science of yoga and has altered it to an almost unrecognizable extent. The science of Yoga, which was designed to free man of his body consciousness and enable him to rise above it, has now become a vehicle for enhancing body consciousness. The 'cult of flexibility' has emerged." Smt. Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani, "Yoga in Modern Times"

The history of yoga continues to be written to this day. Certainly a lot of confusion surrounds the term yoga now, to a large extent a result of the fact that its propagation has seen a veritable explosion around the globe in a relatively short period of time.

Within the most recent decade, that explosion has reached near atomic proportions, with 'yoga' finding itself among the fastest growing trends in pop-culture today... a multi-billion dollar industry that continues to extend its visage into nearly every facet of modern day life.

Needless to say, the 'yoga of today' has moved a long way away from its historical foundations.

Its unfoldment has been a result of numerous periods of cultural transitions and influence. Let's take a brief look at the unfolding history of yoga ...

The Earliest History of Yoga

Peering through the history of yoga, we find that the very earliest practice of it can be traced back to what we could rightly call the Prehistoric Period. This was the time before the written word, when the sages organized their spiritual realizations into teachings that could be transmitted to their disciples orally, in an intimate, one-to-one manner.



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Yoga was a purely oral tradition at this time, which may even stretch back as far as ten thousand years in history. Yoga ashrams (hermitages) were in forests and other inaccessible places. Very few could even find such places, let alone study there.

The teachings were given only to those who were considered pure and fit (the adhikarin), and the relationship between the teacher and student was life-long and revered. This structure was known as the gurukula, which literally means ‘the womb of the guru’, as the student lived in the guru’s home and served him lovingly as part of his family.

The solitary aim of yoga at this time was moksha (freedom), or spiritual liberation.

The Historic Period of the History of Yoga

The period from about 7000 B.C. to 1500 A.D. was an era in the history of yoga when the teachings were written down, marking an end to the exclusively oral tradition of yoga. This is the period where we find a rich tradition of classical literature related to yoga, such as the Upanishads, the Yoga Vashishta, and the Bhagavad Gita.

During this era of the history of yoga, the purpose of yoga remained the high desire for moksha, ‘realization’, and ‘enlightenment’. The intimate manner of teaching between the guru and student remained as well.

Though the teachings were written down, they were done so in a highly secretive, coded form, and only those who had been properly initiated would be able to understand them.

The Rise of Prominent Yoga Teachers

It is within in this timeframe (from about 500 A.D. to 1500 A.D.) in the history of yoga that many teachers arose who started to concern themselves more with social needs. They organized large groups of seekers into sanghas (spiritual communities), and built powerful institutions.

The individualistic, highly spiritual aims of yoga gradually transformed into mass, collective movements, which, while retaining the high and noble aims of ‘union with Atman (God)’, also sought to improve society.

The Slow Decline of Yoga

The period of 1500 A.D. to 1893 could be considered a slowly declining period in the history of yoga, as the lofty spiritual aims of yoga started to become more and more mundane. Even esoteric knowledge was written down and distributed without discretion, and the physical hatha yoga practices began to rise in popularity.



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An interest in developing a strong, flexible and durable body became one of the principal aims of yoga. Physical feats and prowess became highly valued and several texts emerged making the physical practices associated with yoga more concrete and organized.

The Modern Period of the History of Yoga

Sept 11, 1893, when Swami Vivekananda made his historic address to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, is often regarded as the beginning of the Modern Era in the history of yoga... the point from which the movement of yogic concepts to the West swelled quickly into a powerful wave.

In little more than a century since then, yoga has seen an unprecedented rise in its dissemination worldwide. However, for the most part, its face has changed considerably from its ancient past...

... The ascetic values of ancient times - those of purity, simplicity and humility - have been all-but forgotten... Moral and ethical restraints have been cast aside in favour of contemporary cultural attitudes...

... and mastery of desires and the discipline of the body, mind and emotions replaced with a mind-set of permissive indulgence.

Physical fitness, enhanced sexuality and personal achievement have become the primary goals of yoga practice. As Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani states in her essay, "Yoga in Modern Times";

“In short, the modern yoga scene looks suspiciously like the ‘ordinary world’ which it had promised to transcend!”

The Cult of Yoga Personality

"Many other charismatic, energetic personalities have emerged in the last several decades propagating different ‘forms of yoga’. What their contribution to the great stream of yogic consciousness will be shall be ascertained only in the years to come.” Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani- "The History of Yoga"

This period in the history of yoga would see the emergence of several prominent ‘world teachers’ who would have great influence over the dissemination of yoga to the West.

It began with several Indian gurus that taught mainly in the advaitic (non-dualist) tradition of India, and whom did not put any emphasis on the physical practices such as yoga asanas and pranayama.

Along with some pertinent masters in the Bengali Tantric tradition who also came to recognition during this time,

... these masters would spawn a host of ‘new gurus’ who were often Western educated and much more business savvy...



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... and whose influence would further shape the culture of yoga as it is known today.

The Practical Yogis

This period also saw the emergence of a new class of yogis who endeavoured to bring yoga into 'practical use' for the modern society at large. Some sought modern scientific validation for the ancient yogic practices of asanas, pranayama and kriyas, and also embarked on scholarly academic analysis of the ancient Sanskrit literature.

Others aimed to make the concepts, practices and techniques of yoga available to all, especially to ordinary family people. Thus, yogic attitudes, simple asanas, pranayama, relaxation and health oriented techniques were systematically devised to help people solve the problems of daily living.

Stretching the Word 'Yoga' to the Limits

During this period in the history of yoga, where its practice began to gain mass, utilitarian appeal, a more vigorous, athletic, acrobatic approach to yoga asanas became attractive, especially to Westerners and those who were enticed by physical challenges.

Thus, many recent teachers of yoga have put primary emphasis on the practices of asana and pranayama, sometimes even neglecting the higher spiritual and morally based aims of the ancient science altogether...

... which is more than evident in today's yoga culture.

The Rapidly Changing Face of Yoga

The last 100 years has seen this science from ancient India undergo more significant transformations than any other period in the history of yoga... and now, as we advance firmly into the 21st century, yoga has reached unprecedented popularity worldwide.

In most every major city in the world, one would be hard-pressed to walk a few blocks without seeing evidence of this, be it a studio or a club offering yoga classes, or a billboard or poster with some beautiful young model striking a 'yoga-like' pose, selling anything from cars to computers, to dog food, vacations or mutual funds.

Fashionable clothing lines are sported as 'yoga wear', pre-packaged snacks and supplements as 'yoga food', the lean, toned, and youthful figure as the 'yoga body'... and yoga images regularly gloss the covers of magazines and periodicals, spreading just these same messages as well.

The word 'yoga' can be overheard in casual conversation just about anywhere now too. Yoga is here and it's hip, and let's face it, if you haven't been to a yoga class yet, you're fast becoming a part of the minority!



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Yoga Me the Money!

It's undeniable that a huge marketing machine has now gained control of the yoga reins...

In this current phase of the history of yoga, grey-bearded Indian men in saffron robes have been pushed aside as the relentless images of young, toned and tattooed urban hipsters in stylish attire continue to penetrate our psyches at ever turn with some form or another of 'yoga' reference.

Unfortunately nowadays even many 'yoga teachers' are unable to expand on most of the concepts and principles of yoga... and most have a vague and unstudied grasp on the history of yoga, this very science which they are endeavouring to teach too.

If yoga is a tradition that has been preserved and passed down for hundreds, even thousands of years, how did this current environment come to pass?

Where, when and how did we go so far astray in such a short period of time?

Yoga – Just Add Water ...

There are many factors that have lead to this rapid shift in yoga understanding. The expanding interest in yoga from Westerners in latter half of the 20th century could perhaps be seen as the greatest factor in why yoga has 'changed' so much in recent times.

You see, an inherent difficulty presents itself when 'East meets West', so to speak — that being distinctly different world views. Thus, the yogic teachings and their corresponding 'Eastern facts' with which the average Westerner needed to be familiar revealed a problem.

I.K. Taimni Points out in "The Science of Yoga," that as a result:

“ Some teachers of yoga have attempted to meet this difficulty by taking out of the philosophy and technique of yoga, those particular practices which are easy to understand and practice, placing these before the general public as 'yogic teaching'.

Many of these practices are of a purely physical nature, and when divorced from the higher and essential teachings of yoga, reduce their systems to a science of physical culture on a par with other systems of a similar [physical fitness] nature.

This over-simplification of the yoga life, though it has done some good and helped some people to live a saner and healthier physical life, has greatly vulgarized the movement for yogic culture and produced a wrong impression, especially in the West, about the real purpose and technique of yoga."

The phenomenon of the mass appeal of yoga within the past decade, has continued to fuel much of this exact same approach by its teachers ...



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... a watered-down, easily digestible form of primarily physical practices.

Swami Gitananda Giri Gurumaharaj had acute recognition of this problem, as he states:

“It would seem that in their hurry to popularize something called ‘yoga’, high-flying gurus with an aim to build powerful organizations, have not bothered to find out what yoga really is, looking upon it as another form of sport, entertainment... or at the lowest, a popular product to sell ...

... Yoga, as we know, is a guide to the spiritual path of evolution for the individual seeker, as well as the whole of mankind.

The ‘pop approach’ is harmful to the extent that people will form wrong associations with this ancient and beautiful art and science, which will later on be most difficult to break.”

So, is Yoga History?

Unfortunately, much is missing today in the education of the modern-day yoga teacher, and as a result ‘yoga’ is being passed on to literally millions of students every day in both an impotent and ineffectual way.

Nevertheless, out of all this, much good has come. Much of value is continuing to be brought forth in the name of yoga each and every day. Yet it remains intermingled in a modern yoga culture where much misguided, suspect and superficial understanding prevails.

I hope from this brief essay that you are now aware of just how far the common notion of yoga has deviated from its origins, and of the immense amount of potential for growth, health, and transformation that lies largely unnoticed within the body of its teachings.

Smt. Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani relays a beautiful metaphor for the current state of yogic affairs in her essay "Yoga in Modern Times":

“The last century of yoga’s history resembles the fabled churning of the ocean of Hindu mythology. It is said that both the Gods (the Devas) and the Asuras (the demons) sought Amritham (the nectar of bliss and immortality). They had to undertake the churning of the ocean together.

Using Kurma, the tortoise, they poised Mount Meru on its back. The vast serpent Vasuki was used as the rope. Thus equipped, they churned the great ocean of consciousness, to produce the Amritham.

Out of that churning came many terrible things like the Halahala poison which could destroy the world, as well as many great things, like the wish fulfilling cow Kamadhenu.

[In the end] Lord Shiva swallowed the deadly poison Halahala and saved the world.



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Out of the vast churning of human consciousness which has occurred in the last two century, in the name of 'yoga' and 'spirituality', much good has come submerging the great evil.

It appears the challenge of the age for the enlightened, wise individual is to 'swallow and digest' the poisons which have been created in this 'Great Churning.'

The Amritham which has unquestionably been produced by the efforts of so many generations of Gurus and seekers may then be safely 'drunk' and enjoyed."

Be daring, be different, be impractical, be anything that will assert integrity of purpose and imaginative vision against the play-it-safers, the creatures of the commonplace, the slaves of the ordinary.

Sir Cecil Beaton

