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## Yoga: One physician's experience

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Yoga is becoming more and more popular with Canadians, and it behoves our profession to know something more about it. Its critics say that yoga is a very destructive, even dangerous diabolic cult that threatens the moral fabric of our society. Its supporters praise its positive effects on people with tension, anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic illness. In this climate of confusion, and as a physical education graduate, physician and practising psychiatrist, I would like to report on my own 3-month stay at a yoga *ashram* or retreat, where I took a yoga teacher's course from January to March 1977.

Despite a healthy scepticism engendered by my scientific training, I enrolled in the course because my wife was planning to attend, and frankly, regardless of my fears and fantasies, the *ashram* with my family seemed better than a winter alone in Toronto. Besides I had observed many psychologic and physical benefits to my wife during her 7 years of increasing interest in teaching and practising yoga, and there seemed to be no harmful effects. I must emphasize that my experience is limited, that this article does not express all my experiences as many of them are difficult to put into words, and that my experience is limited to one particular *ashram* at a specific period of its development.

I will leave it to your imagination to conjure up the anxiety that I felt once I had committed myself to the

idea of spending 3 months at a yoga *ashram*. What would my erstwhile teachers of basic science in medical school think of such a venture? Their attacks on quackery and irrationality still echoed in my mind as did my psychiatric colleagues' adherence to science and its tenets. Maybe I too would be labelled as a weirdo who had lost his emotional balance and had plunged unthinkingly into a cult. My fantasies of dark, skinny people in loincloths standing on one leg or spending lifetimes contemplating mysteries that could not be solved all multiplied as I approached the endeavour. I nearly abandoned the venture, but persisted because it was the only feasible way to understand what my wife was involved in. All I had were prejudices and ignorance to go on. My wife's enthusiasm was matched by my reluctance. Tempers repeatedly flared! Finally to ease the tension, we decided to stop discussing the trip, and we made our preparations incommunicado.

### Fear of fanatics

Visions of a sparse vegetarian diet gnawed at my gut. Would our quarters be heated? Would I have to adjust to cold and other unpleasant conditions? Who were these other people who were to be part of our small group? Would this small group of fanatics (as I already pictured them) pressure me to give up my rational view of the world? At other times I was reassured by my wife, who is usually sensible, and by the fact that I'd already met several of the other people who appeared to

me to be quite attractive. At a meeting with some of them I received more welcome reassurances. What greeted me on arrival was a very pleasant surprise.

The *ashram* is idyllically situated in a rugged mountainous region of Canada on the shores of a very large and picturesque lake. There were 24 of us on the course, and the others appeared to be solid citizens of one type or another. Most of the people came from different parts of Canada. There were professional men and their wives, a chairman of the board of a large Canadian corporation, students, housewives — people from all walks of life. There was only one person who, with effort, could be classified as a hippie. Soon we were formed into two groups of 12, and we remained that way for the 3 months except for some joint lectures.

Our accommodation was a modern guest lodge equipped with all amenities. The food looked, smelled and tasted the way I like it, and it was prepared and served with a care and skill that few first-class hotels could match.

The staff turned out to be dressed just like — people; they were friendly, considerate, supportive individuals of great maturity. For a while they seemed to be addressing my fears and fantasies as they made some jokes about the nature of the *ashram* and the course, but soon I discovered that my anxiety was shared by many of my fellow students. Some of them were simply feeling threatened by a strange environment and people on which they

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were dependent. Others had magical expectations of the course which also produced tension.

The course itself proved to be rigorous. We rose just after 6 am and began Hatha Yoga exercise classes at 7 am. This class lasted for 2 hours. We breakfasted in a common dining-hall where we socialized briefly and then proceeded to classes that often carried on into the late evening, broken only for meals and stretching. Besides the exercise class, we had courses on the history, development, and philosophy of yoga, and there were endless group sessions. Through all of the activities, which I describe below, free discussion was encouraged, in which we were asked to be personal rather than to intellectualize. Though there was some group pressure from other students to conform to what they at first assumed were the "correct" views, the group leaders encouraged us to challenge this pressure and question these assumptions.

### The philosophy of yoga

Yoga means "union" in Sanskrit. Our word "yoke" derives from the original term. A yoke typically brings together the efforts of two beasts of burden so that their energies can be harnessed to do useful work. In most of us there is a diffusion of energy in many directions, much like the unharnessed and undirected draught animals. We strive for incompatible goals. The conscious and unconscious are often in conflict. Self-acceptance is hindered by lack of self-knowledge, taboos, and socialization. Marketplace values struggle with moral codes and emotional needs. Social pressures and expectations distort our ability to perceive and fulfil our personal needs. Ideologies clash within ourselves, and each of us becomes unsure of what is most worthwhile in our lives.

The goal of yoga is to integrate and synthesize life through its philosophy and techniques. All of the activities labelled as "yoga" seemed to be directed at developing self-awareness, accurate self-evaluation, an improved sense of reality, clearer cognition, improved emotional control, heightened intuition, better social relationships, clearer shaping of immediate and longterm goals, and the development of a sense that exist-

ence is a mystery and all understanding of existence is theory which has utility, but not ultimate validity.

These are also the aims of many systems of psychotherapy, but in addition we had the physical activity of Hatha Yoga which was stated to have a direct effect on our emotional, intellectual, and spiritual functioning. The body, mind and spirit were presented as a whole, which could be separated only in thinking and communication: we cannot influence any one part of the whole without affecting the others.

Yoga is Vedantic in origin. It is mystical and religious. The central belief of the yoga philosophy is that the cosmos, the world, and the individual are outward manifestations of a formless God, an underlying organizing factor, energy or force that creates, directs and harmonizes all matter and energy. Yogis believe that it is possible to be aware of and to relate directly to that force as it exists within each of us by stilling the interference created by our pettiness, our activity, our emotionality and our intellectual pretensions. If we develop awareness of this force, life becomes integrated, more satisfying and less exhausting. Contact with this force brings increasing awareness of the self, other people, and all things that we come in contact with. Conflicts within ourselves diminish; uncomfortable emotional blocks to learning and development are overcome; and life becomes more productive and more pleasurable. Those humans who have developed the capacity to relate to that force often become remarkable individuals who affect the lives of others in very positive ways. Saints and teachers of religions are presented as those who have rediscovered these elemental truths and have shared their techniques for developing awareness of God.

The origins of yoga are lost in time, and began before the written word, and before life and knowledge became encapsulated into defined areas. Science and its methods and complexities did not exist then, and the language of yoga originates in theistic concepts of reality, rather than rational ones.

Perhaps because of the high esteem in which humanity has held science, or their confusion between precision of ritual and precision of

measurement, many yoga enthusiasts claim that yoga too is a science. These practitioners substantiate this claim by pointing out that there is no need for a novice, or for that matter an advanced practitioner, to accept anything on faith. The beginner is asked to suspend final judgement until he has personally experienced an activity before discarding it as useless. Of course this view of the validity of self-evaluation of outcome of a personal experience does not take into account the effects of suggestion, group pressure, placebo or avoidance of cognitive dissonance as factors that may influence evaluation of a subjective experiment. Yoga technique, having evolved empirically over literally thousands of years through trial and error, is in my opinion an art rather than a science, but even as an art it has helped many people with many aspects of their lives.

### The techniques of yoga

I will only say a little about some of the techniques that I have observed or participated in, which I will try to interpret in language palatable to my colleagues. There are many techniques that I know nothing about.

● Hatha Yoga involved a complex series of individual exercises which we did on a blanket on a carpeted floor. The exercises at first seemed very contorted: we assumed many unusual body positions which we held for varying periods. These postures or *asanas* stretched my joints and muscles while the antagonist muscles were much contracted. The exercises made my body more flexible. From being barely able to touch my knees, I was soon touching my toes with ease. I worked muscles that I normally never used with my tennis, squash and jogging. My local muscular endurance increased as demonstrated by my increased ability to hold a position, but my cardio-pulmonary condition deteriorated, and soon I supplemented the yoga with running. I often found myself looking at parts of my body from a new perspective, and my body-awareness increased. After the exercises, the teacher had all of us lie on the floor while she instructed us to relax each part of our bodies in a standard, ritualized way. This state

of relaxation brought with it an end to all physical and emotional tension. I am sure that the mental state is like that which behaviourally oriented psychiatrists attempt to attain in their patients with whom they are doing systematic desensitization. In this body-mind state, I found that nothing bothered me, and that my mind wandered over a variety of topics that normally provoke anxiety without so much as a quiver of uneasiness. Solutions to personal problems seemed to arise quickly after I had clearly conceptualized them — something I had been unable to do before.

### Rapid improvement

I was surprised to find that in our Hatha Yoga class there were all levels of conditioning and experience. Even the most out-of-shape participants seemed to improve rapidly from their very low level. There was very little competition, and it was discouraged. I kept discovering that rather than striving to be as good as or better than the next person I began to accept my own body and its limitations. I thought that the inflexibility that I had arrived with at first began to improve in both my body and my psyche at the same time.

Some of my classmates told me that they meditate during Hatha Yoga and during the subsequent relaxation. I am not sure if the state I described above was related to meditation, but it really felt good.

During the classes I heard many unfounded claims for the value of yoga in health and happiness. They irritated me as did the commands to relax my pancreas, spleen and liver. At first I protested loudly about the inaccuracy of such statements, and the teacher stopped making them. She gave me some articles that seemed to demonstrate that some yogis have had a remarkable degree of control of their autonomic system long before the days of biofeedback machines and techniques. I no longer protest so loudly about the strange statements that I occasionally hear.

● Karma Yoga is work and service. It is founded on the belief that all of life, but especially work, contains opportunities to learn about oneself and to reverse previous mistakes; that life is full of chances to

either learn or make the same mistakes. The belief is like the psychoanalytic concept of repetition-compulsion. All of us repeat early life relationships with the intent of "having them turn out right this time". I was told that if in a work-related activity I constantly focused on the personal gains that I might get from the work, I would have little energy left to watch myself at work and to learn about myself from the work. I found that when my only goal in work was to enjoy the process and to learn, then the work went easily and was full of pleasure for me.

● Bhakti Yoga is overtly religious: it is an emotional, devotional and worshipful approach to self-development. It involves incense, rituals, and prayer and identification with reified images of the formless Vedantic God. One aspect of this is Mantra Yoga. This involves the repetition of short prayers in any language, but usually Sanskrit, over a long period — up to several hours.

I can reassure you that to this particular scientifically trained man even the thought of this practice was very distasteful. Having lost several confrontations between my view of reality and theirs, I had planned to evade this part of the program and not to make an issue of it. My teachers would not let me avoid it. They asked me how I could ever comment knowledgeably without having had any first-hand experience. I was reminded that millions of North Americans are using transcendental meditation, and that none had come to harm because of it. I capitulated and learned about mantras and chanted many of them.

I chanted mantras in a group gathered for a religious service. I chanted them when going for a walk alone. I chanted them out loud and under my breath. I have whispered them. I have been told that they are good for my spiritual growth, but even if I don't have a spirit, they do have some effects that made me feel good right away.

Chanting a mantra produced a calm state of concentration. This relaxed mental and vocal focusing was for me incompatible with my usual neurotic ruminations about the past or worry about what the future would bring for me. Chanting the mantras seemed to exclude future- or past-orientated worries and allowed me to

be very "here and now" oriented. This state of mind produced an acute state of perceptual and emotional sensitivity. Things that I had never noticed before became etched on my mind in a very crisp and beautiful way. On several occasions when chanting in the period after I had learned that my dog had died, I found tears spilling out of me in a way that had not happened since I had been a young child. Somehow or other, chanting a mantra lowers anxiety and defences to the point where new perceptions, feelings and conceptions can grow.

### Intellectual approach

● Jnana Yoga was presented to me as the intellectual approach to what I am, God, growth and problem solving. It seemed to involve an analytical approach to understanding and integrating the events of every day into a pattern of continuous learning. Part of this pattern might be to keep a diary with each day's personal goal and achievements outlined together with their personal meaning. Another might be to analyse each day to see which events could have been altered by my personal approach. Dialogue with a teacher might well be a part of this approach.

● Kundalini Yoga: there is much that I do not know about Kundalini Yoga. I do know that one of its aspects is that it is a structured theory of human development in which there are at least seven stages. As the outline proceeds from primitive to advanced, there is an increasing number of developmental lines. The energy for the development seems to come from aggressive and sexual drives, which become more socialized and altruistic in their aims and activities as one moves along this developmental scheme.

Kundalini energy was referred to frequently. This was supposed to be an energy that arises from near the base of the spine, travels up the spine along metaphysical channels, and emerges from the top of the head. Many yoga techniques are supposed to awaken this energy and its awakening is said to be accompanied by the development of supernatural powers including extrasensory perception, increased ability to think intuitively, ability to predict future events and

even more far-fetched claims than these. I feel a little embarrassed about even referring to these claims, and of course, I can neither endorse them nor for that matter refute them as I have no basis to do either, other than my scientific training. But I feel that I should mention these claims in case they are mistaken for delusional thought in a yoga devotee rather than part of the shared religious belief that they actually are.

● **Rajah Yoga** was presented as a series of techniques that integrated the others by focusing on the personality and character of the student and developing self-knowledge and insight. Under this heading we studied and interpreted our dreams, participated in sensory awareness training, examined our own psychodynamics and those of our group members, watched ourselves on videotape recordings and examined our thinking, our identity, our sources of anxiety and the qualities of relationship to others members of our group.

### **Dream interpretation**

● **Dream interpretation** has long been part of psychotherapeutic practice within psychiatry and outside of it. Yoga predictably did not miss out on this aspect of growth enhancement. Dreams are received as messages from parts of the psyche that are normally shut out of awareness.

I was retaught that dreams can be used to develop insight and to solve problems. I learned how to wake myself up by making suggestions to myself in a drowsy state that I should awaken after each dream. I found that I was sitting up in the dark writing out my dreams by flashlight, and I even found myself asking questions to be answered in my dreams. We were taught to interpret our dreams by free-associating to every object, event or person in the dream. Then we interpreted these associations as projected aspects of ourselves even if the objects were other people in real life. The meaning was then modified until it had a sense of fitness for the current life of the dreamer. During this time I observed recurrent themes that seemed to appear in my own dreams and in the dreams of other members of my group. Though mystical interpretation was preferred by one group member, this was discouraged by our teachers in favour

of the more psychologic method outlined above. Dream interpretation was extended to us as a safe and easy way of developing insight without dependence on others.

● **Sensory training:** I participated in examining and training my sense perceptions and those of other group members. This demonstrated to me that each member of my group had a different ability to perceive the world through his senses, and that the world is different for each of us. Even when examining a simple source of stimulus through one sense organ this proved to be universally true. These senses were presented as windows through which each of us can receive and organize aspects of the world. Our teachers stressed that there are many gaps in the human sensory apparatus, but that these gaps can be narrowed through the practice of sensory awareness. The teachers promoted the belief that there are many subliminal stimuli that do not usually reach my awareness, but that these do reach my sense organs, and that I can increase my sensitivity to these.

● **Psychologic insight:** we were given many opportunities to examine and understand some of the psychologic forces affecting our own lives and those of our fellow group members. Dream interpretation was one way. Projective techniques were used in two other ways. In one, each of us drew, coloured, and pasted up on a large sheet 26 smaller pictures, according to simple standard instructions. The themes, structure, content and arrangement of the drawings were scrutinized by the creator under the guidance of the group leader. From this a clear picture of the individual's strengths, weaknesses, early life conflicts, family dynamics and current problems emerged.

A third technique used to help us develop insight using a projective technique involved walking slowly up and down a limited space and then recording from memory all the thoughts, feelings and behaviour generated by this activity. I reviewed this record in the group setting, and was then asked to generalize parts of the experience to other aspects of my life. I was surprised how effective this was. I was also pleased to see that the individual, not the leader, made interpretations, and the leader's role was to ask for more information

and clarification, assisted by a supportive group.

● **Videotape recording and playback:** I was surprised and pleased to see such a modern technique used in such an archaic context. I was videotaped three times, once alone doing Hatha Yoga exercises, once while discussing a mildly stressful topic with another person and once while a member of a small group discussing controversial questions. Each time we recorded the experience in writing, discussed our recall of the experience with group members and then reviewed the tape. The contrast between the tape and the private memory of each individual was often immense. The degree of distortion that each of us applied to the events was shocking and very clearly opened up the possibility that other memories and current perceptions might also be subject to the same degree of distortion.

### **Group leaders and pressures**

To reduce the potential for distortion by memory, each of us was required to put down our current thoughts in black and white, handing in a copy to the group leaders. We were encouraged to review this written record with a view to studying and understanding ourselves. Where there seemed to be overemphasis on one aspect of life, or on one way of thinking, balance was encouraged.

In the teachers, I witnessed minimal anxiety or competitiveness with other belief systems or methods of fostering psychologic growth. In fact, there was enthusiastic encouragement of other religious philosophies, and other systems of personal development, as they were all seen as having the same end, provided that they encouraged insight, problem solving, and independence. They were less positive about systems in which great dependency developed.

The staff also helped us to uncover and confront the factors that gave each of us an identity. The value of these identifications was challenged, and we were pressed to develop an identity with a religious basis. On many occasions I felt the discomforting pressure of a group of people against whose belief system I was prejudiced and whose theory of hu-

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prevents the provision of suitable treatment, it is important that the physician or hospital have concrete evidence of this inability to act in accordance with sound medical practice.

However, where a patient refuses treatment and there is some indication that he may not be competent to make an informed judgement, a determination of his capacity in this regard should be made. If the attending physician's judgement, supported by a consulting opinion, is that the patient is competent, then he should be asked to execute a release form. This form should reflect the patient's understanding of the consequences that may result and release the physician and hospital from responsibility. If the patient refuses to sign this form, a notation should be placed in his chart with statements from witnesses confirming his refusal to accept treatment. (The options available where a determination of incompetency is made were discussed in an earlier article, dealing with consent and competency. [CMAJ 117: 1215, 1977])

No physician is obligated to comply with treatment conditions laid down by a patient when this would be sufficiently contrary to sound medical practice to jeopardize the patient's health. Where practical, this patient should be released from hospital. If your private patient refuses to follow your advice, you may decide to terminate your relationship with him. In this instance, the patient should be given the names of other

available physicians and should receive all possible assistance in obtaining the services of another doctor. There is a legal obligation to continue treating the patient until care has been undertaken by another physician competent to provide it. A physician should be extremely cautious in terminating the doctor-patient relationship, especially when a patient is under treatment of a serious nature, as is usual in hospital.

A conflict develops where a psychiatric patient is involuntarily detained and refuses to accept treatment. In law, an individual's status as an involuntary psychiatric patient does not create a presumption that he is incompetent to consent to treatment. Physicians operating under such conditions are in the dilemma raised through detaining this individual in hospital but being unable to comply with the standard of reasonable practice to administer the appropriate treatment. This situation does not arise in those provinces that have legislation granting physicians and hospitals authority to treat involuntary psychiatric patients with or without consent. In provinces lacking this provision, where the competency of the individual has been affirmed and the required treatment is refused, physicians who proceed are in legal jeopardy. The safest legal advice would be not to treat in these circumstances. Although the patient's release from hospital is not an option here, appropriate release forms should be used in any event to provide evidence of his refusal.

Despite all this, physicians and others should not attempt to develop multipaged consent forms for every medical procedure. American courts have failed to support such forms, because no reasonable patient could be expected to assimilate them. It should be possible to devise forms for commonly performed procedures which clearly and succinctly set out the necessary information. These forms should not exceed two pages in length.

### Sample form

Forms provided by one Ontario teaching hospital include the following:

- Consent for special procedures or treatment other than operations.
- Consent to several commonly performed operations.
- Consent to anesthetic.
- Consent for sterilization.
- Consent to termination of pregnancy.
- Consent for blood specimens for research purposes.
- Consent for use of organs and tissues for transplantation.
- Refusal to permit blood transfusions.
- Authority for post mortem examination.
- Consent for audio and video recordings.
- Consent for release of information.
- Statement by patient leaving against medical advice, refusing treatment or both. ■

## YOGA

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manity seemed foreign. My personal concepts about most things were challenged, including my values, my concepts of reality and my personal boundaries. At times I felt very strained. There was a lot of group pressure, but I am glad to say that it was identified as such and kept in check by the group leaders. At times simple fatigue became a mind-numbing factor, in dealing with the pressure to accept a reality that is not acceptable in my culture. I was outspoken in my dissent, and received a lot of pressure, but none of it from

the staff who displayed only the most mature behaviour and attitudes toward me.

I find it difficult to evaluate the effects of a 3-month stay at an *ashram*. My wife and I both feel that we know each other a little better, and that we are more tolerant, warm and considerate to each other. I am a little more aware of the mystery of this world than I have been before and certainly gained new insights. I think that I have more respect and acceptance for people and things that are very different from me.

I believe that a less stable individual might have suffered more strain than I did and might even suffer an

episode of psychologic illness, but I am quite sure that the staff would help that person to disengage and to seek appropriate treatment. Showing very private information in the group did not prove the serious problem I had anticipated.

The numbers of Canadians involved in yoga seem to be ever increasing, despite what seem to be alien and outlandish trappings and exterior. At first it seemed to be a cult with strange rituals and jargon, but with further exposure I began to perceive a religiously based, very ancient, but very adaptable system for promoting personal growth, which includes impeccable physical and mental health ideals in its philosophy. ■