



The Rise of Bengali Yoga

(Excerpt from Sun, Moon and Earth: The Sacred Relationship of Yoga and Ayurveda)

By

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To set the stage for a moment, the state of Bengal is an eastern state of India and is one of the most densely populated regions on the planet. It is home to the Ganges river delta at the confluence of the Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers. Rivers have always been a sacred part of yoga and the Indian lifestyle. The capital of Bengal is Kolkata, which was the center of the Indian independence movement. As yoga began to expand at the turn of the century through the 1950s, as a counter-cultural force opposed to British occupation, the region also struggled against a tremendous set-back, the Great Bengal Famine of 1943-44, which took an estimated two to three million lives. India battled through this and eventually gained independence in 1947. Bengal managed to become a womb for bhakti yogis and the nectar that would sustain the renaissance of yoga in India and across the globe.

Bengali seers like Sri Aurobindo promoted yoga as an integral system, a way of life that cultivated a dynamic relationship between mind, body, and soul. Some of the many styles of yoga that provide this pure synthesis remain extant in India, but only through a few living yoga teachers and lineages. This synthesis may even still exist sporadically in commercial yoga.

One of the most influential figures of yoga in the West was Paramahansa Yogananda, who formulated a practical means of integrating ancient themes and techniques for the spiritual growth of people in Western societies, and for Eastern cultures to reestablish their balance between spirituality and the material. In my view, Yogananda somewhat influenced the application of the 84 postures as a precursor to Kriya Yoga, and at the very least gave some simple suggestions on how these postures affect the spine and prana.

However, it does not seem likely that Yogananda, who was sent on a specific mission to spread Kriya Yoga, would have meddled much in such gross matters, considering his discretion about over-emphasizing the physical body.

Rather, what is consistently evident in Yogananda's teachings, as well as those of other great Indian saints like Anandamayi Ma and Sivananda, is asana as a worthy tool for disciplining the mind, transcending the senses, and preparing the spine for meditation. Asana is an instrument for purification of the body and a means of separating our attention from it. We also see no concise, factual description of asana in any of the Indian classics like the Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita and Mahabharata, or even the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

It is important to note that sages like Yogananda often devise new paths and techniques of yoga practice that have no direct reference to any previous teaching or scripture, as was the case with the "Yogoda" system he adapted into the Kriya Yoga taught by his gurus. The "Yogoda" approach was a pilot representation of what Yogananda later disseminated to the West. It represented an integral approach to cultivating a strong body and the power of concentration to transcend sensory perception, as a foundation for the mystical teachings of Kriya Yoga.¹ The ancient science of Kriya Yoga was re-adapted by Yogananda for the modern era, while still maintaining the vital logic presented by sage Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras in approximately the second century B.C.

Subsequently, traces of Yogoda wisdom spread through Yogananda's brother Bishnu Charan Ghosh,² who opened a school called Bishnu Ghosh's College of Yoga and Physical Culture in 1923, which continues to operate today. Although the school was focused on the fitness aspect of the physical culture movement, Bishnu did teach an eclectic combination of asana and muscle control for greater mind-body synergy. Bishnu obtained the title Yoginder Bishnu Charan Ghosh (Rishikesh) from Sri Swami Sivananda, who was not from Bengal but Pattamadai, Tamil Nadu, and later, in 1938, founded the Divine Life Society ashram in the northern city of Rishikesh along the banks of the sacred Ganges River in the state of Uttarakhand. Sivananda also played a major role in the development of the mind-body movement through an integral approach to yoga that launched the famous slogan "Serve, Love, Meditate, Realize." Sivananda called his yoga teachings the "Yoga of Synthesis." During these years, Sivananda began his first yoga teacher trainings, which Bishnu seems to have participated in. I currently study with

¹ Swami Yogananda, who received the title "Paramahansa" in 1935, was chosen by Mahavatar Babaji to spread the teachings of Kriya Yoga. "East and West must establish a golden middle path of activity and spirituality combined." Chapter 36, *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda (Self-Realization Fellowship, Los Angeles, Calif.)

² Yogananda wrote, "The students were also taught yoga concentration and meditation, and a unique system of physical development, 'Yogoda,' whose principles I had discovered in 1916. Realizing that man's body is like an electric battery, I reasoned that it could be recharged with energy through the direct agency of the human will. As no action, slight or large, is possible without willing, man can avail himself of his prime mover, will, to renew his bodily tissues without burdensome apparatus or mechanical exercises. I therefore taught the Ranchi students my simple 'Yogoda' techniques by which the life force, centered in man's medulla oblongata, can be consciously and instantly recharged from the unlimited supply of cosmic energy. The boys responded wonderfully to this training, developing extraordinary ability to shift the life energy from one part of the body to another part, and to sit in perfect poise in difficult body postures. They performed feats of strength and endurance, which many powerful adults could not equal. My youngest brother, Bishnu Charan Ghosh, joined the Ranchi school; he later became a leading physical culturist in Bengal." *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda (Self-Realization Fellowship, Los Angeles, Calif.)

Swami Jyotirmayananda, Swami Sivananda's last living direct disciple, who worked closely with Sivananda to interpret and translate much of his teachings.

Bishnu's primary pupil, Buddha Bose, also eventually opened his own school, called the Yoga Cure Institute, in 1937, in the same location as Ghosh's College of Physical Education. The two continued to share the same location until the 1970s. Buddha Bose's Yoga Cure Institute was more focused on the curative aspects of yoga asana and its integration with pranayama and relaxation techniques. As a former body builder and physical culturist myself; I was enthralled to know more about the deeper spiritual side this yoga system was aligned with. What captivated me was that asana had a much deeper purpose internally and externally, and these "positions" could have much more profound implications on the mind if practiced properly.

Yogananda's very partial interest in the use of these asanas came from exposure to the nationalism that was afire during his youth. Bhagabati Charan Ghosh, Yogananda's father, was also influential. An advanced yogi himself, he mentored Buddha Bose and his interest in the curative aspects of yoga asana. Another mentor was Maharshi Nagendra Nath Bhaduri (1846-1926), to whom Yogananda dedicated a chapter in his autobiography.³ Nagendra Nath was an educator who established a free primary school in Calcutta and encouraged students to build strong physiques. He advocated the physical culture movement as part of the nationalism developing at the turn of the 20th century. Nagendra Nath at heart was a bhakta or devotional yogi, who shared his wisdom in a humble and obscure manner to those close to him.⁴ It seems that Nagendra Nath was another of the formidable influences to Yogananda, a hidden gem who propagated the rebirth of the mind-body synergy that later spread to the West.

I give credit to all the yogis who had full mastery of the mind, and not as much to those bent on the muscular body's external mechanics. My teacher Vamadeva and I often say that many of the greatest yogis are the least known. However, in some mysterious and Divine way, they influence the world and those like Yogananda, who could spread the teachings.

Many others, like Sri Aurobindo,⁵ who was very distantly related to Yogananda, imbued bustling Calcutta with important themes that promoted spreading the value of mind-body synergy. The famous poet Rabindranath Tagore, whom Yogananda met with personally and wrote about in his autobiography, promoted some interesting views on education that Yogananda carried close to his heart. Tagore was an international figure closely connected with towering personages like Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo. He delivered talks in America⁶ and always recognized the importance of the mind-body relationship in his educational system. He was widely admired by many contemporaries.

³ "The Levitating Saint," Chapter 7, *Autobiography of a Yogi*.

⁴ Maharshi Nagendranath [His Life & Advice], Prof. Tripurasankar Sen Shastri, Nagendra Mission.

⁵ Born Aurobindo Ghose in Calcutta, Bengal. He lived from August 15th 1872 to December 5th 1950. He was an Indian nationalist, philosopher, yogi, guru, and poet. Developed a spiritual system he called Integral Yoga that is focused on the transformation of the entire being. This differs from the Integral Yoga taught in the United States during the 1960s and '70s by Swami Satchitananda of the Sivananda Saraswati lineage of Rishikesh.

⁶ Tagore was hosted by Sister Gyana Mata in Seattle, who was one of Yogananda's very advanced and early disciples.

Tagore's educational concepts at Santiniketan were comprised of a well-rounded approach to learning, including physical training, judo, dance, gardening, and other arts. Interestingly, he did not believe in examinations, as these place pressure on learning or cramming as we know it in the West, and stifle individual expression and development. Tagore was also interested in the moral and ethical principles of yoga, the yamas and niyamas, for development. He was influenced by Neo-Vedanta, the interpretations of Hinduism that developed in the 19th century, and by his own father, Debendranath Tagore, the founder of Brahma Samaj movement.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, yoga asana was becoming more recognized in Bengal, and was being reborn alongside the physical culture movement. However, it seems that the practice of asana also grew through the devotional practices that began with Ramakrishna and his disciples, Nagendranath, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, Swami Pabhupada the Guru of ISKCON, and Swami Ram Tirtha.

The idea of the body as temple, with the mind and spine intricately connected, began to gain currency and is evident in what Yogananda brought to the West. However, the physical factor of using the body to develop morality and courage, improve health, and for a host of other common-sense reasons, was never considered primary to the core Vedantic themes that were disseminated by these great progenitors of modern yoga. The physical body was considered a part of an integral development that included the mind and spiritual wisdom. These integral themes of mind-body relationship, nature, devotion, and wisdom were the cornerstones of the greater yoga tradition that has been propagated into global awareness.

Sri Aurobindo once said, "The process...accepts our nature...and compels all to undergo a divine change... In that ever progressive experience, we begin to perceive how this lower manifestation is constituted and that everything in it, however seemingly deformed or petty or vile, is the imperfect figure of some element in the divine nature." It seems that while Indians were emphasizing these strong body practices to raise the morale of the people to fight against the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries and the oppression of British Raj, the Western world was fascinated with the observation of the body merely for entertainment purposes.

Ghosh's College of Physical Culture and the Yoga Cure Institute were literally around the corner from the family home. Both Bishnu and Buddha were also initiated into advanced forms of Kriya Yoga by Yogananda, and implemented its various themes in their teaching at their schools. These approaches represent specific prescriptions according to the principle of prakriti or individual constitution, which gives special emphasis to healing unique to an individual's needs. In yoga, asana, pranayama, relaxation techniques, and meditation are used as tools for establishing balance. Although the pioneers of yoga therapy did not specifically acknowledge the practice of Ayurveda and yoga, they obviously understood the philosophical⁷ importance of such an approach and unknowingly formulated the concepts behind the practice of yoga as "therapy."

⁷ Samkhya philosophy.

This interesting point is connected to the fact that the great yogi Lahiri Mahasaya, guru of Yogananda's parents, and Swami Sri Yukteswar, Yogananda's guru, were well-versed in Samkyha philosophy and the *Charaka Samhita* or Ayurvedic book of medicine. Lahiri Mahasaya expounded fascinating and esoteric commentaries on both subjects from the perspective of prana as related to the scientific practice of Kriya Yoga.⁸ The power of asana to affect our inner anatomy is unlike any other ancient system in world history. Yogis like Lahiri Mahasaya extolled the development of prana through the practice of Kriya Yoga as the greatest medicine for bodily health and realization of the Self.

Although it may seem that muscle-control practices were invented in the 19th century, similar techniques appear in an ancient yoga text called the *Vasishtha Samhita*, which indicates the system's antiquity. This text itemizes 18 vital energy centers evenly distributed throughout the body. Each center is part of a pranic network that influences the flow of energy through the entire body and withdrawal of energy from the senses. In a text entitled "Key to the Kingdom of Health," Buddha Bose outlines twenty similar points taught in Yogananda's energization system, which are also similar to those found in Sivananda's and Kavalayananda's teachings. The centers are stimulated in a variety of positions, from standing to lying on the back in Savasana, for the enhancement of sensory withdrawal. The unique point relative to Yogananda's teachings was to draw the power of attention to the maha or grander form of prana entering the body to expand strength, vitality, awareness, and the energy centers or chakras along the spine.

On a different level, asanas can be used selectively according to our preference, and also for specific remedial measures. Asanas can be practiced individually or, for greater benefit, they can be combined into a series or set of postures. For every pose, there exists a counter-pose, depending on the effect on the spine. When we practice a spinal compression posture like Bhujangasana (cobra), it should be combined with a spinal extension posture like Pachimotthanasana (seated forward bend) to release pressure from the vertebrae and create flexibility in the joints and muscles. Twists can also be used as counter-poses.

The other important factor in enhancing the effects of asana is the symbolism or meaning behind each posture. I have chosen to include limited details of specific instructions on performing the asanas, because it is much more effective to learn them directly from a yoga asana teacher. Also, the basic points of positioning the body can be gathered through study of the images provided in this book.

Yogananda taught some of the 84 scriptural asanas, along with penetrating insights on their therapeutic value, in America⁹. This was a supplementary (not complementary) part of the disciplinary practices undertaken by monks entering his ashram for training. There were also regular public asana demonstrations at the Hollywood, California temple and perhaps elsewhere. The Self-Realization Fellowship published this content regularly in its magazine. Other demonstrations were given in America by Bishnu Ghosh and Buddha

⁸ *Complete Works* of Lahiri Mahasaya, Swami Satyewarananda.

⁹ As seen in the documentary film *Awake: The Life of Yogananda*, by CounterPoint Films.

Bose in 1939. After having taught in England and Germany, they taught in Washington D.C. and at Columbia University in New York City. In the USA, Yogananda sometimes brought SRF monks with him to perform various asanas when he was invited to lecture in different cities. Indra Devi, the only female yoga teacher accepted into training in India with Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya in 1938, eventually moved to America. She opened an asana school in Hollywood in 1948 and taught there until at least 1960, before moving to Mexico. This book includes many years of my own research and personal sadhana with these postures as well as integration of work done at my Dancing Shiva yoga studio and Ayurveda clinic.