

Editorial

The Future of Yoga

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Editorial

Yoga is at an interesting crossroads. At the turn of the 20th century, the Yoga industry was non-existent, while there was an amazing depth of knowledge within the community of practicing Yogin-s of the time. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Yoga market is global with millions of practitioners, but yet there remains very little knowledge about this precious discipline. What are the challenges facing the Yoga world today? And what will happen to Yoga if these challenges are not appropriately addressed? Reflection is needed not only from the practitioners, but also from policy makers who have been inevitably endowed with powers, perhaps way beyond their capacity, in setting the direction of the future of Yoga.

Modern yoga is rootless

The teachings of Yoga are normally rooted deeply in philosophical teachings, and form a way of life, rather than merely a set of exercises. However, modern day Yoga is primarily associated with physical exercise and is devoid of other important aspects that make it a holistic experience, rather than just a performance. Sound Yoga principles exist in the important classical texts that define the entire array of Yogic tools and guidance on how to integrate them as a way of life.

When Yoga made its way into the Western world in the twentieth century, the teachings were brought through Indian teachers who still had access to these teachings that connected Yoga to its roots. However, with each passing generation, less and less of this knowledge was passed down and the practitioners of today are very distant from Yoga's original roots, if not completely cut off from them. Most of the teacher training programs today fail to incorporate this vast knowledge and mainly focus the education on learning a set of postures and understanding them through the bias of modern medicine or physiotherapy.

This is an unsustainable and dangerous path. Just like a tree cut off from its roots will not survive, Yoga cut off from its roots will face a similar calamity.

Yoga cannot be understood through medicine

A big problem in modern Yoga is its attempts to gain the confidence and validation of the medical community. The fact is that Medicine will never understand Yoga within the framework of Medicine's perspective and tools, and hence trying to understand Yoga through medical eyes is like following a blind person. Medical

science is materialistic in nature and believes only in experimental validation. This implies that it only understands measurable tangible entities. While Yoga, on the other hand is based mainly on subtle principles, which are often not only intangible, but also not accepted by medical science. A classic example is Prana, often termed as 'life force energy', which is so fundamental to Yogic understanding, but something that medical community cannot accept or certify, as it is not a measurable phenomena.

Modern medicine as we know it did not exist in India, or anywhere in the world for that matter, when Yogin-s were developing these practices. Yogin-s understood the human body within their own framework and evolved tools based on that understanding. Developed through careful and constant observation and extraordinary intuition, the tools of Yoga use more than just the musculoskeletal framework of the body, unlike Physical Therapy which focuses on body mechanics. Yoga's tools involve all aspects of our being, taking into account our breathing patterns, emotions, and intellect as well.

Yoga differs from medical science in many ways, and in fact ventures into the arena of the subtle that is not recognised, let alone understood, by modern science. In no way is it suggested that modern medicine is not valid. It is both valid and immensely beneficial. But using modern medicine to try and understand the science behind Yoga is inappropriate, an approach destined for misinterpretation and a limited perspective.

Standardisation is not the answer

There is a great debate on standardisation of Yoga protocols among the Yoga community today. This principle essentially goes against the very nature of Yoga's fundamental premise that each of our individual differences must not only be respected, but also celebrated. Yoga, like other disciplines from India such as Ayurveda, strongly advocates that standardisation of tools will not work, as each of us differ from one another in multiple parameters.

Just like a mango cannot be treated as a pineapple, nor can a raw mango be treated as a ripe one, one human cannot be treated like another. So Yoga does not believe in standardised prescriptions, but rather aims to find individual solutions for each person, honoring different parameters such as constitution, age, vocation, season, living condition, health status, energetic capacity and life interests, to name a few. This is why traditionally all Yoga was taught one-to-one and, in order to achieve results of the highest standard, why it should continue to be done in that manner.

Rejection of yoga as therapy

Recently Yoga Alliance, one of the largest certification agencies in the US, sent out a message that it would not authorise teachers to use the word Therapy in the context of Yoga. This not only came as a shock to many in the Yoga industry, but also is against the very philosophical tenets of Yoga.

Among the most important reasons why Yoga originated in

the first place, is its immense therapeutic value to address various illnesses and conditions. This includes not only physiological diseases, but also psychological and spiritual illnesses. Even a cursory browse through any of the classical texts on Yoga such as Yogasutra, Hathayogapradipika, Sivasamhita etc., will reveal the importance of Yoga as a therapeutic system.

Fear of litigation is perhaps the reason for Yoga Alliance's stance. However, this must definitely not be a reason to reject Yoga as an important complimentary holistic health care paradigm. There is a growing body of evidence that is revealing the vast potential Yoga has in the domain of Healing.

Yoga is spiritual, not ego-centric

One of the beautiful dimensions of Yoga is that, though it does not insist on a religious view, Yoga is mainly a spiritual discipline. The reality in the Yoga world is that most people look at it as a replacement for physical fitness or a visit to the gym.

Yoga originated as an important means of spiritual transformation, which involves the discovery of our inner potential and the full expression of the same. In today's world, where society is so influenced by external stimulus, many are clueless as to what is their own inherent capacity and lack the strength to step into their own power.

Unfortunately the Yoga field, too, has been influenced so strongly by the media, that many who come to Yoga, also do so because they want a nicer physique, or want to fit into the modern Yoga lifestyle, which seems more focused on brand loyalty, perceived need (ancient yogin-s never used high end rubber mats), and appearances (so called "yoga clothing" is not necessary for meaningful practice) than on the substance of practice. In essence, Yoga practice today has thus sadly embraced a form of narcissism and focuses too much on the egoistic side of humanity. This is also a very dangerous path to tread, and also contrary to Yoga's belief of diminishing the ego.

Blind following the blind

Yoga has become such a big business that Yoga teachers are mushrooming all over the place. Not only are they often ill-qualified to teach, but also there is no governing body yet that is qualified enough to oversee or guide them. It is indeed true that there are organisations like Yoga Alliance, the International Association of Yoga Therapists and other such groups, that have emerged due to the popularity of Yoga and that try to do the work of legitimate certifying agencies.

But two major issues arise in this context. Firstly, a great number of practitioners raise a very valid question of who gave these organisations the right to govern others. Secondly, a question arises as to how many of the decision makers in these organisations are actually educated in-depth on all matters concerning Yoga. Most, but thankfully not all, are products of the modern era with not so much in-depth training with Classical teachings. Hence their knowledge is limited to whatever modern system they have studied. The latter typically offer either a reduced and standardised curriculum or heavily borrow from Western medical systems or physiotherapy. Also many of these decision makers are forced to accept modern Western views and ideas; otherwise they risk not being taken seriously or, in the most extreme cases, litigation.

If this continues, the next generation of Yoga students will not be trained in Classical Yoga at all but instead have unacceptably limited exposure to Yoga's tools and goals. What will be taught going forward, then, will be a light, New Age version of physical therapy and exercise? Truly a scary scenario.

It is imperative that these institutions that govern Yoga start to stand up for Yoga and not sway from its fundamental tenets. They could involve qualified long term practitioners from teaching traditions span many generations and are rooted in classical teachings, to uplift standards and begin to shine light to the upcoming generations.

Conclusion (Need for Class, Not Mass)

With the business parameters pushing Yoga to become a mass business, great compromises are being made that are the main reasons for these immense problems inflicting the Yoga world. Yoga needs to focus on Class instead. The great Yogin-s of history only had limited students. But they were dedicated and long term practitioners who learnt and embraced the entire depth of Yoga. They were not acrobats and gymnasts who jumped from one Asana to another ignoring the real meaning of Yoga as a spiritual experience. Unless the Yoga community wakes up to these realities and starts to ask tough questions regarding its path and rectifies its deficiencies, true Yoga will be forced to go underground like it has in the past centuries.