

YOGA MORALITY : *Ancient Teachings at a Time of Global Crisis*

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Since its inauguration in 1972, the Union of International Associations has identified over 30,000 global “issues” (read: problems), which between them have more than 150,000 connections. These challenges characterize what many now refer to as our present-day “global crisis”—from the pollution of earth, water, and air to the depletion of nonrenewable resources like oil and arable soil, to widespread deforestation and desertification, to rapidly melting glaciers and rising sea levels, to overpopulation and world hunger, to the displacement of large populations because of the Greenhouse Effect, collapsing ecology, or ethnic and political persecution, to the return of diseases once thought to have been eliminated and the appearance of elusive viruses, to the mass extinction of animal species on a scale comparable to the disappearance of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago, to the proliferation of nuclear arms and uncontrolled arms trade, to increasingly lethal terrorism and the return of fascism (which treats the state as God), and on and on.

Most people are as yet dangerously unaware that humanity is at this very moment facing an unprecedented challenge in its long history. Many are uninformed, but many more simply don't want to see, because either they are indifferent or they can't face reality. It is my understanding, however, that in the years to come we will all be forced to acknowledge that our species is in dire straits, because those difficulties will have become very personal. Many experts fear it is already too late to prevent the worst from happening.

Anyone thinking that environmentalists have prophesied doom and gloom for many decades now and that after all we are still here, should think again. Nor is it only staunch environmentalists who are ringing the alarm bell these days and, moreover, the number of warning voices has greatly multiplied. Until now the media have avoided reporting on the single most important news—the *magnitude* of the crisis we are facing not only environmentally but also socially and geopolitically. By feeding the reader only fragments (“sound bytes”) of the total picture, they effectively trivialize the actualities and thus render them innocuous. Still, there are plenty of publications chronicling the state of affairs and, before long, even the media will finally have to tackle this unpopular topic and assume responsibility for conscientious reporting of the unsavory truths. Among other things, we may expect them to talk about existing governmental emergency programs to control the population when the panic starts.

When the American government declared war on terrorism after the tragedy on September 11, 2001, it essentially redefined world politics and the nation's

understanding of human liberty. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter created the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) granting it a wide range of executive powers in case of emergencies and a multi-billion dollar secret budget—an organization that has sometimes been called the “secret U.S. government.” In 2003, President George W. Bush, Jr., incorporated FEMA along with twenty-two other government offices into the newly launched Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Under the pretext of preventing future terrorist attacks, the U.S. government endowed DHS with unprecedented powers and a budget of well over 30 billion dollars a large chunk of which is unaccountable to the public. Other nations have their own versions of this kind of emergency organization, which are not designed purely for disaster relief but also clearly involve political machinations that revolve around controlling the population at the cost of personal liberty. These are just the beginnings of many more changes that will inevitably encroach more and more on our personal lives, whatever our nationality may be.

Of course, there are countless things we can and must do prepare ourselves for the inevitable at a personal level and also at the collective level. Morris Berman, for one, thinks that the best we can do is to live authentically, bearing the big crisis in mind. As he articulates in his thought-provoking book *The Twilight of American Culture*, today’s critical developments are most likely to lead to the collapse of the American empire and its dependent states.*1 Another orientation is present in books like Richard Heinberg’s *Power Down* and *The Party’s Over* or Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, and Jørgen Randers’ *Beyond the Limits*, Andres R. Edwards’s *The Sustainability Revolution*, and not least Charles Dobson’s *The Troublemaker’s Teaparty: A Manual for Effective Citizen Action*.*2 These works clearly spell out our practical options. There are also many organizations that champion various causes and practical solutions.

The present volume, however, has a slightly different purpose. I want to look at the present situation primarily from the viewpoint of a spiritually committed person, especially but not exclusively a practitioner of Yoga. To be precise, I am interested in answering—from the perspective of a Yoga scholar and practitioner—the question of how we may live consciously, responsibly, authentically, and without fear in the midst of mounting turmoil.

Although *spirit* and *spiritual* are admittedly old-fashioned and possibly quite outdated and somewhat problematic terms, I continue to avail myself of them, because I surmise that most of my readers will know roughly what I mean by them. I appreciate, however, that some people have a problem with these words, and so I would like to proffer the following clarifying comments: For me, *spirit* is short-hand for Ultimate Reality, that is, Reality as it is beyond all conceptualization. The word *spiritual*, again, denotes anything that relates to that Ultimate, in particular the act or attitude of voluntary and consistent self-transcendence, which is the fulcrum of Yoga and other similar traditions.

In my view, the distinction between *spiritual* and *religious* is one of degree. *Spirituality* emphasizes the systematic and sustained practice of radical self-transcendence with the view of fully realizing Ultimate Reality, which in agreement with mysticism is understood to be very core of our human nature. *Religion* also encourages self-transcendence but is more conventional in its approach, emphasizing sound moral behavior and obedience to the will of the Ultimate Reality pictured as a person (i.e., God/Goddess).

How, then, should we conceive the relationship between spirituality and mysticism? *Spirituality*, in principle, requires no doctrines for its fulfillment, whereas *mysticism* is shod through with religious notions. I hasten to add that Yoga extends over a wide spectrum of orientations, some of which should be considered to be more religious, others more mystical. For instance, Bhakti-Yoga (the devotional path) is clearly a heavily religious branch of yogic spirituality, while Karma-Yoga (the path of self-transcending action) focuses on moral behavior and involves few typically religious notions. Then again, Jnāna-Yoga (the path of wisdom) or the Buddhist Dzogchen/Mahāmudrā approach, which all engage the self-transcending process as a training in awareness, or mindfulness, are neither religious nor mystical and thus perhaps best expresses what I mean by radical spirituality. Since Bhakti-Yoga and Karma-Yoga, however, also have perfect transcendence of the human condition as their final goal, they too must be considered spiritual. An example of a mystical spirituality would be Kundalinī-Yoga (the path of mental and bodily transformation via the activation of psychospiritual energy, or *shakti*).*3 But, strictly, all such labels are only approximations and need to be used with appropriate flexibility.

In defending my use of the word *spirituality*, I am not unaware of the unfortunate fact that since the 1970s this term has been ruthlessly exploited by merchants of “religious” consumer goods. This point is well argued from a political perspective by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King in their sharp-edged book *Selling Spirituality*.*4 The authors expose the cultural destructiveness of neoliberalism with its attendant commodification and homogenization of life. I happen to agree with them that we “should be rightly suspicious of calls for a return to the religious traditions of the past.”*5 At the same time, we ought not to blithely discard those traditions, even if this were possible, for they constitute an amazing resource of collective human wisdom.

In writing the present book, I have set myself two related tasks. My first objective is to introduce the yogic moral teachings in their cultural context, freely crisscrossing between Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina Yoga—the three major *forms* of the Indic Yoga tradition. My second objective is to show the relevance of Yoga’s moral teachings for contemporary humanity, particularly in light of today’s global crisis. *Morality*, I know, is not a fashionable term, but, like *spirituality*, it remains useful, and therefore I have availed myself of it without hesitation and apology. Perhaps it is precisely the conspicuous absence of a moral perspective from our contemporary Western society that makes some people intolerant toward the word itself. It is a word, however, that is perfectly appropriate in the present context.

Let me begin by saying that Yoga is not to be measured by the glamour of its spectacular physical postures or fabulous states of meditation, which hold so much fascination for us moderns. Yoga, which lies at the heart of India’s great cultures of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, is as indicated above a spiritual tradition. As such it is concerned with personal growth and the ultimate goal of complete self-transcendence to the point of perfect inner freedom. The core process of Yoga, which conducts the yogic practitioner from a state of inauthentic existence to authentic being, is unglamorous and proceeds through the gradual, quiet transformation of one’s body-mind and everyday life. Thus the foundation of all genuine Yoga practice, like any other spiritual discipline in the world, lies in the realm of moral behavior. It is impossible to be a good yogin or yoginī without also being a morally mature individual. This book is dedicated to exploring what this means.

I have long contemplated writing in more detail about the moral dimension of Yoga, which I see missing from much of contemporary Yoga teaching and practice. I did address moral issues in quite a few of my published works on Yoga—how could I not, considering that the yogic masters fully acknowledged that spiritual growth and moral growth go hand in hand? As well-loved Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh put it:

Ethics is the foundation of Yoga. . . . Ethics is the gateway to God-realisation.

Without ethical perfection, no spiritual progress or realisation is possible. A Yogic student or aspirant must be strictly ethical. He must be truthful and pure in thought, word and deed. He must possess excellent conduct. He must not injure any living being in thought, word and deed. He must practise rigidly right thought, right speech and right action.*6

Again, “Mahatma” Gandhi—perhaps the best-known modern practitioner of Karma-Yoga (the path of self-transcending activity)—wrote in his celebrated autobiography that the “conviction that morality is the basis of things” took deep root in him, while the insight that “truth is the substance of all morality” became his sole occupation.*7 And Albert Einstein, a thoroughly Western voice, noted:

The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life.*8

So long as we are alive, we must act. Even choosing to remain inactive is a kind of action, a stance that—like any action—has both wanted and unwanted consequences. By not voting in an election, for instance, we are not merely inactive but indirectly contribute to the political outcome. Or, to furnish another example, by not taking a stand on ecological issues and implementing an eco-wise way of life, we inevitably contribute to the ongoing decline of our environment. Therefore, as Krishna pointed out in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (“Lord’s Song”) long ago, it behooves us to understand action and its consequences.*9 It is my hope that this book will help thoughtful readers in making proper sense of the nature of their activities in light of the great enduring principles of spirituality and morality.

Who would deny that our lives have become incredibly complex? Our contemporary civilization is a formidably multifaceted enterprise, and more than ever we are in need to shape our lives consciously based on the best wisdom available. Such wisdom, I propose, can be found in the spiritual traditions of India. Even though these traditions were created millennia ago, their insights into the human condition are as valid and vital today as they were then. After all, only external circumstances have changed over the course of history, while our psychological reality has largely remained the same: As a species, we are still afflicted with fear, anger, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, pride, competitiveness, and ethnocentrism. We still ask “ultimate” questions, if only tentatively and mostly privately and then only in crisis situations: Who am I? Whence did I come? Whither do I go? What shall I do? Even those who have decided that posing these existential questions is pointless still face their own demise with apprehension or affected indifference. We still fight wars, and they generally are more destructive than they have ever been, even holding the dread prospect of global annihilation. Our species

still knows poverty, hunger, disease, exploitation of people, animals, and Earth's environment, as well as torture and tyranny—perhaps more so than ever.

According to traditional Hindu and Buddhist reckoning, humanity finds itself in the midst of a dark cycle, the so-called *kali-yuga*, which is marked by a progressive diminution of our physical and mental capacities, as well as moral and spiritual decline. Whether or not the age-old model of world epochs is correct, it certainly fits the bill.*10

Clearly, as a species we have not found answers to these seemingly perennial problems, or rather we have ignored the answers furnished by our spiritually and morally most mature individuals. Nor have our modern technological “solutions” brought us any closer to peace, harmony, and contentment. If anything, modern technology has put large boulders in our way, and for the first time in known history, our species is confronting the growing possibility of global destruction. The medical establishment and social planners are slowly acknowledging the remarkable fact that the so-called advances made by our contemporary “post-modern” society have had a hidden cost: We are in poor mental health, with a large number of people suffering from obsessions, phobias, and generic anxiety, as well as a great deal of despair, unhappiness, and not least self-involvement.*11

Our leadership is far from being exempted from this adverse condition, which explains the dangerously pathological manifestations in national and international politics. Addressing 3,000 neurologists at the World Congress of Neurology held in London in 2001, psychiatrist James Tool, president of the World Federation of Neurology, argued strongly in favor of regularly testing world leaders over the age of sixty for signs of mental instability. Many would want to see such testing done before a candidate actually enters the political arena.

This book, then, is an attempt to outline the moral teachings of Yoga as an integral aspect of Yoga's program of spiritual self-transformation. I have opted for a panoramic approach. When better informed Westerners discuss Yoga, they often only pay attention to Patanjali's classical eightfold path with its five moral disciplines.*12 But these disciplines constitute the ethical ground of *all* yogic teachings. Many scriptures other than Patanjali's *Yoga-Sūtra* contain valuable and even more comprehensive discussions of the moral dimension of the yogic path.

There are inspiring writings particularly in the Buddhist Yoga tradition, such as the literature on the *bodhisattva* path. And who would not be impressed by the careful cataloguing of moral practices found in Jainism, which has developed its own unique yogic teachings? In addition to the classical Hindu philosophies, as well as Buddhist and Jaina literatures, I have also used relevant materials from the Vedic era some 5000 years ago up to the time of the Gnostic tracts of the *Upanishads*.*13 Going forward in time, I have availed myself of the writings of modern Indian thinkers and sages, notably “Mahatma” Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo. Their teachings will give the reader an appreciation of the fact that there is a marvelous continuity of insights on the core issues of existence in the *philosophía perennis*. Whenever it seemed useful to do so, I have also resorted to Western understanding, particularly in the hard and soft sciences to illustrate a point, and, as mentioned at the beginning of this preface, this kind of book would make little sense if I did not also make the materials relevant to the present global crisis.

This book seeks to fill a yawning gap in the existing literature on Yoga and counterbalance the unfortunate trend witnessed today toward overpopularizing the yogic heritage. Often Yoga's modern votaries are no longer even aware of the spiritual and moral aspects of the age-old tradition they presume to practice. This state of affairs has long saddened me, because when stripped of its spiritual and moral teachings, Yoga cannot lead to inner freedom, peace, and happiness, as it was designed to do.

I have absolutely nothing against the physical exercises promoted today under the wrong rubric of Hatha-Yoga. On the contrary, I have intermittently practiced some of them in order to remedy physical challenges. I confess, though, that personally I much prefer an hour's walk in Nature to indoor exercising. The postures of Hatha-Yoga can indeed help a person restore or maintain his or her bodily wellbeing, but let us recall that their original purpose was to transmute the body as part of an extensive program of self-transcendence and self-transformation. Authentic Yoga—including genuine Hatha-Yoga—has always had its focus on the high ideals of mental health and spiritual realization.*¹⁴ The contemporary shift away from these two time-honored and interrelated goals not only distorts the yogic heritage but also shortchanges those who have adopted some of the yogic practices into their quest for physical health and fitness.

We ought never to be discouraged by our failures to live up to our own highest ideals, but learn from our stumbling, raise ourselves up, and try again. Inner growth is not linear and cannot be explained or guided by rigid formulas. Nor should we let the run-of-the-mill morality of others deter us from listening to our own conscience, so long as we are committed to self-honesty and the ideal of nonharming. We must, as the *Bhagavad-Gītā* insists, follow our own inner law even at the risk of committing a blunder. With truth and integrity as our guiding ideals, we will not fail in the long run.

It should not require much imagination to appreciate that a person can be superbly fit but mentally lethargic, emotionally insensitive, morally corrupt, and spiritually bankrupt. After all, we have the historical example of the Third Reich, which placed a premium on physical fitness and health to guarantee its military success and long-term survival. It is certainly desirable to have a fit and healthy body, but we would profit more from a stable and perceptive mind combined with a loving, caring heart. Yoga is primarily about the latter ideals, which have been pursued and realized for millennia by the great masters of the various branches of Yoga. It makes implicit sense to listen to their wisdom teachings and imbibe especially their ideas about morally sound action that stops the vicious cycle of harmful behavior and leads to greater happiness for all.

In writing this book, I have naturally had to scrutinize my own moral history and acknowledge flaws and failures. We cannot grow without properly understanding and acknowledging the many karmic tracks our intentions, verbal behavior, and physical actions leave behind. Each of us has an arm-long record of moral misjudgments and slipups extending, as the Yoga masters assure us, across countless lifetimes. "Who," Jesus of Nazareth is said to have asked, "will cast the first stone?" So, let us not look at the moral flaws of others but focus on our own shortcomings, and more importantly, concentrate on transforming our character to prevent moral failings in the future. The wonderful part about being human is that we can learn from our mistakes and catapult ourselves out of the karmic orbit created by the sum-total of our past motivations. To put it in religious terms, the only valid kind of repentance is acting differently, that is, striving to become morally sound, or virtuous. To speak of *virtue* or *virtuous* is not popular in our

time and, in some circles, is even deemed ridiculous. But that is so only because we have largely lost sight of the things that really matter in life. Hypnotized by the ideology of consumerism, sold so efficiently by the corporate world and governments alike, we see only what is directly in front of us, and even then we see things only through distorting ego-tinted lenses.

I am not known for being politically correct. Hence, as with my other books, the present work does not pander to the contemporary cynics, nihilists, and religious fundamentalists. It unabashedly advocates the reclamation of our common spiritual and moral heritage, as shaped and fulfilled by the great masters of the past. Even where we beg to differ from them philosophically, we can and must learn from the example of their moral and spiritual practice. If we fail to do so, I believe, the present-day moral and spiritual bankruptcy, combined with the growing ecological and sociopolitical disaster, will prove hugely self-destructive.

I dedicate this volume to all those—whether or not they call themselves Yoga practitioners—who pursue the spiritual path with vigor, dignity, and skillful action in the world.

NOTES

1. See Morris Berman, *The Twilight of America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000) and Derrick Jensen, *The Collapse of Civilization and the Rebirth of Community: Volume 1* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005).
2. See the bibliography for details.
3. See Shamdasani, Sonu, ed. *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1932 by C. G. Jung* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).
4. See Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005). See also Susan Bridle, "The Man With the Golden Tongue," *What Is Enlightenment? The Modern Spiritual Predicament: An Inquiry Into the Popularization of East-Meets-West Spirituality*, no. 12 (March 2001); Wade Clarke Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). The preceding publications should be read along with Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectation* (New York: W. W. Norton, repr. 1991).
5. Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, p. 181.
6. Swami Sivananda, *All About Hinduism* (Shivanandanagar, India: Divine Life Society), 1947. Online version (www.dlshq.org/download/hinduismbk.htm) dated 1999. "Ethics" here is of course not so much the theory of moral conduct, but practical morality itself.
7. M. K. Gandhi *The Official Mahatma Gandhi eArchive & Reference Library at www.mahatma.org.in/quotes/*

8. Mark Winokur, *Einstein: A Portrait* (Corte Madera, Calif.: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1984), p. 102.
9. See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).
10. The *kali-yuga*, or unfortunate age, is traditionally supposed to have started with the God-man Krishna's death in 3002 B.C. at the end of the devastating Bharata war (an unlikely date for the war and Krishna) and to last for 360,000 years—a span of time that, given humanity's record thus far, will most likely exceed our species' life expectancy.
11. According to the World Health Organization, one out of four individuals in both developed and developing countries will suffer from mental health problems sometime in his or her life. Well over 100 million people are suffering from clinical depression at this very moment.
12. See Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, repr. 1989).
13. See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. *The Principal Upaniṣads* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953).
14. See Mikel Burley, *Hatha-Yoga* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000).

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