

Yoga Roots

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What is the origin of yoga? What are the roots of this practice? Is the yoga that we practice today the same yoga that the ancient Indians used to practice?

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This can be a very tricky question. Nowadays yoga is extremely popular, so it often happens that people try to put their own cap on it, so to speak. They may declare that yoga belongs to their social group, to their land, to their religion, and so on. For example, in recent years some American yoga teachers have written articles on popular internet blogs in which they stated that some of the most widely practiced forms of yoga, like Vinyasa and Hot Yoga actually belong to the American culture. The articles claim these yoga schools have their roots in the West's fitness culture and, to some degree, in the New Age movement, rather than in Indian culture.

Historically though, there is no doubt that yoga, in its traditional forms, had its origin in India.

Archaeologists have found some steatite seals in very ancient sites like Mohenjo Daro (an area of modern Pakistan that might have been one of the most developed areas of the ancient Indian civilization) which portray a man apparently sitting in a yoga position. If these seals do represent a yogi, this means that yoga might have existed in India since that time, 6,000 years ago. There are ancient texts like the Upanishads (3,000 years old) that talk about yoga in a philosophical and poetic way. The highly regarded Yoga Sutras of Patanjali were composed about the time of Buddha (approximately 2,500 years ago) and give instructions about how to reach Samadhi; the state of mental clarity that allows the practitioner to suspend the stream of thoughts and to merge in the pure Self. Relatively more recent texts like the Hatha Yoga Pradiipika (15th century) give instructions about physical yoga exercises.

We have also some texts written by the Greek geographer Strabo (64 BC- 24 AD) which tell us about the ascetic Indian philosophers that Alexander the Great and his men met during the Macedonian expedition in India (326 BC). These Indian philosophers are described as wise men, kept in very high account by everyone in India, including the kings, which often used them as counselors. They are called Gymnetae by Strabo, because, as he says: "they are naked and they live chiefly in the open air, practicing fortitude"; He tells us also that Onesicritus (a Greek historian which accompanied Alexander) met 15 of these ancient yogis "which were standing in different postures, sitting or lying down naked, who continued in these positions [all day long] until the evening";

Strabo tells us also that they were preaching a philosophy similar to the one of the Greek philosopher Pythagoras.

So, yes, there is no doubt that the yoga tradition is very ancient.

But is the yoga that we practice today the same yoga that these ancient people used to practice?

In the yoga exercises that we practice today there are certainly many corresponding aspects with the ancient practices. After exploring the world of yoga during the last twenty years I can say there also seem to be some significant differences. Some of these differences are just a natural and healthy evolution of some techniques, something that simply comes with the natural development of society.

For example, in the "Hatha Yoga Pradipika" it is said that a yogi "should practice Hatha Yoga in a small room, situated in a solitary place, being four cubits square, and free from stones, fire, water, disturbances of all kinds, and in a country where justice is properly administered, where good people live, and food can be obtained easily and plentifully. The room should have a small door, be free from holes, hollows, neither too high nor too low, well plastered with cow-dung and free from dirt, filth and insects. On its outside there should be bowers, raised platform, a well, and a compound";

These instructions might have made sense in mediaeval India. But obviously a modern yogi doesn't need to practice in a room plastered with cow-dung, or in a place having characteristics similar to those described in the verse quoted. Times change, social habits change and systems and techniques can evolve too. But in my opinion, what should remain untouched, no matter how many years pass, is the meaning and the purpose of the yoga practices.

Is the meaning that we give today to the word "yoga" the same one that the ancient yogis used to give to it? In my opinion the answer is no, at least not always.

In ancient times the goal of yoga was to reach a profound and transformative experience. Yoga was considered a way to attain self-realization, a state of union between the Atman (the microcosmic mind, the self, the individual consciousness) and the Paramatman (the macrocosmic mind, the Universal Self, the Supreme Consciousness).

The goal in modern yoga though, at least in many cases, is merely to obtain a fit and healthy body.

Of course, to experience an authentic Yoga (a harmonious union with the self and with all of life) we need a healthy body, through which we can come in contact with the world around us. We also benefit from a flexible body and a balanced nervous system because these allow us to sit quietly in a relaxed manner to experience deeper states of meditation, during which one can merge his or her soul with the soul of Life. So yes, it is very important to take care of our body.

However, if the final goal is ONLY to have a fit body, that would be just a very partial yoga experience. Maybe it would be a subtle form of fitness but still not yoga, not a conscious union with the Self and with our full potentialities.

In classical yoga the body is considered an instrument to use in order to reach a goal. The body is in fact perceived as relative and transitory. To develop an obsession with the body is something that doesn't really belong to the yoga tradition. An obsession for the body reveals an identification of the self with something that is in fact delusional, something that constantly changes and eventually disappears. So when we identify our self only with the body we create an illusion. And an illusory personality is what we generally call Ego.

When we identify ourselves with something so changeable and transitory like the body, the obvious consequence is to develop a deep sense of frustration when the body starts to become old or sick. This of course is inevitable for everyone. So the Ego starts to suffer. Our illusory personality cries due to the pain of changing and getting old.

An attachment to something transitory, to something relative, dependent on time, space and relationships, is the opposite of yoga. Authentic yoga is rather the union with the unchangeable, the universal Self - with that part of us that remains always neutral, content, benevolent and peaceful, that part of us that simply observes the flux of life, without trying to color it with the expectations or the projections of the Ego.

What gives more pleasure; an attachment to something relative, changeable, subjected to desires, diseases and death, or an attachment to something unchangeable, stable and peaceful? The ancient yogis would definitely say that real joy comes from the eternal, peaceful dimension of the Universal Self.

Is this the same approach of the modern yogis though? As I said before, not always. So to finally answer the question what are the roots of yoga, basically we can say that there seem to be different roots, some are maybe more ancient, philosophical and subtle, while others are more modern, mundane and physical. (extract from the book "Yoga Reflections" of Massimo Barberi and Tanya Schoonraad Wallin, all rights reserved. Pre-order a copy of the book sending an email to info@yogalifetravels.com!) (photo credit to Tanya Schoonraad Wallin, all rights reserved)