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YOGA

Ancient gift for the modern world



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In the run-up to International Yoga Day, June 21, a look at why yoga has captured the imagination of people. Text and photographs by BENOY K. BEHL

YOGA was conceived 5,000 years ago, in the Indian subcontinent. The Upanishads, composed in the 8th or 9th century BCE as a collection of beautiful verses, crystallised deep philosophical ideas that had a timeless quality and a vision of life in which yoga was a fundamental factor.

The Katha Upanishad of 3,000 years ago says: "He... whose senses are uncontrolled, who is not tranquil, whose mind is not at rest, he can never attain the true self, even through knowledge".

It also says: "The Supreme, being formless, cannot be discerned by the senses, hence all knowledge of the eternal must be acquired by the more subtle faculties. These are developed only through the purifying practice of meditation".

Yoga is a deep study of the universal nature of humankind, not just a science of the mere physical world. It is the study of consciousness itself, understanding one's body, one's emotions, one's mind and, beyond that, one's true self.

Yoga has a vision of oneness in all that there is around us. It is a vision of great harmony and works towards integrating us with the eternal reality. What comes in the way of this unity is people's egos and their limitless desires which they spend their lives chasing. There is never satisfaction in their lives, only pain and a constant restlessness.

Conquering the fretful disturbances of the mind, great thinkers researched deep into the self over several centuries and in the process developed a great tradition of logic and epistemology. They examined, among other things, the following questions: What is the basis of our knowledge? What is knowledge itself? It was a precise and uncompromising study, an unerring search for the truth to help us to know ourselves better and to help us attain inner peace and joy.

The Katha Upanishad says: "The one who is free from desire and free from grief, with the mind and senses tranquil, beholds the glory of the true self."

Yoga quite literally means to unite oneself with the higher self, which is in us and is all-pervasive. It means to join the subject with the object. To do this, we have to strip away the many layers of momentary sensory perceptions that assail our senses and keep us bound to the material world. In the words of the Katha Upanishad: "When the five sense organs of perception become still, together with the mind: that is called the highest state."

The Upanishad says: "When all desires dwelling in the heart cease, then the mortal becomes immortal and attains the true self."

The purpose of yoga is to free its practitioners from the shackles of desires, awaken the true knowledge within them and help them be in harmony with all that there is.

Yoga helps people to be in the moment in which they live. Gradually, they become aware, first of their bodies and of their breath. Yoga brings them to look at it, to control it. Once that has been achieved, the transformation has begun.

From there, the next step is awareness of the mind. Yoga and ancient Indian thought do not consider the mind to be consciousness itself. The mind is, in many ways, like the body. People have to see it, be aware of it. The ancient texts point out that the mind is like a monkey, which jumps about. It flits from thought to thought, and people usually have no control over it. In yoga, they become aware of it and step aside, to become observers of the mind. They are no longer carried away by the fluctuations of the mind.

The yoga sutras, written by the ancient sage Patanjali, say that yoga is a state of *Chitta Vritti Nirodha*, a state in which the waves or perceptions of the mind have been stilled. In this state, a person may be able to direct his or her consciousness to the search for what is true and lasting.

Scientific research done on yoga in the past 40 years has confirmed that yoga contributes to the health and happiness of people in all walks of life. Meditation is not about finding anything new. It is about letting go of what is not one's self. When a person learns to observe himself or herself, the outside world no longer has control over him or her. Good health and joy are the natural outcome. At

the end of the path of self-transformation is the reward of true knowledge: when we are deeply aware of our oneness with all that there is: the state of yoga.

Benoy K. Behl is a film-maker, art historian and photographer who, in the past 37 years, has taken over 46,000 photographs of Asian monuments and art heritage, made 133 documentaries on art and cultural history, and held exhibitions in 54 countries around the world. He has delivered lectures at most of the important universities and museums around the world that have departments of Asian art. His book, The Ajanta Caves, is published by Thames & Hudson, London, and Harry N. Abrams, New York, and is in its fifth print run.

Behl is at present completing his third film on yoga. The first film was shown in 50 countries on the first International Yoga Day, June 21, 2015. He carried out the photography for this feature in India, Vietnam and the United States over the last one year and was assisted in this by Sujata Chatterji.

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