

The Essence of Yoga Series – The History



The yoga we know today was developed as a part of the Tantric civilization which existed in India and all parts of the world more than ten thousand years ago.

In archaeological excavations made in the Indus Valley (now in what is modern Pakistan), many statues have been found depicting deities resembling Lord Shiva and Parvati performing various asanas (postures) and practicing meditation.

According to mythical tradition, Shiva is said to be the fonder of yoga and Parvati, his first disciple.

Lord Shiva is widely considered to be the symbol or embodiment of supreme consciousness. Parvati represents supreme knowledge, will and action, and is responsible for all creation. This force or energy is also known as Kundalini Shakti, the cosmic force which lies dormant in all beings. Parvati is regarded as the mother of the whole universe. The individual soul is embodied and bound to the world of name and form, and also liberated from the bondage of the world and united with supreme consciousness through her grace. Out of love and compassion for her children, she imparted her secret knowledge of liberation in for the form of Tantra. The techniques of yoga have their source in Tantra and the two cannot be separated, just as consciousness, Shiva, cannot be separated from energy, Shakti.

Tantra is a combination of two words, Tanoti and Trayati, which mean 'expansion' and 'liberation' respectively. Therefore, it is the science of expanding the consciousness and liberating the energy. Tantra is the way to attain freedom from the bondage of the world while still living in it. The first step in Tantra is to know the limitations and capacities of the body and mind. Next it prescribes techniques for the expansion of consciousness and the liberation of energy whereby individual limitations are transcended and a higher reality experienced.

Yoga arose at the beginning of human civilisation when man first realized his spiritual potential and began to evolve techniques to develop it. The yogic science was slowly evolved and developed by ancient sages all over the world.

In ancient times, yoga techniques were kept secret and were never written down or exposed to public view. They were passed on from teacher or guru to disciple by word of mouth. In this way there was a clear understanding of their meaning and aim. Through personal experience, realized yogis and sages were able to guide sincere aspirants along the correct path, removing any confusion misunderstanding and excessive intellectual contemplation.

The first books to refer to yoga were the ancient Tantras and later the Vedas which were written about the time the Indus Valley culture was flourishing. Although they do not give specific practices, they allude to yoga symbolically. In fact, the verses of the Vedas were heard by the Rishis, seers, in states of deep, yogic meditation or Samadhi, and are regarded as revealed scriptures. It is, however, in the Upanishads that yoga begins to take a more definable shape. These scriptures collectively form Vedanta, the culmination of the Vedas, and are said to contain the essence of the Vedas.

Sage Patanjali's treatise on Raja yoga, the Yoga Sutras (lessons), codified the first definitive, unified and comprehensive system of yoga. Often called the eight-fold path, it is comprised of Yama, self-restraints, Niyama, self-observances, Asana, (postures), Pranayama (breathing techniques), Pratyahara, disassociation of consciousness from the outside environment, Dharana, concentration, Dhyana, meditation and Samadhi, identification with pure consciousness.

The relevance of yoga today.

Today, a spiritual heritage is being reclaimed of which yoga is very much a part. While yoga's central theme remains the highest goal of the spiritual path, yogic practices give direct and tangible benefits to everyone regardless of their spiritual aims.

Physical and mental therapy is one of yoga's most important achievements. What makes it so powerful and effective is the fact that it works on the holistic principles of harmony and unification. Yoga has succeeded as an alternative form of therapy in diseases such as asthma, diabetes, blood pressure, arthritis, digestive disorders and other ailments of a chronic and constitutional nature where modern science has not. According to medical scientists, yoga therapy is successful because of the balance created in the nervous and endocrine systems which directly influences all the other systems and organs of the body.

For most people, however, yoga is simply a means of maintaining health and well-being in an increasingly stressful society. Asanas remove the physical discomfort accumulated during a day at the office sitting in a chair, hunched over a desk. Relaxation techniques help maximize the effectiveness of ever-diminishing time off. In an age of mobile phones, beepers and twenty-four hour shopping, yogic practices make great personal and even business sense.

Beyond the needs of individuals, the underlying principles of yoga provide a real tool to combat social malaise. At a time when the world seems to be at a loss, rejecting past values without being able to establish new ones, yoga provides a means for people to find their own way of connecting with their true selves. Through this connection with their real selves it is possible for people to manifest harmony in the current age, and for compassion to emerge where hitherto there has been none.

In this respect, yoga is far from simply being physical exercises, rather, it is an aid to establishing a new way of life which embraces both inner and outer realities. **However, this way of life is an experience which cannot be understood intellectually and will only become living knowledge through practice and experience.**

(Excerpt from Asana, Pranayama, Mudra, Bandha by Swami Satyananda Saraswati)