

The Changing Face of Yoga

by Gordon Smith

At eighty years of age and having started Yoga as a twenty-year-old, perhaps I am allowed to reminisce a little. My first introduction to Yoga was a way of growing closer to God. There was nothing fanatical about this in the religious sense, as it was part of a process of self-development, Yoga being one of the many tools used in this process. This included study, meditation and reading the classics. Nothing was left out and continuous professional development (CPD) arose from a desire within, rather than any pressure from the outside. Hatha Yoga was an important part of the process and never taken out of the context of the whole. It was a journey of self-discovery and a means of co-ordinating mind, feeling and will, learning to cope with life and hopefully becoming a self-realised being.

My teacher was a Ken Ratcliffe in Liverpool and Ken's teacher was Eugene Halliday, who influenced all of our lives. At that time, there was nothing to join and no fees to pay, although Ken, who had devoted his life to the work, did have a box in the Hall, which if you felt inclined, you could put a coin into, otherwise he did not eat. Eugene and Ken did not advocate that you sat at their feet, only that you did it your way. Study was wide ranging and in the spirit of Yoga we endeavoured to find the link factors between the philosophies and the sciences.

It was during the Sixties, with a small group of friends, that we purchased a property and started teaching Yoga. We had visits from Wilfred Clark, who at that time had founded the British Wheel of Yoga. It was with the formation of the committee that Wilfred soon became disillusioned, as ambition soon took over and the scramble for recognition started. We had many visits from the weird and wonderful, some of whom were looking for an easy ride in the lucrative west. The establishment started to take notice and some clergy had reservations about Yoga in church halls. The Wheel started to exert a bit of muscle, writing to schools etc, indicating that only they had the authority to sanction Yoga teachers. Yoga was becoming less free-spirited, with teachers and organisations springing up everywhere. One in particular, uses psychological techniques, with plenty of loving hugs, as long as the cheques are signed.

Gradually Yoga was becoming more commercially orientated, only paying lip service to its spiritual ideals, young people in provocative poses helped to sell magazines, postures and physical exercise becoming all important, costs increased, class content deteriorated, classes became and little more

than a way of earning pin money.

The competitive nature of Yoga started to grow, pride of place in the Yoga hierarchy becoming all important, with gurus, usually self-advertised, able to command high fees. As students grew fewer in relation to the number of classes, organisations and teachers sort national recognition and fitness organisations started to vie for control. Regulation was becoming a fact of life both locally and nationally.

However, a few still remembered the free creative spirit of Yoga and started a movement toward independence and the birth of the Independent Yoga Network. Organisation is a fact of life and will inevitably cast its net and like the word freedom, the free and the dom hang together. We have to be ever watchful and hope that the free spirit of Yoga does not again become subject to the excesses of organisation and personal ambition.

Essentially, Yoga can still remain free and need not belong to any one organisation. It can find free expression and transform the way we think, feel and will in the quiet of our own homes. These days many Yoga organisations will close the door on those who cannot pay, I can still remember the excellent teaching and the cardboard box in the hall, with all welcome. In today's climate this seems hardly realistic and when I asked Ken about this, he quoted the Sermon on the Mount – *Consider the lilies of the field...* Ken, a student of Eugene and at that time Secretary of the International Hermeneutic Society (IHS), went on to purchase Tan y Garth Hall, a teaching and meditation centre in North Wales. It is a registered charity that continues teaching to this day, their motto:-

The love of God – The dignity and brotherhood of man – The responsibility of the individual.

Gordon Smith