

Medicine, Mastery and Mystery

An Interview with Paul Harvey by Joseph Le Page.

Joseph is the founder and director of Integrative Yoga Therapy. This interview took place while Paul was teaching at Zinal for UENFY in 1999.

JL: How do you adapt Yoga to the individual?

PH: I can approach that in two ways, the chronological and the psychological. Chronologically, the starting point is the age at which people begin Yoga studies.

There are three stages of life, or Trikrama. The first is the stage of growth and expansion (Sṛṣṭi).

This is the stage to develop the body and practice Āsana, and obviously, with very young people their interest will be more engaged by using a range of challenging, jumping sequences.

This is the context within which, perhaps, Mr Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois would have studied. This stage ends at about 24 and then you moved into family life.

When you are in family life, who has time to practice asana three hours a day? Priorities change. There is a teaching around this called the Yoga Rahasya, which says that when you are a family person you have to look after your family, your work, your relatives, the priest, the beggar... what time is there to look after yourself?

During this time there is a developmental shift: you've got the Āsana under your belt, so to speak, and now the priority is to maintain your energy. Yoga is practised for stability (Sthiti), and the need is more psychological than physiological.

Your early training supports your physical health, and now it is time to maintain your psychological vitality, so Prāṇāyāma is the primary practice, Āsana the secondary.

The third stage (Antya) is what would be called a mid-life transition in Jungian terms: priorities change again. The children are grown, you don't have the same ambitions in your work, it is no longer the outside, it is the inside that is of interest.

The question is how to support that. In the first stage the priority is physiological, in the second stage it is psychological, and in this third stage the priority is spiritual.

So in the third stage, Āsana and Prāṇāyāma still have their place, but the focus is much more around the idea of Dhyānam (meditation), inquiring into the question of death, coming to terms with it before dying.

This is the chronological model. In the West, however, if we apply this model, we already have a problem since most people coming to Yoga are already in their middle years. They are not coming for growth; they are looking to Yoga to repair the breakdown. Like going to the car mechanic, the body is getting a bit cranky and needs to be repaired.

From the very start we have a disturbance such as stress or back pain. We have psychosomatic and psychological difficulties, and we need support for our busy life styles. The body has not been built up and it is breaking down due to poor habits, poor diet, not growing up healthfully. Yoga students in the West have two problems: the age at which we come to Yoga and the reason why.

So, people are coming to Yoga for repair, but are using practices that are perhaps more suited to someone who is fit and healthy, with much more time and energy. The question for us in this situation is, where should we begin with people, as individuals and as groups?

This is where another model may be helpful, the one which says that Yoga needs to be taught according to the starting point of the person. This model has three aspects.

If there are no obstacles, limitations or restrictions, whether the person is 14 or 24 or 34, the practice can be taught in the Śikṣaṇa way.

You can teach the Āsana in their most intense forms with all the nuances of Bandha, gazing and so forth. However, the person must have enough energy. This is not a technique for boosting flagging energy, so we must be very careful.

The second aspect of this model is Rakṣaṇa, practising Yoga to protect us. We aim more at maintaining the health and strength that we have, rather than going to the extremes of the postures. We are careful not to make the practice itself another source of stress: we have physical limitations and limited time, and so the practice is adapted accordingly.

The third aspect is where one's health account is well overdrawn, completely in the red (Cikitsā). As we all know, if you are overdrawn, the first priority is to get rid of your overdraft. It is important that when we are dealing with students we find out which of the three is important and relevant to them.

If somebody comes who has energy, money in the bank, then they can spend it, invest it, develop it. If someone comes who is not overdrawn but who has no extra money, then we want to make sure that they maintain what they have and do not become overdrawn in the future.

If someone comes who is completely overdrawn energetically or in terms of health, the priority must be to remove the overdraft.

JL: In many schools of Yoga today, it seems that just the opposite is true, that the students must fit themselves into the system. Where does the system or method of teaching come into this?

PH: Any transformative process needs a map, but the map is not the journey. The teacher needs a system of possibilities, a map, but the needs of the student are paramount. Allopathic medicine, for example, has become all about the map and not the traveller, so quite often you are perceived as a problem, not a person.

However, I know that if I work with two people with the same problem, say sciatica, I might well prescribe two completely different practices for them because their intrinsic natures are very different. They could be a happy person with sciatica, or a depressed person, or a person who has encountered a lot of failure, or a person who has high or very low self-esteem.

We need maps, but we must not become bound by them.

Yoga must adapt itself to the person and the person must also adapt himself to Yoga. If the student is not willing to practice some Viyoga, giving something up to make space for something new, making changes, then the practice is never going to work for them.

The student needs to be prepared to practise, and the teacher needs the insight and the overall view to adapt the practice.

People need to have a core practice; they need to be taught some core Āsana. The question is, how do we choose, respecting all the hundreds of Āsana and yet prioritising. I know that for the majority of people, I use about thirty Āsana and adapt and modify them for different needs.

Someone with the health and the time could draw on perhaps another hundred Āsana and develop them, but we need to be sure that those students are coming with a clear idea. I have seen students who want to learn difficult Āsana and their health is not strong enough. So what do you do?

A student came to me who wanted to do very difficult Āsana but he was stressed: a busy job, a new baby, and he was trying to get up at 5:00 am to practise, and then asking me to teach him Bandha!

So I said, okay, I will teach you Bandha, but first you must be able to inhale for 10 counts and exhale for 20 counts, in Nāḍī Śodhanam for ten breaths, with no disturbance of the pulse.

As teachers we sometimes have to think of strategies to meet the desire of the student, to give them a piece of what they want and a piece of what they need. I knew that a long exhalation could relax him, and that having to do 10 breaths would require him to be still for a certain amount of time and that that would be good for him.

JL: Should Yoga always include a focus on the mystery, the spiritual at some level?

PH: I can't say that when I first came to Yoga I had any focus on the mystery: it was more based around my desire to meditate and discovering that I couldn't sit, and so I began at a very practical starting point.

I feel that the mystery aspect of Yoga is just coming to know more of who I am. I see the Yoga Sūtra as the primary text for exploring this mystery, and there are four parts to this exploration.

First is knowing the mind; knowing that it has habits which are helpful and unhelpful and that there's a part of it which appears to be a mystery for me. Next is appreciating that I can refine the mind, work with it and influence it.

Then, if I refine the mind with care and guidance, I can direct it and get it to work for me rather than against me. The fourth part is going beyond the mind.

From the Yoga perspective, it doesn't matter whether we say that God is beyond the mind or whether we say that there is a deep and quiet place within me. Yoga is very skilful, it doesn't say that we have to take God as that which is beyond the mind. This is where there is a distinction between Yoga and Vedānta.

While Vedānta is concerned with the question of the nature of Brahman, Yoga is concerned with the nature of the mind and of myself. What is this mind that takes me to such wonderful places and yet also gets me into such hellholes?

Yoga is about how to know, and if you have a personal inclination about knowing God, that's fine. What does develop from our Yoga practice is a sense of reverence, reverence for what's around us, our relationships, for what we eat, for different societies. We become more tolerant of different cultures and different attitudes.

We can summarise this view of Yoga as taught by Krishnamacharya, in three terms.

Śakti Krama is practising Yoga in order to gain mastery over things, gaining power over the body through difficult Āsana and breathing techniques, and it is a very valid possibility.

The second is Adhyātmika, when I am more concerned with the mystery of life than its mastery. Adhyātmika means to go into the mystery of myself, inquiring who I am, why I am. The teachings of the Yoga Sūtra are very important here.

The third is Cikitsā Krama. We all get sick from time to time, and therefore there is the need for Yoga as medicine. Here it is linked to the ideas of Āyurveda. The traditional Haṭha Yoga texts described the benefits of the postures in Āyurveda terms saying whether they were good for Vāta or for Pitta or for reducing Kapha. It is a way of seeing where there is an imbalance, whether chronic or acute, and dealing with it.

This is a practical way of looking at the possibilities that Yoga offers.

Śakti Yoga is about gaining and developing power, but one must remember, that which I am using to gain power, the mind itself, is getting more powerful, and this can kick back on us.

So then we need some reflection on the mystery of life rather than its mastery. We need to come closer to the source of what life really is.

Finally, we cannot live without some form of medicine.