

Yoga as a free, spiritual path

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Can yoga become a natural path of self-realization for our modern society? Free from religious dogmas and rituals?

Many people that approach yoga often wonder about the spiritual roots of this ancient discipline. Some people believe that to practice yoga in an authentic way is necessary to go to India and to embrace some elements of the hindu religion, like for example to do the aarti (the ritual of the fire and ghee offered to the hindu deities), or to sing devotional songs dedicated to important hindu gods, or maybe to wear sari or even turbans (a practice very popular nowadays among a modern yoga school called Kundalini Yoga, influenced by some element of Sikhism). If we see the history of yoga though, we understand that the ancient yogis were not Brahmin priests busy practising rituals in temples, but they were rather people more similar to ancient greek philosophers, especially those philosophers influenced by the school of Pitagora, or Plato or the one of Zeno (Stoicism).

The ancient yogis were people that in most cases preferred to live a pretty isolated existence, abandoning the comforts and the pleasures of a conventional social life, abandoning the rituals, the believes, the dogmas and the traditions of their families, to come deeper in contact with their Atman (their true Self) through meditation practices and philosophical investigations.

The life of Buddha is a very good example of that. He used to be a wealthy man, son of a powerful king, and he decided to abandon any aspect of his privileged life to retreat in a forest and practice meditation. No rituals, no temples, no priests. Only he, sitting in meditation in deep contact with Life and with himself. Pure freedom.

So, it is not true at all that those who want to practice authentic yoga have to become Hindu. Though, it is true that the ancient yogis left their spiritual wisdom hidden inside the symbols, the myths, the allegories that we find in temples and holy books. And.. surprisingly, not only in India!

The fascinating thing of a deep, authentic yoga-meditative experience is that is universal. It goes beyond the limited, subjective, relative point of view of the practitioner and it reaches a point of universalism that resonates with the soul of everyone.

So, the experience of union and harmony that an ancient yogi felt 3000 years ago in India still resonates with us when we read his biography or his poetry, or when we look at the art that maybe he or his pupils made to represent the yoga experience through symbols and colours.

Those special words, those visual symbols, those colours, those allegories have some kind of empathic energy that remains alive and can influence people of any culture in any age.

So, it is very interesting to see that we find symbols and allegories that represents experiences and concepts connected to the yoga knowledge not only in the Indian culture, but also in the Western mysticism or in the Native American one, or in the spirituality of any tradition on earth, really. (in the picture to the left a representation of Yoga, Union between Shiva and Shakti, Consciousness and Energy in the Guru Chakra)

In a recent trip to Italy I found in churches symbols similar to those used in India in tantric-yogi traditions. Sculptures representing the symbol of the kundalini (the vital energy flowing on the spine), paintings representing the chakras (centers of energy), and other mystical meanings.

Also during a travel to Mexico years ago I found in some ancient sites esoteric symbolism similar to those of the Indian yogis.

So, how this can happen? Did the ancient yogis travel to Europe and to America, too?

Who knows, maybe… But I personally believe that these similarities among symbols of spiritual, mystical knowledge of different cultures and different traditions are simply the evidence that the experience of Union (Yoga) with life, with the Self, with the Universe is the same for everyone, and it is something that belongs to the whole humanity and not only to the people of one specific country.

And that’s why we find mystics and philosophers that talk about these experiences in any country of this planet. In Africa, Europe, America, India, China, Japan, Australia… and so on.

It is not something religious, it has nothing to do with the holy rituals of one culture. Yoga, the experience of harmony and Union, it is simply a free, natural, human experience (even if the holy rituals of some religions might have been inspired by this mystical, human experience).

(in the pictures down here and in the picture above some representation of the Kundalini. The one above is in the church of Brixen, Italy. The one down to the right is Hermes caring the Caduceus-Kundalini, and the one to the left is a traditional tantric representation of the Kundalini with the chakras)