

Hindu Yoga, Buddhist Yoga, Jaina Yoga

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

In an article entitled "Yoga and Buddhism," published on the Web site of *Hinduism Today*, David Frawley (Vamadeva Shastri) speaks of Yoga and Buddhism as sister traditions. It would perhaps be more appropriate to characterize Hinduism as a sister tradition to Buddhism and Jainism. However, these three are not merely particular spiritual traditions spawned on Indian soil but whole *cultures* with their own distinct moral and spiritual teachings, art, architecture, and social organization. There are many overlaps but also significant divergencies. For instance, in the area of social organization, Buddhism does not subscribe to the caste system, which is a hallmark of Hinduism (though by no means all Hindu traditions accept or support it).

Yoga is commonly understood to be an aspect of Hinduism. However, both the term and the concept (in the sense of spiritual practice) are also widespread in Buddhism. Thus it makes little sense to compare Yoga and Buddhism, unless we define Yoga more narrowly as the particular philosophical system known as *yoga-darshana*, as expounded in Patanjali's *Yoga-Sûtra* and its extensive commentarial literature.

In the broadest sense, Yoga is simply spiritual practice, or spirituality. It is India's version of what has long been known as "mysticism" in Christianity, "Kabbalah" in Judaism, and "Sufism" in Islam. Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as Jainism, are all *yogic* cultures or traditions. That is to say, these cultures are at heart *spiritual*: They acknowledge and promote the age-old ideal of liberation (*moksha*), however it may be conceived. Yoga has from the beginning been a liberation teaching (*moksha-shâstra*), and as such has shaped Hinduism, Buddhism, and also Jainism.

"Hinduism" is the name given to a particular developmental phase of the complex civilization that originated in India over eight millennia ago and that has meantime spread throughout the world. Buddhism is not, as widely thought, an offshoot of Hinduism but of the Indic civilization as such. Yoga is a unique contribution to humankind by the Indic civilization.

Many Western Yoga students confuse Yoga with Hinduism and typically pitch it against Buddhism. Many more Westerners confuse Yoga with physical exercise (i.e., the yogic postures) and see in Buddhism a path of meditation. But the oppositions "Yoga : Hinduism" and "Yoga : Buddhist meditation" are ill conceived.

Yoga is common to both cultural traditions and forms their spiritual essence. Yoga must not be reduced to a mere system of physical exercises but clearly offers many spiritual methods and approaches, especially meditation. It makes no sense to say, as often heard, that Yoga has no meditation practice and that therefore one must resort to Buddhist meditation. Yoga has a wide variety of meditation techniques, which include Buddhist, Hindu, and Jaina meditation practices.

During the past two and half millennia or so, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jaina have been in dialogue with each other, and each cultural tradition has incorporated elements from the others. It has even been said that the disappearance of Buddhism from India was largely due to the fact that Shankara and his school of Advaita Vedanta, or nondual metaphysics, so successfully assimilated Buddhist ideas that Buddhism lost its foothold with regard to the dominant Hindu culture. The Moslem invasion of Northern India was, however, a more decisive factor.

There has traditionally been far less tension between Hinduism and Jainism, since most Jaina adherents regard themselves as Hindu or as not being in conflict with Hinduism. At times, the dialogue between Hindu and Buddhist Yoga was indeed doctrinaire and fierce, but when we look at the great teachers and teachings we also find much common ground. Those of us in the West who are not mired in religious ideology and have imbibed a cosmopolitan outlook, the doctrinal squabbles among the Indic traditions are of little relevance. We are hungering for practices that can nourish us spiritually and in our pragmatist approach are willing to regard their theoretical underpinnings with open-mindedness.

Since the mid-1960s, I have endeavored to make Hindu Yoga accessible to my fellow-Westerners. I have focused on such key scriptures as the *Yoga-Sûtra* and the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*, but also have translated or commented on other, in the West less well-known Yoga texts. I brought many of them together in my book *The Yoga Tradition*, and in that volume also furnished a broad overview of the history of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina Yoga.

In my scholarly work thus far, I have had less concern with Buddhist Yoga, which, from the beginning of my career, I felt had received better attention by preceding scholars than had Hindu Yoga. Certainly over the past two decades, there has been an increasing preoccupation with Buddhist Yoga in the form of Tibetan Buddhism. What is more, the custodians of the Tibetan Buddhist heritage have shown a great willingness to impart to Westerners the esoteric practices underlying their sacred texts. In the case of Hindu Yoga, this is no longer possible to the same extent, though there still are masters capable of imparting the full range of practices and expounding the teachings of specific schools, such as Shrî Vidyâ, Kaula, Nâtha, Kashmiri Shaivism, or Gaudîya.

Compared to Hindu and Buddhist Yoga, Jaina Yoga is a sealed book for Westerner spiritual seekers, who may not even have heard of it. Yet it has its own distinct path and practices, which are kept alive by a few adepts and which definitely deserve to be better known. However, the scriptures of the Jainas have been neglected by scholars, and only a few texts are available in English translation.

From the vantage point of our own time, we can look upon the incredibly complex and diversified heritage of Yoga and appreciate its unique significance for the human race. The adepts of Yoga have blazed trails to summits that at present we see only through a glass darkly but that we sense are of utter relevance to our human destiny. As we delve into the yogic heritage, we encounter a breathtaking wealth of ideas and practices. Yet, at the bottom of it all, are a handful of universal truths that, once we have recognized them, can become powerful agents of transformation for us. Equipped with that recognition, we can then engage any form of Yoga or any specific practice with efficiency and tolerance.

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