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Editorial

Yoga-Sweet Fruit From Dharma's Tree

the Editor

Mommy. Anjali says yoga is inextricably rooted in Hindu cosmology. Is she right?

As the articles for this issue gathered from the far corners of the earth, delivered digitally to our Macintosh network in the Pacific Ocean, we noticed they contained more yoga than usual. There was our color poster, exploring the teachings of Yogaswami, Sri Lanka's sage. There was the unexpected and unsorrowful (we can say this, for death is, to the Hindu, an exalted state of oneness, liberation and light) stories of the two great souls mentioned by our publisher above. This provoked our pondering about yoga's relationship to religion. What's intriguing about this subject, from an editor's view, is that it has steadfast and eloquent adherents on each side. We expect lots of mail, and welcome it.

Many these days who are drawn to yoga are repelled by religion, and it's not difficult to understand why. Their religious leaders have run amuck, awash in sexual scandals, financial improprieties and terroristic plots. As if that weren't enough, religious institutions have turned into entrepreneurial endeavors, political movements and personality cults. No wonder soulful people seek other paths. And what path is more profound, more unworldly, more intimate in its communion with the Divine than yoga?

As the stature of institutionalized faith dwindles, yoga is increasingly depicted as unrelated to Hinduism, separate from religion altogether. If religion is discussed

at all in yoga classes or ashrams, it is in hushed tones, couched in spiritual Esperanto-an artificial, universalistic, cautiously nonsectarian language. In these contexts yoga is propounded as the "essence of all religions." All else that is commonly revered as religion is viewed as unnecessary accretions, something like the barnacles on the hull of a ship which impede its progress. From this perspective, yoga is the only necessary vessel for traversing the sea of births and deaths. The rest is superstition, dogma, mindless ritual and theological mumbo-jumbo. The sooner these are outgrown and eliminated, the better.

Now, don't get us wrong. We love yoga, practice yoga, teach yoga. It is the swiftest path to Truth, the great sadhana which brings the soul to knowledge of its true Self. Yoga is the highest Hindu ideal and teaching, the sweetest fruit on dharma's life-giving tree. And that's just the point-yoga is Hindu (as well as Jain, Sikh and Buddhist). That the two are considered by some as separate would have seemed strange to the great yogis of yore-to Patanjali, Vallabhacharya, Mahavira, Tirumular, Sankara and ten million others. They practiced yoga in the context of their Hinduness.

Without yoga, Hinduism is not deep. Without Hinduism, yoga is not whole, in fact, would not exist. Yoga cannot be severed from the body of Hinduism. It is like body and soul, fruit and seed, ghee and milk. No one will doubt that ghee is richer and more precious than ordinary milk, but we should not therefore diminish the value of milk and conclude that we should sell the family cow.

Hindus ourselves are responsible, for we are teaching the world that yoga has nothing to do with Hinduism. "Practice yoga," it is said, "and you will be a better Christian, a better Jew, a better Muslim, a better human being." So people practice yoga with sincerity and seriousness and are drawn deeper and deeper into its wonderful mysteries, into the teachings of karma, dharma, reincarnation, God-Realization and moksha, teachings which are antithetical to Christian-Judiac beliefs and scriptures. Perhaps these yogis become more illumined persons, but to say they are becoming better Christians is to misconstrue and mislead. Ask any Christian minister. Ask the Pope, who in 1989 admonished all Catholics not to practice meditation, zazen or yoga. The Pope knew these practices had become popular among his flock and that they would not make for better Catholics. He knew, and boldly stated, that such methods are antithetical to the Holy Church.

Catholics, to their credit, value both religion and yoga. We can't say the same

of all Hindus. We're the first to deny our Hinduness, as if such a denial of our roots were more apotheosis than apology. Yoga is dharma's fulfillment, not its transcendence. Ponder this. If you met a man from an Indian preceptorial lineage born to Hindu parents, who bore a Hindu name, dressed in the robes of an Indian monk, taught of karma, dhyana, yoga and moksha, quoted from the Vedas, Upanishads or the Gita, would you not think this man to be a Hindu? It seems a logical conclusion. Yet so many such men and women demure and call themselves something else, anything else.

This is not everyone's opinion, to be sure. Many will argue, as Swami Premananda, founder of the American Yoga Conservatory in New Jersey, vehemently did in a letter to the editors in 1985. Finding such perceptions "divisive and sectarian," he offered another perspective: "Your view that yoga is Hindu and only Hindu is viewed by this self as unfortunate indeed. No one would ever dispute the fact that yoga evolved from Hindu roots. However, that Union which is represented by the word yoga is not and cannot be held limited by parochial definitions. An apple is produced by the tree, and gives life to the person who eats it. The tree cannot be food for man, but it can produce food for the man. The apple's destiny and the tree's are distinct and separate. The apple can be transported around the world, and it will be food for whoever eats it. Yoga, like the apple, is a completely detached product which evolved from Hinduism and which has the ability to nourish any and all who partake of it. Yoga bridges all separations."

It seems to us that, indeed, yoga can and does nourish all those who ardently pursue it to its depths. But just as the Swami's apple tree produces, let's say, Macintoshes, the Hindu tree produces yogas. Swami implies that Macintoshes, once plucked from the tree and taken from the orchard, are somehow no longer apples (as yoga is, to him, no longer Hindu). This world is blessed with diverse species of philosophical trees, each unique, each nourishing. Shall we object to this multiplicity? Shall we try to eliminate differences and pretend there is actually only one "fruitness"? Shall we dismiss as useless category-making the subtle savor of mango, pear, fig and litchee? Certainly not! Let's enjoy what all paths have to offer mankind in his search for Truth.

Serious yoga sadhana leads one along a Hindu path to a Hindu goal-oneness with Satchidananda and realization of the timeless, formless, spaceless Absolute Reality, variously called Brahman, Parasivam, Self, Truth or God. Those who practice it should know this. TM provides a useful example. The most ardent of those who took refuge in TM, practicing daily sadhanas, went deeper and deeper. Not content with the sanitized, pre-shrunk, one-size-fits-all approach, they explored

further, sought out more knowledge about Hinduism and discovered the many rich fulfillments in yoga's source.

It may not be apparent in Swami Premananda's depiction, but apples don't last forever. If they are to feed the world, someone needs to plant more apple trees. If yoga is to nourish the spiritual hunger of future generations, someone must propagate Hindu dharma. We would urge all who teach yoga to do so.