

YOGA THEORY AND PRACTICE: SEPARABLE?—Part 2

By Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon

(from *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, Harvest House Publishers, 1996)

Consider a final statement as to why yoga practice and theory are inseparable. The Spiritual Counterfeits Project in Berkeley, California, publishes a relatively brief treatment on yoga, which we reproduce here with permission. The author was a former practitioner of yoga for several years with the Ananda Marga Yoga Society: ¹

Yoga exercises are taught as part of YMCA physical education programs, as health spa esoterica, on educational TV, and are incorporated into institutional church youth activities—all on the assumption that these techniques are nothing more than a superior brand of physical conditioning.

Yet this assumption is really the worst presumption.... [E]ven physical yoga is inextricably bound up in the whole of Eastern religious metaphysics. In fact, it is quite accurate to say that physical yoga and Indian metaphysics are mutually interdependent; you really can't have one without the other. This point may be illustrated by referring to the two major traditional occurrences of physical yoga in the East.

First of all, yoga postures (asanas) evolved as an integral part of Raja (royal) Yoga, also known as *ashtanga* (eight-limbed) yoga. Raja Yoga is one of the more highly sophisticated systems of psychospiritual conditioning, and all the more so because it recognizes the profound influence of the body upon consciousness. (Indeed, its philosophical premise is that the body is but a crude layer of mind.) *Asana* (physical postures) is indispensable as one of the eight stages of Raja Yoga because the yoga postures are themselves specifically designed to manipulate consciousness, to a greater or lesser degree, into Raja Yoga's consummate experience of *samadhi*: undifferentiated union with the primal essence of consciousness, the monist's equivalent of "God." In his definitive work on Raja Yoga, Swami Vivekananda writes of asana: "A series of exercises, physical and mental, is to be gone through every day until certain higher states are reached. Nerve currents will have to be displaced and given a new channel. New sorts of vibrations will begin: the whole constitution will be remodeled, as it were."

In the context of Raja Yoga, then, the effects of the practice of *asana* are recognized as certainly going far beyond the merely physical and psychological results of Western systems of exercise. But does it necessarily follow that the Westerner practicing physical yoga will automatically have his or her consciousness manipulated into that experience of reality characteristic of Eastern metaphysics? Such a question has a great many ramifications. Some preliminary light may be shed on it, however, by examining the second major occurrence of physical yoga in the East—Hatha Yoga.

Because of widespread abuse in India, Hatha Yoga has there fallen into much disrepute, being considered a gross physical practice without spiritual value. Vivekananda, in comparing asana to hatha, summarily dismisses the latter as having no real worth at all: "This portion of yoga (*asana*) is a little similar to Hatha Yoga, which deals entirely with the physical body, its aim being to make the physical body very strong. We have nothing to do with it here, because its practices are very difficult... and, after all, do not lead to much spiritual growth."

It is this reputation, as well as the ready availability of certain teachers of hatha who

would perpetuate it, which makes it easy for a Westerner to presume to use the techniques of yoga as but another form of physical self-culture. But, in reality, neither Vivekananda's partisan snobbery nor a lotus-cart full of Hatha gymnasts can mask the fact that Hatha is classically understood in much the same way as Raja Yoga.

In fact, the classic esoteric handbook of Hatha, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* by Swami Svatmarama states emphatically in the second and third slokas: "Having thus solemnly saluted his master, Yogi Svatmarama now presents Hatha Vidya (vidya = wisdom) solely and exclusively for the attainment of Raja Yoga. For those who wander in the darkness of conflicting creeds, unable to reach to the heights of Raja Yoga, the merciful Yogi Svatmarama has lit the torch of Hatha wisdom."

The meaning here could not be more plain. The techniques of Hatha are given so as to prepare a person's consciousness for the subtler metaphysics of Raja Yoga. Irrespective of belief, Hatha is regarded as a torch to experientially guide one out from that belief into the "wisdom" of Raja Yoga.

Alain Danielou, a recognized French scholar on the subject of yoga, states that "the sole purpose of the physical practices of Hatha Yoga is to suppress physical obstacles on the Spiritual or Royal path of Raja Yoga and Hatha yoga is therefore called 'the ladder to Raja Yoga.'" However for those who practice Hatha for purely physical ends, outside of a total context of spiritual discipline, most of the classic commentaries issue dire warnings. The Ananda Marga Yoga Society's manual for teachers sums them up well: "Indeed from the practice of Hatha Yoga, without a proper effort to the mind, mental and spiritual degeneration may ultimately occur."

The typical middle-class Westerner, taking yoga classes at the YMCA, has little or no idea of the how's and why's of yoga's seeming efficacy. In the traditional understanding, physical yoga has a great deal more to do with the practitioner's invisible, "subtle" body, than it does with the flesh and bones and muscles which encase it. While yoga does purport to first of all work on the muscular, glandular, and physical nervous systems, its real import, as Danielou says, is as "a process of control of the gross body which aims at freeing the subtle body." This subtle body is extremely complex, but can be superficially described as consisting of 72,000 invisible psychic channels called *nadis*, which constitute an other dimensional body which directly corresponds to the physical, or gross, body. The subtle body is connected to the gross body at several points, with the seven predominant ones located at distinct points ranging from the base of the spine to the top of the head. These are called *chakras*, and they are believed to control the various aspects of the consciousness of the individual. Physical yoga finds its most refined expression when it teaches postures which bring various channels within the subtle body into a specific alignment with one another and thus alter the consciousness of the practitioner in a specified way.

Whether or not this sort of thing is actually going on... it is important to understand that physical yoga, according to its classical definitions, is inherently and functionally incapable of being separated from Eastern religious metaphysics. The Western practitioner who attempts to do so is operating in ignorance and danger, from the yogi's viewpoint, as well as from the Christian's.²

Notes:

1. Dave Fletcho, "David Fletcho's Story: Last Meditation/Lotus Reference," *Special Collections Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, Berkeley, CA: Spiritual Counterfeits Project, Winter 1984, pp. 31-36.
2. Dave Fletcho, "Yoga," Berkeley, CA: Spiritual Counterfeits Project, 1978, pp. 2-6.

2NAStaff0102