

Yoga, Sweat and Mysticism

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Yoga is fast, with a lot of jumping around, except when it's slower and done with smooth quiet movements. Yoga is young, except for the 54% of American yogis who are now getting gray hair (according to Yoga Journal studies). Yoga is done in partners, except when it's done solo, in trios or in groups. Yoga is about how you look; any yoga magazine makes that clear. But if you listen to the teachers, they tell you that Yoga is about how you feel, not how you look. But if you read the ancient yogic sages, they say Yoga is about who you are, deep inside. All of this is true, and none of it describes Yoga.

Yoga itself claims to be a science. It uses proven methodology to get predictable results, just like the battery in your car. On the physical level, the methodologies provide reliable results, often likened to medical therapies, yet the sages always targeted a deeper goal. Even the honored Patanjali, the ancient sage who wrote yoga's most popular book on the mind, agrees:

Perfection of the body is beauty, gracefulness, strength and brilliance.
—Yoga Sutras 3.47

If this were the goal, every Olympic ice skater would have attained it. If physical perfection were the goal, this text would end with that sutra, yet it continues with 40 more sutras about progressively deeper stages of yogic mastery. You attain the goal when you become one with consciousness, as was promised in the beginning of the book: to know your own Divine Self (*svaroopā*), inherent within you. The results are reliable: if you do what the sages teach, you will experience what they promise. This is yoga—pure mysticism, meaning it is about the mystery of life, the mystery that is hidden inside every human heart and being.

That is what distinguishes Yoga from some type of physical therapy. You can go to a yoga class in any environment, with any teacher, in any style, and the “peace that passeth understanding” begins to infect you somehow. An exercise program doesn't give you the same peace. Yoga is still being transmitted through the generations from teacher to student -- an osmosis that transcends mere technique.

It's happening when your teacher shares what she or he learns from teaching. Insights blossom while they are teaching, revealing the nature of life and its source. Teachers love to teach because it places in them in an ancient stream of unbroken knowing. They love to share what they are still learning.

I call it the “Divine Interweaving.” Drawing from my own heritage and lineage, “tantra” is the “loom” on which both form and formless are woven together in the inner infinity of time and space. You are the cloth that is woven of such a strange pairing; you are the mystical reality that you're just beginning to explore.

Yoga offers you so many ways into the inner exploration. Some practices keep you in perpetual motion, while others have you sit in stillness. The goal is the same. The Greeks said it this way, “Know thyself.” I say it this way, “At last, finally, after so many tries before, now, in this lifetime—know your own Divine Self.”

Swami Nirmalananda is an American-born woman formerly known as Rama Berch, who served as the founding president of Yoga Alliance for several years. In 1977 she moved her three children with her into an Ashram, to deepen her yoga studies both in the U.S. and India. She later created *Svaroopā*® yoga in order to bring Kashmiri Shaivism into asana practice. Now the founder and head of *Svaroopā*® Vidya Ashram in Pennsylvania, she teaches meditation and yoga philosophy both in-person and online.