

yoga & hinduism

BY NANCY JACKSON



WOVEN INTO MORE THAN EIGHT THOUSAND YEARS OF CIVILISATION, YOGA IS THE NAME FOR ALL THE INDIAN PATHS OF SELF-TRANSCENDENCE. TODAY'S WESTERN YOGA CAN TRACE THE ORIGIN OF ITS PHILOSOPHY AND MANY PRACTICES FROM THE SPIRITUAL TRADITION OF HINDUISM AND ITS GREAT SAGES.

At its essence, yoga is spirituality. Although all yogis are not Hindus, many familiar words, visual images and practices started thousands of years ago with the rise of Hinduism. The earliest beginnings of yoga are also the beginnings of Hinduism; its first written records are the scriptures of Hinduism, and its spiritual goal the same as in Hinduism. Throughout its long and rich history, yoga has been the pathway for individuals to connect with the core of their innermost being.

Hinduism has many broad meanings. It refers to the Indian culture with its own distinct lifestyle and spirit that emerged from the civilisations of the Indus River valley. Evidence of industrious urban centres of more than 20,000 inhabitants has been unearthed from the Neolithic era as early as 6500 BC. The two great cosmopolitan centres of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappo, along with numerous other environments, attest to a highly developed civilisation known for a range of achievements from mathematical computations to elaborate drainage systems. The great Indian civilisation arising from those roots is the oldest continuous civilisation known on Earth.

The oldest surviving religion in the world, the original name of Hinduism was *Sanatana Dharma*, which means eternal or universal righteousness. Central to Hindu thinking, dharma means to do the right thing, to take

responsibility and fulfil the duty of family, work and charity. It implies good moral and ethical choices – not just believing in a spiritual life but also living it.

The term Hindu may have been coined about 500 BC. The Indus River was known as the *Sindhu* in Sanskrit and the Indian people *Sindhus*. The Persians living on the other side of the river called them Hindus, the word in the Persian language.

The first visual evidence we have of practising yoga is a seal of a meditating yogi unearthed from Mohenjo-Daro, located in modern-day Pakistan. The first writings on yoga were recorded several thousand years later, based on the strong oral tradition of the earliest times. Called the *Vedas*, meaning sacred knowledge, they also are the holiest scriptures of Hinduism and respond to a primal human attribute: the need to know.

WHAT IS HINDUISM?

The Hindu religion is a rich and dynamic system of living based on belief in universal divinity, freedom of thought, reverence for all forms of life, and spiritual practice unmediated by any authority. Hindus follow no founder's initiative, no dogma and no separation between the secular and the sacred.

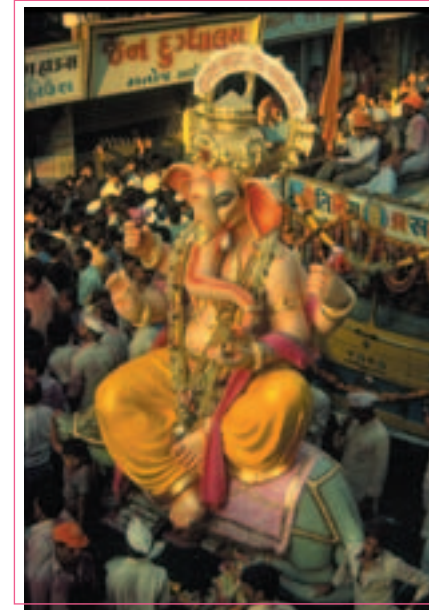
Hindus believe there is one God, or Supreme Consciousness, which is the substratum of all

beings and all things. One aspect of consciousness is the transcendent, meaning above or beyond the limits of human experience. This is characterised by infinite power, ultimate existence, absolute knowledge and eternal bliss. The other aspect is the personal, which dwells within the human being as the spirit, soul or inner Self.

According to Hindus, the goal of human life is to go beyond our limited experience of ourselves as body and mind. This transcendence is attained through self-realisation, meaning to realise, or become absolutely steady in the experience of our true essence as Supreme Consciousness. This is called yoga, meaning oneness. The means for attainment comprise working on oneself physically, such as hatha yoga and *pranayama*; working on the mind through meditation and dispelling negative thought; and becoming steady in the connection that the inner self is the same as transcendent consciousness.

RICH LAYERS OF TRADITION AND CULTURE

Many movements, great teachers and cultural values have added to the fluid practice of Hinduism throughout the millennia. These have been superimposed and entwined, layer upon layer, enriching the religion.



Ganesha represents removal of obstacles. The head personifies discriminating intellect; the trunk is strong yet able to pick up the most delicate; and the human body carries the human heart.

Starting in Neolithic times, the earliest *Vedic* traditions offered prayer and created ritual for continuity of life-sustaining patterns of nature, such as birth and abundant food supplies. Central to *Vedic* culture were prescribed rituals for public worship and offerings, specifically in the form of the *yagna*, or fire ceremony. Priests performed these ceremonies and eventually developed into a powerful class known as *Brahmins*. The priestly *Brahmins* also became the highest level of the Indian caste system. Although some sects of Hinduism may follow this system more or less stringently, it remains controversial.

To explain the cosmic order of life, the *Vedic* people developed a pantheon of gods and goddesses that symbolised particular functions and attributes, the foundation of Indian mythology. The Hindu worship of many deities can be deceptive to the uninitiated. Hinduism actually recognises one Supreme Being that can be known in many ways and worshipped in many forms with different attributes. At one point it was said there were 330 million gods, reflective of what was considered the number of living beings on Earth, or all of the divine creation.

Construction of temples and the worship of idols developed later in the time line, and through the years, certain gods and goddesses were more or less popular as factions arose. Devotional worship, or *bhakti*, blossomed between 1000 and 1800 AD, promoted by a number of poets and sages. One woman poet of the 16th century, Mirabai, said, 'For Thy sake I will become a yogini and wander from city to



TOP: Bindi, the dot on the forehead represents the third eye, or the gateway to spiritual understanding. ABOVE: Lotus, symbolises spiritual knowledge and power.

city. I shall don ashes and deerskin and will veritably reduce this body to ashes.' She is referring to the custom of renunciation, a Hindu tradition where individuals leave their homes and possessions to become wandering *sadhus*, or holy ones, devoted to practising the paths of yoga.

In personifying supreme consciousness Hindus honour both male and female qualities, recognising the limitless play of attributes. The worship of the Divine Mother has had a significant presence in the history of Hinduism, focusing on the loving, protecting, nourishing and all-knowing aspects of ultimate consciousness. Just as in human life, some of the deities marry, have children and undergo domestic quarrels.

In yoga, the God Shiva represents the embodiment of the dedicated yogi. In stories of Shiva, he is known to meditate for a thousand years. He is often depicted in the yoga posture of full or half lotus, with his eyes open, signifying the one who looks inward and outward at the same time.

Krishna, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, is also a yogi. In the famous interchange in the highly revered Hindu scripture, *Bhagavad Gita* (Celestial Song), Krishna urges his disciple Arjuna to 'be a yogi'. He says, 'A yogi whose soul has attained contentment through wisdom and knowledge, who is unperturbed, who has mastered his senses, who sees that a lump of earth and a bar of gold are both made of consciousness, is said to have attained the goal of yoga.'

Recognised as the first complete yoga work, the *Bhagavad Gita* was first translated into Western languages in the late 18th century. Part of the *Mahabharata*, an epic poem of 100,000 verses, the *Gita* is perhaps India's most venerated text. It describes a monumental war that took place about 2000 BC, and was composed later, with the current rendition completed about the third century BC. Filled with symbolism, it espouses the metaphorical war of the yogi to overcome all negative tendencies in the spiritual struggle of the soul. The two Hindu tenets of renunciation and dharma are foundational in the teachings.

SYSTEMS OF YOGA

In the first millennium AD several systems of yogic philosophy added to the mix we choose from today. Historians agree that these systems had been evolving since *Vedic* times, perhaps in schools or lineages of practice passed from master to disciple. The most well known to hatha yoga teachers, of course, is Patanjali, who created a system he recorded in his *Yoga Sutras*. This compilation of *sutras*, or aphorisms, cites meditative and physical practices designed to focus an individual's energies. Patanjali defines the final attainment of self-realisation, or enlightenment, as the state where individuals are established in their real nature, which is pure consciousness.

Another well known system of yoga is in a series of texts and practices known as *Tantra*. A more mystical path than Patanjali's yoga, part of the mystique of *Tantra* is that it has been popularised as an ancient secret path. As in many of the yogic practices, the teachings were restricted to students who proved worthy enough to receive initiation.

In keeping with a basic view of Hinduism, the core teaching of *Tantra* is that all of creation is one. One prominent *Tantric* philosophy, *Kashmir Shaivism* says everything is consciousness. The first text of *Kashmir Shaivism*, recorded about the ninth century AD, is the *Shiva Sutras*, attributed to a sage known as Vasugupta. It is filled with yogic practices to guide individuals in their efforts to still the mind, overcome negative tendencies and consistently choose upliftment. The 12th *sutra* says, 'The different stages attained in the course of yogic practices are filled with wonders.'

THE TEACHERS

On an individual level, yoga emphasises *sadhana*, or spiritual practice. Central to this schooling is the guru, or the master teacher

who guides students. This tradition also has been passed down from the *Vedas* and is a cornerstone of Hinduism. Sections known as the *Upanishads* were written at the end of the *Vedas*. In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, a father tells his son, 'Find a teacher, learn.'

The ancient teachings emphasise the quality of the guru and the resolve of the student. They describe the nature of a true guru as one who teaches from the scriptures and leads an exemplary life. The guru must also be so established in the experience of the divine that he or she (there have been many prominent female gurus) has the power to guide disciples in spiritual matters and open them to profound experiences.

KARMA, REINCARNATION AND MAYA

Many other Hindu concepts have found their way into contemporary Western speech, including the terms *maya*, *karma* and reincarnation. *Maya*, commonly translated as 'everything is illusion', can be compared to a movie screen, where projected images and dramas appear so real that we get emotionally engaged. The concept of *maya* is that cosmic ignorance deludes us into believing that what we experience in the world is more real than the true divine nature within. Through yogic practices, aspirants stay focused on the transcendent aspects of consciousness rather than the transitory dramas of everyday life.

The law of *karma* is based on cause and effect; that each person reaps the rewards or suffers the consequences of every thought and action, in this life or in a future life. A person who lives a good life is rewarded with a better life in the next incarnation. The cycle of birth and death continues until a person attains the goal of spiritual liberation.

Reincarnation is based on the principles of the permanence of the individual soul and freedom from ignorance. According to Hinduism, at the death of the body, the soul reincarnates according to the actions one performs during life. Reincarnation occurs over and over until the individual attains enough merit to realise the divinity of all existence. Hindus place high importance on living in the present, taking the right actions that bring good results and communing with the divinity of all existence right now.

TODAY'S YOGA CLASSES

As a living tradition, Hinduism embraces all religions and practices that bring spirituality into individual life. Its broad spectrum is what

allows its precepts to be followed by templegoers in India and yoga students in St Kilda. As yoga continues to become more popular in mainstream Western society, so do many of the concepts created by Hindu seers at the dawn of civilisation. Its strength is that every aspect of yoga is designed to be integrated into a life-affirming attitude. From the physical and emotional practice of postures to the inner journey of meditation and studying of classics, yoga continues to draw from ancient wisdom and resonate with truth.

COMMON HINDU SYMBOLS

In your practice of yoga or in readings, you may see items or decorative art representing the spiritual or philosophical aspects of yoga, which are linked to its heritage in Hinduism. Here are a few common symbols:

Bell Ringing a bell eliminates distracting sounds and helps focus the mind.

Bindi The dot on the forehead represents the third eye, or the gateway to spiritual understanding. Hindus may place two layers, the first of sandalwood paste and the second of red powder paste.

Camphor When camphor is lit, it burns and leaves little or no residue. This symbolises the light of spiritual knowledge, which leaves no impurities behind. The fragrance disinfects and clears the air.

Conch shell In the form of a spiral, the conch evolves from a single point into ever-increasing spheres, symbolising the origin of the universe from a single source. The sound of the conch represents the sacred syllable OM.

Incense The fragrance of incense symbolises how strongly the senses overpower the mind. Burning incense represents the destruction of craving for sense objects. It also frees the mind from worldly distractions and helps concentration during meditation and yoga practice.

Lamp A lamp of burning oil or a candle symbolises the divine light that dispels ignorance.

Lotus The lotus grows out of mud and unfolds into a beautiful flower, living in water but not getting wet. Symbolising spiritual knowledge and power, it conveys the idea of remaining unaffected by worldly attractions and working towards spiritual unfoldment.

Om The symbol for om represents the infinite. It has several interpretations. One is that it signifies the four states of consciousness. The

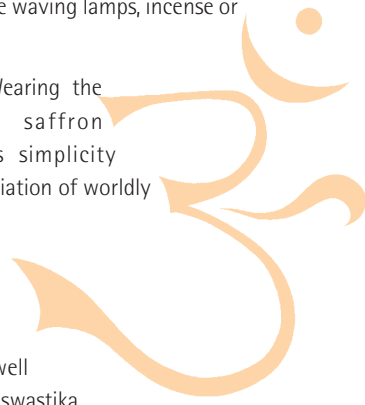
top swoop of the 3 represents the waking state, the bottom swoop of the 3 represents the sleep state and the tail to the right of the 3 signifies the deep sleep state. The dot symbolises the fourth state of consciousness or the Absolute, which illumines the other states. The line below it symbolises *maya*, or cosmic illusion. But it is open at the top, which means the Absolute is infinite and not affected by illusion.

Puja Any ritual offering, or *puja*, is intended to help the participant focus internally. *Pujas* may include waving lamps, incense or candles.

Saffron Wearing the colour saffron symbolises simplicity and renunciation of worldly desires.

Swastika From Sanskrit, meaning well being, the swastika might be unnerving when you first see it, but the four limbs of this swastika are bent in the opposite direction of Hitler's emblem. They represent the four *Vedas* (auspiciousness), the four goals of life (prosperity), the four stages of life (good fortune), the four directions in space (divine omnipresence), the four seasons, (the cyclic nature of time) and the four ages of the world cycle (natural evolution of the universe).

Yantra Often drawn in chalk or in the sand outside Hindu temples and ashrams, the *yantra* is a geometric representation of the levels and energies of the universe, with the centre as a single dot, or symbolic seed of all creation. Similar to the Tibetan *mandala*, which is more pictorial, *yantras* can also be drawn on paper, wood or cloth.



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