

Talk on the History of Yoga

29.01.05

Yoga, as you probably all know, literally means “union”, union with the higher, the divine, or whatever you wish to name it. In the West we may think of yoga nowadays mainly as physical exercises, poses or *asanas*, but in its origins and philosophy yoga is far more than a physical discipline or practice. As contemporary German spiritual teacher and yoga master Heinz Grill says: *“It is an infinite, mental, internalised and joyful attempt to realise the highest, most widely conceived and perfect ideal of humanity.”*¹ In order to understand yoga and this need and wish for this perfect ideal of humanity, we have to go further back in time, to the culture of the East.

The Eastern art of thinking developed from a unified and close connection with the eternal and in North India the philosophy and approach of yoga grew very early out of this understanding. From 9000 BC to about 7000 BC a highly evolved society and culture developed there, a culture of higher knowledge, one which is perhaps not easy to comprehend from our present day consciousness. If we think of how differently our parents and grandparents look at the world from us, we can imagine how completely ignorant we are about this earlier, more spiritually connected state of consciousness.

Rudolf Steiner, founder of Anthroposophy and a great 20th century visionary writer, brings us closer to this state of mind in a fascinating way in one of his many lectures.² He describes in detail how early human consciousness actually experienced the world in a very different way from how we do now. For one thing people had a completely different sense of space and time: *“In surveying the world, they experienced a survey of immeasurable spatial distances and they had a simultaneous experience of the various moments of time.”* Maybe we could imagine this as a state of being in which people felt almost poured out into space, not so aware of their own boundaries and had no sequential sense of this has happened and now this happens. It is really hard for us to imagine, to put ourselves in this different mindset.

And Rudolf Steiner continues, they actually saw in a different way, they saw light and shade, more than defined outlines: *“In that ancient time the main concern of the human being is to interpret the things of the world as various shades of light, brilliancy, and darkness, obscurity.”* I have a picture of it like this, which may of course not be as it was, but that they saw an indistinct physical outline, a blurred unclear substantiality, just the spiritual essence of trees, plants, nature and of human beings in the degree of light present. They saw spirit rather than matter.

And as Rudolf Steiner continues, they understood goodness and badness in relation to the light and dark that they could see.

“This was also the way the moral order was conceived of. A human being who was benevolent and kind was experienced as a light, bright human being, one who was distrustful and selfish was experienced as a dark man.”

So we could understand this perhaps in thinking of how sometimes when we meet people and take some kind of a dislike to them, we might say they seem a bit gloomy, they make us feel heavy and unhappy. We may not be making moral judgements but we are certainly being affected by something we perceive in the other person.

In that earlier state of consciousness it was as though human beings saw the divine everywhere, as Rudolf Steiner describes further: *“Man knew that if he moved his hand it was the Divine within him, permeating him, that moved his hand, that moved his arm. When a tree was shaken by the wind the perception of the shaking tree was no different for him from the perception of the moving arm. He saw the same divine power as Providence in his own movements and in the movements of the tree.”* But he continues, in the next 2000 years a new soul mood arose, human beings now began to have a sense of a God without and a God within. *“If a tree is shaking, this is the God outside and if I move my arm it is the God inside; if I inhale air, work it over within me and exhale it again, then it is the God from*

outside who enters me and again leaves me.” It seems that there was still a great connection with the divine, but a sense of differentiation between a God outside and a God inside.

Then this sense changes. People begin to feel more deeply the contrast between themselves, the God within and nature, the God without. You could say that they had become more embedded in the earth and were living less in the spiritual worlds. And some people, maybe the priestly figures and leaders, noticed this difference and regretted this sense of separation from the spiritual worlds. So from this stage of development a time of asceticism came into being, in which through denial, through strict rules and total seclusion, this sense of connection to spirit could be regained. This is the stage when some of the breathing exercises which later became embodied in yoga began. Working with the breath in specific breathing exercises was a way of reconnecting with this sense of oneness which had previously existed in a quite effortless way. These kinds of exercises are still present in many yoga traditions and yoga classes nowadays, but as you can imagine because our consciousness has changed still further, they have a different effect on us. You will see the effect of these exercises, known as *pranayama* exercises, later in the yoga teacher course.

This path of denial which enabled this reconnection was a major sacrifice of human will and action and is unimaginable for us nowadays. People could deny themselves all food and communication, they could actually deny themselves all the needs of life. But this ascetic approach to life was not necessarily viable for the whole community, and certainly not for the furtherance of life in the world.

Eventually too as people became more and more connected with the earth and their life-needs, this strict asceticism itself could no longer connect even the more spiritually inclined individuals back to their sense of origin. So a different path with a different understanding became necessary. It was a time when people could see how their physicality really meant dependence on the earth and the mortal world. Human beings were becoming more conscious of the body and noticed how this connection to the world and the earth inevitably made them forget the connection to infinity in their consciousness. A dilemma was developing between earthly existence and spiritual existence, as earthly life drew them further from the spirit and as they subsequently realised the effect of the loss of spiritual connection.

So the old path of turning away from the world and denying the world began to be questioned and came to an end, because it was no longer having the right effect, and a new path of self-becoming, or of yoga began. Of course it is impossible to draw a line so easily under one period and another but we could describe this as the general trend. Denial could no longer be striven for as a true art of life and what was needed was a more useful and deeper personal integration of spirit and world, or spirit and individual. This integral discipline with a personal self was known as yoga. *“Yoga is the path of realising the one, sublime, eternal spirit in the person.”*¹ So yoga in its origins was a way of coming to terms with this dilemma of being in the world and yet wanting to remain connected with the divine.

This was the time which brought forth the famous song of the Lord, the Bhagavad Gita³, of which more later today, and which lasted until 3000 BC. It was the time of the Vedas and the early Upanishads which we will look at later in the course and which also produced some of the great Hindu texts alongside the Bhagavad Gita.

The beginning of the Bhagavad Gita describes the story of the great battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, the two peoples who as such represent good and evil. And from this opening struggle yoga in the form in which it was eventually written down is given by the God, Krishna, to his student, Arjuna, the warrior. The Bhagavad Gita arose 3000BC, though it was not written down until 500BC. It is a description of the three pillars of yoga, the three paths of this ancient tradition. The path of devotion had been the main spiritual experience until this time, *bhakti* yoga, and alongside this humanity is now given the path of the yoga of work, activity, selfless action, *karma* yoga, and the yoga of knowledge, of searching for, investigating and trying to understand God, *jnana* yoga. Through developing ourselves in these three aspects or paths of yoga, the individual comes to self-realisation.

All different kinds of interpretations and approaches to yoga arose from this time onwards, which were later codified by the sage Patanjali, in about 200BC. He assembled and systematised all the different approaches to self-realisation into an 8-limbed, step by step spiritual path for reaching enlightenment. Later we will look at the work of Patanjali⁴ and the different stages of the 8-limbed path in detail, but for now let us remember how and why the Bhagavad Gita brought in the expanded philosophy of yoga.

The Bhagavad Gita brought broad, clear and precise knowledge about the nature of the self and the realisation of the self. Self-realisation was always a sign of the land of India, this land that even nowadays still seems to run itself in a more timeless way than is common here. The spiritual return to the highest or, in the personal sense, the realisation of the personal self, has always been the goal of its fundamental philosophy and spiritual approach to life. The Indian *“seeks the one and the eternal, which is indefinable and at the same time the immortal soul, or the eternal one self, in the centre of the whole universe.”*¹

This self-realisation is in comparison unknown in the West. We can understand it psychologically in the sense of learning to express the ego better and thus functioning more effectively in the world perhaps, but this is not the true sense of it. In the West the whole religious tradition is influenced by a different tradition and a different message, by the message of the Gospels and the Christian testimonies of the saints. The whole religious system is permeated by stories and inspirations from the time in which Jesus Christ lived. Self-realisation, or the direct ascent from the earthly into the divine spiritual realm, from the limited into the unlimited, is not present in the same way as in the East. It is more about the idea of heaven after death. The West has been more permeated by devotion to the source of grace and by redemption through the principle of grace described in the Gospels. So this devotion, this call and this prayer for grace is more the essential quality here. We can quite simply hold onto the basic idea that self-mastery was important in the East and the principle of grace in the West, self-mastery for yoga, and devotion in the history of religion in the West.

We need to know and remember some of these fundamental cultural differences because otherwise we can lose our way in these different approaches which relate to the development of different mentalities. The East remained more timeless, the West produced a more materialistic principle. The East a certain non-materialism, a certainly material poverty. In the West you could say, as Heinz Grill, does that the materialistic attitude extends into our way of thinking and so we would tend to use our thinking in a materialistic way and to try to grasp hold of a matter with our intellect and try to create a lasting, formal theory. We tend towards developing a creed which, however, ultimately becomes a prison. The earlier holy men and the medieval mystics knew of the problems of this aspect of the psyche, this seductive power of materialistic thinking, of holding onto our thoughts as truths and they came to the conclusion that if they denied the body, they would be able to stamp out this inevitable grasping attitude. So they tried to overcome the tendencies of the body completely with penance and practices of self-flagellation, most of which seem ghastly these days and totally incomprehensible. Blood dripping off the walls of their cells and even rather miraculous stories of flying around the altars as they unleashed strange physical capacities. But their goal was to deny the body, so that these inevitable tendencies which come from the culture would not grab hold of their being in such an overwhelming way and so keep them separate from the divine.

In contrast there is the beautiful Eastern picture of body, soul and spirit, with its unique unity between all these limbs of the being, between the immortal eternal, the consciousness and the body. The East kept the awareness of this unity much more strongly because it remained more timeless and so untouched by the world. You could say it remained more pure, or even less individualistic.

But the West has fallen more into a form of separated kind of thinking, with life down here and God up there and the notion of heaven thereafter. So materialism has had more and more influence, alongside the rise of individualism. And out of this way of thinking Western culture has produced more and more self-awareness, as well as an attachment to this self-

awareness, a self-confidence, a confidence in the individual self, more than in the higher realm. And this culture has also produced extraordinary technological and scientific, as well as philosophical achievements.

So with this in mind we can look more into yoga's more recent roots in the 20th century when it was brought from the East to the West. Vivekananda, who lived in 19th century India, was the founder of modern thinking on yoga in that he brought this thinking to the West. He was a pure, wise enlightened, spiritual leader. His master and teacher, the sage Ramakrishna, inspired him with the philosophy of Vedanta, of oneness. Vivekananda spoke about Vedanta as he travelled round India and saw the poverty and plight of his people. As a result he went to the US and England talking about Hinduism and Vedanta, inspiring people with these Eastern philosophies to raise money for his poverty stricken people and country. This is how yoga reached the West in the late 19th century/early 20th century. Vivekananda himself died in 1902.

His main follower, Krishnamacharya, known as the grandfather of yoga in the West took on the tradition. He founded many yoga centres, in America in particular. From his influence three main teachers developed the tradition further for the West: B.S. Iyengar with Iyengar yoga, which is still very popular and until about 15 years ago the main form of yoga available in the West, Pratabhi Jois with Ashtanga Yoga which has exploded onto the scene in the last decade, very active, very flowing, and Desikachar, who is actually Krishnamacharya's son, with Vini-yoga, which is a slower practice at the other extreme, focusing on one pose per class. I hope you go and research a few different classes so you have your own experience of these different types of yoga and what is interesting in them for you.

Meanwhile Sivananda is another line of tradition with the *asana*-cycle that you have learnt, which we will investigate in a bit more detail tomorrow. His follower, Vishnudevananda, developed yoga *asanas* in Sivananda's ashram under his guidance and then brought them to the West. The first centres were in Canada and Europe. But the main problem with these traditions is that the spiritual leader had the connection with the higher and was an enlightened, pure soul, but over time and through the descendants of the tradition, the original spiritual fire weakens. So these forms in the West have tended to become more and more physical, which suits the Western mentality perfectly anyway. We can extract what we think we need from this whole, immeasurably broad tradition and reduce it to its more material aspects, to the body and in trying to improve the physical, we can try to ward off the inevitable. We then find it unnecessary to pay attention to the deeper whole, to the rest of the tradition which these physical poses are integrated into. We take a quick fix for example for stiffness and sluggishness and nervous tension, for vague symptoms in the body, or for our fears of becoming ill. Maybe some of us here started with that attitude, not even knowing there was anything deeper.....until it started to touch us more profoundly and we had more of a notion of its vast dimension.

So where do we find a contemporary way of combining some of these beautiful, wholesome qualities of the East with the Western mentality of individualism, in a way that brings spirit into the world, without taking us out of the world? This is the contribution of an integral approach to yoga as found in the work of Rudolf Steiner, German spiritual teacher Heinz Grill and 20th century Indian sage and enlightened master, Sri Aurobindo. They try to describe and explain their experiences of the realm beyond and through their breadth of understanding they emphasise that change and transformation comes from there, from above, from that realm to this, to below. They stress that we cannot just float up into the spiritual realms. But this means that we have to transform what is below. We need to avoid bringing to life our unconscious world from below, literally from the organs, from the old, from that which we have already experienced. Then we can be animated by the new, by the higher, by the purest forces for transformation from above. So these forces come into the consciousness from above, through our higher centres or chakras, to our lower centres. We develop a higher quality in our thinking in order to live a new life, free of the past, unconscious stuff from our organs.

Our work of integrating above and below, which is of use to us, to contemporary humanity and the world in which we live, is based on this crucial point that brings higher ideas and a growing sensitivity into the world here, for the benefit of all. So this integral yoga of self-realisation is one that combines Eastern and Western philosophies, through working with the consciousness for transformation of the self. To transform the self we work to transform our soul-forces in the consciousness, our powers of thinking, of feeling and of the will. This is our individual contribution, which we can each develop as much as we choose or are able to. So in this integral approach to yoga the Western idea of the importance of the individual is combined with the Eastern idea of unity of body, soul and spirit in the notion of self-realisation. Western philosophy combines with Eastern spirituality.

And this work with the consciousness is the work we also do in the physical positions or *asanas*, as well as in concentration-exercises and in meditation in this approach to yoga. The three soul forces and their transformation are our tools, we can master and develop the thinking, the feeling and the will. These soul-forces can be very bound together, self-concerned and full of darkness and constriction, or they can be freer of each other, more open to others, to the light, to expansive thoughts, to sensitive feelings and more selfless actions. So the consciousness is the tool we have to work with and over time the thinking can become clearer, the feelings more sensitive and the actions more free. This is what we are like in those moments when we are in a state of concentration, which all of you have I think experienced at some time or another in the *asanas*. This is when our inner, deeper more creative self is active and free. It is described as connected with the higher self, or God, or the divine. The potential for growth, love, creativity and originality within this aspect of our being is limitless, infinite.

So this is the path of integral yoga, the path of transformation of the self, of individuation. Each individual can have heaven on earth, connected with the world and their task in the world. And so the naturally more self-centred, "taking" aspect of man can be transformed into a more "giving" state through a long path of development. Not from one day to the next, but through a slow, thoughtful, deliberate, step by step movement forward into the unknown, along the path of the heart. The transformation through yoga is the transformation of the heart. And this weekend we will start by studying the heart chakra to have more understanding of its qualities. The heart chakra is connected with the individuality and with seat of the soul. All the work we do with the consciousness is perhaps best described by this quote from Heinz Grill before we start the *asana* class: *"Yoga emphasises the artistic and aesthetic aspect of man and is oriented with all the different exercises more to the development of the so-called soul-forces namely, the thinking, the feeling and the will, which should be expanded and refined in their capacity and illuminated by spirituality."*⁵

1) Heinz Grill - Erkenntnisgrundlagen der Bhagavad Gita, 2001 Lammers-Koll-Verlag

2) Rudolf Steiner - Self-transformation: The Ancient Yoga Civilisation and the Michael Civilisation of the Future, Rudolf Steiner Press 1995

3) For reference: see Bhagavad Gita and its message by Sri Aurobindo with his commentary and translation, LotusLightPublications 1995

4) Patanjali - How to know God, the Sutras of Patanjali, Vedanta Press

5) Heinz Grill - The aim and approach of Yoga out of the Purity of the Soul, lammers-Koll-Verlag 1998