

It All Started in the East...

Like most words in the Sanskrit language, *yoga* has many possible translations, "union" being the most commonly used. According to Georg Feuerstein in his "Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga", as early as the sixth or seventh century B.C. the



Taittiriya-Upanishad (II.4.1) uses the term *yoga* to describe a "spiritual endeavor, specifically the control of the mind (*manas*) and senses (*indriya*)." Feuerstein adds that a few centuries later, at the time of the *Bhagavad-Gita* (third or fourth century B.C.) "the word *yoga* was widely used to denote the Hindu tradition of spiritual discipline, comprising different approaches to Self-realization, or enlightenment." It is only in the second century A.D. that Patanjali systematizes the discipline into his *Yoga-Sutra*, where "he appears to have rejected the idea that the world is an aspect of the Divine, and made a radical distinction between Nature (*prakriti*) and the transcendental Self (*purusha*)." (Georg Feuerstein, "Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga")

According to the same source, *Hatha-Yoga* (translated as "forceful Yoga") is "the vast body of doctrines and practices geared towards Self-realization by means of perfecting the body." The word *Hatha* can also be translated in terms of the meaning of its two syllables, *ha*: Sun and *tha*: moon, whereas *yoga* is the

"union" that comes about when balancing these two basic universal energies. An inspiring interpretation of the term *hatha-yoga* is given by Feuerstein in his Dictionary:

"Its objective is to transform the human body to make it a worthy vehicle for Self-realization. Embodiment is understood as a genuine advantage, and enlightenment is thought to have definite bodily repercussions."

Georg Feuerstein, "Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga"

But how did it all unfold?

In a land far away and a time long ago the sages of ancient India were attempting to make sense of the world around them by asking: *Where did it all come from and what does it mean?*

Obviously they were not thinking in terms of biceps, deltoids, the central nervous system or proprioceptor sites. Rather, they were noticing what nurtured and sustained life: the sun, the moon, the earth itself. All around there were solid things which resembled the earth consistency; wet and liquid things with characteristics similar to water; fiery hot things. There was air and there was the space in which it all occurred. It seemed to be possible to reduce the diversity of life by identifying the basic component in each object. In this way they started to describe the body and the rest of creation in terms of the five elements: earth, water, fire, air and space.

They acknowledged that humans have a thinking, processing mind (*manas*, in Sanskrit) that identifies with the body to create a sense of "I" (*ahamkara*) as a separate individual. The mind became the sixth element.

They also saw that the nature of existence implied a whole range of opposites or polarities. Only in *purusha* (transcendental Self or pure spirit) would there be no duality. In *prakriti* (nature or the world of form), on the other hand, everything could be described as expressing opposite or contrasting energies: the sun and moon, day and night, light and dark, hot and cold, male and female. The human body became a composite of essential energies: the front of the body was associated with solar or masculine energy, while the back was seen as feminine and associated with the moon. The thinking head was masculine, while the feet, walking on Mother Earth, were feminine; the right side of the body was solar and the left side, lunar. Each part of the body, while having a predominant energy, was also a composite of the others: the left hand was considered to be the feminine hand, but its thumb side would be the most masculine and the little finger side, the most feminine.



These values and traditions have been preserved in some cultures to this day. Shown to the right is a yogic ceremony for the blessing of a newly constructed yoga studio in Pune, India, emphasizing the spiritual aspirations attached to the practice of yoga in that part of the world.

Gradually their observations would start to form a discernible pattern. In an attempt to understand life's mysteries, yoga was born as a practice of uniting or harmonizing these polarities in the search to find balance.

The ancient sages described that just as a moving object comes to a complete stop when the composite of all the forces acting on it cancel each other, so does the mind find stillness when all the polarities are in balance.

This may be what the old masters were pointing towards when they developed basic yoga postures (*asana*) and philosophy: the dynamic search of the stillness that reveals itself when we move towards poise, whether in the practice of *asana* or in every moment of our day.

