

Part I

1. Introduction

Yoga is an ancient, multi-layered tradition, encompassing in itself many streams of philosophy and practice. It originated in the Indian sub-continent, but records of its development are sporadic. The earliest mention of the term “yoga” is in the Katha Upanishad, 2,500 years ago. It is described there as a special state of concentration in which the senses are controlled.

We may ask what is so unique about yoga that it has survived for thousands of years, while so many other traditions have disappeared?

At the base of yogic thought lies the assumption that the source of suffering is Avidya, ‘not-knowing’ (from the Sanskrit root vid, to know, in Latin videre, to see) - the inability to see reality as it is.

Yoga’s objective is to lead us towards precise vision. The ancient yogis, much like Plato, believed that if man could see reality as it truly is, he would choose to do the right thing at the right time and place. Consequently the question of how to reach true and clear vision is of the highest importance in yogic lore.

The yogis realized that in order to see well, the mechanism of seeing had to be known and understood. For this reason perception needed to be examined thoroughly and then wiped clean, like lenses. When the mind is transparent and clear, they believed, it would reflect reality precisely. Practices that attempt to bring about clear vision and thus skilful action, have given yoga its power and uniqueness.

The yogic ideals and practices spread gradually all over the Indian sub-continent, and later on, through Buddhism, to much of the Far East. Yoga had a significant effect on the different cultures it encountered. In the 19th century it reached Europe and America influencing philosophy and culture there as well. Yoga became famous under the name of its major technique - Dhyana. In China it was called Chan, in Japan Zen and in English, meditation. In the Hindu tradition this yoga was called Raja Yoga, the Royal Way. It leads to the intensification of the psychic and mental powers and to the direct experience of higher states of consciousness and flashes of intuition that usually only come in moments of grace.

Yet it was not these qualities alone that allowed yoga to survive for so long. Its universal spirit played an important role as well. Yoga is not a religion, but rather a technique for the intensification of physical, mental and spiritual capacities. It doesn't ask of its practitioners to believe in this or that god, nor follow particular customs. It is not based on faith but on experience. For these reasons it could be integrated into

diverse social systems, taking on the colors of the cultures and beliefs with which it has come into contact, without threatening them.

The yoga we know today doesn't limit itself to meditation practices alone. Over generations a wide range of techniques have developed that seek to transform the whole person. It is a system that trains not only the heart and mind, but also the body. Thus developed Hatha Yoga, in which the discipline of the body and breath take on as important a role as the discipline of the mind and heart.

The Hatha Yogis didn't develop a discipline of the body merely in order to have a healthier life. They saw the spiritual potential of the body. They believed that the body itself has the potential of waking the mind to a different way of seeing and that a truly awakened body can be both the catalyst and temple for the soul's awakening.