

YOGA

Anatomy and the Journey Within

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Vitasta

LET KNOWLEDGE SPREAD

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xix</i>
Looking Back	1-20
The Transition	21-32
The Goa Miracle	28
The Dawn	30
The Science of Yoga	33-47
Yoga and 'Health'	35
Yoga and Medicine	37
Yoga and Physics	42
Yoga in Perspective	48-61
The Twilight and After	48
Post Patanjali	56
The Body	62-80
The Defences	73
Disease	74
Neuro-peptides	75
The Genome "Spell-Check"	77
Mirror Neurons	78
The 'Bodies'	81-98
Reality, Probability and Psychic Synchronicity	82
Koshas	85
Nadis	86

Chakras	87
Prana	93
Kundalini	94
Planets and Free Will	99-113
We make our own Reality	101
Astrology: Destiny Deciphered?	102
K N Rao	104
Yuktswar Giri	106
Muktananda	109
Shaktipat: The ‘Lightning’ Yoga	114-137
Shaktipat	117
Initiation	120
The Mantra	124
Guru	130
Karma Transference	135
Reiki	138-154
‘The Universal Life Energy’	139
Treatment and Cure	142
Reiki Possibilities	143
My Experiences	144
Reiki—A Karmic Trap?	149
Paramahansa Yogi Hans Baba	158-79
The Enigma	160
The Early Days	172
Vindhyaçal	173
Hans Becomes Paramahans	174
Healing the Future	180-228
The Alphabet of Healing	182
<i>Glossary</i>	229

Looking Back

And the time came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

—*Anais Nin*

FROM THE LATE teens, I have been fascinated no end by the occult and thereafter even though I was always loathe to being religious in the generally accepted sense of the term. The great divide between the haves and the have-nots, the apparent dysfunction of the much vaunted doctrine of Karma and the generally evident rupturing of the social and moral order, all largely in the Indian and by extension the subcontinent's context, appeared to be reason enough not to fancy the chances of the existence of God, in whatever form. Indeed, the problem of evil

has been the thorniest one in the path of theists and philosophers down the ages – “if God is Good, He cannot be Perfect and vice versa.” I carried this “intellectually correct” notion of God and godmen for most of my early adulthood. Often, I earned the wrath of friends and family for calling the mushrooming roadside temples traffic hazards and for deriding priests as social vermin. Inquisitive though I was, there was no way I could be coerced into believing in anything ‘beyond and after’ through a *sadhu’s* sleight of the hand or a theologian’s woolly discourses.

Then, through a quirk of fate and bang in the middle of what should have been the most rewarding phase of my burgeoning career, I plunged into the darkest recesses of my life; forcing me to deeply introspect and re-charter my life at this rather late stage in a desperate bid to ‘make something click’ . The more I tried to come out of the quagmire, the deeper I sank till a stage was reached when my analytical mind which I was proud of, my foresight and the will to fight, all appeared to have deserted me. It was at this juncture that I, the ‘rationalist’ cried for divine help and in fact tentatively dabbled in the occult. What followed thereafter was an amazing roller-coaster ‘journey back’ in mysticism that at times literally, left me gasping for breath. Over the years, this budding romance with the paranormal now seems to have made way for a more mature co-existence with a fascinating world of yoga that has the ‘miraculous’ or the ‘supernormal’ entwined with it at each step.

Ever since, I started feeling sort of duty-bound to share my rather fortuitous, yet invaluable insights into a completely higher way of living that was healing and enlivening beyond imagination, and that was yet open to all those who cared to listen. In this strange and shadowy world of seers that had tantalizingly half-opened to me to show glimpses of the latent

dimensions of human existence, my mental state was not unlike that of the diminutive Gulliver in the land of giants who lived to tell his tale of fellowmen. With this difference that in my case, I was the Gulliver and I had to be my Jonathan Swift!

It is in this background that I started toying with the idea of writing about the science and art of practical spiritualism as I have understood. What made me dither was essentially a reluctance to join the bandwagon, as I have always held the yoga way of life to be a very scientific, yet sacred subject. To me it was a subject, not to be trifled with without the requisite preparedness, as was the case with most New Age writings on the subject. My ambivalence was not without a basis. I would start with the cons first. In this age of dot-coms and 'instant karma', there appears to be no dearth of literature on this subject. The new-found wisdom on meditation and yoga, through a process of reverse osmosis as it were, has travelled from the West to the Orient in such a deluge and frenzy that adding to the existing bulk appeared to be nothing short of a crime. On the other hand, having gone through so much of available reading and practising material on the subject, I came to the uneasy realisation that by and large yoga/meditation was being presented to the layman in either of the two ways: (a) by the revivalists in a classical form that, though well meaning, was too esoteric, convoluted and even scary for the ordinary mortal; or worse, (b) by a set of unscrupulous elements who knew nothing of yoga, but were peddling meditation, mantra and allied concepts in a ready-to-serve package that was hollow in substance and deceitful in intent. The average yoga enthusiast has therefore got put off by the rigours of the "real stuff," and often on the rebound, been claimed by the 'market forces' with their alluring promise of fixing the mind, body and soul in one go, for a fat fee of course.

Particularly unfortunate has been the tendency among the yoga-conscious to become more and more physically inclined – aiming for more and more complex bodily postures and breathing techniques – in a misconceived zeal to get the yoga practice rid of its ‘unscientific’ component. In modern physics as well as in yoga scriptures, energy is seen as the fundamental nature of existence. In the ultimate analysis, there is no solid matter. The human anatomy, our thoughts and emotions are all nothing but energy vibrating at various frequencies. The coarser the vibration, the more likely we are to fall into stress or disease; the finer the vibration, the greater the bounce-back to physical and mental well-being. New Age science is therefore, in perfect sync with the teachings of the perfected yogis, the *siddhas*. The learning from some of my own experiences is that the richest and quickest bounties of yoga, even from a purely utilitarian point of view, can be accessed by proceeding from the mind side in the mind-body continuum. Simply put, the mind shapes the body much more than the body shapes the mind. The yoga beginners therefore, would do themselves a world of good by consciously starting to think of themselves as energy vibrations rather than solid matter. As for myself, I do recognize the place of the *hatha-yoga* component in the overall scheme of things and have often successfully overcome minor ailments through specific *asanas*. I have nonetheless seen a combination of simpler, more ‘energy oriented’ techniques of mind-management pay wonderful dividends even in the near-total absence of *hatha-yoga* practices. Likewise, the unsuspecting converts to the contrived New Age techniques of breathing need to be firmly told that yogic breathing happens on its own when the seeker’s psyche and physique are up to it.

When one practises advanced meditation, *Kevala Kumbhaka* or natural retention of breath without *Puraka* - inhalation and

Rechaka - exhalation comes by itself; when *Kevala Kumbhaka* comes, one enjoys immense peace and exhilaration. That the conscious practice of *pranayama* in today's fast life is a double-edged weapon ought to be hammered into the minds of the New Age yoga-enthusiast before it is too late. Sample this: the *Gheranda-Sambhita*, one of the most authentic manuals on hatha-yoga, lists four essential prerequisites for pranayama-practice – (a) *sthana*, or right place, (b) *kala*, or right time, (c) *mitahara*, or controlled diet and (d) *nadi-shuddhi*, or purification of the psycho-energetic channels that carry the life force or *prana*. The *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika*, another medieval classic on hatha-yoga, cautions: “just as a lion, an elephant or a tiger is tamed gradually, so should the life force, through *pranayama* be controlled; lest it kills the practitioners.” And the *Shiva-Sambhita* forbids pranayama-practice shortly after a meal or when hungry.

When I saw some of the most Westernized people viewing and practicing yoga in terms of some isolated physical exercises and breathing techniques unmindful of its necessary spiritual underpinnings, I felt somewhat like a computer-buff who would grow impatient with an upstart inclined to use the personal computer exclusively as a typewriter. Yes, the PC can type and type beautifully. But it can do much more; it can edit, it can instruct, it can play chess, and it can do a whole lot of things, even connect you to the Super Computer. Similarly, I now knew and wanted to tell anyone who cared to listen, that Yoga could bring you relaxation, good health and mental peace; but it could – and was meant to – do a lot more; even connect one to God or the Supreme Intelligence. In the event, I clearly saw the need and space for a detailed exposition on Yoga that combined the authenticity of the teachings of the orthodox school with the simplicity and directness of the trendy meditation packages now flooding the market.