

# What is Yoga?

## **Yoga in Prehistory**

Yoga has been called a living fossil. Conventional wisdom generally holds that yoga evolved ca1000-2500 BCE in association with the Vedic culture of ancient India. But we can locate a source of this living practice deep into pre-history. Scholars Mircea Eliade and Georg Feuerstein agree that *proto yoga*, to use the latter's term, existed in the form of shamanism, the original system of spiritual and physical healing within ancient human tribal societies throughout the globe. According to Michael Harner, author and practicing shaman, "Archeological and ethnological evidence suggests that shamanic methods are at least twenty to thirty thousand years old." <sup>1</sup> To the extent that the practice of shamanism continues today, it could also be called a living fossil.

Understanding some of the salient aspects of shamanism will shed light on yoga as we attempt to understand and define the practice from its inception to its application in modern times. Shamanism evolved prior to the written word, prior to mythology, prior to science, religion and philosophy. The shaman plied his or her craft in the service of individual health and well being. Currying the favor of deities through ritual observances let alone solving the problem of human existence were far in the future.

Scholars have found a remarkable consistency in shamanic techniques and principals that evolved within tribes occupying regions characterized by vastly different climates and survival challenges. Moreover, some of these tribes were out of contact for as much as ten-thousand years so could not possibly have exchanged ideas about the practice. This suggests that the principle of shamanic journeying into unseen realms of existence is simply indigenous to the human psyche. The ancient guardians of tribal psychic and ecological equilibrium apparently evolved their methods of power and information retrieval in parallel. Whatever fascination we may have for the trance state Eliade called *ecstasy*, and for underworld contact with power animals and guardian spirits, shamanism is a purely practical and empirical method. The shaman was a regular working member of the tribe, may have been an excellent hunter, and would have employed conventional herbal treatments like any practitioner of natural medicine. The humility, heroism and freedom from doctrinal biases on the part of the practicing shaman give us a significant clue into the character and practice of the future yogi.

## Yoga and the Age of Philosophy

*Philosophy* is Greek for “love of knowledge”: *Phila*, love; *Sophia*, wisdom. We have fast forwarded to the golden age of philosophy, ca 1000 BCE to the time of Christ. We typically think of this period as being ancient. However, from the perspective of human evolution it is anything but. Indeed, the thinkers and adepts of this time have not been surpassed.\* The Greek and Sanskrit-*perfectly formed*-languages were ideally suited for analytical discourse and scientific precision. How lucky we are to have the written gold from the Upanishads and the writings of the pre-Socratics through Plato and Aristotle. Can we even imagine civilization without them? In China, we had Confucius, 551-479 BCE; and Lao Tzu wrote the Tao Te Ching during this period. Taoism would later become blended with Buddhism resulting in Chan or Zen. *Qi Gong*, ancient Chinese medicine, was evolving parallel to the Indian *marma* system. These would later come together to create the meridian science we take for granted today that is the basis of acupuncture and other healing systems.

The yoga phenomenon was born from the mix of ideas and practices which were boiling over during this period. Religious history is characterized by a tension between the orthodoxy of established doctrinal authority and the individual impulse to have a direct encounter with cosmic truth. This period epitomized that tension and the result was a great gift to the human race, a vehicle not only for health and happiness but for Self-Realization itself. History provides a great story line here... two opposing camps, battling for spiritual supremacy: the masters of the Vedic religion known as Brahmanism vs. the *munis*, the silent sages of the forest.#

Much of the technology we associate with yoga can be found in the practices of the rishis-*seers*-whose religion was based upon the writings known as Vedas, meaning, *revealed knowledge*. Sacrificial rites (see *agni hotra*) were infused with contemplative techniques and prayerful meditations. The rishis employed mantra or exploration of sound, visualization of deities--Rudra, Vayu, Agni, Sarasvati and Indra are a few representatives of the Vedic Pantheon--and absorption into psychic and cosmic mysteries during their highest stages of meditation. Despite the metaphysical and spiritual richness of the practice, it would not have been inclusive; only the religious elite would have been qualified to participate. Moreover, to the extent that Brahmanism was a religion, it was inevitably bound to doctrine, specific deities and prescribed rituals. The spiritual protagonists, the *munis*, took their leave from society to seek the *unreligion*, a direct experience of truth, unencumbered by prescribed rituals and theological science. Practicality and experimentation were their mantras of choice. For better or worse, they practiced extreme forms of asceticism to burn away accumulated *karma*\*\* that causes *avidya*, spiritual ignorance that blocks the inner eye from direct apprehension of divine knowledge.

\* This is not to say that Indian Philosophy did not evolve in subsequent centuries. From my perspective, Indian thought reached its full potential in the Buddhist Mahayana-see *the Diamond and Heart Sutras*-, Tantra and Advaita Vedanta. Asanga, Padma Sambhava, Bodhi Dharma, Milarepa and Shankara are a few of the greats from this period, ca the middle of the first century CE.

# The reader may be familiar with the term, muni, without realizing it. When Siddhartha Gautama achieved enlightenment, he became known as Lord Buddha Shakyamuni, silent sage of the Shakya clan

\*\* The theory of karma was put forth by ancient India's most famous sage, Yajnavalkya, ca 850 CE.

Let us not be misled by a hard line of distinction between the Vedic mainstream and the emerging yoga phenomenon. After all, the early yogis would have spoken Vedic Sanskrit and would have been aware of Vedic doctrine even as they attempted to turn it on its head. The Sanskrit speaking Aryan invaders, who came to supplant the pre Aryan Indus civilization ca 2000BCE, would have had their own shamanic tradition, coming from Russia where shamanism played a prominent role. The Vedic sacrifice involved fire. But the yogis were known to sit in the middle of raging fires under the hot sun in a fire sacrifice of their own. Thus *tapas*, heat or glow, became strongly identified with yogic practice; the practitioners would come to be known as *tapasvins*. Most readers have probably heard of the tapas mat; and the pranayamas we take for granted evolved to serve this process of inner combustion in the interest of karmic purification...a living fossil indeed! So the influence went both ways. The Brahman priests began to incorporate more purifactory practices into preparation for the sacrifice as the yogis contemplated the metaphysics of the Vedas. Eventually yoga would emerge triumphant and come to dominate Indian mainstream religion and culture. But before we get to that, we need to return to our present topic which is philosophy.

Like the Greeks, the yogis and Upanishadic philosophers sought to solve the thorny ontological problem of existence. Simply put: who are we, where did we come from, why are we here and where are we going? Curious humans first invented mythology as a way to explain our place within the great chain of being. But there came a time when thinkers sought to truly understand the underlying mechanisms of reality. The proximate causality effectuated by a fabricated world of the gods would not provide a scientific solution. And the doctrines of the elements and their interactions found in Greece and China alike, although a major step toward natural science, were still bound within the phenomenal world and could not offer a final solution. My belief is that the evolution of yoga coincides historically with the evolution of science and philosophy and was conceived as a tool to help solve the universal conundrum of existence. The philosophers of this period stumbled upon a profound paradox. We live in a world of change and impermanence. As the Buddha would have said, the phenomenal world in which we find ourselves is non-substantial and characterized by relational interdependence. And yet, something, however ephemeral, can not issue from nothing. So there must be an underlying reality, prior to phenomenal reality, which is the progenitor of that reality and yet is nothing like the phenomenal world because it is permanent and unchanging.

According to Aristotle, it was Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander, 612-547/6 BCE, who first named the ultimate reality, the *infinite*. Here is what he says in his *Metaphysics* to elaborate on Anaximander's proposition:

Everything either *is* a beginning or *has* a beginning. But there is no beginning of the infinite; for if there was one, it would limit it. Moreover, since it is a beginning, it is begotten and indestructible. For there must be a point at which what has come into being reaches completion, and a point at which all perishing ceases. Hence, as we say, there is no source of this but this appears to be the source of all the rest, and "encompasses all things" and "steers all things..."<sup>2</sup>

Indian thought made a similar advance. *Brahman* had been a critical concept of the traditional Vedic sacrifice, the central practice in Brahmanism. Brahman was the phenomenon which gave power to the sacrifice by integrating speech, *mantra*, holy “utterance”, ritual action and the gods into a unity that was understood to maintain creation in a very real sense. But as the age of philosophy came upon them, the Brahman priests began to question whether the sacrifice held a permanent solution to the problem of life and death. The question was already echoed in the late Rig Veda: “Who truly knows? Who shall proclaim it here-whence they (the gods) were produced, whence this creation?” “The older gods could no longer be considered creators of the physical world; they were only part of it and also must have been created. But by whom, out of what, and by what process?”<sup>3</sup>

Brahman took on an entirely new meaning. Like the infinite of the Greeks, Brahman came to represent unconditioned absolute existence, the reality unknowable from the phenomenal perspective and yet that which is the very substance of phenomenal reality. *Maya*, has two important shades of meaning with respect to Brahman. It is the illusory condition that precludes apprehension of Brahman, but also the generative principle, the “measurer”, that which gives form to the formless. So how to rationalize the sense of *self/ego* as a distinct reality, defined by characteristics or attributes always in flux, given the inescapable logic of Brahman as undifferentiated, unmodified, unchanging? The famous Vedanta formula, *Atman=Brahman*, attempted to reconcile the paradoxical relationship between the temporal self, atman, whose existence is maintained by name and form, *nama/rupa*, with Brahman, in whom atman ultimately resides. The ever rebellious yogis understood that the sense of self was not only inherently illusory, but that it constituted a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to realization of Brahman. They would have rejected the formula and the Buddha did so explicitly. From the yoga perspective, the most elegant verbal constructs designed to resolve the cosmic duality, known by many names: Being vs. Becoming, Real vs. Unreal, Substance vs. Attribute, or J.P. Sartre’s En Sois vs. Pour Sois, although not inherently illegitimate, are necessarily insufficient, and ultimately a trap. As long as we employ language as our guidepost, we are inevitably and hopelessly consigned to worldly understanding. Moreover, to the extent that our very existence as discreet individuals is bound up with language, *name and form*, we end up in an endless loop of self definition.

Yoga was designed as a technique to literally smash through the illusion of *self* to realize a nonverbal/nonsensual grasp of reality. Yoga is originally meditation, nothing more and nothing less. The ancient yogis redirected the psycho-spiritual technology employed by the shaman to attain divine knowledge and liberation from conditioned existence. What they encountered were myriad psychic realms and supraconsciousness itself. The pioneers of Mind exploration gave us a roadmap for our own experimentation including descriptions of various stages of Samadhi. According to Eliade, “The means of attaining to Being, the effectual techniques for gaining liberation. This corpus of means constitutes Yoga properly speaking.”<sup>4</sup> I hope it is not lost on the reader that there is no mention here of attracting abundance, getting a trim butt, or learning to relax.

We conclude this section in around 450BCE. Shortly after the life of the Buddha, *Lord of the yogis*, the term yoga made its way into the mainline of Indian thought in the *Katha Upanishad*. The work is in the form of a dialogue between the god, Yama, and the young Nachiketas, who is searching for the meaning of life and death, having proven that he is not concerned with worldly pleasure and ready to receive the highest teaching. Here are two stanzas:

There are two paths, Nachiketas.  
One path leads outward and the other inward.  
You can walk the way outward that leads to pleasure  
Or the way inward that leads to grace,  
Though concealed, that leads to the Self.

That Self which you wish to know,  
Which is subtle and difficult to see,  
Is there~deep within the deepest part of you.  
Fix all your thinking and all your enquiry  
On that ancient radiant Self.  
This practice is called *Adhyatma Yoga*.<sup>\*</sup>  
Through it you will rise above both joy and sorrow.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> “The yoga of the inner Self”

## Classical Yoga and its Contemporary Application

I am no scholar of the Bhagavad Gita, “Song of the Lord”, ca 350BCE, but can tell you that this work epitomized the grand synthesis of ideas that had exploded within and without Vedic society.\* Brahmanism was under siege. The *heretical* sects of Buddhism and Jainism were on the rise-Buddhism would actually come to dominate Indian society for two-hundred years prior to and after the turn of the millennium-and yoga itself was a major draw to aspirants who sought illumination outside the confines of society. The *Brahmanic Synthesis* achieved two herculean but necessary tasks...first, to reconcile the disparate philosophies of yoga, Vedanta and Samkhya-which the Gita explicitly set out to do, and, second, to create a new social order that would bring male seekers back into the social mainstream. After all, it is hard to run a society without able bodied men to maintain industry, *artha*, and raise children, *kama*. The *ashrama* system allowed young men to be introduced to Vedic study and to fulfill their hermetic aspirations once having satisfied their social duty, *dharma*.% Do not doubt the political subtext of the Gita, given Krishna’s insistence that Arjuna fulfill his dharma to fight a great battle despite terrible moral reservations.

The Gita gives us an understanding of yoga which totally penetrates the human condition and yet is profoundly simple, and perfectly lends itself to a thoroughly modern application. Bearing in mind that we as phenomenal beings do not substantially exist, the classical definition of yoga recognizes that three primary relationships define us: our relationship to each other, *Karma-yoga*; our relationship to ourselves, *Jnana-yoga*; and our relationship to God or Nature, *Bhakti-yoga*. To practice Karma-yoga is to serve others in a spirit of selflessness. We should learn to appreciate the Karma-yogis among us and aspire to be more like them. Indeed, we can also offer “citizenship” as a definition of Karma-yoga for a secular democracy. When you seek personal wisdom, you practice Jnana-yoga, *svadhaya*. So study up on some philosophy, psychology and anthropology. Question your actions and motivations in an effort to improve your character. Seek professional counsel to learn to see through the blind spots that keep you from the happiness which is your birthright. Doing these things will make you a better Jnana-yogi. Bhakti-yoga is the devotional practice to which humans are inevitably drawn. No matter what religion you practice, Bhakti-yoga says to practice with your total heart and soul. Even if you do not believe in God or a particular religion, Bhakti-yoga says to live your life with humility and gratitude for the blessings that come with each day.

Two more branches of yoga, the practical *Hatha-yoga* and *Dhyana-yogas*, complete the system. I promise the reader that these five yogas, three relational and two practical, are all you need as a framework. All other systems, be they traditional, e.g. *Laya-yoga* or what I call proprietary, e.g. *Iyengar-yoga*, can be understood in terms of some mix of the five. We have discussed meditation science, Dhyana-yoga, as the essence of yoga. Now we finally come to the most important yoga for contemporary out-of-shape society. The yogis did not set out to create a fitness regimen. But in their search for a super refined nervous system, they developed not only the mystical physiology (see *kundalini*) we associate with the adepts, but a superlative form of exercise science, Hatha-yoga, which came into its own as a distinct branch during the Tantra period. I believe that Hatha-yoga holds great potential for our society today. But it must be taken back from its association with New Age commercialism and the anti professionalism that is a vestige of the counter-culture of the nineteen-sixties and early seventies, and restored to a practice grounded in science, tradition and service to individual and collective health.

\* We will leave discussion of the quintessential *Yoga Sutras* and the Eightfold path to other writers.

% Not to be confused with *dharma* in Buddhism, where the term refers to the metaphysical teachings.

- <sup>1</sup> The Way of the Shaman, Michael Harner  
Harper and Row, © 1980, p40
- <sup>2</sup> An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy, John Mansley Robinson  
Houghton Mifflin, © 1968, p 24.
- <sup>3</sup> The Hindu Religious Tradition, Thomas J. Hopkins  
The Religious life of Man Series, Franklin & Marshall College, © 1971, p21
- <sup>4</sup> Yoga Immortality and Freedom, Mircea Eliade  
Bollingen Foundation Inc, ©1958, p3
- <sup>5</sup> Katha Upanishad, Translation by Swami Ambikananda Saraswati  
Viking Studio, ©2001, stanzas 1+12