



## WHY IS THE WEST INTERESTED IN YOGA?

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For 25 years, I have been regularly visiting the West for periods of three months or so. On these visits, I have met many eminent personalities, as well as common people. The question : "Why is interest in Yoga increasing day by day in the West ?", has been asked several times by our people.

India is a land enriched by its ancient but ever-fresh and flourishing culture. Although we were ruled for a long time by foreigners and were in the clutches of poverty. We did not lose our ground, for our culture, and strong faith in its philosophical thought, along with our strong faith in the Inner Self, have always protected us from all sorts of disasters. Facing the calamities of life, we have understood the meaning and the depth of life. Even the Hindu religion has not remained within limited boundries. Though it is known as the Hindu religion, it has often proven that it is not meant only for Indians, but is a universal religion, or *Vishva-Dharma*; for its truth has not remained only for a selected few, or for any particular caste, creed, or class. The truth of this Dharma or religion has contributed human betterment.

Yoga is neither a foreign nor a new subject to our country. It was evolved centuries ago by our sages. If anything at all it is Yoga—the ancient Art, the perfect science—the path which takes one towards the innermost truth.

Yoga means Union. It means evenness of attitude in our day-to-day life, or a skill which arises by itself in our action or meditation, and so on.

To achieve union and evenness one has to still one's mind. One has to break the frontiers which distract one's mind from thoughts and emotions. Actions are subordinated to thoughts and emotions. Thus these actions are not pure. Pure action is that by which skill comes into being, which brings serenity, morality, and creativity. That is true Yoga. Thus Yoga brings purity in action, clarity in thought and stability in mind.

The West has realized that there is a fundamental need to introduce Yoga into their way of life. India could make Yoga a gift to the world.

It was first introduced to the West in 1954 by Yehudi Menuhin, the world famous violinist. It was then that I sowed the seed of Yoga, and today I am proud to say that it has grown into a gigantic tree. I see the enthusiasm growing. Hundreds of Westerners have benefitted from my instruction, tacking advantage of my presence and working hard to maintain what they learned with great effort and keenness to add to their practices. Not only did they derive the benefit of my work, but they also started conducting classes in different centres in different centres in Europe, America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Mauritius, etc., on a purely humanitarian basis. Thus more and more people are being introduced to Yoga.

Western people have always been interested in Indian Philosophy. Not only are they keen to know about the Indian way of life, but they are also keen to adopt it. Impeded by all their book-knowledge of Yoga, they could never grasp what Yoga is exactly and actually. In 1954 when I arrived at London airport, I was looked upon as a 'miracle man', and was asked



whether I, being a practitioner of Yoga, could chew glass, drink acid, or walk on fire. When I denied all such demonstrations, the audience was very surprised and enquired further what kind of Yogi I am. I immediately realized that some gross misconceptions about Yoga existed in the West, and I felt that there was a lot of work for me to make these people understand what Yoga is. It was then a kind of challenge for me to dispel so many misconceived notions.

The West has progressed very rapidly in technical and scientific knowledge. But the simultaneous growth of materialism has created a great spiritual void. Discipline has become a mechanical format in a barren existence. Bored with materialism, the people in the West are searching for something which will give them peace of mind. The lack of any spiritual touch in human life and relationship has led many frustrated people to turn to the East for solace and inspiration. They realize that happiness and peace elude them. The art of living has been drained from their lives. A hectic life has eclipsed their peace of mind; the soft and sophisticated material comforts have robbed them of life's simple happiness; an externally imposed discipline has kidnapped their inner freedom.

Now they are realizing that it is Yoga that can keep their minds out of bondage. Though physically able to sustain the pace of modern life, they are often not able to bear the mental pressures of it. The artificiality of that life has been hurting the core of their consciences. A lopsided and pampered existence has not harboured them from enormous mental tensions generated by so many hectic claims on their lives. Though Western society recognizes and permits divorce, re-marriage, free sex, independent living even in adolescent aged children, etc., still the people there have not been able to bring peace to their inner selves. On the contrary, this so-called liberty has produced innumerable mental and psychological worries and problems. Westerners are intellectually developed but emotionally starved, as they are cut off from the fountain of inner life springs. They talk a lot from the brain, but their hearts are empty and sterile. This has separated them from spirituality. Because of all this they have been drawn to Yoga, to regain inner balance.

While explaining why the West has taken to Yoga, I cannot refrain from saying that we Indians have neglected Yoga, this rich legacy which has come to us from our ancient sages. While the West wants to adopt the Indian way of life, which is known for its simplicity and straight-forwardness, we Indians are trying to immitate their way of life. Not only have we neglected our own Art : Yoga, but we are forgetting it. We talk a great deal about our philosophy, but we do not convert it into action. We are merely glorifying the past. We do not live according to what is morally important ; we live on ideals. We are humble and simple ; belief has a very strong hold on us, but we are very slow and even slovenly in action.

The Western mind is intellectually well-trained. In India we believe that one cannot improve society unless one is evolved mentally and spiritually. As the Westerners are people of action, they go all out to improve society. Both types of approach are partially correct and productive. No doubt we Indians are proud of our civilization and culture, and of our great Yogis and Rishis. But that feeling is not going to lift us from lethargy. We must work, steadfastly and purposefully, as did our great masters in the past. We have to act in our chosen paths earnestly, and not casually and merely intellectually. Only action with understanding and a desire to learn with humility will bring us once again to that past glory. We are patient, simple and humble, but we lack keenness and interest and the drive to get results.

Being of just the opposite frame of mind, the Westerners, once they set their minds to something, will persevere with fit. Once they take to Yogic practice, they do not treat it casually, but try to project it. Yoga has gone to every nook and corner in the West, whereas we in India think that it is in our blood and neglect the real Art.

The West is eager to know about our philosophical approach in the daily walks of life. The Western mind is in search of peace ; but peace cannot come from outside ; it has to come from within. Unless people learn to distinguish essentials and non-essentials, peace will ever

elude them. The West thought that the soul could be realized through intelligence. Now India must teach that the head can take us only so far and no further ; we must instead hitch the wagon to our heart. There should be co-ordination of head and heart. The proper mental approach and a firm moral background are essential factors; without them, a spiritual approach is an impossibility. The West seems to have realized that Yoga is the only path which is universal in its nature, and which can bring about a fundamental change in their way of life.

When I came in contact with Westerners, the first thing they told me was that they are tired of lectures on Indian philosophy and weary of so much endless theoretical knowledge ; they wanted something practical and tangible, of which they were ignorant. We do not distinguish between the body and the mind. There must be an integrated approach. I then had to teach the *Yogāsanas* and *Prāṇāyāma* with this wholesome approach. At every step, it had to insist and make them understand how the body and the mind work in co-ordination, how each *āsana* and each breath is treated with a kindred spirit. Their bodies, being very supple and elastic, could perform the *āsanas* very easily, but I had to make them aware that it is not merely a physical movement, but that the mind has also to be kept alert, living all the time in the present, and how the current of spiritual awareness has to flow in each movement, in each action, in each breath.

The family structure in the West, their habits, conventions, and social living, are all opposite in nature to the Yogic way. Smoking and drinking have never been regarded as unacceptable behaviour. Their idea of morality is such that they never considered it necessary to give up smoking, drinking etc., for spiritual life. Yet after beginning the regular practice of Yoga, many of them stopped smoking and drinking, and even attending so often social parties.

The only solution for mental and psychological problems is Yoga, and this is the main reason for its becoming so popular. It is of course true that popularity can sometimes damage the real and original nature of a subject : and it is here that I have found the second stage of my work. In the fifties and sixties I worked hard to popularize the subject of Yoga ; now I must work to correct the distortions that have appeared since that popularization. On television especially, in classes such as "Keep Fit", Yoga is being presented, not in its true form, but in a Westernized version that is more like any other form of physical exercise. Whenever I appeared on Western television, it became my duty to point out the discrepancies between these adapted versions and the true original Yoga, and to emphasize that Yoga is not done merely to "keep fit". If one practises well health will be an inevitable by-product.

Today I am happy to say that at least my pupils have remained faithful to me and to my work; they are carrying that work in its true form to their brothers and sisters abroad. There are now hundreds of teachers trained by me working in centres throughout the west. Many are teaching in the Inner and Greater London Educational Authorities, (ILEA), Local Educational Authorities, and in the Universities.

The scientific Western mind is also greatly interested in the medical effects and application of Yoga. While we in India only claim that Yoga is beneficial in the treatment and curing of such diseases as heart trouble, high or low blood pressure, diabetes and so on; the Western doctors are actually testing these claims in hospitals, with the result that they have concluded that Yoga can and does help to a great extent to cure many physiological, psychological, and psychosomatic illnesses. In America, Britain, and other places, I have several doctors as pupils, and they have made observations and experiments during classes I was conducting, to assist them in their research into the effects of Yoga. Their research has led them to conclude the *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāma* done merely in the name of Yoga do not help, and that only that which is practised in the genuine and correct way, can have a beneficial effect. I fear that one day these doctors may prove to the world that it is they who are

(Continued on Page 107)

