

# Yoga and Russia

from the book “*Hatha Yoga. Theory and Practice*”. Vol. 1  
by Vladimir Afanasyev

*Rendered from the original Russian.*

**Question to the author:** I can understand the reason why Western countries are interested in yoga since Indian teachers introduced it there at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But why do you think Russia got interested in yoga as well?

**Author:** Once upon a time, back in the Soviet period, a person I knew from Zaporozhye (Ukraine) suggested an idea that in our country the way to yoga goes through illness. Indeed, many of those who opted for and kept on practicing yoga aimed at improving failed health, especially when there was no more credibility in conventional medicine, which mainly emphasized drug therapy with its inevitable side effects that often cause complications and drug addiction. As an American toxicologist, E. C. Lambert, aptly put it, “There are patients who cannot be helped but there are no such patients who cannot be hurt.” Unlike medicine, yoga *cannot* hurt if practiced correctly and there are a lot of people whom it has helped. Yoga managed to get them out of extremely critical mental states and healed them from physical ailments. By stating this, I am in no way comparing yoga to medicine. Each of them has a considerable scope of work to do. The therapeutic benefits of asanas and other yoga exercises are not an end in themselves. Its tasks are rather different.

In Soviet times, people did yoga individually by “samizdat” books (self-publish books) and much less often in small and inexperienced, in terms of teaching level, “health groups”, which the authorities did not take seriously or as a real threat to the state ideological foundations and therefore, in general, turned a blind eye to them. Nevertheless, the interest to yoga in *those* days was huge and genuine and most of those interested were men, many of whom had no troubles with their health. Yoga for us, luckily I was one of them, happened to be a breath of freedom which people of the Soviet era greatly missed.

Nowadays people, mostly women, who practice yoga or rather “go to yoga” are quite healthy having experienced the impact of ubiquitous advertising that ensures quick weight loss, body fitness and sex appeal. Can yoga really give it to them? Actually, yes it can but with a number of stipulations. However, this kind of leisure pursuit is certainly a more positive factor, as opposed to nightclubs and discos with their mind-numbing

“music” and intoxicating atmosphere, or to evening get-togethers in front of the TV. As for the male population, considering the current decline in the general culture of the nation, their interest in yoga as well as in spiritual issues in general, has dropped markedly. However, there are certainly some enthusiasts among others who turn to yoga and practice it in one form or another on their own or in groups. My teaching expertise allows me to say that even when men start practicing yoga in a group, they “fall out of the race” more quickly than women who have distinctively stronger motivation and will. Only few master yoga and practice it intensively.

The basic group of people that have something to do with yoga consists of those who are sort of interested in it: know (read) or have heard some ideas (visited a lecture or a seminar) done some exercises or attended group classes but have not decided yet if they need it or not. The main problem among the majority of those undecideds, as my experience suggests, is defined by a simple phrase “I would like to but... .” Some people are held back by the religious factor that “we are Christians after all...”; “Devil takes hold of” others, put simply, this is the demon of laziness; some lack patience and for others a “working schedule does not let them”; some people “wash workout clothes” and forget “to take them along” for weeks; others get divorced and could not care less! A tenth, newly-weds, need to settle down, have kids and raise them. A twentieth are urged “to invest money into business!” Thus, behind the endless “I would like to but...” life passes by with the body wearing down, the will weakening and the heart emptying.

The body is inert by nature as well as bodily consciousness. People have their life values and guidelines blurred. If they get focused solely on material well-being and “personal happiness”, it will inevitably cause a loss of meaning in life, the so-called *crisis of purpose* or, in the language of psychology, an “*existential vacuum*” that weakens the mighty human will. And mind... it is always ready to make excuses for human weaknesses and imperfections.

There was a representative experiment carried out by an American professor of psychology Ed Diener (Edward Diener, year of birth 1946) who worked on happiness and well-being issues for 25 years. In his studies, he tried to determine how much well-to-do people, the middle class and the poor were satisfied with their lives. He came to the conclusion that the rich have only slightly higher results than the middle class and poor people. But the most interesting twist he identified was when he paid attention to dynamics. It appeared that the greatest happiness people experienced satisfying their needs was when they “make their way in life”, i.e. when they rose above poverty, social plight and made an effort, they quickly became

successful and well-off. But once a person develops the average level of well-being, all his contentment with his own solvency and his opportunities gradually erode. It all comes up because, apart from competition with a neighbor in “who has the best trimmed lawn and the most expensive shoes”, there is nothing special to strive for. This is where yoga can be a great help to go ahead and not just make one’s way in life but to have a genuine life filled with the *paramount* meaning of life: attain Self-realization and be a benefit to humanity!

Finally, there are some men worth mentioning who categorically reject yoga because of their religious beliefs and are openly hostile to it. The most active of them instigate anti-yoga campaigns run particularly via the Internet. While making spiritual enlightenment their backing, which they sincerely believe they promote, those aggressive faith followers enjoy crying out, on behalf of God, “the intrigues of Devil”, “spiritual danger of meditation, asanas”, and God only knows what else which does not fit into their canonically defined outlook. They are puffed up with their self-righteous involvement in absolute Truth and are trying to call ill feeling towards the spiritual culture of the traditionally friendly Indian people whom they know nothing about. Thus by sowing discord, they show clumsy assistance to Omnibenevolent as well as to their own religion.

“As a matter of fact, one should explore the Orient no sooner than one is 30 years old and only after profound self-examination on mastering fundamental forms of European culture.”<sup>1</sup>

*Alekseev V. M. (1881-1951),  
Russian Orientalist, the member of  
the Academy of Sciences*

For fairness’ sake, it should be said that sometimes yoga followers themselves, especially Russian, give a good reason for that as they neglect yogic principles which call out the followers for *modesty*<sup>2</sup>, and boastfully capture themselves on photos in extremely difficult physical postures and parade them around the world, demonstrating “true yoga” and their outstanding achievements. The Internet is flooded with such shots and countless advertising leaflets which tout people to come to another seminar by “one of the best yoga masters in Russia.” In this sense, an average humble Christian from the provinces is much worthier to be called a yogi than a “master” of that kind. What special commission is there, I venture to ask, to determine who is “the best” and who is not? Who is the first and who is the last? It is all but meritorious for a yoga master to try and appear among the chosen in the eyes of the ignorant public. One should exercise greater prudence, bearing in mind a warning of Lord Jesus, “So the last shall be first, and the first last” (Matt. 19: 30)! Wouldn’t it turn out exactly like He said?

There are lots of examples demonstrating this situation. Now tell me, why the author of the article, “Yoga and Morality”, published on an English web-site, had to include a complicated yoga-asana, posed by him, with a reference to a “famous Yoga Master (such and such)” from a neighboring Slavic country? What did my colleague want to express by this? That it is as difficult to comply with yogic morality as it is to hold such a posture? If so, then I completely agree and approve the author’s smart vein! If not, then it is as hard to understand what this pose has to do with morality.

Unfortunately, the exploitation of yoga for commercial purposes in Russia, is ruining its intimacy in favor of thoughtless populism, which seems to come from the prevailing trend back to the beginning of the 2000s that has developed into a disease and has become commonplace. Wittingly or unwittingly some magazines promote it by illustratively exposing yoga as a glamorous activity that calls attention primarily to the external effect. Yes, it is beautiful. It is eye-catching, stylish and sexy! But what does yoga have to do with it? Commercial hints that stream from the pages of some magazines develop to the highest point (*fortissimo!*) as they announce a “unique chance” to meet “the world's best yoga teachers” and “Himalayan yogis” who are ready to conduct yoga classes at 30 % discount in the capital of our country. Why couldn’t they peacefully stay in their Himalayas caves, I wonder? And when they introduce another distinguished foreign guest invited to our country as the “First disciple” and “one of the most respected yoga teachers in the world!”

With all the variety of schools, traditions and styles of yoga in the world today, existing as completely independent and quite stand-alone institutes of psychophysical and spiritual culture, such statements sound ridiculous.

And it is an absolutely acceptable thing for these magazines to apply the adjective “leading” to a yoga teacher no matter what style he/she teaches. There are leading programmers, operators, engineers, scientists, any experts of secular occupation. A teacher, by virtue of his/her unique teacher’s mission to *lead* students through a class, passing the knowledge to them, needs no assessment of this kind. Even more so in yoga. It's like meditation that does not need the adjective “transcendental” because meditation *as such*, *dhyana*, is either transcendental or it is not meditation at all but concentration. Where did the slavish manner to praise and assign titles like “leading” or “best” come from? One can and should praise a person for his services, thus encouraging his work, his ambition and skills. One can *admire* and *appreciate* a person but only God and Guru, who has realized God, are worthy of glorifying!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alekseev V.M. *“The Academic Study of the Orient.”* Moscow: Nauka GRVL Publishers 1982, 341 p.

<sup>2</sup> Modesty (Sanskrit *khri*) is considered a Divine property of soul in yoga. It is directly mentioned to, e.g. in *“Bhagavad Gita”* (chapter 16, verse 2).