

THE 3RD PERSPECTIVE AND YOGA : BRINGING EAST AND WEST TOGETHER

One of America's best-known yogis discusses how an integration of Eastern and Western philosophies can create a third perspective which unites the best qualities of both views.

By Joel Kramer

As a Western man deeply involved in the practice of yoga, I have had to distill the truths of the East that make sense for my life and culture. Yoga is remarkable in its capacity to transcend the beliefs and attitudes of its origins. It gives people of any persuasion a tool to open up to themselves, enhance the quality of their lives, and discover new directions of experience. Yoga provides a context for a basic confrontation with yourself, making you more aware both as an individual and as a participant in the total movement of life.

Perhaps the best way to express what yoga can offer modern society is to explain how it has helped transform my outlook on the world. I was a highly trained intellectual who spent years of post-graduate work in philosophy and psychology trying to find the answer to the riddle of my existence. I put all my hopes into thought and science for answers that became more elusive the deeper I went. Science directs itself to those aspects of life that are observable, repeatable, predictable. But what about the unique, the creative, the spontaneous? Is the universe, am I, an entity that can be totally understood by thought? Are love, care and compassion ultimately reducible to an equation the mind can create? Or, are there realms of understanding that come from a different place?

The West has put enormous emphasis on understanding through external routes, looking at the world outside of oneself, whereas

the East has focused its energy into "looking within." Looking without" has given us an ever-increasing power and understanding of our environment and of the mechanical and predictable aspects of ourselves. Its strength lies in creating a process that is adjustable through feedback. Science values objectivity derived from shared experiences and the mutual agreement of specialists. It proves itself by prediction, control, and workability. The weakness of "looking outside" is that our understanding remains limited to the repeatable and mechanical aspects of experience. We take on the beliefs of the times, going to experts to find out about the world and ourselves. When we become depressed, we go to doctors or psychologists who tell us that certain chemicals in the brain, or an early trauma, are causing the depression. Do the chemicals cause the depression, or are they a result of being depressed? Do I create or have some control over my feelings, or am I merely the effect of impersonal forces and past events?

"Looking within" is the Eastern approach to finding out. It is what the long tradition of yoga has developed. Its strength lies in that you can touch directly into what's going on inside. And, since you are an expression of nature, it enables you to experience nature's essence in a first-hand way. A human being is a miniature universe, and to the extent a person can truly understand the inner workings of his being, he can touch into patterns of impersonal universal processes. The great danger of "looking within" lies in how easily fear, desire, preference and attachment create subjectivity that can prevent a human being from learning. It is so easy

to tell yourself what you want to hear and be blinded by your mental projections and emotions. If "looking within" is colored by my wants and images from the past, then what I see will itself be tainted with the very subjectivity I hope to transcend. This is the great paradox and weakness of the inner path. Traditionally, the emotional bond between the seeker on an inner journey and a teacher or guru has been the link that has helped counter the dangers of getting lost in the mind's endless capacity of creating its own world with itself at the center. There is a further danger. Out of our needs for certainty, security, and feeling protected, it is so easy to create a subjective world with the guru at the center. Here, under the guise of "looking within," one can in fact be internalizing another person's point of view.

In my own approach to yoga and to life, I have been interested in bringing together and integrating the Eastern and Western perspectives. What I have come upon to date is a way that has been a continual source of renewal for me, making it possible to live in our highly technological world while incorporating in my life the wisdom of the East.

THE EASTERN PERSPECTIVE

In order to understand the difference between "looking within" and "looking without," I had to examine the world views that underlie each of them. The East looks at the world from what I call the "point of view of the one," proclaiming the basic underlying unity of all things to be the only reality. Here, separation, division, and individuation are illusion, or maya. In other words; you and I and everything else that appears

separate are actually an illusion. In this context, it's easy to see why "looking within" became the path. Since the senses are not to be trusted, and "out there" is not real or important, where else can you look but within? God, soul, or spirit is inside – beyond thought, beyond desire and emotion. This creates a value system which emphasizes ego-loss and subordination of self to the grand design. Life then takes on a deterministic flavor, which breeds resignation. You live out your karma, hoping for a better next life, which eventually will bring you to the final reward – getting off the wheel of rebirth and death, out of illusion, into oneness or the void.

History in the East is cyclical; everything that matters has all been done before and thus the path is prescribed. Truth is eternal and unchanging. This is why finding a spiritual master (someone who has made the journey past illusion) is so important. Reality is found by "remembering" impersonal eternal truths blocked by the machinations of ego, such as desire, fear, and other aspects of self-centeredness. You must get out of your own way and participate in the flow of life by not resisting your destiny. Surrendering to "what is" is coupled with a tendency to value renunciation. For example, if the conflicts of sexuality bind your energy, then renounce sex. If you are mechanically led by pleasure, renounce it. Also, turn your face away from negativity – root out anger, spite, envy and, of course, violence.

Carl Jung aptly saw that when a person or a culture accentuates one aspect of life, its opposite thrives in the unconscious. This causes the behavior one is trying to suppress to manifest itself in devious, unacknowledged ways. For example, the East's way to truth – "looking within" and experiencing it in the "now" – is counterbalanced by its authoritarianism and reverence for tradition. Renunciation of worldly pleasures is done to achieve more sublime ones, which are thought of as "bliss" instead of mere pleasure.

The suppression of violence and negativity through ideology has never done away with suffering and violence. The East intellectually values non-violence (*ahimsa*), yet has not eradicated violence from its culture. Violence can easily occur even in spiritual practices and in yoga itself: when, for exam-

ple, teachers attempt to force students into regimented molds, or students try to force their bodies into postures without listening to what the body is saying.

The "point of view of the one" tends to deny the importance and even reality of the individual – of his personality, his body, relationships, thoughts and feelings. This makes people try to renounce their own self-interest, which creates conflict, as self-interest is repressed and operates unconsciously. When self-interest is denied, it is done in the hope that more can be gotten. For whom? Why, of course, for one's self.

There are many "yogas" in the East, but Hatha Yoga is often considered the least important. This is because the body itself is not valued. ("Too much emphasis on the body is narcissistic and keeps you stuck on the material plane.") At best, Hatha Yoga is presented as a stepping stone to higher spiritual states. The body is acknowledged as the "temple" of spirit, but since the body ages and decays, spirit, which is eternal, must live independently of it.

THE WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

I call the basic framework of the West the "point of view of the *many*." Here, the universe is looked upon as containing separate entities that live in relationship to each other but are fundamentally distinct. The most basic division is between the "me" (the skin and everything inside it) and the "not-me" (everything else). Consequently, "looking within" has had little meaning for most of the West. If I, the individual, am just one point of life among countless others, the important truths and meanings can only be found outside, by "looking without." Should I try to look within, I find merely a jumble of subjectivity. I am created by my experiences, since what take in from the outside becomes my inside.

In order to understand the world and myself, I must look at how separate entities affect each other. This I can only do by looking "out there" as objectively as I can. Science, which is interested in "hard facts," exemplifies this point of view. Truth is found by piercing through the veils of another kind of illusion, that created by our personal subjective viewpoints. As it is the senses that connect us with the world, we value experience and we have built an em-

pirical tradition that uses public agreement and shared perceptions as the ultimate test. This, of course, tends to make us materialistic, since we feel that the external world we perceive is the ultimate reality.

The West conceives of God as being separate – "out there." Meaning and truth are also "out there" to be found. We are very practical, immersed in a pragmatic approach to life. ("It's true if it works.") If belief in a religion or God makes me feel better, I give it more credence. If I can control my environment, I'm on to something. In fact, control – as opposed to surrender – is a key value in the West. We want to have the ultimate say in what direction our lives go. As we are interested in control, we emphasize "becoming," since you can only control what changes. The East, on the other hand, emphasizes "being" and values non-attachment. We, however, value goals, achievement, progress and the fruits of competition. As we saw with the East, the West also creates values that live in opposition to each other. For although we are always "looking without," we are also very self-absorbed. We want to enhance our lives, realize our full potential, become Promethean as we wrest fire from the gods. We want to create our own life, taking responsibility for everything that happens. We value independence, self-exploration, and being a self-made person. Our choices create our future, and so we want the freedom to choose. Freedom here has within it aspects of resistance, resistance to "what is," in order to make life something else, something better, through choice. Freedom for the East is letting go of resistance and surrendering oneself to the whole.

When the West does go within, it analyzes subjective experience – thoughts, memories, emotions, sensations. Going within for the East involves either negating subjective experience – saying "I am not this, I am not that" – or allowing its flow while detaching from it, so that ultimately a silence comes. The silence or emptiness behind experience is the reality, while for the West the experience itself is the reality.

For the sake of contrast, I have presented two different world views that are abstractions, in that neither is purely one way or

the other. The West has greatly influenced Eastern culture, and especially in the last 15 years, Eastern perspectives have permeated our Western viewpoints. For example, in athletics and even in business, there are books that emphasize “being in the present” and letting go. However, in true Western fashion, we become interested in the inner approach to, say, tennis, in order to improve our game. We value non-attachment if it brings results. We use “being” in order to “become.”

Although yoga came from the East, the West brings its own flavor to it. The way we approach yoga shows our tendencies toward “becoming” and achieving material instance, most of us here are interested in yoga insofar as it enhances the quality of our lives. We look for benefits in regards to health, aging and energy. We want our teachers to help us change and progress, and to give us some sort of experience, whether it be relaxation or a heavy workout. As we are enamored with control, we tend to use our minds to order our bodies around. The danger with this is that yoga can so easily become mechanical, like calisthenics. When the mind uses the body or puts it on “automatic,” separation on between the physical and the mental increases.

Of the many different schools of yoga and spirituality that have come from the East, the ones that have rooted most deeply in our culture acknowledge to some extent the importance of the individual and of self-improvement. In fact, the most popular schools of Hatha Yoga do emphasize the body and the well being yoga brings.

THE THIRD PERSPECTIVE

The East and West in their opposing viewpoints each express fundamental truths that are incomplete in themselves. A synthesis bringing them together into a third point of view is necessary. This “third perspective” sees unity and diversity as two aspects of the same thing, neither being more real, important, or profound than the other. In fact, paradoxically, neither wholeness nor separateness could exist without the other. *The one is the many.* The “eternal now” has within it the products of the past and the seeds of the future, so past and future are not illusory, but exist within the

now. Being or “is-ness” has within it “becoming,” and “becoming” at every instant displays within it “what is.” The “perspective of the one” values merging with the whole; the “perspective of the many” values individuation. The great psychological conflict for people both in the East and the West is between these two ways of looking at things. We all want to realize ourselves as individuals, and yet we want to be in touch with something more profound than merely ourselves. From the “third perspective” individuation and merging are actually not opposites, but are two poles of a growth process and are necessary for each other. Surrendering, whether it be to life, a relationship, or a yoga posture, must be balanced by the ability to exercise control. Determination is necessary to counter the mechanical aspects of aging and entropy and to make the world a better place. Here the potential to merge and break boundaries comes not from ego-loss, but from ego strength. For when boundaries break without there being the strength to form them again, this creates, at best, a dependent person and, at worst, a truly fragmented one. To fully individuate, there must be a merging with something greater than oneself. To be able to merge without being shattered psychologically, there must be individual strength.

Another way of creating the synthesis of East and West is seeing how history is both cyclical and linear at the same time. Cycles repeat, yet each turn is different, unique. Still another way of bringing the points of view together is seeing how the eternal (“timelessness”) only displays itself in the field of time, and how each separate moment is “all-ways” expressing the eternal.

In my yoga, as well as in my life, the “third perspective” has been essential in integrating opposites within myself. It has brought about one of the most basic joinings necessary for yoga – the integration between mind and body. Although we may intellectually agree that the mind and the body are intimately interconnected, we often emphasize the physical side of postures because it is more tangible. We tend to forget that yoga is a truly psycho-physical activity. It is the mental aspects that involve bringing together seeming opposites such as control and surrender, goal-seeking and

non-attachment, focus and attention.

The “point of view of the one” does away with the mind/body split by negating the reality of the body, calling it “illusion,” as is all matter. The West has been battling with this split for at least 2,000 years, trying to solve the problem intellectually. The “point of view of the many,” by giving ultimate reality to separation, tends to divide not only the external world, but the individual, too. We think of ourselves as minds that have or live in bodies. The mind becomes the rider, in control, while the body is the horse – to be trained and used. The paradox is that although we identify with the mind, calling it “me,” the mind itself is very materialistic, worshipping tangible accomplishments such as beauty, youth, or wealth.

The “third perspective” sees how the mind and body are both two things and one thing at the same time. They are two different manifestations of energy whose interplay creates a total being. This means that in yoga, as in life, control must shift between them. Thus, the mind will sometimes control the body by pushing and directing. However, the mind must allow the body to take control, too, so that movement and relaxation can come from the inner intelligence of physical systems and even the cells themselves. On occasion, the control comes from a third place where one’s total being is effortlessly the director and the directed at the same time. Yoga involves the aware interplay of these three spaces.

ON YOGA

The mental attitudes you bring to yoga greatly influence where yoga takes you. The following is a brief description of how the “third perspective” has influenced the way I approach doing yoga.

People do yoga for many reasons: to achieve certain mental states, to control emotions, to retard aging, to generate energy, or simply to feel better. I know that yoga can and does bring these as well as other benefits.

The paradox of yoga is that if you are doing yoga solely for the results it brings, you are not really understanding what yoga is about. Yoga is in essence transformative – it can change your whole being in a way that does not come simply from aiming at

results. We usually build habits in mind and body unconsciously, and although the habits are sometimes convenient, they all too often constrict us. So, as we age, this conditioning process limits movement in the body, and we become tighter.

Tightness in the muscles affects glands, circulation, nerves – our energy – thus accelerating the body's breakdown. When the body becomes less flexible and open, it has a direct effect on the mind and personality. There is no way to stay the same. Life is change, and change in a person can take only two directions. You either specific habits become more rigid and crystallized, more set in your ways, or you continue to grow, transform, and open up to yourself and the world you live in. Yoga brings the energy, stamina and flexibility to move out and meet life totally.

The deeper you get into the body, the deeper you must get into the nature of the mind that is doing yoga. There comes a time when you realize that the major limits you face in yoga do not live in the body, but in the mind's resistance's. We all, at least intellectually, value growth, often without realizing that growth involves change, which means dying to old ways of being. Our attachment to the pleasures and comforts we have secured creates unconscious resistance to change, a resistance that must be made conscious and worked with. Not to do this greatly limits your yoga. In fact, most breakthroughs in yoga are mental. For example, yoga moves to a new dimension when you usually prefer to do yoga alone rather than in a class or group. This is a sign that you are generating energy from an internal place and are in touch with your own inner processes. Another more advanced breakthrough, which is also mental, is when you fundamentally do not fear hurting yourself. This means that you are sufficiently in touch with the feedbacks of the body and with how to do yoga that you can fix your own problems.

These are examples of mental changes that have a more far-reaching effect on your yoga than how flexible you are or what postures you are doing. In fact, one of the greatest changes that occurs is when you see that yoga is a process to be lived rather than a goal to be achieved. This is true for every posture. Getting the final

pose is not the important thing. Technical aspects such as proper use of breath, concern with alignment, creating more energy to strengthen nerve flow, and so forth, are important only as tools of self-exploration. The yogic process is both simple and profound. It involves confronting yourself and your limits, learning to read physical and mental feedback, knowing how to get into blocked areas, and knowing when to push and when to relax in the posture.

The essence of creativity is an aware balance between control and surrender. This involves the capacity to take your life in your own hands and direct it. It also involves letting go so that life can lead you. Yoga is a miniature universe in that it encapsulates the basic polarities of existence. Each posture is a play between push and release, focus and attention, direction and letting go. The more yoga teaches you this balance, the more it carries over into other areas. Balance cannot be achieved mechanically by formulas or by copying others who may have greater understanding. There is a creative, personal aspect to it that can only be "known" in yourself. Specifically, the answer to the question, "Should I push for further depth, hold the posture, or back off and relax?" is fundamentally knowable only in the moment. Whether you move appropriately depends on how sensitive and in tune you are. So yoga is – as is life – ultimately an art, which means that there is always a uniquely individual expression of universal principles. Everybody is both the same and different. A given posture gets at similar areas in everyone. Yet each posture can be approached in endless ways. The more rigid your approach to yoga is, the more mechanical your sessions become. When yoga becomes a chore, it is a sign that the creative aspect is missing and you are "on automatic." You have to pay attention not only to what your body is saying, but also to what happens in your mind.

Feedback is one part of a system telling another part how it is being affected. It is a key to integrating the internal and the external, for it is both looking within and looking without. Examples of physical feedback are pain, dullness, different levels of intensity, energy flow, trembling, fatigue and so forth. Mental feedback comes in

various forms such as boredom, ambition, fear, inattention, hurry, a sense of struggle or effort, being easily distracted, or being concerned with time, with comparisons, inadequacy, and so on. There is also feedback that involves responses to externals such as diet, environment and relationships. I can learn from others, but it is only by being in touch with what's going on inside of me that I can see if the other's point of view makes sense for my life.

Integration of mind and body, without negating either one, is a challenge all of us face. We are both two things and one thing at the same time – a mind and a body, and a total organism or unity. The "third perspective" sees that the seeming polarities and paradoxes of life, such as the mind/body split and individuation versus merging, are actually not opposed at all, except in the way we think about them.

We can look at the different problems that both Eastern and Western cultures are facing as results of the imbalance that both the "perspective of the one" and the "perspective of the many" create. The West, as exemplified by science, values progress ("becoming"). This has given us great technical mastery and many material advantages, including a longer life, but has created a spiritual vacuum and brought alienation and isolation. The East's yearning for the eternal ("being") has developed inner perspectives that help people break out of personal isolation and connect with a power larger than themselves; but this has been coupled with holding life cheaply and has brought great poverty, suffering and human degradation.

Yoga means "union." It offers the potential of bringing together these polarities in our personal lives, and is a force that can help forge a needed synthesis between East and West. The flame of yoga is moving West. We have a unique opportunity to infuse Eastern mysticism with Western practicality and create a more viable context to meet the challenges of these times. ★ Copyright © by Joel Kramer, 1980.

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