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New Light on the Yoga Tradition

An Interview with [Georg Feuerstein](#)Conducted by [Richard Miller](#), Ph.D.

For the past thirty years, Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D., has contributed steadily and significantly to the dialogue between East and West, in particular to our understanding of Yoga. His more than thirty books include many scholarly and popular works on Yoga, notably *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy* (1998), *Teachings of Yoga* (1997), *The Shambhala Encyclopedia of Yoga* (1996), and *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga* (1980, 1996). His most recent book is *The Yoga Tradition* (1998), which is a 720-page illustrated overview of all important aspects of Yoga in its Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina forms. "My purpose in writing this book," observes Georg Feuerstein, "was to give Yoga practitioners and teachers the best possible tool for studying Yoga systematically and in adequate depth. I hope that it will enable them to more fully appreciate the magnificence of the tradition of which they are a part and also to practice Yoga more authentically."

Georg Feuerstein is a patron of the British Wheel of Yoga, coeditor of *Yoga World* newsletter, a contributing editor of *Yoga Journal*, and a recipient of awards from the Leverhulme Trust Fund, A New American Place, the British Academy, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

In 1996, Georg founded the Yoga Research and Education Center in Northern California, which has since won enthusiastic support from fellow researchers and Yoga practitioners. The Center has several goals, including conducting and facilitating indological, historical, medical, and psychological research on Yoga. The Center is unique in that it is nondemoninational, seeking to bridge the gap between Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina Yoga and between traditional Yoga and contemporary adaptations, as well as between scholars, scientists, and Yoga practitioners.

The Center's directorial board recently resolved to create a campus, which will consist of an office complex, an educational facility, and a retreat building. In order to realize this important project, the Center has started a fundraising campaign with the goal of raising \$5 million. "So many people have benefited from Yoga," says Georg Feuerstein, "that I am confident we will succeed in meeting our target in the not-too-distant future. I believe that our Center, which is attracting many accomplished and open-minded researchers and teachers, could have a crucial role to play in the further evolution of the Western Yoga movement."

Question: You describe your book *The Yoga Tradition* as a summary of your investigations into Yoga over something like thirty years. It seems you have covered just about every aspect of Yoga, as it has unfolded over the past 5,000 years. What prompted you to undertake such a challenging project at this stage in your life?

Answer: Books have a habit of happening to me. As I explain in my preface to *The Yoga Tradition*, this particular work has been in the making ever since my first book, that I wrote in German at the age of nineteen. I always need to see the larger picture before I can get down into the details of anything. So, periodically I have created—for my own benefit but also for the benefit of other students of Yoga—these systematic overviews. *The Yoga Tradition* is simply the most recent and most comprehensive incarnation of this kind of effort. Perhaps ten or fifteen years from now, I will feel moved to develop this book further to take the latest research and thinking into account. Or one of my students will do so, always providing, of course, that my publisher will continue to humor me.

Question: Your book approaches this incredibly complex tradition very systematically, and it provides not only clear information about the various branches and schools of Yoga and how they relate to each other, but also a lot of useful background material. Additionally, you have included ample source readings from many Yoga scriptures. It will be very useful for students to have these full renderings that you have provided of the *Yoga-Sutra*, the *Bhakti-Sutra* of Narada, several late *Upanishads*, and even a first-time translation of the *Goraksha-Paddhati*, which is an old Hatha-Yoga text.

Answer: Yes, the source readings form an important aspect of this volume. I have included them, because I feel Yoga is best studied on the basis of its own literature. The many source readings—which cover translations from the archaic *Rig-Veda* and *Atharva-Veda* right up to more recent Hatha-Yoga texts—will help readers to get the "flavor" of traditional Yoga.

Question: How important is it for Western Yoga practitioners to study these texts?

Answer: It's very important, and here's the reason why. Yoga is not merely practice but what I call a theory-practice continuum. The scriptures furnish the context for the actual practice of Yoga. Would you set out to build a computer without the necessary manuals? Many Yoga practitioners do just that. They perform postures, breathing exercises, and other yogic techniques without having a clear idea of their

purpose within the larger path of Yoga. Study (*svadhyaya*) of the scriptures has always been an integral part of yogic education.

Most Western practitioners come to Yoga through various popularized versions of Hatha-Yoga, often taught by teachers, who themselves may not have been instructed in the traditional way. Thus study of the scriptures and knowledge of the theory behind the exercises have been given short shrift. Let's not forget here that the Western Yoga movement is now in its fourth or even fifth generation. Essentially it all started with Swami Vivekananda's appearance at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. There were some other Indian *gurus* visiting the West before him, but he was the most influential of these early Hindu missionaries. In a way, the others prepared the ground for Vivekananda's great success. Then in the mid-twentieth century, Hatha-Yoga was introduced into the equation, and because of its focus on the body it quickly became popular. As a result, Hatha-Yoga was popularized and deprived of much of its traditional moorings. I know that some Western teachers think this is quite healthy, but many Indian teachers rightly look askance at what has become of Yoga, especially Hatha-Yoga, in the Western world. All too often, Hatha-Yoga is presented as a kind of gymnastics.

Question: In your view, what is the traditional form of Hatha-Yoga?

Answer: Like all schools of Yoga, Hatha-Yoga was originally a liberation teaching, or *moksha-shastra*. In other words, it primarily served a spiritual purpose—that of Self-realization. Self-realization, or enlightenment, is the goal of all traditional forms and branches of Yoga. It consists in awakening to one's essential identity, which is the eternal, omnipresent Self (*atman*).

As a branch of Tantra, traditional Hatha-Yoga seeks to awaken the *kundalini*, the serpent power, which is the psychospiritual energy dormant in the body. All Hatha-Yoga is Kundalini-Yoga. Many Western teachers remain unaware the Tantric character of Hatha-Yoga.

Question: What's the use of Kundalini-Yoga with regard to Self-realization?

Answer: According to Tantra, Self-realization is more complete, because the awakened *kundalini* transforms the physical body into a "divine body" (*divya-deha*), in which every single cell becomes conscious. Thus in Tantra, enlightenment does not merely transform the adept's cognition of the world, but it percolates down to the physical body, producing what can be called "cellular illumination."

Question: When you use "Tantra," you obviously don't mean the sort of sexual Tantra promoted by some Western teachers.

Answer: Not at all. Tantra is an amazingly comprehensive and enlightened tradition, which crystallized around 500 C.E. and some 500 years later led to the creation of Hatha-Yoga. In its technical sense, the Sanskrit term *tantra* signifies "continuity," that is, the continuity between body and mind, external reality and internal reality, transcendence and immanence. The traditional definition of *tantra* is "that which expands wisdom." Tantra is an intensely practical, experiential approach, which emphasizes ritual and particularly involves *mantra* recitation, visualization, and the many techniques of Hatha-Yoga. From the beginning, Tantra has been presented as a "New Age" teaching, that is, a teaching for the *kali-yuga*. The *kali-yuga* is the Dark Age characterized by moral and spiritual decline. The *Tantras*—the source scriptures of the Tantric tradition—contain all the teachings necessary for spiritual growth and liberation in the dark age, which is still in full swing today.

Question: What is the connection between Tantra and the *kundalini*?

Answer: Well, the *kundalini* or *kundalini-shakti* ("coiled power"), is actually a concept from Shaktism—the teaching that there is a great spiritual Energy underlying the universe. According to this teaching, the body's dormant psycho-spiritual energy is locked in the center at the base of the spine. Through various practices, notably breath control and visualization, the *tantrika* (or Tantric initiate) seeks to awaken that energy and conduct it, in stages, to the center at the crown of the head. There the individuated *kundalini* energy merges with the omnipresent "divine" Energy. This is pictured as the union between God (i.e., supreme Consciousness) and Goddess (i.e., the serpent power, which is a manifestation of the supreme Energy). The result of this union is, in the first instance, ecstasy or *samadhi*. In the long run, it is liberation or Self-realization. Obviously, both the theory and practice behind this process is a lot more complex than I can capture in a few words. I have said more about this in my book *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy*.

Question: In your book *The Yoga Tradition*, you mention learning Hatha-Yoga from an Indian *guru* while you were still in your teens. Can you say something more about this?

Answer: Oh that's a long time ago. I spent about a year studying with a Hatha-Yoga master, who was well known in Europe for his extraordinary yogic abilities, which he was always eager to demonstrate especially to the medical community. He was, for instance, able to stop his heart and pulse, pull a cartload of people with his long hair, and have a steamroller roll over his chest. He taught me postures, breathing exercises, and some visualizations, but mainly he worked me to the bone, which I didn't mind and found very beneficial. He spent a great deal of personal time with me, and I received a lot of transmission from him. At one point, however, it became clear to me that my deepest spiritual promptings were not being met by his teachings.

Let me just say that I abandoned Hatha-Yoga in my mid-twenties and only resumed practicing it at the beginning of 1998. Abandoning Hatha-Yoga for meditation and mindfulness in daily life was one of my more regrettable mistakes. I should have continued it alongside my other *sadhana*. It took a bout of ill health for me to rediscover and treasure Hatha-Yoga. After all, we are embodied beings and need to take care of our physical vehicle. It's the only one we have right now.

Traditionally, Hatha-Yoga was put forward as a way of steeling the body, preparing it for the onslaught of full spiritual awakening. A complete arousal of the serpent power can cause havoc in the unprepared body. Therefore the masters of Hatha-Yoga developed a whole range of purification practices, which not only purify the physical body (notably the digestive system) but also the subtle body. The Hatha-Yoga initiates speak of subtle elements (called *tattva*), subtle pathways (called *nadi*), and psychoenergetic centers (called *akra*). They all must be readied for the visit of Queen Kundalini, the Goddess energy. Otherwise she gets angry and ruins your nervous system and organs like the heart. All this is well known in the Yoga tradition, but many Western practitioners dabble with it, unaware of the dangers of Kundalini-Yoga.

Question: Why ever did you drop Hatha-Yoga?

Answer: To be honest, I thought I didn't need it. My health was holding up fine, and meditation was more interesting. I didn't look far enough ahead, I guess. When you are young, you don't pay much attention to the aging process. Also I had soured on Hatha-Yoga, because of the teachers I had met, who I felt failed to embody the ideals of Yoga. At one point, a very heavy work schedule and too little sleep demanded their price of me. Suddenly, even my meditation suffered from an imbalance of the subtle energies. A wonderful lesson, really. So, now I practice postures and breath control at least once but

often twice a day. I relish those times of the day when I can use Hatha-Yoga to explore my body's potential. This is serving my other yogic practices as well. Spiritual life is a spiral, after all.

Question: What other practices do you do?

Answer: For the past six years, I have been practicing the Medicine Buddha *sadhana*, which stems from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition into which I have been initiated.

Question: Isn't it a bit strange that you are following the Buddhist path, after so many years of being passionate about Hindu Yoga?

Answer: Only from the outside. It seems completely natural to me. It really doesn't matter what form of Yoga (or spiritual discipline) one practices, so long as one practices something. I was fortunate to receive initiation into the Medicine Buddha *sadhana*, and have enjoyed it from the beginning. So I cultivate it diligently. However, let me just say that even though I repeat the Buddhist refuge prayer daily, I think of myself as a person who is treading the yogic path. Right now my practice happens to have a largely Buddhist orientation. But I have a deep respect and love for all spiritual traditions and great masters. I bow to all the great masters, whether it is the Buddha or Pata-jali, or some other master, and I gratefully accept their blessings. However, I don't believe in mixing practices too much. A smorgasbord is good on the dinner table but not so good in one's spiritual practice, unless you happen to be a spiritual genius like Sri Ramakrishna, who could effortlessly navigate between various approaches, having mastered all of them.

Question: But you do combine your Buddhist practice with Hatha-Yoga?

Answer: Yes, but I use Hatha-Yoga primarily as a preliminary system for maintaining physical health and energizing my body. Traditionally, Hatha-Yoga is a path in itself, though it is true that the *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika* speaks of it as a ladder to Raja-Yoga. By Raja-Yoga, Svatanmarama Yogendra, the author of this medieval text, probably meant the practice of meditation and ecstasy. Well, you could say that I am using Hatha-Yoga as a ladder to Vajrayana Buddhism. By the way, in actual spiritual practice, there isn't that much of a distinction between Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism and Hindu Tantra. They even venerate some of the same great masters.

Question: Do you think it is important to have a master, a *guru*?

Answer: Yoga has always been transmitted from teacher to disciple. Very few individuals awaken spontaneously, Ramana Maharshi being perhaps the best known example in modern times. The majority of practitioners require a teacher and proper initiation. Only in the West has the initiatory structure of Yoga been ignored and even called into question. Westerners have had some bad experiences with teachers, who either lacked in morality or failed to understand the psychological makeup of their Western disciples, or both. But it would be foolish to throw the baby out with the bath water. You don't need a *guru* to learn Hatha-Yoga, just a good instructor. But when you aspire to more than physical fitness and hope to attain enlightenment, then I think a *guru* is as necessary today as he or she was 5,000 years ago. Few people are born with the spiritual maturity to trigger the higher spiritual process themselves. Initiation seems to be essential, just as proper guidance through the higher stages of realization is also necessary if you want to avoid the inevitable pitfalls.

Question: Where do we find qualified *gurus* to initiate and guide us?

Answer: That's a good question, which I am often asked. My standard answer is that they exist but don't

tend to be all too visible. In fact, I like to think that there are a lot more qualified *gurus* than there are qualified disciples. Personally, I believe in the verity of the traditional maxim that the *guru* comes when the disciple is ready. In my own case, I have always received help when I needed and was ready to receive it. Until the *guru* comes, one can always do a lot of preparatory work. In fact, he or she won't come unless one is properly prepared. *Gurus* come in all shapes and sizes, of course. Traditionally, only the *sad-guru* can lead the disciple all the way to enlightenment. *Sad-guru* means "the real teacher" or "the teacher of reality." He or she is fully enlightened and therefore can transmit the high-energy state of enlightenment to others. Depending on the readiness of the student, this kind of transmission can either catapult him or her into instant enlightenment (very rare!) or transform the disciple step by step. Sometimes people are confused about the spelling of *sad-guru*. The word *sad* (pronounced *sud*) is derived from *sat* (pronounced *sut*), which means "real" or "reality." Sanskrit grammar requires for a *t* to be changed to *d* in front of a soft consonant. So, it's not a sad or sorry *guru* we are talking about here. The *sad-guru* is a true miracle, for such a being exists in the familiar world but experiences it as infinitely spacious, completely timeless, supremely conscious, and unutterably blissful.

Question: In *The Yoga Tradition*, you mention that there are several types of *guru*. One who awakens you, another who instructs or guides, and so forth.

Answer: Yes. And sometimes a single individual performs the various functions. It doesn't really matter how the spiritual process is triggered or fostered. The important thing is that we do our part. There is no point in being passive while we wait for our *sad-guru* to turn up. We can work on laying solid foundations for that eventuality. Besides, anyone and anything can become our teacher. I have learned a lot from my wife, my children, my friends, and my cats, as well as difficult people and situations.

Question: There is another traditional opinion, though, according to which the *guru* is within you. How does this tally with what you have said.

Answer: It tallies perfectly. The ultimate *guru* is our own true nature, to be sure. The problem is that we can't hear our inner teacher too well, or what we think we hear are voices from our unconscious. So, most of us need an external *guru* to guide us until we find our true inner teacher. Then—surprise!—we discover that the voice of the external and that of the internal *guru* are identical.

Question: But that presupposes that our external *guru* is fully enlightened so as to reflect to us the ultimate truth of who we are.

Answer: Indeed. That's why we shouldn't rush into discipleship blindly. There are *gurus* and there are teachers who, by custom, are called *gurus*. Good teachers can still take us a long distance, but only the *sad-gurus*—those who communicate the Real (*sat*) by their enlightened presence—can help us attain enlightenment.

Question: How can we tell an enlightened teacher from one who isn't?

Answer: There are no sure-fire criteria, and that's why we need to study the Yoga tradition and cultivate both common sense and higher discrimination (*viveka*). You can always apply the rule of thumb given to us by the founding master of the Christian tradition: By their fruits ye shall know them. At the same time, however, we must not succumb to our idealizations of what a *guru* ought to be. Because the *guru's* task is to dispel our fundamental spiritual ignorance (*avidya*), we may not always understand his or her actions. Yet, without fail, they should lead to spiritual growth and greater inner freedom. For instance, Marpa treated Milarepa very harshly, yet Milarepa gained enlightenment and became Tibet's best

remembered yogi. Marpa himself had a very difficult discipleship under Naropa, and Tilopa put Naropa through hell. These were all *sad-gurus*, who knew their disciples' capacity and what was required in order to lead them safely to liberation. Most teachers, as I said before, don't fall into the *sad-guru* category, and therefore harshness can simply be a personal style rather than skillful means. We need to watch out for signs of abuse and remove ourselves from harm's way. If a teacher consistently strikes you as being abusive, he or she probably is. Trust your gut feelings on this. Most importantly, however, monitor whether you are feeling caged up or inwardly free.

Question: And inner freedom is exactly what Yoga is all about.

Answer: Yes. So long as we are ignorant of our true nature, we act more or less unconsciously, out of habit. Yoga teaches us how to gradually extricate ourselves from the unconscious, which is governed by the force of karmic necessity. When we have polished the mind's mirror sufficiently to behold our true original face, as the Zen masters put it, then we can live in freedom. Even if we were shackled to solid iron chains for the rest of our life, we would not feel bound or unhappy. Enlightenment does not depend on any external conditions. It is never-ending ease. The great power of Yoga lies in that it can help us remember who we truly are.

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[Richard Miller](#), Ph.D., has published widely in the field of Yoga and teaches throughout the U.S. and Canada. He was co-founder of *The International Association of Yoga Therapists* and the founding editor of *The Journal of IAYT*. He is currently on the board of directors of the *Yoga Research and Education Center (YREC)* and also is the Center's director of education.

[back to top ▲](#)

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