

What is Yoga?

An interview with Paul Harvey on BBC Radio Bristol Feb 1986.

I. Yoga is often portrayed as sitting still perhaps in rather bizarre positions communicating with the depths of human relaxation and comprehension. How accurate a picture is that?

I am delighted to welcome to the Programme this afternoon Paul Harvey who among other things teaches Yoga at the Centre for Yoga Studies in Bath and at the Whiteladies Natural Health Clinic. You also, I think, have a couple of diplomas haven't you?

PH. Yes I have though I feel that my main training has come not from diploma work but from the closer experience of studying and practising Yoga in India.

I. You've only recently come back from India I know and you spent what two years or so in India in the late seventies or early eighties?

PH. Yes that's right.

I. Where did your own interest in Yoga come from then Paul?

PH. My own interest in Yoga came from a vague understanding of Indian thought and Indian philosophy in the late sixties and early seventies and from looking at the idea of meditation and at what meditation was.

One of the first things I found was that I couldn't sit still. It was impossible to sit because of the stiffness in my back and the discomfort in my legs and it was my wife who saw an advert for a Yoga class. This was in 1972.

I. But.....A Yoga class? One imagines them all sitting with their legs behind their neck in rather odd positions as I mentioned before. Was that the picture you had in your own mind of Yoga at that time?

PH. I'm sorry to say that the first class I went to was like that. The teacher stood on his head and waved his stomach in and out. He had a rather large stomach so it was quite an extraordinary sight and when we finished the class we all went down to the pub afterwards.

I. Did you get any benefit out of it at that point?

PH. There was some benefit. I felt better.....and feeling better encouraged me to wonder what it was that made me feel better.

I. So what was your next stage from there?

PH. My next stage was to look at different classes and at different teachers. I think that if you want to make a serious study of anything you're involved in you look at ways to find a teacher and this is what I did.

It took some years to come across a teacher to whom I could relate and a teacher I felt could relate not only to me as a person but also to my Western psychology. There are many teachers around who are willing to teach you, but I wonder if they are asking you to be as they are rather than respecting how you are.

I. Because it is almost something rather alien to our whole way of thinking isn't it here in the West?

PH. Yes. Yoga is a product of Eastern thought. A further complication is that the early Yoga teachers were both Indian and Hindu. So from the late 1800's and early 1900's the Yoga teachers who came across were as interested in Hinduism as in Yoga. Often what we were being taught was a mixture of two different systems.

I. So in modern terms you've actually experienced it from an Indian point of view?

PH. Yes, I've experienced it from the Indian point of view. I found it invaluable to go and live in India and study in a traditional setting within a teacher–student relationship.

There were several reasons. One is that just living in India you can appreciate the difference in the everyday posture of the Indian compared with that of a Westerner. Here we are sitting in chairs and this is quite normal to us. In India one is used to sitting on the floor; one is used to sitting cross–legged, one is used to being more physical and more manual. You watch women carrying water, you watch men squatting.

It's a different culture and when you make the transition to perform certain exercises, I feel their starting point is ahead of ours.

I. What makes that better? I mean, the logic of my mind says to me that simply to bend the knees and sit down is more suited to my body than to squat on the floor with legs crossed, scrunched up underneath me.

PH. Let me give an example related to yourself. If I were educating people in the West on how to bend and how to use their bodies, the first thing I would say is that, when you bend forward, you should bend your knees, because this is what you're used to. We're used to spending a lot of time with our knees bent – sitting in the car, sitting at a desk, sitting on a chair – and along comes some form of exercise in which, when we bend over, we keep our legs straight so that the back is strained.

I would say: "No, let it be in harmony with what we're used to. So bend the knees". If we interpret Yoga just by looking at the form an Easterner is adopting and then trying to match ourselves to that form, we're misunderstanding Yoga. If I may say so with risk of criticism, there are a lot of people trying to adapt themselves to a body posture that is inappropriate and perhaps, even if they do achieve it, we can't really say that it's Yoga.

I. If we started younger, could we? Because they actually start very young in India?

PH. Yes. Traditionally you're introduced to Yoga at the age of six and you're taught the type of activities and the types of movements that a six–year old needs. If I have, say, a parent wanting to bring a child to a class, I'm loathe to take the two together, because I feel that what a young child needs is quite different from what an older person needs.

A young child needs to be very active, to have stimulating movements. An older person perhaps needs something different. We come across Yoga generally when our bodies are starting to decline, and this is very often the very reason why we can't do Yoga. It's because the body doesn't function quite as well as it used to. We are becoming aware of this, and in the same way that, when our car is starting to malfunction, we put it into the garage, we are looking for a garage for the body.

In this way we come to Yoga, and if we're then introduced to the type of Yoga that's appropriate for an six–year old, it could perhaps make things worse. If somebody's got arthritis, the last thing they want to be doing is standing on one leg or trying

I. The body obviously is the first port of call in Yoga, but it's portrayed as something far more than that, isn't it? It's not just your physical, it's your mental state as well.

PH. I think that the hub of the work that I do and the understanding I have of Yoga revolves round the idea of the breath. The breath is seen to be the key between the emotional state, the mental state and physical state. It is perhaps the most important tool that we work with, and it's one whose importance is underestimated in the West.

Breath is perhaps the first thing we have in life. It's how we measure the starting of life and it's how we measure the ending of life. Yet what of the time in–between? Breathing is taken for granted unless there's a problem such as asthma or bronchitis. For me the breath really is the tool which allows you to understand what's happening on the mental level and what's happening on the emotional level, and it also allows you to measure what's happening on a physical level.

So, when people come to me with emotional and mental problems, I also work with the breath. Breathing will both relax and energise a person. However I would rather see my work as a Yoga teacher or an educator than use the term therapist.

I. Yes, the word therapy is one I used earlier; how therapeutic is Yoga?

PH. Yoga was originally offered as preventative. If you're starting at the age of eight, then it has marvellous possibilities as a preventative. But it also has a lot of scope as a therapy. And I would say that probably about 80% of my work is using Yoga as a therapy, people with back problems (particularly in the lower back), with shoulder tension, with depression or agitation, with digestive and circulatory problems and arthritis. All of these conditions can be improved by Yoga practice.

I. How? I mean we'll probably spend the next, I was going to say, three hours – three months would probably be more appropriate – to answer that question fully.

PH. Yes, and it's also difficult that, when people come to Yoga, they are perhaps coming to it at the end of a long series of alternatives, and they're looking for something that's going to act very quickly. But Yoga is not a quick answer.

I would look at those people and I would look at ways of improving their body function and improving their awareness of the conditions that creates these problems. This is where you have the idea of Yoga as a therapy, and this is where you have the idea of Yoga as an inquiry. It's not only improving the actual function of the body, and the function of the breath, but also improving an awareness of the conditions that lead to problems developing. However the first thing we have to see is that the problem doesn't get worse, that's my starting point.

I. Do you feel that you and your colleagues who think along the same lines have Westernised an Eastern thing?

PH. This is a criticism that's extended to us. People say that it's not Yoga. I've even had students say: "Wonderful session, but it's not Yoga, you know". We need to be very clear on what Yoga aims to do. Yoga aims to bring about a situation where the mind is quieter and more effective. It's not only about relaxation, it's also about improving our energy. It's about making us more decisive and at the same time better able to judge a situation clearly.

I. So perhaps we'll meet in the middle – you never know.

PH. Maybe....in time.

I. Just briefly then, Paul; what do you think is the next stage for us? Should we all turn our minds to this sort of Yoga?

PH. I think we should turn our minds towards improving our sense of well being. One can see that there is a tremendous increase in body consciousness. One only has to look at what's coming across from the States, in the form of the Work Out System, Weight System and Body Definition.

It goes further than that, because we have also to look to the causes; we have to look at the factors that produce stress and the factors that produce illness in the body.

I. Surely that's life around us? Isn't that the speed at which we're moving? The fumes that we're breathing in, and so on?

PH. Things haven't changed that much internally. Life must always go on and Yoga is not about an escape from life. Yoga's about a way of dealing with life more effectively; to be able to involve oneself with one's family, one's friends, one's social commitments, one's job and yet at the same time maintain one's centre. You're able to stay well, stay healthy and yet still participate fully in society and life around you.

I. Thank you, Paul.