

Yoga and Ecumenism: An Interview with Georg Feuerstein

conducted by Prof. Seshagiri Rao

Rao: Dr. Feuerstein, I have some questions for you regarding Yoga and interfaith relations. But first, is Yoga a science or essentially a technology?

Feuerstein: In a strict sense, it is neither. It hovers between art and science as well as between science and technology. There is a high degree of precision in the terms used to describe yogic practices and the states achieved by them. The processes involved in reaching those states are related to personal growth. Thus Yoga is somewhat unpredictable. To that extent it is not scientific. But it furthers our understanding of ourselves.

Rao: Let me state the question in a different way. Is Yoga experimental?

Feuerstein: It is experiential rather than experimental.

Rao: Is it verifiable?

Feuerstein: Most practical results of Yoga are verifiable through personal experience. I think there are certain practices, especially those of Hatha-Yoga, where one can do medical experimentation, and the traditional claims in this field have been shown to be largely correct. For example, experiments relating to "stopping the heart." Actually, the heart is not stopped by the Yoga adept; but his control is raised to such a high degree that the function of the heart is not normally recordable. This yogic phenomenon is still significant however, and arouses our interest in the process as well as the technique involved.

Rao: Is Yoga common to all the Indian and Eastern traditions?

Feuerstein: Yoga is the practical dimension of the Indic traditions, viz., Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The term *yoga* is used to describe practices designed to alter or transform consciousness and perception of reality, leading the practitioners to what is called *moksha*, *kaivalya*, and *apavarga*. Yoga is not only praxis, however. Yoga is always embedded in a particular cultural environment. How Yoga is expressed in these traditions varies from tradition to tradition, school to school, teacher to teacher, and even from practitioner to practitioner. As one progresses in Yoga one discovers nuances of meaning; and Yoga continues to grow in richness and significance.

Rao: Has Yoga made any impact on the West?

Feuerstein: The impact of Yoga that started with Swami Vivekananda, Swami Ramatirtha and many others continues in the West. Yoga has become a household word, but it has been largely misconstrued. People do not clearly understand that it is, in fact, a spiritual tradition. I have recently come across some writings that deny all

religious ingredients in the concept "Yoga". That is completely wrong. It is erroneous to think that Yoga is purely a consciousness technology. Actually, it always comes with a conceptual package. Yoga is not just action, it is also thought. Yoga has enriched our Western culture; Yoga, in turn has been enriched by the challenges it had to face in our cultural context. In the Western world, the Yoga tradition has encountered issues of world peace and global understanding as well as different world religions. Traditionally, Yoga was concerned only with liberation. In the modern context, it has to deal with wider problems. For example, Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga addresses social, global, and even evolutionary questions.

Rao: Are the different Yogas harmonious with and supplementary to each other or are they in conflict with one other?

Feuerstein: Obviously, there are schools of Yoga that demonstrate much common ground; there are also sectarian schools that postulate fundamental differences. Some Yoga traditions clash with some other yogic traditions, though we can expect truth to lie somewhere in between radical positions. Tantra, for example, has been subjected to a hostile attitude by those practicing Karma-Yoga and Jnana-Yoga. Some sects practicing Bhakti-Yoga do not see eye to eye with the ascetic practices of the *sannyasins*. Yoga has never been uniform. There are creative differences between different schools. It is a rich, delightful and powerful tradition. After thousands of years, it is still living and potent.

Rao: How has Yoga influenced Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions?

Feuerstein: Generally, those who are influenced by Yoga in these traditions are on the margins of their respective religion. A personal sense of unfulfillment in their respective tradition has been responsible for their taking to Yoga in the first place. How one integrates Yoga with his/her own tradition is a personal matter. People respond very differently. With some persons, no integration occurs; Yoga is just piled upon their religious life. But to encounter Yoga in a deeper way is to challenge and enrich one's particular tradition or philosophical system. Yoga is not an abstract entity. Yoga is some specific school devoted to specific practices. It is attached to certain beliefs. We need to look at each case and find out how it manifests itself in any school or tradition. In its psycho-technology, it will enrich and challenge every conceptual environment. The ultimate purpose is to overcome the limitation of mind and go beyond the conceptual realm. This movement inevitably arises from the force of Yoga in living practice.

Rao: What are your reactions to books that are coming out with, such titles as Christian Yoga, Zen Catholicism, etc.?

Feuerstein: I am reluctant to use expressions like Christian Yoga. To call Christian Mysticism and Islamic Sufism as Yoga is misleading, because it implies that Yoga is merely some form of practice that could be crafted on to Christianity or Islam.

Rao: Can Yoga be practiced across religious borders for physical and mental health as well as for moral development without compromising the practitioner's tradition?

Feuerstein: The Western Yoga movement, by and large, has used a "pick and choose" approach. It has adopted the least significant parts of Yoga. Psychotherapist and Yoga teacher Richard Miller observes that we are at the level of postures (*asana*), skipping

moral discipline (*yama*) and self-restraint (*niyama*). Most people don't even meditate. Yoga is practiced as a very bodily oriented system. Hatha-Yogic procedures are used as physical therapies. But traditional Hatha-Yoga wants us to transform the body into a divine body and to prepare it for withstanding the onslaught of dualities (*dvandva*), such as pleasure and pain. The Yoga *asanas* (postures), and *pranayama* (breath regulation) are definitely useful to people. I do not want to take these away from the practitioners. But they do not constitute the essence of Yoga.

Rao: Can Yoga be used for mental health?

Feuerstein: Yes, it can and has been used for mental health, emotional maturity and fulfillment. A qualified aspirant, eager to engage Yoga, must have clarity of understanding and peace. The benefits of Yoga include physical and mental health. But its goal is the total spiritual transformation of the individual. This should not be forgotten; otherwise the beauty of Yoga is missed.

Rao: Does Yoga help eliminate religious conflict?

Feuerstein: Yoga, ultimately, is for enlightenment; but Yoga practice also brings power to the practitioner. There are teachers who are not fully enlightened and they might misuse that power. Power in the wrong hands might accentuate differences and cause conflict, not only within a person but also between people and the view points for which they stand. Enlightened persons fully endorse the respective traditions in which they have grown but are also respectful of other traditions.

Rao: Does Yoga internalize conflict?

Feuerstein: To become a mature human being compassion and tolerance are required. People may not live up to the requirements. Inner attitudes need to be transformed. Western teachers have not, generally, manifested universal moral values. They teach in a competitive environment. However, the proliferation of yogic schools is no threat to anybody. In fact, it affords a creative opportunity for change and growth.

Rao: If Yoga is for spiritual liberation, does it teach withdrawal from society?

Feuerstein: There are two strands of the Yogic tradition: vertical variety and horizontal. The vertical variety takes the aspirant away from the world and into mountain caves or the deeps of forests for meditation. Such practitioners work for humanity purely on the level of mind/spirit rather than on the physical or social levels. The horizontal variety accepts that life is action. Even in a cave, one is still active. Such practitioners manifest moral virtues in society through Karma-Yoga. Both these brands have been in practice for millennia. There is also a continuous dialogue between the two. In the West, the tendency is to emphasize action along the lines of Karma-Yoga, looking for answers in the culture of yogic householders upheld by the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Mahabharata*.

Rao: Are Yoga and vegetarianism connected?

Feuerstein: It is true that the main stream of Indic traditions endorse vegetarianism, due to *ahimsa* or nonharming. People in the West need to look at the harm done to animals. Animals are slaughtered by the millions for the Western palate. This is unnecessary and

avoidable. Sensitivity to all forms of life is an important value. Yoga encourages an optimal diet. The Western Yoga traditions may have somewhat different answers based on the physiological, chemical and biochemical advances in knowledge, but in essence their answers will coincide with the nonviolent ethics of vegetarianism.

Rao: Is the movement of Yoga connected with increased vegetarianism in the West?

Feuerstein: Possibly. Yoga practitioners should become vegetarian.

Rao: Are Yoga and the doctrine of reincarnation connected?

Feuerstein: Most of the Indic and Eastern traditions subscribe to reincarnation. Some medieval *siddhas* in Tamil Nadu debunked reincarnation, but these are rare exceptions. I personally like the Buddhist interpretation of reincarnation. However, Yoga is a matter of now and now and now. Its focus is not reincarnation, but to break the cycle of births and deaths.

Rao: Does Yoga adopt a scientific outlook in its investigation of the inner world?

Feuerstein: Carl Jung realized that we have much to learn from Indic Yogic traditions, specially from the Tantric tradition regarding *nadis* and *cakras*, etc. We have much to learn regarding the subtle body, the inner dimension of life, which is so incredibly rich. The subtle realm of mind has been investigated with great vigor in India. Those Western psychologists who have understood that have turned to Yoga. Western practitioners, as they become masters in due course, will provide descriptions that can be expected to be more understandable in the Western context. Indian texts are often cryptic; they serve as signposts for others to follow on the subtle planes. An appropriate and precise Western vocabulary to describe the subtleties of *samadhi* states is still to be created.

Rao: What is the future of Yoga in the 21st Century?

Feuerstein: Yoga is here to stay. More and more people are accessing and experiencing the benefits of Yoga. It has a bright future.

Rao: On behalf of the readers of *World Faiths Encounter*, I thank you very much for your time.

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