

True and False Yoga by Arthur A. Wells

The Theosophical Review May 1901

Published in 1920's
Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai [Madras] India
The Theosophist Office, Adyar, Madras. India

I suppose that some excuse is needed for undertaking to speak upon a subject with which I can claim no practical familiarity, and which I have never myself taken up with that steady purpose and resolution which alone can bring about any actual result. In all probability, had I done so, I should have found myself under the laws of secrecy which seem so strictly to bind all who attain; and my best excuse for undertaking to speak of Yoga will probably be found in the fact that all my qualifications are comprised in the desire to communicate what seem to me to be results of some value to which I have been led in the course of my studies.

From an early period of my acquaintance with Theosophy I have given a good deal of thought to the Indian books on this subject, with the hope of being able, in time, to put their statements into such a shape as to bring them to some extent into relationship with our Western thought. It is completely useless to treat them as one would European scientific treatises, to compare and classify their statements and draw serious conclusions from their use of this word or that. Dictionary meanings are quite out of place; when an English scientific man undertakes, for example, to investigate the nature of the Vedic Deities by counting up the number of times their names occur, he is only manifesting his hopeless ignorance of how to set about his task. The early writer sees his subject before him, and proceeds to try to express it by throwing words at it in just the same vague sort of way in which a child with his first colour box will undertake to paint a red cow, with indefinite splashes of every colour at his command — his eye not yet sufficiently trained to know any difference between one and another shape or hue. It is entirely natural that the Western philosopher, on discovering this, should throw his studies aside; it *is* quite hopeless to expect any "scientific" results from them. But if by study and meditation you can bring before your mind, even vaguely, the reality which the books are trying to describe, then the case is altered. At once, every confused hint or half-intelligible word takes real meaning; each not only shows that your author himself saw what his words so faintly express, but also helps to clear up your own misty conception. You are able to see what was intentional "blind" (to use H. P. B.'s favourite word), and where the reality was beyond all power of expression. In this manner you come, by degrees, to possess, not an answer for an examination paper, but an intuition of the truth.

There are many around us who have more or less power to see what is not visible to the ordinary eye; who have attained (either by their own effort or by outward tuition, in either case aided by natural qualifications not shared by all) to the knowledge of something more than words can give; who are ready and desirous of undertaking to use this power for the world's benefit, of doing for it something, they know not what. I venture to think that it is time we ceased to meet them with mere denunciation of every attempt to gain or to improve these powers. Let us leave this attitude to theologians scenting heresy in everything unaccustomed. We are running serious risk of being left behind in the world's movement, as has already happened to the priests. If we cannot help and guide them, the Powers will have to find some one to take our place; and if our principles forbid us — so much the worse for our principles !

Let me begin by giving my own definitions of two Indian words often used in this connection. As Euclid does, let me *postulate*, for the purposes of my argument, that :

(1) *Hatha Yoga* is such exercise of body and mind as is calculated to gain certain special and extraordinary *powers*, to be used in this present life; and that (2) *Râja Yoga*, on the other hand consists in such exercise, also of body and mind, as may bring them by degrees fully and completely to express the higher Soul to which they belong. The benefit of this last is not affected by the death of the body, but continues for all time.

It will be seen at once that I repudiate the simple but crude distinction which is frequently made amongst us, that the first is of the body, the second of the mind. There is a sense in which this is partially true, as will be seen hereafter; but as usually given, it is entirely misleading. It is not the exercise, but the goal aimed at which restricts what is usually called *Hatha Yoga* to the lower nature; and all that I have to say here will be directed to maintaining and illustrating this position. Exercise of the mind only will never make a *Râja Yogin*. No one can attain save by bringing *all* his "bodies", buddhic, higher and lower mental, astral and physical, to work together as one organised whole under the guidance of the Self which is above them all. This, and no less, is the goal of the world's pilgrimage, and the object of those who seek to realise it more quickly by the steps of the Path; and it seems to me well that it should be clearly set before all.

Such a book as Vivekânanda's well-known *Râja Yoga* will answer well enough for an example of the Indian teaching to which I refer. It is intended for Western readers, and a good deal of trouble has been expended to make it intelligible to them; notwithstanding, the effect of the whole is thoroughly misleading, and this intentionally. Is anyone simple enough to imagine that an Indian author would really print and publish rules whereby anyone can make himself a *Yogin* by six months' practice, as he writes, with all the ironic gravity of Éliphas Lévi himself ? There is a little note at the end, which nine readers out of ten would pass over without notice, which tells you quite honestly that it is of no use undertaking all this without the help of a *Guru*. *That* is so true that nobody believes it; the *Guru* is needed to explain that the whole is only an elaborate system of "blinds" to keep you from the knowledge you seek, until your personal fitness is known and judged. The favourite "blind" of the Hindu writers is to put the *effect*, or one small part of the effect, for the *cause*. You are told that certain wonderful effects are produced by breathing alternately through the right and left nostril. In actual fact, you may go through the comical finger-gymnastic there described for all eternity and be neither the worse nor better for it. There *is* a practice, one result of which happens to be that the breath comes through the nostrils in this very way; but you will never find it printed in a book — *that* you must find out for yourself ! Similar is the *Prânayâma* of which he says so much. If an ordinary Englishman should undertake to hold his breath according to the rules set down, faithfully and perseveringly, I will answer for it that in three months he will have completely disorganised his interior, and before the six months are out will have attained all the powers (whatever they may be) possessed by a disembodied spirit — but he won't be alive ! All that is said of *Prânayâma* is true, but the control of *Prâna* is quite another thing from holding the physical breath. There will come, we are assured, a stage in our *Yoga* where the breath *will* be thus affected, but this will be a result, not a cause. It will *mark* a great advance, but not cause it.

With this preliminary, let us see how we can lay down, in general terms, what is our life-task. In

considering what we have to work with, we need not go into details as to the seven centres, chakrams or lotuses, which every Indian book enumerates, and no two alike. It will be sufficient for us to take notice only of the parting of the body into two stories, as it were, by what is known as the diaphragm, which is connected with the breathing apparatus and makes a separation, like a house-floor, between the upper and lower body. We thus have three divisions:

- (i) The lower body, the centre of the vegetative life, containing the organs of nutrition and reproduction. The nervous centre or brain of this is formed by the often-named " solar plexus " in its midst.

- (ii) The upper body, the seat of the circulation of the blood, "which is the life" — comprising the heart (to pump it), the lungs (to restore its virtue when spoilt by use), and the needful nerve-centres to keep up its movement.

- (iii) The brain; as to which we need notice, for the present, only the etheric centre in the space between the eyebrows, and the higher organ known as the pineal gland, in the very centre of all.

These three divisions are connected into a single organisation by the two sets of nerves. The lower body has its own set of nerves, known as the sympathetic system; whilst the brain has its special communication with the rest of the body by the spinal nerves, one side of which conveys to the brain the currents which we sense as " feeling," the other side carries the orders of the brain, which produce " motion " as a result of our feeling.

Nature's ideal of man is thus complete. The brain is to be the absolute ruler of the whole organism. The nutritive system goes on its own way in the lower organisations which have no brain to interfere with it; but in man every portion of the sympathetic system is accompanied — vivified as one may say — by twigs of the spinal nerves, which are to ensure that even in these matters the higher part of man is to have its say also. And as you go higher, the rule of the Higher Self is to be more complete over sensation and action alike; the very test and definition of imperfect development being (as F. Nietzsche rightly gives it) "the incapacity of *refusing*, when so directed by the will of the higher mind, to answer to the stimulus of the outer world.

But when we come to enquire how this ideal is carried out in actual life we shall find, very likely to our great astonishment, how very far short of this even the most highly developed of us fall. A curious statement, made not long ago by Mr. Leadbeater, will perhaps help us to understand. He pictures the atoms of the brain substance as laid out in a flat layer, and upon them the corresponding atoms of the astral; and describes the ordinary state of things to be that there are large regions in which there is no mutual communication one with the other. In this way, when the higher wishes to pass some knowledge to the lower, in many cases it cannot do this at all, or only by a circuitous route, through particles which have nothing directly to do with the message, but which happen to be in circuit with their counterparts. This is a very fruitful suggestion, which seems to account for the difficulty (sometimes amounting to actual impossibility) we all find now and then in assimilating new branches of knowledge. Now, something precisely like this meets us on the physical plane also. The more ordinary actions of life are performed automatically — that is to say, the stimulus of sensation reacts upon the motor nerves without being taken to the brain at all; we breathe, not only without conscious effort, but even against the

strongest resolution of the mind not to do so; there are very few, if any, who are conscious of the beating of their own hearts without feeling the pulse with their fingers.

Anyone who will make the attempt to focus his consciousness on any interior organ of his body will find he cannot distinguish one from the other; if he tries consciously to direct the nervous currents upon it, he will discover that, at least at first, they give no sign of obedience to his will. It is common to say that these actions were at first voluntary, but the mind has by degrees let go the reins — that once we had to learn to breathe, as we learn to walk, by repeated, conscious efforts, which have now become automatic, but it seems to me preferable to regard them as portions of the bodily life over which the mind has not yet *gained* control. For example, the nutritive functions, such as digestion, etc., go on under the direction of what I have already described as their own "brain" — the solar plexus — without relation to the mind at all; nevertheless, a strong nervous or mental shock will often be transmitted along the true brain nerves and throw these functions out of order. Were the mind in full *possession* of the body, it would be able as easily by a thought to set them right as to set them wrong; and herein lie all the mysteries of "faith-healing" and of the large majority of so-called "miracles". The mind, in short, rattles loosely in its body as a dried pea in a pod; it only touches its shell at the few points where sheer necessity has forced it to take the command.

Now I venture to lay it down that the *first* step of any kind of progress — call it Yoga if you prefer the word — is for the mind fully to possess the body. You cannot be a pupil at all, of Masters either white or black, until you are able at will to concentrate yourself fully on any defined portion of your physical frame. And this word "concentration" does not mean the mere vague "thinking" of it, but the becoming fully conscious of it as if it were an image set before the mental eye, the bringing the nerve and thought currents to bear upon it steadily, without interruption, and for just as long as you choose. It is not dreaming, but the very most energetic and continuous exercise of every power of mind and body alike which can be conceived. And the true reason why most of us are yet outside the Hall of Learning is, not want of goodwill on either side, but simply our want of power to begin even the preliminary exercises; just as a Liszt or a Rubinstein *could* not, if they would, take as a pupil a three years old child.

I came lately upon a few words, purporting to be written under a portrait of a Master, which express this view very forcibly. He says:

"I am your Master, but you are not my disciples. Though not my disciples, yet you are my children. Learn then of the nurses till you are ready for Me. The nurses are love and hate, fear and longing, struggle and despair, passion and desire. Meantime my children have my love with them."

And the "struggle and despair" here spoken of as belonging to the babes in the nurses' arms, are just the very process of the subjugation of the body I am referring to. When this is done comes the subjugation of the lower mind; but this step is almost impossible unless the first has been made safe.

In this sense the Indian books are quite right when they say that Hatha Yoga must in every case precede Raja Yoga, but we must carefully distinguish the true Yoga from the false. The false, commonly called Hatha Yoga, spends its time in learning *feats*, often horribly painful and always useless; the true aims at providing a perfect body for the use of the perfect Soul — the *mens sana in corpore sano* in the highest sense of the words. There cannot be perfect physical health so long as any portion of the body is, as it

were, dead to the mind to which it belongs, insensitive to the mind's orders, impervious to its nervous currents. And the action and reaction are equal; the mind is at all events incomplete, if not warped and injured by the condition of its body, the only means by which it can communicate with the world around it whose lessons it has to learn. Perfect sympathy and control of the body by the mind mean, then, health, physical and mental; as we go higher and place this whole organisation under similarly perfect control by the Higher Ego, we have moral health also; the Indian statement that such a condition cleanses from all "sin" is a mere truism. The "man" at that stage is beyond the "nurses" — passion and desire have no meaning for him; as the New Testament has it, "he has passed from death unto life and therefore he *cannot sin*".

If anyone should ask me to lay down for him some regular course of exercises for carrying out the object I have suggested, I can only answer that (in all probability) no two men will ever follow precisely the same course. He must work it out for himself on the lines I have indicated, learning from his successes, still more from his failures, watching himself carefully, alive to every hint books or lectures or chance words in conversation may have for him. He must not be discouraged by fear lest all his gains should be lost when the body is disintegrated. The feats of the false Yoga will assuredly not be renewed in a new body — that is true; but the soul that has learnt in one life fully to vivify and guide the body which then belonged to it, will find but little trouble in bringing a new one into order, and the whole Man — body, soul and spirit — will start his new life at vast advantage.

Nor should difficulties or apparent failures be any cause for discouragement or despair. He is not aiming to pass an examination, to gain entrance to a school, or at power to work wonders. All these *may* be for him in the future; at present he is but taking into his own hands, consciously and intelligently, the task usually left to the slow working of the circumstances of the passing hour. Wherever he begins, and however he arranges his labour, it cannot possibly be wasted, for his work is incomplete as long as any portion of the field is left untilled. At *some* point of his development the work must be begun; we cannot pass the critical period of the Fifth Round by merely drifting with the current. Why not begin at once? The reward of success is incalculable; there is no joy in life to be compared with the exercise of the complete activity of our whole nature which the attainment of the full control of which I have been speaking renders possible for the first time. This, and this only, is the happiness which our soul desires so blindly. When the mind degrades; itself to the lower pleasures, it makes to itself a misleading reflection of this, the only true happiness; mind and body *do* work together as a complete whole as far as it goes; this unity being, however, gained by entirely ignoring the Higher Ego. That they work thus in harmony is the pleasure — the temptation; that they can do this without caring for the true Life is the sin and shame. But who of us are, really *conscious* of anything higher? As long as we have to *resist* temptation — as long as we feel that to refrain is as the "cutting off the hand", or "putting out the eye" of the saying of the Christ, we show thereby that we are deaf and blind to the higher influences. We yield to the temptation because we cannot feel anything left for us but blankness and emptiness if we do not take our pleasure. But supposing that all were *not* blank to us? Suppose that our mind had learnt by sad experience no longer to "prefer to her divine husband the earthly wedlock with her terrestrial body"; that the desire-body was completely under her control and the physical nature also, so that all might be felt consciously working together for the noblest purposes without a single jarring note, a perfect instrument answering to the touch of the Divine player — what yet unknown revelations of bliss and glory might not come to the world through such a being, and what pure and perfect happiness for himself also?

When we are inclined (as we all are or have been in our time) to grumble that the Masters do not show

themselves, that we are not let into any school and do not have our eyes opened to the astral plane and the like, it may be good to remember that all I have spoken of is for the outside world we are tempted to think ourselves above. In the third volume of *The Secret Doctrine* (page 62) H.P.B. says: "As to ecstasy and such like kinds of self-illumination, this may be obtained without any teacher or initiation, for ecstasy is reached by an inward command and control of Self over the physical ego". It is simply the preliminary step to this control — a step often overlooked or even said to be unnecessary — which has been the subject of my paper, and I cannot better conclude it than with her warning that " even this is difficult, as the first necessary qualification is an unshakable belief in one's own powers and the Deity within oneself".