

“Yoga - eastern concepts through western understanding”

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“When we think of yoga [in the West] today, we envision spandex-clad, perspiring, toned bodies brought together in a room filled with yoga mats and engaged in a fitness ritual set apart from day-to-day life.”¹

This is the paramount theme of yoga which reigns in the West today: fitness, health, physical, movement, body image. Moreover, we cannot remove yoga from the dominant neoliberalist ideology in the West, whereby self-fulfillment, body ascetic and consumption have become mutually reinforcing². However, these images shaping the ideas about yoga in the West have never before been seen in the history of yoga, and are not easily transferable between cultures and geographies. When we think about yoga from a historical perspective, there comes images of seated meditation postures (as seen on the Pushupati seal over 5000 years old from the ancient Indus Valley civilizations); whereas, from a Western perspective of the yoga in the East today springs forth images of half-naked bearded Indian gurus covered in ash and ritual at the banks of the Ganges.

Both these ideas are stereotypes, not true in every case, and not essential in nature. Yet, the respective cultural ideologies are so pervasive, they are hard to ignore; and yoga has become something completely different across the seas of geography. Amidst such distinctions, do we understand we are talking about the same thing - yoga? Or are what we are talking about two distinct practices under one name? Is the yoga we experience and practice today in the West still an Eastern concept? Or a completely novel one as crafted through the Western lens?

I present here an idea that connects ideologies and philosophies to cultural expression.

From quantum-physics comes the notion that life is operating as a balancing act between the polarities of existence: and, this is the balancing act wherefrom ideologies are born. To simplify: I had an entrepreneur explain successful business to me as follows: ‘A successful business is one in which the entrepreneur takes resources, ideas, and techniques to a place where those resources, ideas and techniques are lacking.’ This is the balancing nature and effect.

The same is applicable to philosophies, theories, ideologies: they are born to address an unmet need or lack of resources in society, and to attend a societal challenge. Human beings are endless creative and efficient; and through our ingenuity, we live in a modern society geared to meet all our needs in well-organized and creative ways. Think technology: airplanes to travel far, quickly; steam engines carry contents across continents; boats walk on water. These new

¹ Andrea R Jain, “Who is to say modern yoga practitioners have it all wrong? On Hindu origins and yoga phobia,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no.2 (2014): 428.

² Lavrence, Christine, and Lozanski, Kristin. “This is not your practice life: lululemon and the Neoliberal Governance of Self,” *Canadian Review of Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2014).

ways of doing the same things bring many social benefits, and because everything operates in balance - there are equal and opposite consequences to account for the shifts. One of the resultant consequences of the ingenuity of industrialization that pervades our modern-day societies is that our lifestyles have become increasingly sedentary: we drive to work, sit at a desk all day, eat at a table, sit in front of the TV in the evening. We, as humans, require less effort, less movement in the body, and correspondingly, less awareness to the subtleties of our physiological and energetic (pranic) body.

In modern societies, people are thus lacking a connection to the body, which connects to our mind and beyond (this 'beyond' being the goal of Yoga). It is for this reason the various representations of yoga in the West have developed around a body obsession, and become synonymous with an exercise class. Now-a-days, people need help to get back into their bodies, to circulate the *prana* (life force) that courses within. It is the free flow of this prana within the body by which one may become 'dis-ease' free; and only in such a state of pranic free flow is one open to awakening, awareness and enlightenment – to Yoga.

In this sense, yoga in the West is necessarily bodily focused because prana gets stuck within our energetic body (pranamaya kosha) due to past trauma and pain – from the individual and the collective. Through the body is one way to 'unstick' our energies. Due to the shifts (or imbalance) that come with modernization, industrialization, globalization; the Western lens of yoga as simply asana (the bodily postures) is supporting a collective progression towards transcendence on the macrolevel.

To further understand how the dominant ideologies of a given society are reflected in the dominant expression of yoga, we can trace the historical path of yoga. I reference here two of the major shifts within the yoga discourse that corresponds to different time periods with distinct cultural conditions: the Patanjali Yoga Sutras, and the emergence of Tantra yoga.

The Patanjali Yoga Sutras serve as a seminal landmark for yoga. Despite the popularity of the text today, very little is known about Patanjali. Most of what can be garnered is from inferences in his writing and from Hindu mythology; thus, it is difficult to conclusively determine the cultural context in which Patanjali lived, other than post-Vedic (sometime between 500 and 200 B.C.). It is widely acknowledged that although Patanjali is not the inventor of yoga, he systemized "the heterogenous practices of yoga" which "in time emerged as the most dominant, but by no means exclusive, version"³. For time immemorial, yoga practices have taken a number of different forms in which a dominant version arises, yet not exclusive. According to the Patanjali text, meditation is "interpreted to be the preeminent component of yoga in the *Yoga Sutras*"⁴; whereby yoga is namely practiced as meditation operating within the realms of higher wisdom and intuition.

Herefrom, I signal the emergence of Tantra (middle of the first millennium C.E.) as the next pivotal shift in yoga discourse that simultaneously reflects a social and cultural shift. At the time in India, society was colored by the *varna* (caste) system. Within this context, spirituality was

³ Bryant, Edwin F., *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (New York: North Point Press, 2009): xxxiii.

⁴ Andrea R Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (Oxford: University Press, 2015): 10.

reserved for a Hindu elite (*Brahmins*); and Tantra emerged as a “grassroots movement”⁵ response to the dominant spiritual hierarchy. As such, the central tenets of Tantra were born from the lower castes “insisting on the continuity between the process of the world and the process of liberation of enlightenment”⁶. The psychotechnology described in the Tantras was “invented for those who are barely able to channel their aspirations to the Divine but are easily distracted by their conventional ideas and expectations”¹³. In order to locate spirituality within the everyday experience, the subtle body “was made the subject of intense yogic investigation particularly in the traditions of ... Tantra in general”⁷. The general conceptions of yoga thus shift within a few centuries from a meditation focus to a prana-based one; from the higher realms of intuition to that of energy manifest. In reference to the Pancha Kosha theory (five layers) from the Taittiriya Upanishad, the focus of Patanjali to Tantra shifted from the *Vijanamaya* or *Manamaya* Kosha to the *Pranamaya* Kosha.

Although Patanjali references *asana* and *pranayama*, the corresponding practices “in the *Yoga Sutras* do not resemble the types of asana and pranayama that dominate the popularized varieties of postural yoga today”⁸. Yoga practices have gradually shifted from highly connected and spiritual aims of meditation in the *Yoga Sutras*, to a more tangible-based focus of pranic manipulation with the expose of Tantra, to the now body-focused elements of modern yoga. This map demonstrates how the dominant understandings and practices of yoga are constructed by the prevailing needs of the society in which they arise; and the manifestations of yoga in each society reflects where each society is at in the greater ideological and spiritual landscape. We can make further reference to Patanjali’s Ashtanga system of yoga that outlines a hierarchical path towards yoga as *samadhi* (union). What can be noted is that our societies as a collective are moving in reverse of this natural progression toward *samadhi* from *samyama* (spiritual aims) to *pranayama* (energetic ones), and now – predominantly in the West – to *asanas* (physical aims).

So, the question is not understanding yoga as an Eastern or Western concept; but rather as a universal concept that adapts to the main social, cultural, political, economic, environmental needs. Yoga thus serves as a balancing force for any discord in societies that may be arising in response to the arisings of human ingenuity and the transformations of energies. This brief historical tracing of yoga demonstrates that yoga does change. Whatever the landscape, yoga adapts; and in essence, this is the crux of yoga: fitness is the ability to adapt to the circumstances of the outside world without getting disturbed or aggravated in ones’ being.

With this perspective in mind, what are the modern-day Western representations of yoga – a results-orientated focus, desire for immediacy, and obsession with the body in which yoga is reduced to simply asanas at the gross level - reflecting about own societies?

Knowingly or not, the desire to know thy Self is an innate, “primary and omnipresent, if not mostly hidden, force in our lives”⁹. Feuerstein comments “the desire to transcend the human

⁵ Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy, and Practice* (Chino Valley: Hohm Press): 343.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁸ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 10.

⁹ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, xxvi.

condition, to go beyond our ordinary consciousness and personality, is a deeply rooted impulse that is as old as self-aware humanity”¹⁰. For this reason, the utmost importance of the Self and the connection with it, we have a yoga in the first place.

“Yoga is a scientific and systematic discipline for a successful organization of all the energies and faculties of the integral human being with a view to attaining the highest ecstatic communion with the cosmic reality or God”¹¹.

About the Author: Tia Ashleigh

I am a Hatha yoga asana instructor, a practicing Yoga counsellor, and currently studying an MA in Yoga studies with Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. My niche specifically within the world of yoga comes from traditional Colleges of Yoga in India including Kaivalyadhama College of Yoga and Cultural Synthesis, and The Yoga Institute. It is here I learned the importance of the development of knowledge alongside the practices.

“Knowledge of the practice – why we do what we do in modern yoga settings – *must* develop in parallel with the practice, otherwise we fall into habit and lose awareness and thus connection to exactly that which we are trying to foster in class. Remember, knowledge is power, and only becomes wisdom when we experience in practice.” – Tia Ashleigh

I am the founder of Self Balancing Beings – a yoga psychology practice operating globally, which invites in the tools from Eastern philosophy into a Western Psychology setting. I am founder of a social enterprise sharing yoga in rural communities in Africa (Living Yoga Zanzibar). I am currently based in Guatemala – offering sessions and workshops online – as we adapt to the changing global scene.

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¹⁰ Ibid., xxv.

¹¹ R.R. Diwakar, 1979 cited in Iyengar, *Light on Pranayama* (London: Harper Element, 1981), xvii.

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