CHAPTER 1

HOW YOGA WON THE WEST

In the Beginning…

‘Will yoga make me thin and happy?’ Thus, my path of yoga began. I didn’t find yoga because I was interested in union with some divine ultimate reality. I wasn’t a philosophy or religious studies student searching for answers to the existential nature of my being. I didn’t stumble onto the path of yoga because I happened to be born into a family who practiced it. I didn’t even know I was looking for yoga. I was a depressed and overweight twenty-one-year-old searching for a way to get thin, because I believed that was the key to my happiness. At the time I worked in a flower shop and a woman there befriended me. She watched me struggle with myself and after a few weeks asked whether I had ever tried yoga. I answered no and asked her my most important question: would it make me thin and happy? Now, a decade later, every time I step on my mat, I offer gratitude to my first teacher, Ute, whose response to that question was: You never know what will unfold when you step on the mat.

What brought you to your mat for the first time? And, if you have yet to step on a mat, what kinds of curiosities lead you to pick up this book?
Today, it seems like yoga is the solution to everything. We hear doctors telling us it’s good for our health; psychologists say it’s good for our emotional well-being; yoga teachers talk about union with something bigger than the human experience; gurus talk about alternative states of consciousness; and perhaps your friends have shared with you how yoga has changed their lives. Can a practice really do all of that? With all these different experiences of it, and prescriptions of why to use it, what is yoga anyway?

Throughout the history of humankind, we have attempted, in myriad ways, to answer three questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? How should I live my life? When I was searching for the key to my happiness, unconsciously I was in the throes of trying to answer these questions. Up until that point in my life, I had searched for the answers to those questions everywhere, except within myself. I was so used to looking to my parents for answers, or to academia, to the church, or to what my peers were doing, that I never stopped to think that, if I could learn to listen to that faint whisper inside myself, I would have my own answers to those questions.

Stepping on the Mat

When I stood on my mat for the first time, I experienced anger, frustration, sadness, curiosity, overwhelming peace, silence, and an inner critic with an incredibly loud voice. I know: a lot was happening! Despite the crowd of voices and experiences, what really happened on the mat was that for the first time I witnessed the entirety of what was happening inside of me. And because I could witness it, another part of me awoke – an aspect of myself that had incredible compassion, tolerance, and patience for the part of me that was hurting.

As I reached for my toes (intent on going further into the stretch than anyone else in the room) and my hamstrings sung out in defiance, for a brief moment I was able to make a connection between how hard I was pushing myself to ‘look the best’ in the pose and how hard I was pushing myself in life to live up to some idealized version of me. That awareness only lasted a moment, but it was enough to bring me back to my mat, again and again. I was hooked; I wanted to know why bending forward to touch my toes brought up such a large inner experience. And what was it about being aware of my body in this way that allowed me to witness...
my thoughts and feelings, instead of unconsciously and habitually reacting to them? What was it about the practice that brought forth that witnessing consciousness? Ute was right: There is no telling what will unfold when I am being present with myself, and being on the mat teaches me that.

It is this mystery of myself that has kept me going for the past decade. After that first class, I knew yoga was about much more than twisting my body into a pretzel. I had a sense it was about something much bigger even than losing weight. There was a resonance with something bigger than me, a sensation that felt oddly familiar. It was the sensation I once had of the Holy Spirit. It was the same sensation I felt after a long, exhausting climb to the top of a mountain. It was the same depth of silence I felt after a fresh snowfall. That sensation was there in the last gaze my grandma ever gave me. It has been called many names throughout the course of human history, and, whatever it is, I recognized that something about presence and reaching for my toes allowed me to experience it, within myself, again.

The Exploration of Yoga

As yoga becomes more and more mainstream in the West, there are more and more attempts to define and explain what this ancient practice is. To some people it is a hippie movement, to others a cult religion, and to still others a new fad in the exercise industry. There are numerous commentaries on the practice, a multitude of scholastic research papers and books, several scientific studies on its physical effects, and myriad individual stories about its personal effects. More often than not, the more visible something becomes, the more questions there are about it. Many of my new students ask questions like: ‘I’m not really flexible, can I still do yoga?’ ‘Will practicing yoga make my stress go away?’ and ‘Why can’t I breathe deeply?’

Western culture tends to like answers, looking for physical proof and experiencing trepidation about trusting the unknown. Further, Westerners tend to thrive on experience, sensations, and a depth of curiosity that drives us toward creative endeavors. It makes sense that the majority of Westerners want to know a bit about what they are going to do before they do it. And learning a bit about yoga philosophy before, or while, engaging with a practice is supportive of a fuller embodiment of the practice. The benefits of yoga are greatly enhanced when there is
an understanding of the intention (and philosophy) behind it. I hope this essay will offer you some explanations of the ever-evolving nature of yoga, evoke further curiosity about what it is, and shed light on how this current form of yoga is both the same and different from its traditional roots.

It’s All a Matter of Perspective

Over thousands of years, as the practice of yoga has moved from culture to culture, the expression and perception of yoga have changed several times. There are undeniable core truths to the philosophy and practice of yoga, and as it moves between cultures and continents the practice is flexible enough to use the current language and cultural consciousness to adapt its image. Just as you might dress up for a wedding or down for pizza night while who you are remains intact, yoga may be dressed differently in each culture, or in each tradition, while its core remains the same. Modern definitions and attempts to explain the path of yoga are filtered through cultural and individual experience.

While this essay might offer you a general overview of how yoga became what it is today, keep in mind that the explanations I offer come through the filter of my own experience. While you might read all about yoga from others’ perspectives, stepping onto your mat will reveal your own mystery and give you a deeper meaning of yoga than I, or any other author, might be able to provide for you. As the great teacher K. Pattabhi Jois used to say, ‘Practice, practice, practice. Ninety-nine percent practice. One percent theory.’ My hope is that, as a result of reading this essay, a spark of curiosity will be lit and you will take it upon yourself to seek out your own experience of yoga.

The filter of experience through which you will be reading comes from a white, middle-class, fourth-generation-American female, who has spent only a decade of her life in self-study (svadhyaya), practice (tapas), and letting go to something bigger than her (ishvara pranidhanani). Almost all of the teachers I have had the privilege of learning from learned from someone who learned from someone who trained with a teacher in India. My path of yoga is unique to me, and has provided me with opportunities to experience some of the depth of what yoga is ultimately translated as: union.
The Birth of Yoga

In its most literal translation, yoga means ‘to yoke’ or ‘to unite.’ A broad, encompassing definition refers to the joining together of one’s physical experience with universal energy. To gather a sense of what this means, let’s start at the beginning and explore the historical roots of yoga. Perhaps reading the story of the evolution of this practice will provide some insight into how our innate human urge to understand and unite with the unknown took shape in what became called the practice of yoga. Perhaps this way of telling the story will enable you to see the ever-evolving nature of yoga, and how its essence has stayed the same while its form has changed to meet the demands of each evolving time period.

The first sign of anything that resembled what we now think of as yoga was an emblem on a business-card-like impression called the Pashupati seal. Imagine the body of a man, sitting in padmasana (lotus position: legs crossed with ankles by hip creases), wearing a striped tunic, a mask, and a huge headdress in the shape of two large horns. The Pashupati seal was created in the Indus Valley in around 6500 BCE, a period known as the Pre-Vedic Age. The Pre-Vedic Age encompassed the time period before the written word (which meant that the only way to pass anything on was through symbols and oral recitation), before traditionally recognized religions such as Hinduism, and at a time in human history when we were connected (or united) with nature in a way that is now mostly foreign to us.

In part because there was not yet any written language, there were many great and layered meanings behind symbols such as the Pashupati seal. In lieu of written narratives, these symbols held rich stories within their images. Perhaps this was the beginning of the long history of using symbolism to describe experiences that seem to be indescribable. Using symbols allowed each person to pass on both the well-defined rituals of a yoga practice and the personal (story-like) experiences embedded within the teachings. One of the stories of this seal had to do with the image of Shiva, an aspect of divine consciousness, who sat in the woods to expound upon a path that would lead individuals to divine realization. This particular symbol of Shiva spoke of being in union with both his higher and lower natures and is the platform for many of the yogic rituals of meditation that seek to bring unity between the human and divine aspects of oneself.
What does ‘Divine’ Mean to You?

It feels prudent to take a moment to pause in this history to define what I mean when I say ‘divine.’ When I use the word ‘divine,’ I am speaking about a great mystery – about an ineffable experience humans are incapable of describing with words. Because divine experience is beyond description, the divine has been embodied into forms so that it is easier to speak about and relate to. As humans, we use form, whether that is words, symbols, or movements, to communicate with one another. Experiences that go beyond words necessitate form. The form, as a symbol of the ineffable experience, may then be used to speak about the ineffable experience. When I mention the divine throughout this essay I am referring to whatever symbol or form you might use to describe your experience of something that feels indescribable to you.

In human history, we have tried several different ways to speak about these kinds of experience. This is evidenced by the numerous religions and philosophies that all attempt to give form and name to the eternal essence that is the common thread through them all. This is what has happened with yoga. Its essence remains unchanged, while its form has evolved throughout history. Yoga’s essence adapts to fit the familiar symbols in each culture and time period.

A New Era Begins…

After the Pre-Vedic Age, the written word was developed. From this time period, known as the Vedic Age, several important evolutionary steps in yoga occurred. At this time, those adept at practicing and guiding others along the path of yoga were not the priests but the rishis and sages. They were people who lived in union (in yoga) in nature. They took a natural way of life and modeled a discipline after it that came to be known as yoga. Their teachings led to the first glimpses of how internal inquiry could guide an individual on the path of living in union with the divine. Their wisdom was written and became known as the Vedas.

The study of the Vedas is non-dual, meaning that the Vedas explain the inherent nature of the divine within physical experience. There is no separation (no dualistic relationship) between this reality and the divine.
There are four main texts that make up the Vedas – the *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*. The Vedas were regarded as a form of sacred knowledge – thus rendering the actual Sanskrit words as sacred themselves. These texts spelled out the proper performance of sacrifices and rituals while also recording incantations meant to bring about union with the divine.

For thousands of years, humans had been living in union with nature, learning from it and communing with it. Humans who were sensitive to the ways of the Earth (e.g., the seasons, cycles, and patterns) and those who were able to spend time contemplating their existence within nature had cultivated great experiential wisdom from yoga. These abilities and practices had been passed down the generations through spoken word and symbols alone. Then, the advent of the written word made available the ability to write down these ancient secrets and practices. Thus the recorded history of yoga began.

The Vedic Age was also the beginning of what we now know in the yoga world as *mantra*. *Mantra* is the painstaking memorization and recitation of the exact tone and enunciation of the Vedic scriptures, and is used by a path of yoga we have come to know as Japa yoga. In this form the divine makes itself known through the devotion of precise recitation. Japa yoga is integral to the devotional form of yoga known as Bhakti yoga. Cultivated by reciting the Vedas, performing and attending ritual sacrifices, and through the devotional practice of Bhakti yoga, these now-familiar ideas of what yoga is associated with emerged in the Vedic time period: concentration, watchfulness, austerity, watching the breath (meditation), and devotion. Spiritual life flourished in the Vedic Age.

What Goes Up Must Come Down

The essence of evolution is being able to adapt to environmental change. As change is inherent in life, what adapts well will survive. Have you ever noticed that, after a while, when it feels like your life is flourishing, a challenge comes along, oftentimes wiping out the feelings of prosperity? This is also a pattern in the larger picture of life: there is a pattern of golden ages, followed by dark ages, followed by rebuilding in middle ages, only to allow for more golden ages, and so on. Throughout these natural cycles of life and death, birth and rebirth, that which remains is...
that which is best able to adapt to the changes, and therefore evolves and thrives.

Marking the end of the prosperous Vedic Age around 500 BCE, a war began that would later become known through the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. This war, between two ruling families, plunged India into its Dark Ages. Consider what happens for you when life becomes dark, uncertain, or terrifying. I know that, when I fall into that kind of experience in my life, my tendency is to cling to what feels solid and secure. The ways in which the people responded to The Great War were not so different. During the centuries that followed, known as the Brahmanical Age, priests (or brahmans) became the elite class. They became the primary advisors to the ruling class and used their rhetoric on religious teachings to encourage a very strict ritualistic approach towards governing. The performance of rituals and sacrifice was an exact science and taken to be literal. Only people of the brahman class could perform rituals or seek out the sacred texts. The brahmans systematized the Vedas. The rishis and sages no longer had large influence, but instead became part of the fringes of society – *sannyasins* (hermits) living in the forest.

The path taken by this fringe group diverged. One group continued to live on the outskirts but stayed connected with the Vedic teachings of the time. They wrote a sacred text known as the *Aranyakas* (forest teachings) and paved the way for the Upanishads. They still engaged in rituals, but the focus of these rituals was on the internal nature of sacrifice.

The other half continued to explore the ancient rites in a non-orthodox way. They formed a band of nomads that became known as the Vrratya Brothers and traveled around, exploring sex, magic, breath, and subtle energy. In contrast to the brahman class, which gave highest recognition to the masculine energy of the divine, the Vrratya Brothers gave more credence and reverence to the feminine forms of energy. This fringe of society helped to seed the roots of a well-developed lineage of yoga today, known as tantric yoga.

While it was beginning to take on several different forms, yoga’s essence – union with the great mystery of life – still lived on in these different expressions. The essence of yoga (concentration, mindfulness, present moment attention, and union with the divine) lived on through all these different expressions. It would be easy to say that, because the teachings looked different, it was no longer yoga. But that would be like saying that, because you look different at age eighty from how you looked at birth, you are no longer you.
A Shift in Perspective

The Post-Vedic Age was populated with a diverse group of people. With such diversity, and the myriad ways to explore the ancient traditions, an ideological revolution occurred. While the brahmans were still the elite class, their perception of yoga evolved. This path was now being explored with more esoteric wisdom and transcendental knowledge. As opposed to external sacrifices, inner worship and meditative practices abounded. This revolution of thought, based on previous centuries of differing experiences, had an atmosphere that encouraged exploration of the unknown. The Upanishads, more sacred texts of yogic philosophy, were the product of this revolution.

As wisdom is gained through experience, concepts become clarified and unfold in deeper meaning. While the Upanishads were radically different from the Vedas, they were not a departure from them, but rather an evolution. The Upanishads made explicit what the Vedas had hinted at. Whereas the Vedas hinted at the mystery of form, the Upanishads wrote that behind the reality of multiple forms exists an unchanging single being. The Upanishads allowed for difference in form with the recognition of that form as one expression of a single, united, divine consciousness. The Upanishads also held that access to the divine comes purely from inside; while helpful, no external means of accessing the divine are necessary.

Four concepts from the Post-Vedic Age connected the past with what would become the future of yoga. Within these four concepts ring the tones of early Pre-Vedic worship and the forms of Buddhism and Jainism (two religions that formed out of this time period’s influence) that were yet to come. The four concepts are:

- Innermost nature is a total mirror of outermost nature and is called *atman* (or, in the West, self).
- Realization of self and ultimate reality frees us from suffering.
- Thoughts and actions determine what is to come (destiny) and *karma* is becoming what you identify with.
- Unless one is liberated and achieves ultimate reality, one will be reborn (laying out, for the first time, a clarification of reincarnation).

The Pre-Classical Age took these four concepts and extrapolated upon them in a few different ways. Six schools of philosophy emerged; both
Buddhism and Jainism were born; and the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, were written. These great epics were a classical example of a return to using story and symbol to bring forth a message. Their contents offer examples of ‘right action’ by demonstrating moral disciplines and wisdom over action through their characters’ adventures.

**The Father of Modern Yoga**

The Classical Age (100 BCE to 500 CE) is the next stop in this story. This was when what the West knows as yoga and all that came before began to merge. Somewhere in this time period, a sage called Patañjali wrote the first book outlining, in simple terms, practical ways for the common person to access the royal path of yoga, Raja yoga, in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patañjali.

There are many outstanding commentaries on the *Yoga Sutras*, so I will refrain from going into very much depth about them here. In short, the *Yoga Sutras* of Patañjali outline methods to still the mind. In book two of the *Sutras*, Patañjali writes about the eight limbs of Raja yoga. He expresses that, since the body and mind are inseparable, both must learn how to become still in order to sense the subtle expressions, the quiet whispers, of the divine. Asana (postures) and pranayama (breath control) are but two of the eight limbs that aid an individual in bringing stillness to his or her being. This is the first mention in the history of yoga of the reason for postural practice.

**The Cycle Repeats Itself**

What does all this history have to do with how yoga is shaping a sphere of influence in the West? While it may not look the same every time, history does repeat itself. Once again, yoga was flourishing. Its influence in the East grew for many centuries. The aforementioned six schools of Indian philosophy (one of which was yoga) were born out of this history. The fringe group that seeded the roots for tantra grew ever more discerning with their study of subtle energy and the divine feminine energy. Further expositions on yoga (which had more of an emphasis on
postural practice), such as the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, were written to clarify aspects of Patañjali’s *Yoga Sutras*. By the Post-Classical Age (1300–1700), India had risen out of the Dark and Middle Ages and found herself flourishing again, in a way reminiscent of the Vedic Age. But then, with the invasion and colonization of India by the British in the early nineteenth century, yoga was once again asked to survive the challenge of change, and evolve.

In the early years of British rule, yoga and the forms it took were greatly discouraged and looked down upon. In response, yoga went underground. This time its practitioners did not only go to the forests; they also found a way to keep the practice alive under the guise of entertainment. An inspired yoga practitioner named T. S. Krishnamacharya formed traveling ‘circuses’ – demonstrations of the physical aspect of yoga. While these were often seen as entertainment by the ruling classes, the ancient line of yogic philosophy and practice was being passed on to the students of these traveling exhibitions. Once again, yoga found a way to adapt, evolve, and continue its influence.

Over time these displays of great physical ability were brought to Europe, where traditional *asanas* were mixed with the dynamic flowing forms of European calisthenics, which still have great influence on how Westerners view yoga practice today. In 1893, Swami Vivekananda, an intensely brilliant young man with a deep desire to transmit the message of unity through multiplicity, traveled to Chicago to address the Parliament of Religions. His teachings were some of the very first yogic teachings to and gain respect from people in the United States. Unlike how yoga is currently viewed in the West, Vivekananda’s teachings had nothing to do with twisting bodies into pretzels. Instead, his message carried the essence of yogic teachings about union through encouraging peace, unity, and compassion. As Westerners grew interested in yoga, some began traveling to India to study with teachers such as Krishnamacharya, his son T. K. V. Desikachar, son-in-law B. K. S. Iyengar, and esteemed student K. Pattabhi Jois.

**How Yoga Won the West**

While yoga was being practiced among the wealthy as early as the late 1800s in the United States, Krishnamacharya’s first female student, Indra Devi, is credited with making yoga popular in the United States. Similarly
to how Krishnamacharya used yoga’s physical component to attract new students, Devi emphasized yoga’s benefit to personal health. This has contributed to the evolution of yoga as we know it in the West. There are more branches on the family tree of yoga than ever before. While yoga may take on many forms, they are all born from the same tree.

My path to yoga began with the question, ‘Will it make me thin and happy?’ and I am forever grateful for the introduction of yoga for physical benefit in the West. But, as you have just read, there is quite a bit more to yoga than being able to twist your body into a pretzel. One philosophical concept in the Yoga Sutras is that there is a differentiation between layers of consciousness. This can be likened to the following analogy: Consider the various forms water may take – liquid, solid and gas. The solid state is the easiest to discern, to become aware of, and, as your ability to perceive with your senses deepens, so does your sensitivity in discerning the multitude of ranges between solids, liquids, and gases.

Perhaps, then, it makes sense that Western culture would need to be introduced to yoga in its densest form – that is, under the guise of its being a physical practice. No matter how yoga is known, no matter what form it takes in Western culture, yoga is ever-evolving. It will adapt and find expression in a way that makes sense to the society and culture of each era. This does not take away from the unchanging essence of yoga. Behind the multiplicity of forms lies a single, unchanging truth. There is unity within different forms. This is the ever-evolving nature of yoga.