

YOGA: TOWARDS A WESTERN PRACTICE. Dangerous hybrid? Or productive adaptation?

As yoga becomes public domain in the west, a smorgasbord of mix-and-match styles have emerged, some more bizarre than others. Do these western adaptations threaten yoga's traditional values and practices? Greg Wythes talks to leading yoga practitioners and finds them generally optimistic about yoga's development in western countries.

With its promotion to mainstream status in western countries, yoga has multiplied into a wide range of expressions and forms. As diverse groups and individuals embrace yoga, many have begun to mix and match, combining yoga with other systems, from the scientific to the religious, to create a smorgasbord of styles and approaches. Perhaps the most unlikely of these is Christian yoga, a system growing rapidly in popularity in the U.S. Here yoga has been stripped of its Indian cultural roots and given a decidedly New Testament feel. Yogadevotion, the Lutheran version of this approach, blends Christian prayer with classic pranayama techniques.

Of course the western mind is good at this kind of thing. The New Age movement provides many examples of philosophies and practices that are drawn from divergent cultural and spiritual sources and cobbled into a seemingly acceptable form, though sadly the results don't always create coherent or creditable systems. Sometimes in the adaptation the core is lost. Is yoga at risk as well? Where does it stand now in the process of adaptation? How can western students judge if the style that they are practising is a worthwhile one?

Yoga, as it is practised today in western countries like Australia, is different in many ways to the yoga that first came out of India. But this is not to be unexpected, for yoga is not a static art or science. As a practice that enhances personal development and transformation, yoga is itself subject to the same processes of growth and change. But is the west's process of cobbling together sometimes disparate influences a valid form of development? Or should yoga stay rooted in its traditional structure?

Buddhism provides a more positive analogy. If we chart the progress of Buddhism from its native India and out into the neighbouring Asian countries, we find that the expression of Buddhism was altered radically by the colouring of the culture it took root in. Tibetan Buddhism is very different to Zen or to the Theravadin style of Burma. And now as Buddhism takes a stronger hold in western countries, it is again undergoing change. But though there may be ideological variations across the cultures – both eastern and western – the fundamental elements have not changed. Buddhism has maintained its spiritual integrity. So in what ways is yoga's contact with the west changing it? How beneficial are these changes? And how is yoga to maintain its own integrity as it changes?

Kausthaub Desikachar, student and son of TKV Desikachar and grandson of T Krishnamacharya, is convinced that yoga will undergo an inevitable and ultimately positive transformation in the west. "It is natural for different groups to modify the central teachings of a non-native discipline in order to integrate it effectively with their own culture and customs," he says. "For example, Christian rituals in India are not performed in exactly the same way as they are in Europe. It is not only the language that is different, but the style, as well. This kind of adaptation is inevitable."

But Kausthub says it will take time for the west to appreciate the real depths of yoga's teachings. "Yoga is booming right now in the West. Yoga is the latest fad, but this faddish popularity will not last. What this kind of expansive popularity does, though, is allow yoga to gain a sure foothold in the cultural and spiritual landscape and create a space for serious practitioners to delve deeper into the full spectrum of yoga's teachings."

The pitfalls of this eclectic approach to contemporary yoga are very clear to Swami Kriyatma, Director of Education for Satyananda Yoga at Mangrove Mountain.

"One of my concerns is that the west is a great one for borrowing from here and there and making a new hybrid, a kind of 'generically modified' yoga", says Swami Kriyatma. "Like any other field in which this approach has been taken there have been some unquestionable breakthroughs, but often also some unforeseen and undesirable outcomes as well, that could not have been predicted. In other words, there are undoubtedly benefits and undoubtedly costs. But it is without question that whether we think it is a good idea or not, this homogenisation, this hybridisation will occur.

"The benefits seem fairly obvious to me in that there will be a greater information exchange, and more opportunity for validation. On the negative side however is the issue of dilution. Where systems have evolved over millennia then we must remember that the whole is often greater than the sum of the parts and the integrity of a system can be lost in the re-shuffle. The potency of these systems can easily be understated and where one or two practices have been extracted from a system without the buffering of complementary practices, imbalance and unpredictability can occur."

Along with the risk of imbalance and unpredictability in a modified system, Swami Kriyatma notes that modern yoga hybrids could lose the rich heritage acquired through its 5000-year history: "We run the risk as well that the hybrid version will lose the parampara, the history and experience of a tradition. When this happens we can be left with only a collection of practices and not with a collection of wisdom. Even when these systems function, if the originator or teacher is not from a tradition, what will happen when the teacher of this system is no longer around? The possibility is that we end up with a system with no centre."

Ma Devi, president of the YTAA¹, and co-director of the Shiva Ashram at Mt. Eliza in Victoria is more optimistic and holds a firm belief in the inherent qualities of yoga to maintain an integrity and find its own level in western culture over time. She also recognises that yoga in India was in need of some changes.

"Yoga had become invisible in its own country," she says. "The west revitalized yoga in India. Westerners bring a fresh approach and the growth and adaptation that came with this was good for yoga. Yoga can no longer be the possession of one particular lineage, teacher or person, as it so often was, and still is, in India. Any yoga is good yoga because it has an inherent power to uplift and to move energy."

Though yoga has grown rapidly in western countries over the last 25 years, the process of its assimilation into the west has not been a speedy or an easy one. Indian thought and culture first came into contact with the British who were the colonial power from the middle of the 18th century until 1947, but it is really only in the last 100 years that these ideas have begun to make any impression on the mainstream. The books and lectures of Sir John Woodruff –particularly his *The Serpent of Power*, a translation of a classic Indian text – presented these ideas in a way that captured the imagination of the English public in the early 20th century. Swami Vivekananda had a similar effect in the United States during a visit there in 1893. As India's spiritual ambassador he argued for a healthy synthesis of east and west, of religion and science.

¹ Yoga Teachers' Association of Australia

However the establishment of practices rather than just ideas took a lot longer. Many Indian yogis felt the call to take yoga to the west and traveled there to lecture or to set up schools and ashrams. Paramahansa Yogananda, author of *Autobiography of a Yogi* established himself in California in 1925. Krishnamurti had schools in England, California and India, and lectured worldwide for over 50 years. Later teachers like Swami Satyananda, Swami Venkatesanada, Amrit Desai and many others set up schools and ashrams in the U.S. and Australia. In the 1960's popular culture received a jolt when the Beatles traveled to India to study with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Slowly yoga's cultural toehold was growing in the western psyche.

Yet in sections of Indian society an inverse process was at work. For many Indians who had grown up under British colonial power, and especially those who worked in British companies or government bodies, the science and materialism of the west, and the values that accompanied them, seemed much more attractive. Yoga was seen as outmoded and old fashioned, a relic of a past India that had little relevance for its advance into the world of the future.

By the mid -1970's however there were enough westerners traveling to India to study yoga that native Indians came to notice what it had to offer on a global scale. Of the modern yoga masters that have had an impact in the west, the contemporary influence of Krishnamacharya is probably the most significant, especially through the teachings of his students BKS Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, and TVK Desikachar. In many ways it is the work of these teachers that gives yoga in the west its particular distinctiveness. For many people this yoga seems to be intensely physical, with a strong emphasis on asana. Hatha yoga, rather than Raja Yoga, or Bhakti Yoga, or JnanaYoga, or any of the other classic paths appears to be the western orthodoxy at present.

Swami Kriyatma disagrees with those who infer that Hatha yoga is somehow 'less' than other forms of yoga: "Contrary to popular opinion hatha yoga is very much concerned with the rich inner treasures. In the hands of a master it is a holistic and complete path. Different individuals, different personalities, people of different temperaments and different constitutions will resonate with different components of Yoga. Some people are naturally attracted to Hatha others to Bhakti, others to Raja, Karma, Mantra, Kriya.....vive la difference! They are all pathways up the same mountain."

Swami Kriyatma sees the priority of physical yoga in the west as a natural response to western lifestyles. "In the west with the imbalance towards cerebral work it makes absolute sense for people to balance and progress through physical means. If at another stage they elect to explicitly go within, then these pathways are available also and fortunately there are those that have traveled these pathways before and know them well. What we need to be looking for are guides who have been there before themselves, rather than just having bought the map!"

Hatha yoga, the Swami points out, is often a trigger for a deeper exploration: "Often the Hatha yoga practice leads to people seeking, exploring and experiencing some or many of the other yoga practices and philosophies."

Kausthub Desikachar sees the contemporary emphasis on Hatha Yoga as part of a process. "In my opinion," he says, "the world at present has experienced only a small taste of what yoga has to offer. The current emphasis on asana practice is due to the fact that some top teachers have been emphasizing only asana practice for decades now. However, certain exceptional teachers like T Krishnamacharya and TKV Desikachar have demonstrated that yoga is much more than asana practice. As the yoga community matures, its infatuation with asana will fade and it will embrace the full spectrum of yoga's teachings and practices. It is only a matter of time."

In the meantime, teachers like Krishnamacharya and his disciples have made yoga available to everyone, at all levels of ability. "Whether someone is seeking to become physically fit, alleviate a health problem, find relief from stress, or yearning for spiritual transformation, Krishnamacharya's teaching has something to offer,"

says Kausthub. “It is Universal — open to all, yet personal — practices are adapted to meet the unique needs of each student.”

Also undergoing a transformation through contact with the west is yoga’s traditionally hierarchic structures. The western mind has a different cultural response to the authoritarian and patriarchal values of traditional India and some forms of yoga. The guru/disciple relationship is unfamiliar to western students and the role of women in Indian society is very different to that in the west.

“Westerners are less hierarchical than Indians because of their upbringing,” says Ma Devi. “Yoga grew out of a Brahmanical tradition in India which emphasizes authority and the need for hierarchy. It takes generations for dogma like this to change, but this process is accelerated in the west. The place of women in yoga is very different in the west. Generally in India, women have chosen not to be gurus but rather to give service, love and support. Some traditions, like that of Shankaracharya, are very patriarchal, and not suited to women. What is freedom to a woman is different to that of a man.

“But yoga opens opportunities for women. If we look at what is happening in Australia, we can see that yoga is predominantly being run by women. The associations – the YTAA and the IYTA², for example-, the training bodies as well, such as the Gita School, Yoga Arts and others, are mainly run by women.”

Australia too is at the forefront of innovation. Yoga Synergy brings a contemporary scientific understanding of the body to traditional yoga practice in a way that Swami Vivekananda may well have anticipated over 100 years ago. Shadow Yoga goes back to yoga’s early roots to find new inspiration for the modern practitioner. Many of the accredited training schools today have an ecumenical approach where the yoga that is taught covers a broad range of systems and styles, rather than emphasising just one.

“It is marvelous to watch the dissemination of the teaching of yoga today,” says Ma Devi. “The west needs this teaching and, depending on who is doing the teaching, it can be poor or it can be very strong. The west is too caught up in the externals of the material world and it needs to turn inward towards spirituality. This will be good for individuals, good for the country and good for the world. It’s a cause for celebration.”

Yoga in the west is deep in a process of change, and everyone who practises yoga – whether it is one class a week, a daily practice, and at whatever level – is a participant in this process and, in part, an agent of this change. In many ways it will be the decisions that individuals make about the directions they take in yoga that will influence the way yoga will develop in the coming years, for without the student there is no teacher. Students will seek out the style of yoga that meets their needs. **The practices that become popular will be the ones that are pertinent to the needs of a society at any one time and these needs may change. We can be thankful that there is so much diversity within yoga to provide for the varying needs of a society as it evolves.** The traditional lineages still maintain their reliability and power and it is most likely that these traditions will continue to be the roots from which any new developments may grow. There is little doubt too, that these traditions will continue to thrive.

Change though, is inevitable. There may be risks, but a practice that reaches back 5,000 years, that contains an immense body of literature and that is marked by both diversity and integrity, can be expected to survive the challenges of western science and materialism. And, with any luck, to be enhanced by the contact.

² The International Yoga Teachers’ Association