

What is Yoga?

Shiva (Neil) Edsall

Yoga is a discipline that requires years of dedicated effort and at the same time is the art of effortlessness. Scholars tell us that the word yoga comes from the Sanskrit word yug, meaning to link together. The Sanskrit word Yoga can be defined as the union between the individual self (jiva-atman) and the universal self (parama-atman). So, when we discuss what yoga is joining, it takes us to the very heart of Yoga.

The Bhagavad-Gita defines yoga in several ways. Yoga is equanimity, being unruffled by life's ups and downs, creating harmony and balance, Yoga is separation from union with pain, and Yoga is perfection in action. In other words, yoga is how we should live our lives.

The Yoga Sutras of Sri Patanjali explain Yoga as one's ability to direct the mind exclusively toward an object and sustain that direction without any distraction. Then only when one is absorbed in the object can the true reflection of the object be seen. To gaze and merge with the beloved inner teacher and allowing all actions, words and deeds to be the result of that union is Yoga.

Yoga makes a distinction between our physical body and personality from a larger Self or Cosmic Self which includes all of creation, of which we are but a tiny drop in the infinite ocean of life. Yoga reunites the personal self with the cosmic self by removing the veil of illusion clouding the reality that we are one with all creation. This veil of illusion is referred to as Maya, the illusory power of God. True illumination of the indwelling spirit appears as one merges with that which has never gone away, just been shadowed by ignorance and misunderstanding.

The practice of yoga brings us into connection with the understanding and awareness of this unity, which already exists, in each of us. The Buddha had stated that there is a Buddha in everyone. Jesus said, "If those who lead you say to you, 'Look the Kingdom is in the sky', then the birds will get there first. If they say, 'It is in the sea', then the fish will get there first. Rather, the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the children of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty, and it is you who are that poverty"... "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you" from the gospel of Thomas.

Yoga is not just the effort of living in human existence but the effortlessness of emptying the mind to dance with the cosmic Self (god self). It is a dance, welcoming grace and focus, discipline and

faith. (Patanjali's Yoga Sutras 1.20) Through faith, which will give sufficient energy to achieve success against all odds, direction will be maintained. (PYS 1.30) There are nine types of interruptions to developing mental clarity: illness, mental stagnation, doubts, lack of foresight, fatigue, overindulgence, illusions about one's true state of mind, lack of perseverance and regression. So here we begin our journey because we have a mind and a human body as a vehicle.

Yoga as the practice is important because it helps us to get where we are going. Yoga as the experience of unity is our ultimate destination. Because of its multifaceted nature, the definitions of yoga are also multifaceted. First there are the paths; Raja Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Japa Yoga, Mantra Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga... Then there are the traditions and styles; Classical Yoga, Vinyasa Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Iyengar Yoga, Power Yoga, Bikram Yoga, Anusara Yoga... Then of course there are the literal or philosophical definitions, such as union and separation. Instead of seeing these as contradictory, we can relate them to the Indian story of the blind men who were asked to describe an elephant. Each touched the elephant in a different place and came up with a different description. All were correct but failed to describe the elephant entirely. If you look at the many definitions of yoga as parts of the whole, you will come to see the beauty of this multifaceted gem. "Truth is One, Paths are many", Sri Swami Satchidananda.

Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti

Om Peace, Peace, Peace