

Standing Upon the Shoulder of the Past

By Ganga White

Many questions can be brought up about Yoga taking root in the West. For example, is Yoga becoming “Americanized and is that Americanization some sort of degeneration of the purity of the teachings or of their authenticity? If Yoga is being changed in the West what right do we have to make these modifications? These concerns also raise the deeper question, “What is the nature of tradition and authority?” Can we truly know exactly what was taught and practiced in the past? Is there any actuality to a “pure teaching”?

I first realized the importance of these questions at a lecture series in the early seventies on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali by Swami Venkatesananda. Swami Venkates (1921-1982) is a much loved and respected Yogi and Sanskrit scholar from India. He explained that very little is actually known with much certainty about Patanjali. He emphasized that it is impossible to make any translation or commentary on any scripture without interpretation. The very translation process is interpretation. Language usage, meaning and circumstance change over time. We all know the story in Psychology 101A of the man who runs in and out of a room with a banana and the students are asked to write a report. Nearly everyone sees something different. What does this imply about the possible purity of teachings handed down over thousands of years? What should we learn about the limits of tradition and authority from our observation of the fact that in every religion and tradition there are dozens of sects and subgroups, often with each one asserting that they have the actual truth?

The Swami also asserted that an adept scholar could find many different, and often contradictory, meanings in the ancient texts. He showed many examples where, in order to support various philosophical positions, the texts could be translated in different ways. As a matter of fact I remember him saying that the Yogic scriptures and teachings are so vast and complex that one could find traditional support and authority for almost anything one wanted to do! In spite of these limitations, students and teachers often spend great energy in debate to try to bolster an edict or find an exact meaning in English. This may ever elude them. Can truth or the immensity of life and spirit be limited to an explanation? Or can it be attained mechanically by the practice of a specific technique? Venkates said that these questions or problems should not cause us despair but should strengthen us in following our hearts.

Another great teacher, J. Krishnamurti has said, "The observer is the observed" meaning, among other implications, that when we study something it is affected by our interpretations and projections. This is also a problem in setting up scientific experiments. Krishnamurti also said, "Truth has no path, and that is the beauty of truth, it is living. A dead thing has a path to it because it is static." He pointed out that because there is exactness and authority in the technological world we unconsciously carry this over to the spiritual. We are living, changing beings. We need to learn from and honor tradition while developing our ability to listen to our own uniqueness and needs.

At the conference participants were able to explore many approaches to Yoga that were new to them. The majority of those attending were there to learn new things, not to find a non-existent "best way". Many of the teachers were evolving their own forms or were bringing teachings newer to the West. Yet a few of the voices at the conference felt something was wrong and that we should stick to "Yoga as it has been for thousands of years". The question I would like to raise is whether we, or anyone, really know how Yoga was practiced thousands of years ago? And further shouldn't we inquire into the relevance to modern man of what we think was practiced in the ancient past? For example, does someone from the space age with instant communications, computers and high speed automobiles have the same mind-set and need the same approach to Yoga as someone from the age of the bullock cart? Is it possible that our minds have changed and evolved? Do bodies that travel in cars on freeways, that live with electricity and use couches and chairs have the same needs as those of our ancestors, or even contemporaries, from the East?

We have a cherished and valuable tradition in Yoga and we are not suggesting abandoning it. We must use and learn tradition in a way that is tempered by the realization that what we call tradition is truly our, or another's, interpretation of something from the distant past. Venkates suggested that we use ancient writings to catalyze our understanding and direct perception now but not get overly dependent on it. When I first started experimenting on the piano an award winning composer advised me to "just sit and start playing" so that I would develop creativity. Shortly thereafter another teacher said this was wrong--I must learn the form and structure before I improvise! The new student is often faced with contradicting teachings or teachers. When we question authority we must also question our own authority. Perhaps what we think our body or inner intelligence is telling us is actually laziness or folly. So once again Yoga is balance. It is a continuous dance on the interface of tradition, evolution and revolution, of control and surrender, of learning from the outer and the inner.

One of the more valuable things I've learned is to listen to and trust is the intelligence of the body. After all it is millions of years old, which gives it seniority to tradition! When I have been climbing mountains or doing a lot of construction work around our center I adjust my Hatha Yoga to a softer and more stretching practice which balances the tightening of the work. If the body has been more sedentary I find that a more flowing, vigorous asana practice seems to "happen". There can be many ways to practice asana. There are the vigorous, the soft, the flowing, the dance-like, therapeutic and the technical approaches to name a few. I am happy to have been able to learn many approaches and variations so that "my body can choose" what is needed in the moment. I've also noticed that when people have rigid beliefs or practices their Yoga often becomes an effecting which loses the joy and spontaneity. When we are aware enough to keep joy and aliveness in our Yoga we no longer have to force ourselves to do it. It becomes a gift.

This article raises many questions yet it may be more important to question our answers than to answer our questions. I feel that when each person holds these questions in

themselves the answers become apparent. When we trust ourselves enough to begin to question authority we begin the process of direct discovery. We also free ourselves from the rigid, mechanical life of strict adherence to one belief and move into the joy of continuous learning. Once while walking in the mountains an old Chinese teacher said, "If I teach you, you must stand on my shoulders". This is a beautiful metaphor. We don't throw away tradition but stand on the shoulders of the past to find out if we can see a bit farther.