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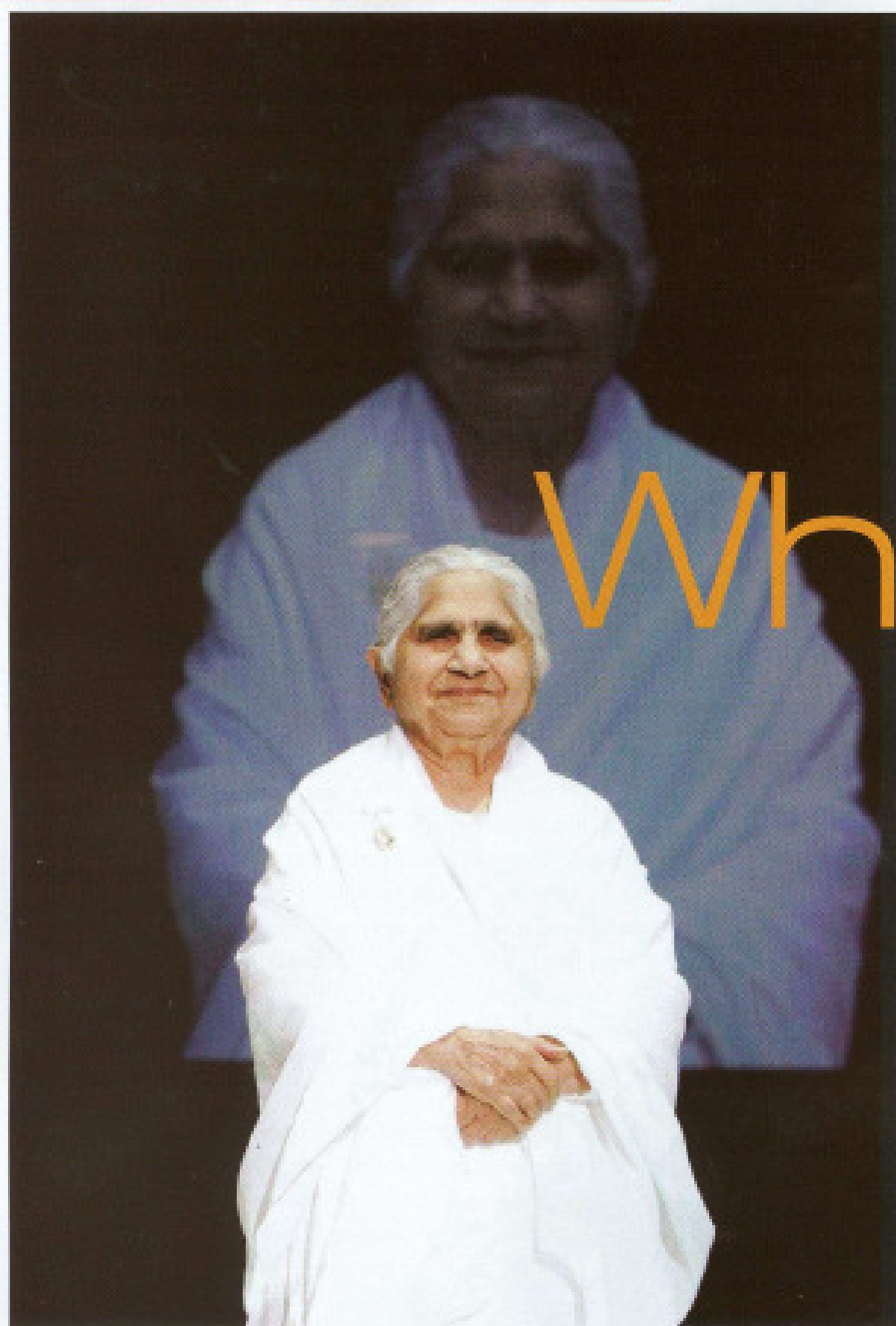
Royal Yoga Meditation

Ancient techniques for peaceful living

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PLUS WHAT'S HOT VEGETARIAN RECIPES GREEN-LIVING



This is not meditation as you may know it. Nor is Raja Yoga yoga as you may know it.

Words:
Melissa
Wheeler

In fact, this ancient system of meditation and spiritual understanding is more akin (for us westernised yogis) to its clinical great-granddaughter, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy – all the rage in the psychotherapy-culture world – for its “mind-altering” influence. The key difference here, of course is the yoga (union), the connection with God; Baba; Shiva or the Supreme Being which sets it apart holistically. Shiva is the Absolute Truth and our supreme benefactor in Raja Yoga, the natural and peaceful reality of our being, unfettered by the bonds of time and space in the world of matter. As such, He is removed from us and the world of matter and so is able to guide us towards our true

selves and show us who we really are. By meditating on his perfect, pure qualities we can erase the negative Sanskars from our mind, nourish our intellect and remain true to our innate, peaceful nature. The form in which we visualise Him may vary – old chap with long white beard perhaps? – but the qualities and virtues are unchanging.

While many therapies claim to answer some, or many, of our questions as to our purpose and to our means of achieving happiness, Raja Yoga believes it answers all our questions in the simplest, purest and

What is

truest form. One distinguishing, and endearing, characteristic of the Brahma Kumaris is their philosophy that they are not giving us anything we don't already possess. All BK programs seek to instill positive values through supporting individuals in recognising their own inherent qualities, in making the most of their lives. It is for this reason that the Brahma Kumaris, which means “Sons and Daughters of Brahma” in Hindi, has consistently refused to charge its students, even turning down a sizeable donation from the Heritage Lottery Fund for its Diamond House extension to Global Co-operation House a few years ago. The organisation's philosophy, as expressed by our teacher, is that understanding ourselves, knowing our intrinsic qualities and our innate value is too valuable and precious a gift to charge for. All of which makes the growth of the national co-ordinating office, Global Co-operation House, and the work carried out there all the more remarkable. The meditation is the essence of this philosophy and the ultimate goal is to live this way.

In addition to offering courses in Raja Yoga meditation as a way of living, the foundation runs free workshops, seminars and lectures in other aspects of self-development such as positive thinking, self-esteem, anger management and stress free living. Such therapies are all areas of popular currency in our addictive, materialistic, high-octane and stressed environment today; a period of ignorance and chaos termed as the Iron Age in Raja Yoga or as

Kali Yug, or the Steel Age for those more familiar with the Hindu Vedic scriptures. The motivation here is that we have lost touch with the essence of being, what it means to be a peaceful human soul and that we increasingly focus on the superficial and material. Being pulled towards the physical realities of our world, we are distracted from our truth by illusions. These illusions are referred to as the *Mayas* and can be compared to the temptation of the Serpent in Christian scriptures – their vice is to draw us away from the truth and dis-

but does have many connections with Hinduism”, European Director Sister Jayanti explains. Their work is also a perfect example of what William Bloom terms “Holistic Spirituality” in his book *Solution: the Holistic Manifesto*.

It was at this point, entering the fourth week of the course, that I felt in need of a brief semantics refresher. Yoga, of course, means “Union”. Union between our mind, body and soul. Union with others. Union with our planet and all other sentient beings. Many of our problems

anger, frustration, greed...); one of the goals in Raja Yoga is to teach us to perform only elevated actions, karma yoga, and to accept that what comes our way is merely a settling of our accounts and nothing more: “Learn to wish that everything should come to pass exactly as it does” (Epictetus 55-c.135) is a good phrase to keep in mind. To take this analogy one step further, even if ignorance has led us into the karmic “red”, and even if we have become karmically “bankrupt”, we can become “solvent” again simply by acting with good intent;

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ort our perception by employing Anger, Greed, Ego, Lust and Attachment.

A variation on a life class with a philosophical and spiritual core, the Brahma Kumaris’ Raja Yoga is unique and refreshing for another reason: it is inclusive of all faiths – a Zen USP in our world today! There is much confusion; division and indeed conflict, surrounding faith, religion and spirituality today, illustrated by a sizeable shift from orthodox faiths and dogma to a more open-minded and inclusive form of spirituality; a shift from division to inclusion. Raja Yoga can enhance anyone’s faith, whether it is Buddhism, Christianity or any other faith, and is not exclusive. It is everyone’s right to have this knowledge; what they choose to do with it is their personal choice. There is no evangelical mission to convert you. It is a global vision of interconnectedness, union and oneness and the BK’s philosophy is very much a testament to this: “Raja Yoga is specifically based on the teachings of the *Gita* [rather than representing an organised religion]

stem from imbalances (e.g. too much/little Yin/Yang) and disconnectedness – the word we call disease originates from the French *désaisir* – so it seems that re-establishing some harmony within ourselves through meditation is the ideal antidote to all manner of ills. Bearing in mind the yoga = union point, Raja Yoga means no less than “Royal Union” or “King of the Yogas”, sure to exercise a pulling factor on those who seek only the Rolls-Royce of yogic practices! Raja Yoga can also be called Karma Yoga, as it explains in *Pathways to Higher Consciousness*, one of BK’s many inspiring publications: “It means to perform action while having a mental connection with the Supreme Being or to have a meditative consciousness while walking, talking [...] or doing anything. The yoga is reflected through the karma that I do.”

To conveniently westernise these terms for brief moment, we might consider our “karmic accounts”. The idea being that our actions, our karma, tend to be weighted towards the negative (criticism, blame,

ergo it is not the flowers which you give your mother on Mothers’ Day, but the pure, loving intent behind it. And the same goes for the suspicious and spontaneous romantic gesture of a bunch of roses from our partner: “What has he done?”

In our compulsive thirst for answers, it seems we often miss the essence of what we are trying to grasp. In this case, for me, it was meditation. So we know it’s not physical. We know it’s not exclusive to any particular faith. And we know that it doesn’t require sitting in a cave in Lotus position chanting with a joss-stick burning. But what is meditation? And is it a reliable route to happiness? Well, as Pattabhi Jois likes to say of Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga, spiritual yoga really is “99% practice; 1% theory”. The word meditation has a wide variety of interpretations. In the wisdom philosophies, such as Buddhism and Taoism, meditation is viewed as a way to realise, and integrate into daily life, “eternal truths”. Religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, include meditation alongside

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prayer and worship as a means of underpinning these traditions. The word itself probably derives from the same root as the Latin word *maledri*, meaning to "heal". As Sister Jayanti puts it, "meditation can certainly be looked on as a healing process [...] The simplest definition of meditation is: the right use of the mind or positive thinking." As with most forms of meditation, Raja Yoga employs a degree of concentration, but instead of focusing on an object such as a candle, Raja Yoga uses no physical object but rather a focus on the inner self – the source of our innate power and wisdom. Nor is there repetition of a mantra, which literally translates as man (mind) and tra (to free). Raja Yoga encourages a flow of thoughts inspired by our true self within, thus unlocking us from a cycle of self-defeating karma and connecting us with our peaceful selves, our true sanskars. We must try to rest, uninfluenced, between the extremes of the mind and just "be" instead of "becoming".

Moving On: From Ego to Self-Esteem

Like many people, before discovering yoga I had always struggled a little with anything bearing the slightest trace of mysticism, and been suspicious of anything bearing even a tenuous link with happy-clappy fever – far more comfortable taking refuge in the physical. Admittedly, my judgment in these cases says far more about my own hang-ups than it does about the subject concerned and so, true to form, my preconceived fears that embarking on the path of "soul consciousness", through meditation, was not my cup of Yogi Chai were as misguided as ever. I'm not sure what this says about me, or others who suffer the same instinctive reactions, if anything at all. Perhaps we have hearts of stone or suffer from chronic cowardice? Perhaps both? But why this reticence? Why this resistance? It turns out such obstacles are often wrapped up with ego; not in the conventional western sense of arrogance, but as the quality of false pride that arises from lack of self-respect and which is a core element of Raja Yoga philosophy. Ego and lack of self-esteem are flip-sides of the same coin. As the book *Moving On... Pathways to Personal Growth* (BK publications) explains, "If I don't have true and real feelings of self-regard and self-love, I

usually feel an inner emptiness which I compensate for with ego. [...] Ego drives them to 'prove' their worth through external 'show' or achievements [...] With ego people put themselves down for making mistakes and tend to focus more on their weaknesses and shortcomings [...] Ego is a major cause of suffering."

Still, I couldn't help wondering, can these learned behaviours really be altered through meditation and am I so very different from the majority of people? After all, as someone once told me, "we are all on a journey aren't we?" So, hands up who else a) harbours an aversion to formally "doing nothing"; b) can not envisage themselves sitting cross-legged, incense burning, ... and Ommm-ing amid their work colleagues in the lunch hour; c) knows that the above preconceptions are misguided, to say the least, but is still unsure how to go

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about meditating "actively" as a way of life. Plenty I know of. Enough to make the practice of meditation one of the most valuable, undervalued, and yet increasingly popular and effective healing tools for self-transformation. But what if those same people came across an advertisement claiming that practicing meditation for 10 minutes a day could: 1) Reduce anxiety & depression 2) Improve self-awareness, body image & self-esteem. 3) Reduce atherosclerosis and risk of heart disease. 4) Reduce symptoms of IBS, cancer and chronic fatigue. 5) Improve energy and sharpen awareness and concentration. 6) Heighten libido and improve your sex life. (Okay, no. 6 isn't strictly true unless you're practicing Tantric Meditation; think Hugh Grant's reference to "Buddhism in a thong" in the BAFTA-nominated *Music & Lyrics*.) Chances are they would jump at the first opportunity, ... because "You're worth it",

Right? And also because it costs less than an exclusive gym membership: it's free!

The thing is, meditation has been clinically proven to alter our state of consciousness and improve mental health, and this ancient discipline is now giving pharmaceutical companies a run for their money. Although it has been practiced in the East for thousands of years, for some reason we are only now beginning to fully embrace meditation here in the west!

Why Meditate? Because "you're worth it!" The Science Bit!

Shamelessly, I have to say that there are far too many of us – yogis included – who still need a little celebrity endorsement when venturing into new territory or out of our comfort zone, myself included. It seems we have a yen for all things "alternative" and holistic such as meditation. But more impressive – and more

credible – is the scientific endorsement of this technique and the research made in the field over the years – as a pre-history practice, it has certainly stood the test of time. Just as we listen intently to the adverts proclaiming the "science" behind the latest L'Oréal age-defying face cream – the poster-girl for our body-conscious society – so too we marvel at the salutary effects of meditation, the emblem of soul-conscious living. It is yet another example of the ever-expanding world of alternative therapies; the meeting and merging of science and ancient holistic practices into an integrated approach to living our lives and to healing. Time was when a massage was considered "complementary" rather than conventional, more recently psychotherapy, physiotherapy and acupuncture have entered the "royal" enclosure in the medical world, being awarded the status which they deserve. One in five Britons experi-



ments in alternative therapies and integrated medicine is currently breaking the barrier from the holistic world of yogis and hippies in to modern mainstream medicine. All of which adds weight to the argument that “conventional” and “alternative” need no be mutually exclusive; hey – they can even work in union (union = yoga; no pun intended):

The results of more than 500 studies carried out at 214 universities and research institutes worldwide over the past 35 years make a convincing case for all forms of meditation as a component of a holistic system of natural healthcare and as a successful lifestyle technique for stress relief and general wellbeing. Less known perhaps is the acknowledgement of yoga techniques such as meditation, as a holistic form of cognitive therapy and as a holistic means of altering our thought patterns. Researchers at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center found that meditators have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. However, the true power of meditation is cumulative: energy, clarity, peace, training of the mind and

improving our threshold for generating “fight or flight” stress responses are just some of the day-to-day rewards that develop with practice. “Meditation can be the way to ‘unlearn’ this conditioned stress response, and become less reactive to the normal stresses and strains of daily life,” explains Patrick Holford, author of *Neural Rights* (Plaitus).

From Body-Consciousness to Soul-Consciousness: it's all in the mind

Unlearning old behaviours and erasing the habits and impressions – Sanskaras – from our mind is a key theme in Raja Yoga. So often we look outside of ourselves for the root of happiness – that elusive state of “pure” being. We become extrovert or materialistic, obsessed by our physical selves, but remain spiritually impoverished and unhappy, concluding that, for example, “if only I won the Lottery, then I would be happy, then all my problems would be solved”; “if only my nose wasn't so big”; or insisting that our irrational idiosyncrasies are “just part of me; it's just my nature”. Raja Yoga suggests that these are simply learned behav-

iours and habits that have become second nature to us. Becoming “soul-conscious” – the ultimate goal of this style of meditation – is a way of returning to our true selves, of rediscovering our natural identity and our innate qualities before these learned Sanskaras confused things. As our teacher put it: Soul consciousness is being seated on our throne of self-respect, freed of the chains of ego and connected to our own truth. This elevated state of awareness is “real [...] and correlates to a distinctive change in brain-wave patterns to a slower alpha wave rhythm,” says Holford.

What scientists are now discovering is that, with enough practice, meditation can actually train the mind and reshape the brain. Recent studies using MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) have disproved the belief that brain circuits are fixed early on in life, suggesting that the pre-frontal cortex – responsible for planning, memory and rational decision making – can actually be strengthened and altered through meditation! Many will draw similarities between the “training of the mind” through meditation and current

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clinical psychotherapeutic practices such as CBT; that's fine, but few such therapies offer the student the freedom to seek the truth within themselves free of any dogma or labelling and fewer still offer all the answers to our questions. Raja Yoga claims to do both. Conventionally termed as "cognitive reframing" in the world of clinical psychology – basically shifting our focus from the bad to the good – *prakti paksha* is an ancient yoga technique described by the ancient seer Patanjali in

Yoga Sutra II.33 and is a noticeable trait in Raja Yoga, though not termed as such.

In his 1970s bestseller, *The Relaxation Response*, Harvard cardiologist Herbert Benson argued that meditators counteracted the stress-induced fight-or-flight response and achieved a calmer, happier state. "Just about any condition that is either caused or made worse by stress can be helped with meditation," he says. This would include such conditions as cholesterol, high blood pressure, angina and

depression – all potential killers. Such is the recognition of the health benefits, both physiological and psychological, that a variety of health insurance companies have finally come around to the idea of offering discounts to policy-holders who practice meditation! It is a common misconception that meditation and conventional forms of relaxation is one and the same thing. However, as Paul Roland, author of *How to Meditate* (Hamlyn), explains, "Meditation is not the passive act that it appears, and when practiced regularly it has the potential to bring far greater benefits than simple relaxation." It brings self-awareness and clarity of thought akin to Brahman. When practising visualisations for instance, the key is to be playful without losing the concentration to be creative.

Lastly, the relaxing quality of meditation is worth exploring for one more hard-core and unashamedly physical reason – the fact that stress has a causal link with metabolic syndrome, which includes abdominal fat. And the science behind stress bit? Here's how it works: Chronic stress causes the body to produce too much cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone. Cortisol affects both the adrenal glands and the immune system. Ultimately, the extra cortisol encourages the abdomen to open up its fat deposits to store more fat than it would otherwise do. So, voilà, not only can meditation protect your health, but the metabolic benefits provide the

yogi or yogini, still rooted in a degree of body-consciousness, with a plausible reason for signing up for a meditation class!

I'm a great lover of analogies for getting to grips with a new concept and I found this one, given at the start of the course as an explanation for the benefits of starting the day with meditation, particularly delicious: If you've ever woken up in the morning to a radio alarm clock you'll know that the first song you hear – irrespective of your musical taste – will be

relentlessly humming in your head.... all day long. The same goes for a peaceful 10 minutes meditation in the morning, before the vibrations of the world distort your perception of the world, before the calm "lake of emptiness in your mind" is unsettled by ripples of thought which then distort your vision. Yes, the line of thought goes, the seed of everything is our thought so plant a positive thought in the morning and from that foundation your day will grow; where attention goes, energy flows and life grows. Pay attention to the "weeds" and neglect the "seedlings" and the garden of your mind will essentially run riot, and become overgrown. So forget the modern day adage, "You Are What You Eat", rooted in our obsession with the physical, and consider instead the spiritual alternative: "You Are What You Think."

We Are What We Think

So, what sort of journey has this introduction to Raja Yoga meditation taken me on? Have I developed a better understanding of who I am, once the Ego, the labels and the decorations are removed? And how is the yoga off the mat going? Raja Yoga certainly addresses these questions, though I would say that I am still some way off arriving at that "Ah-hah" moment of suddenly seeing myself and the world clearly – the reality – without those distorting Samskars colouring my vision, without the senses overriding the intellect. Every person's interpretation is personal to them and it would be wrong for me to reduce the benefits of Raja Yoga meditation to my experience alone.

Having said that, one of the most powerful aspects of the course, for me, is where Raja Yoga instills the idea that we are none of those things which attach us to our body or to the material world around us. They are simply illusions, "props" on loan to us while we play our role here: we are not what we eat; we are not what we look like; we are not our Luis Vuitton luggage or our Manolo Blahnik shoes; we are not the wonderful gifts we shower on our loved ones, nor are we the feelings that we feel. And we are certainly not the complex Primary or Secondary Series poses we practise in Ashtanga Vinyasa. We are our thoughts and the elevated intention behind our action, karma yoga. Pondering this pursuit of happiness, I was encouraged by

the result of a little equation I had been toying with. I understood that happiness is quite simply understanding your True Self and your innate qualities, and living true to them. As one dear friend told me: "Be guided by your intuition (and a little bit of head too!) Compromise is good...but stay close to your own truth." So it followed

Raja Yoga instills the idea that we are none of those things which attach us to our body or to the material world around us.

that if one of the primary benefits of Raja Yoga meditation is to understand the self and our qualities, and to learn acceptance as a salutary by-product; and if one of the most popular reasons for practicing meditation, or any yoga, is to find peace and happiness, then in all probability anyone following the path of meditation will, at some stage, cross the path of happiness. Four weeks into the course, it became apparent to me how much our way of thinking has become conditioned. We have learned to think and perceive ourselves and the world in terms of unforgiving binary opposites: win/lose; right/wrong; success; failure; fight/flight. The answer – as much there is one – it seems is just a question of adjusting our perception and thinking differently – we are our thoughts, "We Are What We Think", if you like. All of which is easy to understand in theory, but typically less so to put into practice!

There is a gentle joke shared at the Brahma Kumaris on the wild-goose chase that the pursuit of happiness represents to many students and lost souls. "Is it under that rock?"; "Oh, perhaps it's at the bottom of that well?"; "If only my offer gets accepted on that house"; "If only I get that promotion, then I'll be happy"; Or "maybe happiness rests at the bottom of the rainbowor at the top of Mount Everest?"; "No! Happiness is that \$600 pair of Jimmy Choos – they will change my life!" The truth is – in true panto-esque style – far less cryptically hidden and far more prosaic: "It's inside you!" It is this belief that knowing our true selves and our pure, peaceful qualities and acting on them is the source of happiness, which

is also what inspired the Brahma Kumaris to continue their work worldwide. As our teacher explained: we don't consider we are giving you anything.... just guiding you to employ the tools and access the qualities and powers you have within you. Contrary to what we have learned to believe, we have everything we need to be

happy, we only need to unlearn those ideas that have taught us otherwise, those illusions which insist that happiness lies elsewhere. So instead of making such misguided associations between things to be strived for and our happiness – e.g. "I didn't manage to bind in Supra Kurmasana today – I'm worthless", perhaps we'd do better to adopt an attitude of *Qui sem, sem?* As Nathaniel Hawthorne so beautifully captured it, "Happiness is a butterfly, which, when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you."

To learn more about the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (UK) and its courses, resources and retreats, visit:

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All courses are free of charge.

"The gift of learning to meditate is the greatest gift you can give yourself in this life"

— Sogyal Rinpoche