

Wisdom From India

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on

Y O G A

Five Ways Of Salvation In Hinduism

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1. YOGA'S GLOBAL APPEAL

Yoga's global popularity testifies to India's growing cultural influence. It compensates for our recurring four-yearly embarrassment at not winning Olympic gold: that we are not a healthy, athletic people. How can Indian culture contribute to global health via yoga, and yet not produce winning athletes?

The answer is simple: yoga was never meant to be a fitness régime. The word *yoga* is Hindustani from Sanskrit, meaning 'union'. In Indian philosophy yoga is a means to *moksha* (salvation or liberation), understood as isolation from physical nature or union with God. Physical yoga (that is, *hatha* yoga) is only one form of yoga. Indian sages have taught many different forms of yoga – or ways of obtaining one's salvation. Western fans of yoga abuse it when they use it exclusively for physical fitness.

Jews, Christians and Muslims naturally find it difficult to understand how physical exercises could contribute to one's spiritual salvation. This booklet seeks to explain the religious worldview behind yoga. Let us begin with a question:

The Basic Human Problem

Is the basic human problem biological, moral or metaphysical?

Materialists think that Mother Nature (evolution) has made us bad, that our problem is therefore *biological* or genetic. Perhaps some day genetic engineers will be able to make us good – loving, caring, just and upright. Scientists will then become our saviors. They will determine what we can think, say and do. But might we not then lose our humanity – our ability to make moral choices? Would love really be love when we are genetically engineered to love? Doesn't the moral value of an act depend upon our choosing that act voluntarily?

The Jews popularized the idea that the human problem is moral: that the human beings are sinners, guilty of having broken God's law. Christianity and Islam share the Jewish perspective. We will return to this idea later.

Yoga's worldview assumes that the human problem is neither biological, nor moral, but *metaphysical*.

Biological, Metaphysical, or Moral?

Before explaining the difference between metaphysical and moral, let me hasten to add that some ancient Hindu traditions take moral weakness and failure very seriously. They recommend ritual sacrifices for the propitiation of sins. These sacrifices are similar to the ones taught in the Jewish scriptures, commonly called the Old Testament. Some of these Hindu scriptural teachings on sacrifice foreshadow the New Testament teaching that Jesus sacrificed himself for sin, as a substitute. Nevertheless, later Hinduism does not think that the basic human problem is moral.

Originally yoga techniques were a part of *Samkhya* philosophy. This philosophy is dualistic in that it postulates two ultimate realities: *purusha* (soul) and *prakriti*

(physical nature). *Samkhya* teaches that soul (*purusha*) is pure, but physical nature (*prakriti*) is evil. Somehow the soul has become entangled with the physical body. Our liberation – or *moksha* – therefore lies in isolating soul from body. Yoga was the technique by which to achieve this isolation. This low view of the physical body was the chief reason why yoga undermined any possibility of a culture of physical fitness in India.

Today yoga is generally defined not as isolation of soul from body but as ‘union of soul (*atma*) with God (*Brahma*).’ This change has occurred because gradually other schools of Indian philosophy that rejected *Samkhya* philosophy adopted yoga.

A prominent version of Upanishadic Hinduism, for example, taught that the human soul was not distinct from God. God (*Brahma* or the Universal Self) was the same as the human soul (*atma* or our inner self). God and man were ultimately one. This teaching was called non-dualism (*advaita*), meaning that the human self and the divine self were not two distinct entities. It is also called monism – from ‘mono’ or one – emphasizing oneness of everything, especially of God and man. The monistic gurus teach that man is Infinite Consciousness or God, who has somehow forgotten his true nature and become entangled in finite, personal, rational, consciousness. So long as he remains in this state of ignorance, he is repeatedly born into this world of suffering. Salvation lies in transcending finite, personal consciousness and merging into (or experiencing ourselves to be) the Infinite Impersonal Consciousness, and thereby escaping the cycle of births and deaths. In this school of thought, yoga is understood as a technique of uniting the human soul with the divine soul.

In parenthesis it should be acknowledged that monism or non-dualism did not undo the damage that *Samkhya* philosophy had done to the Indian view of the material world, including the human body. In a sense it made matters worse by declaring the material universe to be a dream (or rather a nightmare) of God. It called the physical world *maya* or illusion. A nightmare might be so vivid that it makes you scream. But when you wake up you realize that it was unreal – an illusion, created by your own mind. Likewise when you attain enlightenment and realize your divinity, you awaken to see that the world is unreal, an illusion. Needless to say that this low view of the physical universe undermined serious interest in nature and science in India.

Be that as it may, our point is that although the non-dualists or monists rejected *Samkhya* philosophy, nevertheless they also see the central human problem as metaphysical rather than moral. We are God; we cannot therefore have broken any divine moral law. Our central problem therefore is that although we are God, we have somehow forgotten our divinity. Our problem is ignorance. We need to experience, ‘realize’ or perceive our divinity, not repent of anything and seek moral transformation.

To say that human beings are not sinners but simply ignorant of their *true* self, is to imply that the problem lies with consciousness or perception. Salvation lies in attaining that original state of consciousness that has been lost. If you are God, you cannot expect a god to come and save you. You have to realize your own divinity . . . and yoga is the path by which to experience God consciousness, or your inner, essential divinity.

Salvation, in other words, is a matter of perception or *realization*. You are already God, you just have to perceive or realize this fact. Perceiving, in this context, is not a cognitive activity. It is not a matter of intellectually knowing or logically deducing that you are God, but rather transcending your cognitive, rational consciousness and

experiencing a ‘higher’ state of expanded consciousness which is believed to be God or our true self.

Of course, not all gurus teach monism or non-dualism. Some gurus and sects, such as Hare Krishna, do not believe that man is or ever becomes God. God, according to Hare Krishna, is a personal Being, Krishna. Man’s original state is ‘Krishna-consciousness’ and his true nature is to be a loving servant of Krishna. Man’s problem is that he has forgotten his Krishna-consciousness and become entangled in this material world. He has to re-establish his link with Krishna and gain Krishna-consciousness. Only then will man get out of the cycle of births and deaths and live forever in Goloka or heaven.

(I have used the term ‘man’ here because traditionally, Hinduism did not accept the equality of male and female. While some contemporary gurus affirm equality, the traditional view is that a woman needs to be re-born male before she can find salvation or *moksha*.)

To sum up, salvation in Hinduism consists in the realization, perception, or experience of our so-called ‘true nature’. This realization takes place when we are able to alter our consciousness and attain what is called a ‘higher’ state of consciousness.

How can we alter our consciousness? The answer is – through manipulation of the nervous system. This is so because our consciousness is dependent upon our nervous system. During the preceding millennia numerous techniques have been developed to manipulate the nervous system in order to alter consciousness. These techniques are generally called yoga. Let us discuss a few of those that have been popularized by modern gurus.

2. TECHNIQUES TO ALTER CONSCIOUSNESS

***Hatha* Yoga: Salvation Through Physical Exercises**

Some chemicals make us sleep, others excite us, intoxicate us, cause hallucinations or psychedelic experiences in us. Chemicals can change our mood and make us see things inside our head that appear real. By manipulating our brain chemistry we can experience altered states of consciousness. Because our brain needs oxygen and blood to function normally, its chemistry can be affected by regulating breathing or deliberately reducing oxygen intake, or by standing upside down on our heads and altering blood flow. So, just as our nervous system and brain can be manipulated chemically, they can also be manipulated physiologically.

Hatha yoga, which consists of physical and breathing exercises, is a very ancient method of salvation. The belief that one can attain ‘salvation’ through physical exercises rests on the assumption that salvation is a matter of perception – of ‘going within’ and seeing or perceiving our inner consciousness, which is believed to be God. Perceiving, seeing, or experiencing depend on the state of one’s nervous system, which in turn depends on one’s physical condition. By physiological manipulation of one’s body, the nervous system can be affected and consciousness altered.

One of *hatha* yoga’s attractions lies in its stretching exercises that make our bodies extremely flexible. It also trains us to regulate breathing and blood circulation

consciously. Its problem however is that real mastery is a long and tedious process requiring much discipline and a competent teacher.

Hatha yoga is often advertised as non-religious. It is promoted for fitness or for its therapeutic value. But many gurus who promote it in secular terms actually hope that the disciple practicing yoga for physical well-being will experience alteration of consciousness and gain a ‘vision of possibilities’ (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi). This would open the disciple to the philosophy on which *hatha* yoga rests. Obviously there are teachers of *hatha* yoga who are not interested in propagating its philosophical basis at all. They teach it to impart health or to make money. Studies are now being conducted to assess the therapeutic value of *hatha* yoga and base its claims on sound empirical data. Such research will demystify excessive claims. It should also refine and simplify some of the exercises to maximize their therapeutic value to more people.

No sane person is likely to object to *hatha* yoga’s contribution to our health. However, an exclusively therapeutic use of yoga raises the question: *is it yoga anymore?* Physical exercises become yoga only when they are practiced to alter consciousness or to merge into God. For yoga is defined as union of soul with ‘God.’ It is unnecessary here to discuss the ethical question about whether it is OK to promote a religious discipline as a purely physical program. For, as we shall see, yoga’s worldview is not interested in questions of ethics, which presuppose a dualism of good and evil.

Someone may ask, ‘What is wrong with artificially altering consciousness?’ By itself there is nothing wrong with an altered state of consciousness. Sleepwalking, hypnosis, hallucination, even madness are all ‘altered’ states of consciousness. There is nothing wrong with them in a moral sense, even if some of them are deemed undesirable states of consciousness. The problem is philosophical. Is your altered state of consciousness God? If it is not, then does it matter if you *consider* your own altered state of consciousness God? Is it harmless to call yourself the President of your nation if in fact you are not the President? If your inner self is not God then when you look within could you be looking for God in the wrong place? Is it right to call something spiritual which is in fact physical or psychological? Does it matter if you are mistaken in your beliefs? Well, does it matter if you go on the longest and the most important journey of your life with a map drawn by a person who mistook East for West or North for South?

***Japa* Yoga: The ‘Mechanical Path’ To Salvation**

Japa is the repetition or chanting of a *mantra*, usually a name of a god or demon. (That may sound strange to dualists, but it is not strange if you believe in the oneness of everything. Then god and demon are not distinct, nor is good different from evil.). The Hare Krishna movement is a good example of *Japa* or *Bhakti* yoga. It chants the names of Krishna and Rama:

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna
Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare
Hare Rama, Hare Rama
Rama Rama, Hare Hare

To give a name to something or someone is to distinguish it from others. The monistic gurus believe that there is only one soul – God – and it permeates everyone, if not everything. Therefore they prefer not to use a specific name for God.¹ They use a

symbolic name, such as ‘*Om*’ or a *mantra* whose meaning the meditator does not know, so that the name or *mantra* may not create any thoughts or images in the mind by association.

Our mind is constantly bombarded with many different stimuli entering our brain through our eyes, ears, nose, tongue or touch. Our senses make us aware of the external world – the world of *maya* or deception. Entanglement with the world, including the world of thoughts is our bondage. How can we forget the world and become aware of the inner self or God? Constant repetition of a sound (*mantra*) eliminates all other stimuli, thus concentrating the mind. If you keep repeating the *mantra* then eventually its sound itself becomes a non-stimulus. Your mind goes blank. This induces a state where the mind is aware or conscious, but it is not aware of anything or any thought. One may say that it is only conscious of consciousness. This is what is called ‘pure consciousness’ or ‘transcendental consciousness’.

In order for this technique to be effective in ‘God-realization’, one has to practice it for three or four hours a day. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the popularizer of Transcendental Meditation (TM) prescribes it for only forty minutes a day to the new initiates. This is meant to give them a taste for it and to help them have a ‘vision of possibilities’. In advanced stages the Maharishi prescribes as much as one full week of silent meditation.

Because the initiation into TM is a private affair, many consider it to be some mysterious thing. Actually it is very simple. A seeker who is interested in being initiated is asked to bring flowers, sweets, a white handkerchief, camphor, etc., along with a substantial amount of money as a fee for a *puja* ceremony. During the ceremony the teacher worships a photo of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s guru and also asks the initiate to bow before this photo. The teacher invokes the blessings of various gods and goddesses and then gives a *mantra* to the initiate. Usually the *mantra* is a short word, a name of some Hindu deity such as Ram, or *Om*, *Hrim*, *Sring*, and *Aing*. These words don’t have a meaning. At least the meditator is not to know them or bother with meaning. The objective of the *mantra* is to go beyond thinking of meaning, to obtain thoughtlessness. The disciple is asked to sit in a comfortable position, close his eyes, and silently repeat the *mantra*, like, ‘Ram. . . Ram. . . Ram . . .’ for twenty minutes. He is told that he will first forget the rest of the world and be aware only of the *mantra*. Then he will forget the *mantra* too and transcend all thoughts and feelings and become aware of the awareness. This is the transcendental state of consciousness.

After some time, the meditator reaches a higher state of consciousness, called ‘cosmic consciousness’, in which he is aware, both of the world and of ‘pure consciousness’. Then after some more years of meditation, he can attain ‘God consciousness’, in which he comes to perceive the subtler levels of the objective world, which appear as personal. In this state it is said that one can even communicate with birds, animals, plants, and rocks. After this state comes the final state of ‘unity consciousness’, in which one perceives oneness with the universe. This is liberation.

Mahesh Yogi calls this path the ‘Mechanical Path to God-realization.’ He says it is possible to realize God in a mechanical way because ‘God-realization’ is a matter of perception and ‘the process of perception is both mechanical and automatic.’ In order to perceive the external objects, we just ‘open our eyes and the sight of the object comes automatically without the use of intellect or emotions.’ Likewise in order to perceive the

inner consciousness, we just have to turn the attention inside and we automatically come to perceive it.

‘Whether perception is outward or inward,’ writes the Maharishi, ‘it is automatic and mechanical. Perception in the outward direction is the result of a progressive increase of activity of the nervous system. And perception in the inward direction is the result of diminishing activity . . . until the entire nervous system ceases to function and reaches a state of stillness, a state of restful alertness. This brings the realization of ‘Be still and know that I am God’.

Mahesh Yogi’s brilliance lay in the fact that he developed very effective marketing techniques for his brand of *Japa* yoga. He called it TM. He insisted that it was not a religious but a scientific technique to reduce stress, induce relaxation, lower blood pressure, increase concentration, creativity and productivity. He also emphasized the social benefits of TM – better relationships, lower crime, higher economic growth and a better world. This enabled TM to gain acceptance in the academic, corporate and political world. More committed followers, however, were taught that reciting *mantras* that are names of demigods will also connect them to the world of spirits.

In my book *The World of Gurus* I have told the story of my own initiation into TM that took place in Maharishi’s living room in Rishikesh in the Himalayan foothills.² I had to give up TM for practical reasons – my experiment resulted in insomnia. However, I was also having doubts about its worldview. It sounds good to know that deep down in your essence you are God. But if God alone is real and all human beings are God, what happens to my uniqueness? Is the philosophy behind yoga offering me dignity *without* uniqueness? I might be God, but what about my personality? Is that not real? In the name of *enhancing* my consciousness, was I not being led to *abandon* my consciousness as a unique individual? TM’s claims to achieve political, economic and ecological utopia through meditation were enticing, but if my very individuality was unreal, how could I claim such basic political privileges as individual rights? To attempt to lose one’s individual consciousness into a larger whole seemed to me to be a recipe for totalitarianism, not political freedom.

***Surat-Shabd* Yoga: The Path Of Sound And Light**

‘God is Light,’ many gurus affirm, and add that this light is within us. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,’ declare many sects, and add that this Word is within us. When a soul establishes contact with this Word, the Word takes it back to the Godhead, its original home.

The Divine Light Mission and Radha Soami Satsang (Beas) have been chiefly responsible for popularizing *surat-shabd* yoga in our day. *Surat* in this tradition means soul and *shabd* means Word or Sound; so *surat-shabd* yoga is union of the soul and the Word. It is also called Nam Bhakti, or meditation on the Sound.

The sects that teach this path try to keep their techniques secret. The techniques are called by various names, such as *Nam* (name) and *Updesh* (knowledge), deliberately to mislead non-initiates. The name and knowledge refers to techniques of physiological manipulation of the senses, or to meditation on what is called the “primeval sound” or “Logos” and to breath control.

The sects that teach the path of sound and light, unlike TM, do not initiate everyone who asks for it. One has to be spiritually 'ready' for initiation. There is no objective, declared criterion for judging whether or not a person is ready; it depends on the arbitrary feelings of the initiator. The initiator claims that he has his reasons, but they are not revealed. Some sects stipulate a few objective conditions, too, such as giving up alcohol, non-vegetarian food, and drugs.

After one has been chosen for initiation, he is taken into a closed room, conveniently available, where the initiator explains the importance of the 'knowledge', *satsang* (the weekly gathering for fellowship and teaching) and *Satguru* (the True Teacher). In most sects the would-be initiate takes a vow of secrecy and to follow no other guru except his own. Although some sects forbid idolatry, generally the would-be initiate bows, kneels, or generally prostrates before the guru or his photographs, and worships them.

Sects such as the Divine Light Mission teach the following four techniques: In order to see the 'divine light', the initiator asks the devotee to close his eyes; then to place his middle finger and thumb on his eyes. Then starting, from the corner of the eyeballs, he presses the eyeballs up from the bottom, so that in actual fact if the eyelids were open the center of the pupils would be looking at the point between the two eyebrows on the forehead just above the nose, which is supposed to be the location of the 'third eye'. If the initiate concentrates on this point, he can see a light.

Some people see only a small point, others see a blinding light, some others see a psychedelic 'movie' of pulsating patterns and brilliant colors, and some do not see anything at all. Readers can try it for themselves. You will most probably see the light. Some devotees train their eyes so they can see this light without using their fingers.

In order to hear the 'divine music' or 'the sound', novices are asked to block their ears with the thumbs so they cannot hear any external sounds. When one listens long enough to one's inner silence, one can eventually hear some noises. To some devotees this sounds like celestial music, whereas others think they are hearing their favorite tune played on a heavenly instrument.

The third technique in Divine Light Mission is a difficult yogic exercise: tasting the 'divine nectar'. Usually one experiences the nectar only after much practice. One has to curl one's tongue up the back of the throat, then swallow the tongue in such a way that it points upwards. Here the tongue is supposed to hit a point and make contact with the 'divine nectar' that is constantly flowing through one's body. It is claimed that this nectar is the 'living water' of which Jesus spoke, and it is indescribably delicious. Some devotees claim this nectar is what Jesus called the 'bread of life' and after making contact with this ever-flowing stream of nectar, one can live without water or food.

The main meditation is a breathing exercise called hearing or contacting 'the Word'. The devotee is asked to sit in the lotus position (if possible) with both hands on the knees, and to concentrate on the breath going up and down, up and down. This is supposed to tune one into that 'primordial vibration', the Word or Logos, which has created the universe and sustains it. By constant meditation one reaches *samadhi*, or the expanded state of consciousness. According to the Divine Light Mission, when you achieve *samadhi*, you become full of the divine light. At initiation, the light may appear as a small dot, but in *samadhi* it overtakes you and you feel (or perceive) that you have *become* that Divine Light.

The other sects, who teach salvation through this path, describe their experiences differently. According to some sects, such as the Radha Soami Satsang, during meditation the ‘third eye’ is opened. The soul leaves the body through this eye with the ‘Sound Current’ (Logos), and travels up to heaven. On the way it has many wonderful experiences, and finally it merges into God.

There can be no reasonable doubt that these experiences are real in the sense of being vivid psychological experiences within one’s head. But are they real in an objective sense? Does the soul (*surat*) actually leave one’s body with the Word (*shabd*) and visit other worlds? A follower of the Radha Soami Satsang once said to me, ‘These Americans have gone to the moon only now. We have been travelling to other planets and galaxies for ages – ever since we learnt *surat-shabad* yoga!’ ‘You may be right.’ I replied, ‘The only problem is that you don’t bring the rocks back from these planets for us to have some evidence that you actually left your body.’

***Kundalini* Yoga: Salvation Through The ‘Serpent Power’**

Hindu psychology teaches that in the human body, three centimeters above the rectum and three centimeters below the genitals, at the base of the spine, is a beautiful triangle in which lies the *kundalini*, *shakti*, or the ‘serpent power’. What *kundalini* really is, nobody knows. It is supposed to be red and white in color. It is also described as ‘coil power’ or the ‘creative sex energy’. Normally it is taught that *kundalini* lies coiled and dormant, but when it is awakened, it arises and begins to travel upward. In its journey from the base of the spine to the top of the head, it passes through six psychic centers called *chakras*. When it passes through a *chakra*, it gives various psychic experiences and powers. When at last it reaches the top *chakra*, called the *sahasrara chakra*, one can supposedly attain the power to perform miracles and achieve liberation.

Many means are used to awaken the *kundalini*. They range from breathing exercises, like *pranayam*, to the homosexual handling of the genitals. The most influential guru in the last few decades who preached *kundalini* yoga was Swami Muktananda of Ganeshpuri, near Bombay. He described *kundalini* yoga as ‘*mahayoga*’ (Great yoga) or ‘*siddhayoga*’ (perfect yoga), for he said it was the only yoga in which the aspirant does not have to do anything. He just surrenders to the guru and the guru’s grace does everything for him.

Thousands of people have testified that Muktananda awakened their *kundalini*, but that the method he used was ‘occultic’ (hidden or secret). This secrecy implies demonic power. *Kundalini* yoga has not been very popular in India because many of the experiences it gives are what William James, the great Victorian expert on comparative religion, calls ‘diabolical mysticism’.³ It gives pain, makes people depressed, and even produces madness.

Muktananda’s own initiation into *kundalini* yoga explains what William James meant. Muktananda had left his home early in quest of spiritual enlightenment. He went to all the holy places in India that he heard about, and met with all the holy people he could, but he did not find anyone who was truly enlightened and could help him. Discouraged, he was ready to quit, when he found a naked ascetic sitting on a pile of human excreta. (In those days poor people went outdoors to relieve themselves on the ground, while richer people had an outdoor ‘toilet’ consisting of a tin, upon which they

would squat. A sweeper would later come and carry away the ‘night soil’ and dump it in one place on the ground.) Nobody liked going near that dump, but the ascetic was not only sitting on it, he was brimful of bliss. Muktananda was intrigued. The naked ascetic invited Muktananda to come and sit on his lap and lick his head. Then he initiated Muktananda into *kundalini* yoga. Muktananda described his own experience of ‘diabolical mysticism’ after leaving the ascetic:

On reaching my destination I sat . . . for meditation. Soon I started feeling restless and uneasy. Within moments things were happening to me. I could not understand it. I was perturbed mentally and emotionally. My mind seemed deluded. By the time evening came this delusion became worse. Generally I am a man of great courage but that day I was overcome by fear. I felt I would soon become insane. My mind was terribly agitated.⁴

That evening, at about nine o’clock, Muktananda sat again for meditation:

. . . I felt there was great commotion around. My entire body started aching and I automatically assumed *padmasana*, the lotus posture. The tongue began to move down the throat, and all attempts to pull it out failed, as I could not insert my fingers into the mouth. My fear grew; I tried to get up, but I could not, as my legs were tightly locked in *padmasana*. I felt severe pain in the knot (*manipur chakra*) below the navel. I tried to shout but could not even articulate. It seemed as if something was stuck in my throat. Next I saw ugly and dreadful demon-like figures. I thought them to be evil spirits. I then saw blazes of fire on all sides and felt that I too was burning. After a while I felt a little better. Suddenly I saw a large ball of light approaching me from the front; as it approached, its light grew brighter and brighter. It then entered unobstructed through the closed doors of my *kutir* [hut] and merged into my head. My eyes were forcibly closed and I felt a fainting sensation. I was terrified by that powerfully dazzling light, and it put me out of gear.⁵

Was Muktananda silly to think that a naked ascetic sitting on a pile of stinking filth must be an enlightened being? Most people would indeed have considered the ascetic mad. But Muktananda was more intelligent. He understood that if *advaita* or monism is true, if everything is one divine consciousness, then that ascetic had really become one with everything. The ascetic was the only one who really knew that the filth was also God. God alone is real, God is everywhere and everything – including that detestable pile of filth. God is blissful consciousness and that is what the ascetic was radiating!

You cannot discard some things as non-divine and also claim to have become one with Everything. Holy men who go to the holy places on earth (or to the ‘psychic centers’ of the earth’s energy as they call it) only betray their faith that everything and every place is God. There is no difference between good and bad, demons and gods.

With that kind of map as a guide to reality, it should be no surprise that Muktananda’s sect split following multiple court cases alleging rape, sexual and financial abuse, and murder, in pursuit of worldly power for his spiritual empire.

Tantra: Salvation Through Sex

Tantra is sometimes portrayed as the opposite of yoga. Both, however, aim at the same end. *Tantra* yoga is the opposite of *hatha* yoga in the sense that the latter is the path of great discipline, effort and self-denial whereas *tantra* is the way of indulgence. The tantrics claim that their form of yoga is the original and easiest way of salvation. The possibility of *samadhi* or ‘unity consciousness’ must have appeared to sages during sexual intercourse, for in orgasm rational consciousness is transcended in a pleasurable experience of oneness. *Tantra*, is, in part, a system of techniques for prolonging orgasm in order to experience ‘God’ or unity consciousness.

Tantra may have originated in India’s pre-historic fertility cults. It reappeared in India around AD600. Three centuries later, at least sixty-four *tantric* texts were in circulation. By the year AD1000, *tantric* art had begun to dominate the cultural scene in India. By the nineteenth century *tantricism* had sunk to such levels of crudity and cruelty, witchcraft and superstition, description of which is unthinkable in any sophisticated society. In its crudest forms it includes worship of sex organs, sex orgies which include the drinking of blood and human semen, black magic, human sacrifice, and contact with evil spirits through dead and rotting bodies in cremation grounds. The *tantrics* were feared for their occult powers, and hated because they kidnapped and sacrificed children to obtain their powers from demons. Naturally, self-respecting Brahmins, Muslims, and Christian missionaries all opposed *tantra*. Consequently it went underground in India.

Dr S. Radhakrishnan, a philosopher and India’s first President devoted not one sentence to *tantra* while compiling *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* with Charles A. Moore.⁶

Tantra’s history confirms St Paul’s profound observation. He noted that when men suppress the truth in unrighteousness and begin to worship creation instead of the Creator, God gives them over ‘in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another’ (Rom. 1:24). And their base minds and lusts lead them to unbelievable depths of filth and foolishness.

It was the ‘counterculture’ movement of the 1960s in the West that revived *tantra* and gave it fresh respectability. It fused sexual permissiveness and the occult with ‘spirituality.’ Although still suspect and despised in India, *tantra* is now at the root of virtually all religious forms of yoga and other Eastern religious practices adopted by the West. This point has been made repeatedly by Professor Johannes Aagaard of the Arhus University in Denmark. He is one of Europe’s leading authorities on Eastern religious influence in the West. Aagaard’s contention can be illustrated in many ways. An obvious example is Dr Fritjof Capra’s highly influential book *The Tao of Physics*.⁷ Capra, a physicist turned mystic environmentalist, reproduces in the book, a photograph entitled, ‘Self-realization in the experience of sensual love; stone sculpture from the Citragupta temple at Khajuraho, circa A.D.1000.’⁸ It is so important to him that it is placed first among the photographs in the book. This sculpture, only thirty kilometers from my hometown, is an explicit portrayal of sexual intercourse. To represent a goddess in the sexual act has tremendous shock value for young people, especially if they come from a Catholic background where the highest portrayal of femininity is as a holy virgin. For the average Westerner, the shock lies in the fact that the sculpture is not regarded as pornography, to be suppressed, but is blatantly incorporated into a religious site.

One of *tantra*'s assumptions is that cosmic sex lies at the root of creation. *Tantra* accepts the non-dualistic (*advaitic*) idea that reality is one. Our normal (rational/sensory) perception of duality – of male and female, right and wrong, good and evil – is a perception of unreality, *maya*, or *lila*. *Lila* is the play of cosmic consciousness (God) or illusory magic.

Before the beginning, beyond time, was pure consciousness, existing in perfect unity or equilibrium, having no polarity, no form, no thought, no distinction. Something disturbed this primeval, pure and still ocean of consciousness. The divine stability then turned into an oscillating instability, imbalance or insanity. God was divided. The first duality to appear as a result of this 'insanity' was male and female. This original duality produced a series of waves, further disturbing the tranquil surface of the sea of bliss (God). A criss-crossing of these waves created elaborate patterns. The farther these waves were removed from their original state as divine consciousness, the 'grosser' they became; appearing finally as condensed matter, the world of sense experience. The cosmos, in other words, is a divine devolution – densified frequencies or compacted waves of consciousness that conceal their divinity because they are convoluted divine emanations. The original polarity of male and female manifests itself as the polarity of mind and matter.

Capra finds this *tantric* view of the ultimate oneness of mind and matter a mind-blowing scientific insight. He notes that it took centuries of painstaking research to lead Western science to conclude that matter and energy were one. Science, he feels, has yet to catch up with the discovery of the mystics that even mind (or consciousness) is no different from matter, but is only the ultimate form of energy. Is the energy of physics the same as the consciousness of the mystics and yogis? Capra believes that it is, but he is cautious enough not to say so. We cannot know for sure because, 'Mystics understand the roots of Tao but not its branches; scientists understand its branches but not its roots.'

Tantric thought says that human beings are the microcosmic versions of the cosmos, because the finer 'consciousness' and the grosser 'body' coexist in a human being. Polarity is the key to existence, and gender division of male and female is the basic polarity in human beings. The reunification of male and female in sexual intercourse is our point of contact with the cosmic powers. *Tantra* uses duality as the surest path to cosmic unity. It defines our sexual function as the means of our direct connection with the divine. It reaches Reality by embracing illusion – our own bodies.

Tantra is unapologetic about using insanity to reach Reality. Creation itself is divine insanity; therefore sanity has to be left outside the temple of God. Although *tantra* entered the West in 1893 through Swami Vivekananda, it was not until the 1970s that the West embraced *tantric* insanity in a big way via Bhagwan (later Osho) Rajneesh. Rajneesh was as famous for his Rolls Royce fleet at his ranch in Oregon as he was for his book *From Sex to Superconsciousness*.¹⁰ It summed up his *tantric* creed. Rajneesh, of course, was no simpleton. He had taught philosophy in an Indian university before becoming a guru. He knew that the Western 'Age of Reason' had reached a dead end and that human reason by itself was incapable of knowing truth. Boldly, therefore, Rajneesh described the human mind as our 'chief villain'. Intellect, he said, acted like a prism. It divided one ray into many. The mind was the source of our bondage and ignorance of the ultimate reality because it could see an object only by separating it from others, by

labeling or categorizing it. Therefore, the aim of the religious quest according to Rajneesh was to 'kill the mind', to choose insanity.

Tantra, like other schools of Hindu thought, admits that the world is *maya* – unreal in a fundamental sense. However, unlike other Hindus the *tantric* does not scorn the world as a source of temptation. He embraces it as the raw material of enlightenment. For *tantra*, the realm of *maya* is the only available context of liberation.

Tantra uses *mantras* as one of the weapons to kill the mind. Words are sounds with meaning. The mindless repetition of words aims to sever sense from sound. Prayer is an attempt at a meaningful conversation with our Creator. Professor Mircea Eliade says, 'All indefinite repetition leads to destruction of language; in some mystical traditions, this destruction appears to be the condition for further experiences.'¹¹

The sexual ritual in *tantra* is called *maithuna*. The 'right hand' *tantrics*, also called 'white *tantrics*', believe that the *maithuna* passages in the *tantric* scriptures are to be understood figuratively. The 'left-hand' or 'red *tantrics*' advocate a literal enactment of the rites, though some of them would reserve it for advanced practitioners. One has first to find an experienced guru, because the deepest *tantric* traditions are oral, not written. Even the written texts are ambiguous. They use symbolic language called *sandha-bhasha*, which cannot be understood without a guru's help. This language is intended to discourage the non-initiate and to remind the enlightened *tantric* that the reality he seeks is beyond logical language.

During a secret initiation ceremony the guru connects a disciple to the spiritual tradition he embodies. The ceremony may consist of the worship of the guru, receiving of a *mantra*, instruction for meditation and visualization, and purification of *chakras* (psychic centers of one's body) by the handling of a disciple's genitals.

During *maithuna* a male disciple usually prefers a female *tantric* who takes on the role of a guru. But in *tantra* it is not essential for a man to have a woman companion. For in serious *tantra*, *maithuna* does not aim to achieve physical release through ejaculation and orgasm. It seeks psychic experiences by the 'threefold immobility' of semen, breath and consciousness. *Tantric* transcendence takes place when the mind is completely still but focused, breathing has ceased and sexual arousal is arrested at the point of maximum tension. Thus *maithuna* first stimulates and then traps the energies of sexual arousal to be able to release them through the channel of a still mind. This is 'spiritual orgasm.' It does not seek to make a man and a woman 'one flesh'. Its aim is to help fuse a *tantric's* own inner polarities into one; that is to give him a mystic experience of oneness. That is why most Hindu and Buddhist *tantrics* are unmarried. They do not seek an abiding, growing, fulfilling love-relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Rajneesh said *tantra* treated sex as 'simply a door. While making love to a woman, you are really making love to Existence itself. The woman is just a door; the man is just a door.'¹²

Once you have learned to reach *samadhi* or superconsciousness through sex, said Rajneesh, you do not need a woman for you can have sex with the whole universe, 'with a tree, with the moon, with anything.'¹³ Or you can simply shut yourself in a room and reach superconsciousness using the female *kundalini* within you.

Some interpreters, like Amaury de Riencourt, see *tantra* as a celebration or affirmation of life, a human counter-attack on other life-negating forms of yoga. They suggest that it was a manifestation of human instinct for self-preservation, an attempt to save India from the destructive consequences of religious outlooks, which view life as

suffering, if not illusion.¹⁴ Although there is an element of truth in this interpretation, by and large it is little more than wishful thinking. For, as Brooks Alexander wrote, ‘Even in its affirmations, *tantra* is haunted by paradoxes. The naturalness of human life is affirmed, but only as a means for its dissolution. Human existence is validated, but only as a platform for leaving humanity behind.’¹⁵

As Rajneesh admitted, and many female devotees of Muktananda have testified, a *tantric* does not make love to a woman or a man. He uses his partner as a means of his own enlightenment, leaving him or her sexually frustrated. Shirley MacLaine, Hollywood actress and a popularizer of *tantra*, admits that sex in *tantra* is not meant to fulfil two people by uniting them in one bond. It is used by one (or both) partner(s) to discover his or her own completeness as an androgynous being so that each may become complete without the other.¹⁶

Tantra unabashedly embraces human sexuality in its spirituality. But by using sex for personal gain rather than for human bonding in love, it frustrates sex. It does not cause sexual fulfillment, nor does it celebrate life. It seeks to deny by transcending the essence of what we are as male and female.

3. MANY WAYS TO SALVATION?

There are many forms of yoga, because there are many ways of altering one’s consciousness and gaining mystical experiences. Using hallucinogenic drinks (*soma*) and drugs (*ganja* or *bhang* – varieties of Indian hemp – or opium) to obtain psychic experiences is a common practice among the *sadhus* or ‘holy men’. These drugs delude them into thinking they are God. The question is, are they deluded because of the drugs, or because they began their spiritual journey with a mistaken map of reality, a false worldview?

How can we find salvation? By our own effort or by God’s grace? If it is by human effort then obviously there can be many ways. If salvation is a gift of God’s grace, then no effort on our part can qualify us to merit His grace. Grace, by definition, means unmerited favor.

Whether you define yoga as an attempt to *isolate* the soul (*purusha*) from the body or nature (*prakriti*), or as an attempt to unite the human self with the divine self, you end with a low view of physical reality and of the human body. The logic of the yogic worldview undermines the motivation to pursue science – the study of nature – as well as the pursuit of bodily well-being.

The monistic idea that the human self is the same as the divine self and that everything is one, makes our individuality illusory, thereby destroying the very foundation for affirming the unique value of every individual. It should not surprise us that the Indian philosophical tradition, in spite of all its brilliance, could not produce a culture that recognized human rights and the intrinsic worth of the individual. Nor could yogic monism give to Indian society a framework for moral absolutes, a strong sense of right and wrong, fair and unfair. Yogic exercises indeed gave flexibility to our bodies but unfortunately the yogic philosophy gave too much flexibility to our morals – making us one of the most corrupt nations in the world. That is why St Paul wrote, ‘physical training

is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come' (1 Timothy. 4:8).

The pursuit of physical fitness is desirable because our bodies are a part of God's good creation. God made our bodies his temple. The yogic tradition is right in making spirituality the real goal of physical training. By the same token Western fans abuse yoga when they use it only for physical fitness. The problem is not with yogic exercises, but with its understanding of spirituality.

God is holy – morally pure. We are sinful, not merely ignorant. We have done what we know to be wrong and failed to do what we know to be right. A holy God must judge and punish our sin. God and sin cannot co-exist anymore than light and darkness. Our need is not altered consciousness, but transformed hearts, for the heart is the real core of our being and our character. Yoga seeks our union with God. The question is: How is that union really achieved?

The Bible teaches that the human problem is *moral*, rather than biological or metaphysical. God created human beings good. (Would you expect anything different from an almighty Creator?) Our first parents, says Genesis (the first book of the Torah and the whole Bible) chose to disobey God and thereby became sinners. That trait has been transmitted to us all. Although we are still God's image-bearers and capable of goodness, none of us is perfect. From childhood our tendency is towards evil. We need teaching and training to live moral lives. Yet, in spite of the best training, we fail morally. Our central problem, according to the Bible is that we are sinners. We need a divine Savior who will forgive our sins and transform our hearts – the core of our being.

With God this is possible because he not only created us but he loves us. He wants to forgive our sin. That is why Jesus came and died as our substitute. He took the punishment of our sin upon himself. In order to be reconciled with God we need to repent of our sins and accept his gracious offer of forgiveness through Christ. He will then replace our sinfulness with his godliness. This, God's Word says, is valuable for all things – for the present life as well as for the life beyond our physical death. The salvation that Jesus offers does bring about our reunion with God. This union fulfills, not obliterates our individuality. It makes our bodies precious – temples of the living God.

Glossary

adwaita = non-dualism (God and human self are not distinct)

Aing = a mantra whose meaning you are not supposed to know

atma = soul (human self)

devas = nature spirits

Brahma = God (the Universal Self that permeates us all, including physical nature)

chakras = the six psychic centres of the body

Hrim = a mantra whose meaning you are not supposed to know

Jainism = non-Brahminical Indian religion of strict asceticism, founded c.BC600; 'saint' or 'victor'

karma = good or bad deeds or destiny; past lives dictating present and future lives

kutir = hut

lila = the play of cosmic consciousness

maha = great

maithuna = the sexual ritual in *tantra*

mantra = chant; sacred sound or name of God to be repeated as meditation

maya = illusion, unreal (as a dream)

Om = sound representing ultimate reality or God

padmasana = the lotus position

prakriti = physical nature

pranayam = breathing exercises

purusha = soul

sadhu = holy man, ascetic

samadhi = expanded state of consciousness.

samsara = world or life as a wheel of suffering

samkhya = Indian dualistic philosophy concerned with pure soul and impure body

sandha-bhasha = symbolic language of *tantra*

satsang = the weekly gathering for fellowship and teaching

surat = soul; beauty

shabd = word; sound

siddha = perfect

Sring = a mantra whose meaning you are not supposed to know

Footnotes

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- ¹ The monistic 'God' does not have a name. For a name distinguishes one entity from another. But in monism there is only one ultimate reality. Only finite demigods can have names. From their ultimate standpoint they are as unreal as we are.
- ² Vishal Mangalwadi, *The World of Gurus* (Mumbai: GLS Publishing, 1999) Revised edition, pp. 96ff.
- ³ See his famous *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh* (London and Cambridge, Mass: Longman's & Co, 1902), p. 410f.
- ⁴ Amma, *Swami Muktananda Paramhansa* (Ganeshpuri, 1971) p. 32ff.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ S. Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore (eds.), *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press and Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1957).
- ⁷ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (London: Flamingo, 1990).
- ⁸ Ibid. p. 322.
- ⁹ Ibid. p. 338.
- ¹⁰ See Vishal Mangalwadi, *The World of Gurus* (Landour, Mussoorie: Good Books, 1987), ch. 7.
- ¹¹ Cited in Brooks Alexander, 'Tantra: the Worship and Occult Power of Sex', *SCP Newsletter* vol. 2, no. 2 (Summer 1985).
- ¹² Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh, *Neo-Sanyasa* 2,4 (1973), p. 20.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Amaury de Riencourt, *The Soul of India* (London: Honeyglen Publishing, 1985).
- ¹⁵ Alexander, 'Tantra: the Worship and Occult Power of Sex'.
- ¹⁶ See Shirley MacLaine, *Going Within: a Guide for Inner Transformation* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990).