

On Self-Deceit

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The decades that followed the Second World War bear witness to a remarkable revival of Yoga. Ever since, the ancient Hindu doctrine characterized by a lack of institutionalized governance has held its attractive power worldwide on millions of prospective yogins and yoginis. Its manifold aspects include metaphysics and practical lessons that are greatly valued in these days of technological advances and improved welfare, where values and existential issues resurge as counterweights.

According to Yoga Journal Releases 2008 "Yoga in America" Market Study indicated practitioner spending grows to nearly \$6 billion a year.

This reported figure would represent an increase of 87 % compared to the previous study in 2004—almost double of what was previously spent.*

The worldwide success enjoyed by ancient yogic philosophy can be explained in many ways. The Western liberal climate has morphed into a place where studying and practicing Yoga is widely accepted. Even though prejudices may never be eradicated altogether. Yoga courses are open to anyone willing to enroll, irrespective of race, religion, gender, age or social status.

Positive reports on the advantages of practicing Yoga, in some form, mostly stem from teachings offered by a plethoric army of Yoga schools and organizations. These organizations have diverse agendas, which may include different kinds of services—educational, religious or for therapeutic purposes.

One result of this unrestrained diversity is the creation of various off-shoots of Yoga, such as Calisthenics, Kegel Exercises, Coué's autosuggestion method, Pilates Yoga**, Japanese Reiki, Sophrology, Stretching and Power Yoga. There has grown to be an almost endless array of relaxation and meditation techniques, as well as " *Yoga for...*", where the blank space may

be filled with anything and everything between heaven and earth! Westerners who create such off-shoots feel quite free to “borrow” methods and techniques from the vast reservoir of Yoga, usually without giving any credit where it is due.

More particularly in the USA, curiously Yoga teachers are able to patent or brand at the USPTO postures, methods and techniques that were empirically coined and made available millennia ago. And, as duly registered patentees or trademark owners, fight back their former employees who, inspired in a liberal climate where exclusive rights on free intangibles are officially granted, are teaching their former employers patented or trademark registered Yoga styles.

This is, in brief, how ancient, orally transmitted wisdom intended to support Man in the great adventure of Self-Realization is thoroughly “borrowed” to promote the personal, branded projects of Westerners. Experience teaches that self-asserting and irresponsible teaching leads to frustrating dead ends at best, and personal or collective disasters at worst. In either case, it constitutes an offense to the sacred science of Yoga and its genuine representatives.

The following are personal reflections from the author’s considered observations collected with an ambition of strict objectivity. They extend from more than two decades at Sri Goswami’s ashram and subsequent personal experiences as a Yoga teacher. These reflections are well corroborated by reports, written and verbal, from other Yoga ashrams.

Far from being exhaustive and with no other aim than honestly informing those who feel attracted to the vast cognitive field of Yoga, these thoughts and reflections should hopefully help to mobilize the reader’s own lucidity, so as to escape the pitfalls of wishful thinking and other illusory thoughts. To

escape inevitable sequels from wrong decisions, preventative knowledge is a must. Some cautionary suggestions are given at the end of this article.

Self-Appointed Ambassadors

*Hundreds of Gurus are there around but
there is only one real disciple out of one million*

Ma Santi Devi

Human lives are driven by the intertwined forces of ignorance and knowledge, so strongly attached to human nature that they form a permanent background to the unfolding of human destiny. Existing sometimes in symbiosis and at other times antagonistically, these inseparable twins interact in many ways.

It seems that a distinction is justified, on the one hand between "basic ignorance" (easily illustrated in the condition of someone who is unable to read and write) and the more generalized condition of being generally unaware of or unknowledgeable in a particular subject or cognitive field.

In yogic terminology, ignorance is designated by the term *avidya*. There is has the specific denotation of lack of knowledge concerning one's own true nature. *Avidya* is the result of desire (*kama*) and attachment to worldly matters (*sneha*), the end result of which is suffering (*duhkha*).

The practice of Yoga has attracted some enthusiastic patrons who not only practice for themselves, but also have embarked upon the adventurous task of teaching others, thereby becoming, so to speak, self-appointed teachers. Some of these self-appointed teachers are service-minded souls, while others share the same ambition but within a more speculative professional

scheme. Thus we find a parallel movement of two categories of Yoga teachers—authentic *acharyas* and *gurus* who belong to a specific Yoga tradition, and a modern movement of self-appointed teachers. This latter group may be subdivided as follows:

- a) Uneducated but candid Yoga students who have decided to teach other people—relative, friends, schoolmates etc...
- b) Self-interested practitioners whose noble intentions coalesce with mercantile ambitions or other materialistic motives, along with an impelling need for self-assertion.

Malpractice or misuse often characterize uneducated Yoga teachers thus illustrating the old adage: *Hell is full of good intentions and desires!*

On the other hand, self-interested Yoga teachers like to ignore or simply forget that, in India, spiritual teaching has always been regarded as separate from the business world. Quite understandably, genuine representatives of those sacred teachings feel offended when facing marketing ads intended to promote spiritual teachers. Such marketing techniques are frequently misleading and show a strong disregard for established traditions, as evidenced by certain self-interested Yoga teachers who take liberties with usage of the Hindu tradition's venerated titles *Yogi*, *Swami* or *Rishi*, or others who adopt an Indian-sounding names in order to appear more authentic.

These aberrations are made possible only in a world where people disregard the Hindu tradition's holiness and lack basic education on the vast subject of Yoga. The undertaking of short-term, money-making projects in the name of Yoga compares with driving at high speed on the highway with no police in sight.

Tougher, indeed, are the qualifying conditions for a serious education in Yoga, where the student must be prepared to sacrifice whatever it may cost,

often without a time-limit, and there is the direct supervision of a duly qualified (and often very demanding) spiritual guide, the guru.

Questionable Credentials

As a Western disciple with a rather long experience as a qualified teacher, this author has heard many self-appointed Yoga teachers confess to having been at one time or still being subject to self-deception. Henceforward, the author shall refer to those wandering souls as self-deceivers. Some self-deceivers claim, often in the name of freedom, that it is their full right to act as they please. Others justify themselves by referring to casual ashram stays, or perhaps a providential encounter with another yogi that garnered their blessings. Others give evidence of their skills and so-called legitimacy by simply referring to an intensive Yoga course they attended in a local self-appointed Yoga school. This author remembers the report of an MD pupil who was doing the rounds in a psychiatric clinic and was amazed to find as a patient there the man he once had as Yoga teacher!

The vanity of Yoga teacher claims is, alas, evidenced by the fact that there are very few (if any) self-deceivers who ever reach the status of yogi(ni)hood, in the strict sense of the term. The deliberate departure from genuine Yoga *sadhana* lies in the fact that most Western self-deceivers deliberately discard the basic set of rules found in all great Yoga paths. These have in common a solid morality, based on a starter with the practice of *yama* and *niyama*. In Ancient India, these ten ethical rules were the very qualifying criteria to be accepted in ashrams in the first place. Inwardly and outwardly directed, these regulatory rules - *yama* and *niyama* - are indispensable in any type of *sadhana*, irrespective of the Yoga path chosen. The essential aim of *yama* and *niyama* is to provide *sadhaks* a

higher self-control and lasting purity—two cornerstones in any spiritual quest. Only in the context of self-deception could one imagine to do without this solid foundation, or mask its absence with eloquent discourses or impressive physical skills.

Self-Deceit Defined

The description given by the Thesaurus English Dictionary for “self-deceit” reads: “...a *misconception that is favorable to the person who holds it.*”

In the following, the author will restrict himself to this limited (and yet so pregnant) definition which in the present context, however, is more considered as mental systemic failure.

Self-deceit is but another grim face of ignorance. At the core of both deceit and self-deceit are lies. Axiomatically, lies are extremely difficult to detect. Thus it is that self-deceit requires a lack of self-awareness, here to mean awareness of Man’s complex nature and the potential powers of the mind.

Self-deceivers are often infatuated people, victims of some sort of brain conditioning wherein reasoning and deep thinking are weak or totally absent. Typically, such people adhere to escapism and seek in Yoga a way out, a safe rescue from tough social or family living conditions. They may also be searching for an alternative therapy to cure a poor physical or mental condition. Some are affected by strong discontentment with their cultural environment, are looking for a remedy to boredom in their sentimental lives, or are perhaps experiencing a sexual attraction towards the teacher. Self-deceivers may be involved in a pathetic search for human understanding and affection, a masked want of love, seemingly unaware of the importance to first love oneself. Lacking any need for reality check, these people will display an unrestrained attraction toward esoteric literature or be enthralled

by captivating discourses or inspirational music.

Following the societal wave of mixing Yoga with consciousness-altering drugs, milder forms of self-delusion surfaced. One of its more benign variants consists in surfing on the Web to trace some suitable prescription on how to teach Yoga. Easy access to such information becomes an avenue to enter into the realm of daydreaming and escaping everyday reality. This will occur when one is unprepared to confront the challenging realities of a spiritual quest—the truthfulness and purification which are vital cornerstones in Yoga *sadhana*.

It would be exaggerated to claim that self-deceivers are always dishonest and deliberately harmful in life. After all, cheating oneself does not necessarily imply malevolence or a clear tendency to cheat others. The mental world of self-deceivers expands in proportion only to the narcissism they are experiencing. They will look like and behave like mainstream people, and even display a higher level of awareness, and yet at the same time they might claim quite unrealistic things like: reaching non-sensorial levels of consciousness at will, levitating, existing in a sea of felicity (*ananda*) and limitless bounty, or receiving a vocation to save Mankind as an incarnation of God or as His designated prophet. Such people may also falsely construe support in certain ancient myths or religious scriptures. They may suffer various psychological disturbances with an acute misperception of the world and their places within it. It may be the case that the extreme attitudes found in sectarian fanaticism and the dire consequences sadly taught in man's History are caused by such irresponsible self-deceivers, to which the special category of *vibhutis* may be added.

Various Targets and Collateral Effect

Self-deceivers who live too long in their imaginary worlds, fully alienated from the realities of life, may come to display cynicism, misogyny and failure to comply with most elementary family obligations. Living too long in their ivory towers, they are utterly filled with unrealized dreams and painful frustrations the painful frustrations on unrealistic expectations. Their mental instability gives often rise to severe psychic disorders in their perception of the world and their own identity, typically evidenced by irrational behaviors. All of this has various repercussions.

To deceive in general is morally contrary to good order and the prevailing customs and habits of most societies. Cheating or inducing the public in error (two variant descriptions of deception or fraud and imposture) may also lead to police investigation and lawful punishment.

To deceive ones parents, spouse or other close family members or friends is presumably a more serious fault, especially in traditional societies where family life is most important.

To deceive ones spiritual guide is a serious issue in yogic circles, especially in Guru Yoga. Here, the relationship between teacher-disciple is generally sealed by the ties of *diksha*. Deceit within such a relationship is even considered dangerous. Historical and contemporaneous evidence confirm that breaking a Guru-*chela* relationship may result in a very painful aftermath for the party at fault. Such cases ought to be rare, though, considering the fact that responsible gurus will assure that the *chela* is properly educated before initiation is granted.

Self-deceivers may evidently also indirectly harm followers of their teachings

and/or life-style. By first deceiving themselves, it must then follow that many (if not all) people around the self-deceiver will be affected by their delusions. This is especially true of those upon whom the self-deceiver's influence may be strong—parents, friends, students and anyone who neglected to question the self-deceiver's behavior and credentials in the first place.

Cautionary Words and Conclusion

Today, books and the Internet have become the most convenient means for access to knowledge. These tools may also be valuable sources of inspiration, but the danger is that indirectly acquired theoretical knowledge supposes correct understanding and interpretation, lest it cause wrong assessments and false premises. Even in the best case, such tools will never compare with or replace the necessity of a knowledgeable and responsible living guide.

In traditional Hatha Yoga—such as in Sri Goswami's modern ashram and in all expression of Guru Yoga—the term "self-realization" entails, among other things, the challenge of having to strictly follow the teachings of the chosen guru. To fulfil this basic requirement, an initial measure of enthusiasm is required and yet more than so. A declared seeker of Truth is expected to be both mentally and physically prepared to face the challenge of mastering body and mind. This will take time and require regularity in exercise, lest all efforts become vain. Moreover, spiritual apprentices may also have to accept personal sacrifices in addition to the time and energy required. Well-intended seekers should realize and readily accept the fact that a yogi (or a guru) is not a miracle man with universal knowledge, expected to solve all kinds of problems. A genuine guru will never accept prejudiced or narrow-

mindful students as serious *chelas*. Would-be yogis may also be disappointed if they expect the spiritual teacher to flatter their egos or to adapt the teachings to the students' own national or family traditions. Such actions would only serve to prevent the advantages of proven teaching, besides creating additional hurdles to mental emancipation. Also, qualifying for Yoga is easier when one already possesses a reasonable level of *shanti*. This peace of mind will undoubtedly serve as an asset in any form of Yoga *sadhana*.

Those people who would aspire to the heights of yogic consciousness, but who lack direct access to a genuine Yoga teacher (and a solid Hindu cultural background), should carefully consider their inner motives before radically changing their life-styles to enter into the yogic world of spirituality. Until these conditions are fulfilled for the undertaking of serious Yoga *sadhana*, one should look for easier alternative quest channels, preferably within one's own culture. In the case of believers, it would be consistent to consider praying earnestly for the Almighty to help find one's own true path and spiritual guide.

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** Data for this survey were collected by the Harris Interactive Service Bureau on behalf of Yoga Journal. The poll surveyed 5,050 respondents, a statistically representative sample of the total U.S. population. Yoga Journal commissioned RRC Associates, a research firm in Boulder, Colo., to perform the data analysis. The 2008 study indicates that 6.9% of U.S. adults, or 15.8 million people, practice yoga. (In the previous study, that number was 16.5 million). Of current non-practitioners, nearly 8%, or 18.3 million Americans, say they are very or extremely interested in yoga, triple the number from the 2004 study. And 4.1% of non-practitioners, or about 9.4 million people, say they will definitely try yoga within the next year.*

*** Joseph Pilates was a former boxer who developed a style of stretching and balancing exercises in the early 1900s.*