

## YOGA I

*Where could man, scorched by fires of the Sun of this world, look for felicity, were it not for the shade afforded by the tree of emancipation?*

*Vishnu Purana*

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When I was a kid, I thought people in the 1920's and 30's never wore colored clothes, never saw beautiful blue-sky days, never enjoyed red roses or yellow marigolds. Why? Because the only contact I ever had with that era was through photographs and newsreels that were in black and white. It never dawned on me that what I was seeing wasn't an accurate reflection of the times.

When I was in my mid-teens, I thought all ancient cities were squalid, dirty, congested places where people threw their filth and garbage out into the streets. Why? Because my early history teachers vividly animated what life was like in medieval European cities . . . and that was all. I had no idea there were places like Knossos on Crete that had flush toilets as early as 1500 BC!<sup>1</sup> Or the fact that Pompeii and Herculanium had sewers as of 40 BC. I was oblivious to all that because there were enormous gaps in my education, and because I made speculative guesses about *all* antiquity from what little I knew about *some* antiquity.

As surprising as this may be, historical scholars are saddled with similar problems.

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<sup>1</sup> You may well say, "Big deal. *We* have flush toilets." But it was a big deal. If you were given two hours to design one, there is a good chance you wouldn't be able to do it. In fact, the first one to find its way into relatively modern European history was "invented" by Thomas Crapper in the 1800's.

As of 50 BC, almost all of the literature of the Mediterranean world was housed in one of two places: the Library of Pergamum on the coast of Asia Minor and the Library of Alexandria in Egypt.

Of the two, the Alexandrian Library was by far the larger storing close to 700,000 scrolls and manuscripts on topics ranging from art, drama, and oratory, to history, law, medicine, philosophy, and the natural sciences. Scholars came from all over the Mediterranean and as far away as India to study. The library complex had beautiful colonnaded walkways with places to rest and contemplate. There were lecture halls, sleeping apartments for guests, a zoo, a botanical garden, and parks. It was a major complex of learning; a place of refinement.

I'm sure that most modern-day scholars would sacrifice precious, private parts to have access to a hundredth-part of the information protected within the walls of the Alexandrian Library, but that possibility will never be. Julius Caesar, defending himself after taking the city (or, more accurately, arriving as an envoy from Rome, taking up residence in the palace, then finding himself in the middle of a city-wide rebellion), inadvertently burned a large part of the library during the fighting. Twenty or so years later, Anthony tried to make amends by looting the Pergamum Library and bringing most of its contents to Cleopatra and the newly rebuilt complex at Alexandria. With its competition sacked, the Alexandrian Library became the *only* major repository of ancient literature and knowledge in the Mediterranean world.

By 400 AD, the Christians had outlasted the Roman persecutions and were becoming a new and growing power in the Mediterranean. Incited by various bishops of the church, most notably Clement of Alexandria,<sup>2</sup> they began their own persecution of anything "pagan," which is to say anything that did not conform to their own relatively narrow beliefs. In 416 AD, they destroyed the magnificent Temple of Serapis located on a hill above the center of Alexandria and, according to eye witnesses, burned what was called "the daughter library" in which most of the metaphysical and non-Christian religious writings were housed.

Although the medical school remained intact, the Christian attack on the library resulted in enormous losses. The final straw came in 645 AD when the Moslem caliph Amr supposedly made his infamous statement, "If the contents (of the library) are not in

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<sup>2</sup> This was *not* the Clement who taught Origen.

the Koran, then they are false; and if they are in the Koran, then they are superfluous." With that he proceeded to use the remains of the library to stoke his bath fires.

What this means is that until the time of the Crusades, Europeans knew nothing about Plato, nothing about Socrates, nothing about Aristophanes or any of the other Greek dramatists, philosophers, or poets. Europe, in short, was completely in the dark when it came to the accomplishments of the ancient Hellenic peoples.

The only reason we know anything about the ancient Greeks today is because early Arab scholars translated a number of the Greek works—the writings of Plato and Sophocles and Aristotle, etc.—into Arabic before the Christian and Moslem fanatics individually torched the Alexandrian complex in their own time. It wasn't until East met West in that most unholy of endeavors, the Crusades, that Europe's ignorance on the matter was remedied. With that contact, scholarship was exchanged and the western world gained back a little of what had been lost.

With this backdrop, you can see why modern historians are to some degree hamstrung when they talk about the ancient world. It is not as though there isn't some material from which they can make their deductions. We do have the writings of Plato, who was absolutely brilliant. But we also have fragments of plays and poems that were sensitive and beautifully written but whose authors have been long since forgotten; we have *references* to brilliant thinkers and writers who were purported to have been voluminous in their creative output but of whose works we haven't a single shred (we know about them from mention made by other writers); and we know of philosophers every bit as thought-provoking as Plato but whose works for us exist only in scant fragments.<sup>3</sup>

In short, in comparison to what actually existed during the time of the Alexandrian Library, we haven't an enormous amount of primary material from which to study.

In the hierarchy of problems-one-encounters when trying to understand the ancients, far and away the most subtle problem—especially when dealing with the ancients' views of Man as a spiritually evolving being—comes from a source somewhat foreign to modern scholars and today's academic community. It has to do with secrecy.

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<sup>3</sup> Heraclitus was one such individual. In thinking about the changing nature of man and life, he wrote, "You can not step into the same river twice."

In the very ancient world, the main repository of philosophic and spiritual teachings was found in what have come to be known as *the Mystery Schools*. The public side of the Mysteries are well documented because they were often run by the state. They used symbolic images—gods and goddesses animated through plays and parables—to educate the public concerning *the virtues*, the consequences of "evil" action, etc.

Although we know a fair amount about the myths, morality plays, and the public festivals that were staged to celebrate these teachings, we have very little in the way of public commentary about the inner workings of those institutions. All we know is that there were *inner teachings*, and that they were available only to those who had substantially directed their lives away from the mundane and toward a more spiritually inclined path.

As G. dePurucker said in his book, *The Esoteric Tradition*:

Whatever the Ancient Mysteries were, and whatever the doctrines taught in them, we know that they were deeply and universally revered and that the greatest men whom antiquity ever produced, virtually without exception, were among the number of those who had passed through, in greater or lesser extent, the different degrees of the initiatory rites.

Why do we know so little about the Mysteries? After all, we know at least some of their names: the Greek Eleusinian Mysteries; the Persian Mysteries of Mithras; the Druidic Mysteries of the Britons and the Gauls; the Greco-Egyptian Mysteries of Serapis; the Egyptian Mysteries of Isis and Osiris; the Christian Gnostic Mysteries; the Greek Mysteries of Orpheus and of Bacchus; and the Cabiric Mysteries of Samothrace. And we know the names of some who partook of those repositories of knowledge: Plato, Socrates, Plotinus, Pericles, Apollonius of Tyana; some even believe that Christ spent some of his "lost years" in the Mystery Schools of Egypt. But as for what was taught, we know very little because all Initiates of the Mysteries were bound by the *strictest oath of secrecy*. Our knowledge of them comes from veiled clues deduced by examining the lives and doctrines of those we know were Initiates. Example: we can surmise that reincarnation was a part of the Mystery School teachings; the evidence (if evidence be the right word) is found in Plato's writings about the allusions Socrates made to the doctrine of rebirth, and in the Christian Bishop Origen's commentaries on that same doctrine (Origen was an initiate of the Eleusynian Mysteries). What else might we conclude?

The inner structure of the mysteries was evidently based on two general levels, the Lesser Mysteries and the Greater Mysteries. The Lesser Mysteries probably focused on *moral virtues and the making of those virtues a part of the initiate's everyday life*. It's likely there was instruction in the sciences and astronomy. In addition, initiates of the higher levels of the Lesser Mysteries were probably introduced to a view of the *psychology of man as a spiritually evolving Being*, and to some extent to the "powers" thought available to an awakened, realized individual.

The Greater Mysteries were considerably more serious. If the Eastern view we have been examining is accurate to reality, the lower-side of the child-self is a complex amalgam of wants, desires, natural and self-created instincts (both noble and not so noble), and "burdens" (i.e., habit patterns) developed in and accumulated over past actions. Through karma, life urges humans to deal with this spiritual hodgepodge slowly over great periods of time. For those who wish to move more quickly (i.e., for those who want to follow a spiritual path), this process must be accelerated. Severe psychological and emotional pressures are needed to pry open the aspirant's subconscious so that the self, through disciplines, can be cleansed.

In ancient times, those pressures were not naturally a part of everyday life. Sure, people had to worry about invasions, pestilence, disease, famine—all those good Biblical scourges—but the pace and the general complexity of ancient life was not intense in the same way it is today. The ancient peoples were not constantly being bombarded with the heavy sexual imagery that we are immersed in through our TV, movies, advertising, even our music. There wasn't the franticness, the tone of hurry we seem to have bought into in this age. They didn't have to cope with subtle (i.e., sub-clinical) physical, emotional, and psychological stresses that you and I unconsciously deal with all the time: the breathing of air from an atmosphere that has essentially been made into an airborne-pollutant cesspool; the living in a space awash in high intensity, artificially created electromagnetic radiation<sup>4</sup>; the drinking of water laced with chemicals; the eating of food that has lost most of its vitality due to land abuse (the using of nitrogen-based fertilizers to stimulate

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<sup>4</sup> If our eyes were sensitive to radio and microwave radiation in the same way our eyes are sensitive to optical light, Mt. Wilson in Pasadena above my home would look like the sun. We are being bathed in enormous amounts of electromagnetic radiation from the TV stations there. Although scientists claim there is no problem, we have absolutely no idea what the long-term effects on the body will be, not to mention the effects on the human psyche. Why? Because this situation has never existed on this planet previous to the last forty years. Power-intense electromagnetic radiation—high power radio and microwave radiation—is not a situation that happens naturally on earth.

the land into producing greater and greater yields . . . and greater and greater profits). People in ancient times certainly had problems, but their life style hadn't the artificiality we endure. In a lot of ways, their lives were more natural, more simple.

That is why the Mystery Schools existed. They were, if this view is accurate, the places where men and women went who wished to move spiritually. Within these schools resided the real spiritual teachers, the *men of power* who could bring to bear the deep emotional, psychological, and mental pressures required for one to proceed into the more advanced stages of spiritual enlightenment. These were not "feel good" places. There were places of serious, life and death, spiritual effort.<sup>5</sup>

As expressed by Alvin Boyd Kuhn in his book, The Lost Light.

All spiritual wisdom was held in secret brotherhoods and rigorously safeguarded from common dissemination . . . . . Sheer pious faith could not alone gain one admission into the Mystery Schools. Actual discipline of body and mind, and certain inner unfoldments of faculty were held as requisite for the grasp of deeper truth. Initiation was to some real extent a matter of the mastery of theurgic (i.e., inner world) powers dependent in the main upon purity of life. Esotericism (i.e., secrecy of doctrine) arose primarily from the necessity of safeguarding the use of dynamic knowledge . . . What we have derided as "magic" in the religion of old was just the control of subtle powers which we mostly permit to slumber in dormancy beneath the surface of our superficial life. Religion touched man so deeply in olden times that it awakened the potencies of his godlike endowment, an enterprise which concerns us rather little now. The imputation of sacredness to the rite of religion flowed directly from recognition of the vital issues at stake in the soul's incarnation on earth. And the right to participate in the higher mysteries, of which St. Paul speaks, belonged to those who had won it from nature by the payment of the full price—a life schooled to harmony by intelligent consecration of every personal force.

. . . (Consider) . . . the positive testimony offered by Plato, Porphyry, Apuleius, Heroditus, Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblichus, Euripides, and Cicero. Certainly a man like Cicero cannot be scorned when he testifies as follows:

"There is nothing better than those (Lesser) Mysteries by which, from a rough and fierce life,

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, within this view it is believed that the reason there are no Mystery Schools today is because we don't need them. All the pressures we need to learn and move ahead in a spiritual sense are now present in our everyday life.

we are polished to gentleness and softened. . . . not only have we received from them the doctrine of living in happiness, but even of dying with a better hope."

. . . . There is little or no evidence of esotericism, for the good reason that esotericism is the one thing in the world that is bound by its nature to leave little evidence! Do scholars expect that the members of the Mysteries would have published their secrets abroad? On the contrary, they were bound to secrecy by the severest of all pledges.

Severest of all pledges, indeed. Consider: Alcibiades was the intelligent, dashing, charismatic nephew of the fifth century Athenian statesman and scholar Pericles. Even though Athenians of the time hoped Alcibiades would take up the reins when Pericles stepped down, he was nevertheless stripped of his citizenship and exiled from the city for becoming drunk and publicly reciting some of the Lesser Mystery teachings.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps now you can see where the problem lies for modern historians. If the Mysteries were central to the philosophic heart of the ancient world, and if they were shrouded in secrecy as seems to have been the case, then making hard and fast judgments about any spiritual knowledge the ancients did or did not have has pitfalls that are not generally made public by contemporary historians.<sup>7</sup>

Why are we talking about all of this? The topic we are about to delve into is a *discipline* that was not directly connected to any Mystery School in India, but was created by a teacher who appears to have been of that tradition. The discipline is called Yoga, and just as was the case with the Mystery School disciplines it was not originally

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<sup>6</sup> Being exiled from a city-state at that time was like having someone put a gun to your head and pull the trigger. One's safety and security was wrapped up in one's citizenship. Being thrown out of a city-state was about as radical a thing as you could do to a person—even worse than throwing them in jail—but that was exactly what Athens did to the very well-connected Alcibiades when he broke his vow of secrecy to the Mysteries.

<sup>7</sup> What is worse, the little that has been written about the Mystery Schools comes primarily from historic observations made long after the degeneration of those schools. Mention the Mystery Schools of Britain to most scholars and they will respond: "Druids: colored themselves blue with woad and performed animal sacrifices." It is true. Later Druids (the ones for which we have the most records) did engage in animal sacrifices . . . but only after the wise within the tradition were long since dead and the remnants of the tradition had fallen into decadence.

intended for popular consumption. It was a severe discipline designed to aid the spiritually motivated aspirant along his or her path toward enlightenment.

The word *yoga* means "union." As a discipline, it was originated by an Indian named Patanjali somewhere between 400 BC and 400 AD (for more history, see the book How to Know God by Christopher Isherwood). Patanjali's work was not original in the sense that it was a focusing and culling of ideas first presented in the Hindu Vedas. His aphorisms are called *sutras* (the word *sutra* means bead—the idea being that each aphorism is a succinct, unembellished, bear-bones statement of discipline the expansion of which is left to the student or subsequent teachers). They were beads of wisdom meant as guideposts for those whose meditations would allow them to see into the self.

In almost all cases today, Yoga is no longer taught in the old way—as a spiritual discipline. Universities across the United States provide recreational Yoga classes through their Physical Education departments. These classes teach the *asanas*—the yogic positions (mastering these guarantees a very supple body)—possibly along with elementary breathing exercises designed to calm and focus the mind. This is probably why the word "yoga" conjures in Westerners' minds the image of men or women sitting all pretzeled-up in exotic positions, trying not to look as though they are in pain. What is important to realize for our purposes is that the original motivation behind the practice of Yoga was to gain enlightenment and, as such, a union with God . . .

The first two limbs of yoga, the Yama and the Niyama, are concerned with the moral and ethical fabric of the disciple-to-be. In ancient times, yoga masters were particularly careful to whom they taught their tradition. This, again, has largely been lost today, especially given the more recreational nature of the discipline in the Western world (as hard as it may be to believe, there are very few formal yoga teachers in the East today—almost all are found in the West<sup>8</sup>). Nevertheless, it was believed in ancient times that as an individual progressed through the limbs of yoga, he or she was preparing for a coming-together-of-the-self that would lead to some level of inner awakening. One consequence of this awakening was the opening up within the self of all sorts of seemingly abnormal phenomena—everything from the bubbling over of fears and angers,

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<sup>8</sup> Why? My suspicion is that the reasons run from "that is where the interested parties are" to "that is where the money is."



etc. from the subconscious, to intense psychological pressures, to psychic-type disturbances, to the opening up of what was called in the ancient Sanskrit language of India *the siddhas*—powers that were and still are believed to exist latent within all human beings.

The responsible yoga teachers knew they were karmically linked to their teachings. Not only did they not want to put their students in spiritual jeopardy by allowing them to go beyond their abilities to cope, they also knew that if their teachings helped open up powers within a discipline and the disciple then misused those powers, the teacher would to some degree be responsible for teaching the mysteries in the first place. As such, the responsible teachers in ancient times watched each novice for long periods, years even, before accepting the student, to be sure that the student-to-be would be able to successfully deal with the disciplines of the first two limbs, the Yama and Niyama, and the limbs beyond.

And once the teaching of the Yama and Niyama commenced, only when the teacher was convinced that the student's motivation was as it should be was continuation into the higher limbs allowed.

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NOTE: Acknowledgment of a teacher's responsibility for his or her teachings and, consequentially, for the way followers act upon those teachings, is found in some relatively unexpected places.

Christian doctrine maintains that Christ came *to take on the sins of the world* (Hebrews 9:28—"so Christ, having offered once to bear the sins of many . . .," and 1 John 2:2—"and he (Christ) is the expiation of our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the world . . .").

There is no place in the Bible where *Christ* is quoted as making this claim, but the belief has nevertheless become a cornerstone of Christian doctrine. In fact, it is one of

the Christian missionaries' most persuasive arguments: "Believe in Christ and he will lift your sins."<sup>9</sup>

What is confusing is the fact that when questioned about taking responsibility for one's own acts, Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, 10:21, and Luke 9:23). He evidently didn't profess to be willing to lift anyone's burden in the ways one might be led to believe from examining current Church doctrine.

So how can this apparent discrepancy be explained?

The East believes that there have been at various points in history highly evolved spiritual Beings who have come into bodies to act as *world teachers*. The Sanskrit name for these teachers is *avatar*, and avatar is exactly what Christ, among others, is believed to have been.<sup>††</sup>

An avatar is a human Being who has learned all there is to learn from this solar evolution, who has completely balanced the karmic energies associated with all of Its actions over all of Its many lives, who no longer has a karmic necessity to come back into incarnation. In other words, the Being who would act as an avatar must be absolutely pure, absolutely karma-less.

This level of purity is necessary because an avatar is not simply a spiritually awake human Being. It is a human Being who will, within the course of his or her teaching, be *overshadowed* by a Consciousness so vastly immense that you or I could only conceive of it in terms of the word God. This cosmic Consciousness uses the human Being/avatar as a conduit through which energy is directed, and by which It can grab humanity by the scruff of the neck and set it back on track.

Only an absolutely *pure cup* can act as host for this kind of overshadowing, and as such only the purest of the pure within humanity can act as an *avatar*.

What is important here is that the human who takes on this task becomes inextricably linked to those whose minds and actions are affected by his or her teachings. In other words, these Beings love so greatly that they are willing to take on these ties even though in doing so, they take on karma in the process.

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<sup>9</sup> This is very similar to what Indian gurus often say when trying to attract followers: "Follow me and I will take away your karma." Translation: follow me and I'll fix things so you won't truly have to take responsibility for your actions.

<sup>††</sup> Note from 2019: It is really kind of sad that the gaming industry has coopted the word "avatar" to mean "player." The origin of the word is considerably more reverential.

If this is an accurate version of what is really going on, the origin of Christianity's belief about Christ *taking on sins* reveals on an entirely different glow.

That is, if Christ was an avatar he surely knew he would have to take responsibility not only for his own actions but, to some degree, for the actions of all those who would act in his name. And if that was the case, it would not be surprising to find him acknowledge the fact that he was moving from a state of complete, unfettered purity to a state of burden by saying something to the effect of *I am taking on the sins of the world . . . I am, in effect, casting my lot and becoming one with beings whose understanding is highly limited, and whose actions through my name will inevitably be imperfect.*

Knowledge of such responsibility was part of early yogic teachings and, being conscious of that responsibility, the real yoga masters of ancient times were extremely careful to whom they taught their disciplines.

