

It is beyond a shred of doubt that the ancient Indian art and philosophy of Yoga has become a massive fad of our time. The term 'Yoga' has become somewhat of a misnomer because it is always used to refer to 'Hatha Yoga' (Physical Yoga) and its modern offshoots. Etymologically, the word Yoga literally means 'to unite', 'attach, or 'join'. Its purpose is to guide the 'Yogi' (a practitioner of Yoga) towards ultimate enlightenment by eradicating one's suffering. Today, its purpose has changed drastically thanks to a multi-billion dollar health and wellness industry fueled by throngs of curious or unsatisfied minds.

The purpose of this short essay is to critique modern culture's integration of competition and sensationalism into Yoga. Indian Yogis/businessmen of the recent past understood the lucrative potential of marketing Yoga to modern societies. Therefore, they exploited Hatha Yoga and advertised it as a sacred technique shrouded in ancient mystique! This is the language that modern Capitalist societies speak and understand. It allowed pseudo-Guru types to market a convenient package of health, well-being and enlightenment to desperate, over-worked or chronically unsatisfied masses while fattening their own pocket books (the documentary, *Kumaré*, does an excellent job of showcasing this phenomenon).

Historically, the word Yoga was used in ancient Hindu (Vedic) scriptures to describe several different kinds of Yogas that range in their origins from relative modernity to thousands of years old. Hatha Yoga is a relatively new development that is several-hundred years old (although, it is believed to be an ancient art). Raja Yoga, Jñāna Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Tantra Yoga are popularly known among the myriad forms of Yoga. We are all very fortunate to have such incredibly profound, yet practical techniques we can use to diminish or eradicate our suffering! Even though Yoga finds its origins in ancient Hindu scriptures it is not confined to any religion. Its purpose and message are timeless and nonsectarian.

Yoga (original pronunciation, "Yog") describes specific paths one can take in order to achieve complete dissolution of the ego and attain union with the universe. It was not intended to be a leisurely routine, an exercise, sport, or competition. It is wonderful if people obtain physical benefits from Hatha Yoga. There is nothing wrong with that. The trouble lies in how modern Hatha Yoga obfuscates the ancient philosophy of Yoga, as well as the competitive dimension transposed onto it. And modern society — in true fashion — thrives off competition, sensationalism, extravagance and pomp. I fear a backlash against the entire school of Yoga due to sensational attention that Hatha Yoga is garnering. I do not want people to dismiss Yoga as another fad or fraud because modern ignorance or ulterior motives have hijacked the philosophy behind it.

Competition is about distinction and separation. There is a time and a place for that. However, applying the element of competition to Yoga is inherently at odds with the essence of Yoga. No one who fully understands the ancient history and purpose of Yoga can deny this. As we've read before, the purpose of Yoga is to unite — not to separate. Competition, by its very nature, causes separation. It is diluting and adulterating the wonderful teaching of Yoga.

Any path of Yogic teaching can lead an individual through the most challenging and uprooting experiences they can undergo. Yoga is about going deep within in order to eventually arrive into the now. It can be quite a violent internal process. It isn't some parlor trick to show off to your buddies, or some blissful state of ecstasy that will take you to LaLa Land (although, there are moments of profound bliss & clarity arising from Yoga). Yoga is a rather slow and systematic death of one's ego. Its purpose is to remove the veil of 'Maya' — the delusion, the duality, the sense of separation which is causing your suffering. This process requires an immense amount of patience, focus, compassion, vigilance and endurance. Yoga is an Art of Dying just as much as an Art of Living.

Yoga covers a variety of techniques that are like “boot camp” for the soul. Any of the ancient Yogic paths break us down along with all our wants, desires, and prejudices before they will build us back up. This is not a pleasant routine where one can clock in every few days per week in order to attain a nebulous state of permanent bliss. Hatha Yoga, for its purely physiological benefits is a great thing, no doubt, but I implore you not to fall into the competition trap. If Hatha Yoga is truly in line with the ancient philosophy of Yoga then its primary mission should be to help us dissolve our ego and our own ignorance. If it is in any way boosting our ego then it is either not Yoga or you have not understood it. The asanas and mudras are symbolic and allegorical. The physical benefits of Hatha Yoga are a bonus, not the end goal. Yoga is not about impressing a panel of judges or your peers.

That original purpose and meaning of Yoga has largely disintegrated and evaporated in modern culture thanks to corrupt Hindu guru-types from India, spiritual hucksters, Western misinterpretations, and Western society's insistence on transforming everything into a mega competition. Please don't confuse my suggestion: I'm not implying that people should not alter or tweak any of the teachings. If someone finds a better way to help others dissolve their ego then I highly encourage them to spread that information! There is no use in sticking to tradition if a better way is discovered, but turning Yoga into a competition and an ego-stroking orgy will not benefit any humanity in the long run.

If you are at all interested in Yoga then please educate yourself on its history and its purpose, and please refrain from diluting the message. Ignorance spreads like wildfire if it is left unchecked. So, I feel that I'm doing my part by shedding light on what I have learned growing up in India, and through the wisdom I've gained via meditation. My purpose is to discourage people from distorting the message of Yoga, and to encourage them to realign the focus back to authentic introspection. That is all.

If you are practicing Yoga then I'm very happy for you! Please continue, but I urge you to be mindful and respectful of the intent behind Yoga. I'm of the opinion that we should refrain from participating in any action that adulterates or distorts Yoga. The number one question you should be able to honestly answer to yourself is: "is this action dissolving my ego, or is it feeding it?" Your ego might trick you into saying "yes" when the answer might be "no". Either way, this will be your litmus test.

Yoga begins and ends with YOU. The moment you perform Yoga to encourage favorable judgments, competitions and impressions you are no longer practicing Yoga.

With Metta,
Jimmy Thanki

Recommended reading for anyone interested in this topic:

'The Yoga Tradition' by Georg Feuerstein
'Light to Yoga: Yoga Dipika' by B.K.S. Iyengar
'Light on Pranayama: The Yogic Art of Breathing' by B.K.S. Iyengar
'The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali' by Swami Satchidananda
'How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali' by Swami Prabhavananda
'Autobiography of a Yogi' by Paramahansa Yogananda
'The Bhagavad Gita'
Any of the various books by Swami Vivekananda