

FOREWORD

The Yogi and the Shower Singer

by STING

It may surprise you to read that someone who sings for a living like I do would enjoy singing in the shower as much as anybody else.

My shower, I suppose like most, has the kind of hard surface that reflects the notes back at you with a satisfying and friendly echo, almost as effectively as the walls of a church or an underground cavern or even the electronic reverb in a professional studio.

Admittedly, I don't sing what anyone would recognize as songs per se, nor do I use the shower fitting as a fantasy microphone, but instead limit myself to vocalizing long resonant tones. I will sustain a single OM for as long as my lungs can hold out, and advance semitone by semitone of the chromatic scale, beginning near the bottom of my range and gradually rising high enough for the sound to disturb the Labradors sleeping in the kitchen below. When they start to howl in sympathy (or agony, I can't tell which), I know it's time to dry off, shave, brush my teeth, clothe myself, and start the day.

As I enter the kitchen, the youngest of my six children greet me ironically, seated cross-legged at the breakfast table, chanting their own tuneless but grand, guttural OMs, eyes crossed and little hands flipping the bird in irreverent imitation of those mudras they've watched me assume at the end of my yoga practice.

"Good morning, my little philistines!"

"OHMMMMMMM ohmmmmmmmm ohmmmmmmmm!"

"Why do you make that noise, daddy?"

Noise? Noise? I feign professional outrage while reaching for the coffee, black and bitter. Well, I suppose it's a fair question. Why *do* I

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make these noises? And why do I spend a good deal of my morning attempting to turn my body into a pretzel, while breathing like a telephone stalker, or chanting ancient unintelligible sounds in the echo chamber of my bathroom?

When my good friend Ganga requested that I write a foreword for his new book on yoga, I was both flattered and daunted by the task. While I've been practicing for more than fifteen years now, what do I really know about yoga? And has my fifteen years of practice changed me to any significant degree?

In fact, I don't spend a lot of intellectual energy thinking about yoga, or trying to articulate the processes it awakens, because, for one, I don't have to teach it, and, two, it's become an intrinsic part of my whole life, permeating it to such an extent that I don't really know where it begins or ends.

I have benefited from the wisdom of many teachers whose example has inspired me to undertake a voyage of discovery as complex and fascinating as music, through a realm that is mysterious, unexpected, and startling.

I have made a space for myself and my yoga practice every morning for fifteen years. I can perform feats of flexibility with my fifty-five-year-old body that I couldn't do when I was an athlete. That never ceases to amaze me, but is it the point?

"Part of yoga practice," Ganga has often reminded me, "is to connect."

And he makes his point clear: To connect flexibility and strength, balance, concentration, sexuality, consciousness, and spirituality, so that what may have begun solely as a physical practice can evolve into an integrated and holistic approach to all aspects of one's life.

For example, after Ganga's advice, my chosen profession of singing has morphed into yoga and yoga into singing.

Getting back to my shower practice, I will choose a low resonant tone and after a little practice I have learned to become aware not of this

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note I have chosen, but the subtle and ghostly harmonic five semitones above—the “dominant,” as it is known. This note appears almost miraculously whenever you give it some attention. With a little more practice, further and yet higher resonances from the overtone scale reveal themselves, all related mathematically to the “tonic,” my original note. Physics and metaphysics begin to blur here, as harmonic resonances beyond our hearing connect us to other realms.

Nada Brahma . . . the world is sound, so the sutras say.

Whatever seems solid and impermeable in this world is, at the molecular level, vibrating at pitches way beyond our range of perception. And this is the ultimate connecting principle.

My shower singing connects me at a molecular level to everything around me, to the frequency of the earth, and indeed with a leap of the imagination, to the cosmos or realms of dark matter.

And yoga, as my dear friend says, is to connect.

I've come to think of the asanas this way too—each position changing the frequency with which our bodies vibrate. To be conscious of this, as we breathe, turns the physical practice into a devotional one, connecting us via resonant vibration to the cosmos, tuning the instruments of our bodies to a higher “symphonic” purpose. A well-tuned instrument is a healthy instrument; yoga helps us resonate more efficiently with the universe.

I've also come to believe that the highest form of prayer is to pray and yet ask for nothing,

To resonate with awareness, acceptance, and gratitude is surely to pray,

To breathe and accept gratefully the air that surrounds me into my body.

Why a new yoga book? The world is chock full of orthodoxies—religious, pseudo-religious, political. These orthodoxies tend to assume that mankind is a finished product, that the “sacred” word is the final word. Such absolutism means that most of these true believers are

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unhappy with the idea of evolution, and some actively work to suppress it. *Yoga Beyond Belief* steps out of that limited mold. It will strike a chord with people seeking a new level of awakening and freedom in yoga and in their life. This book offers a flexible and modern perspective that is needed more than ever to live in these times of accelerating change.

Yoga has been pivotal and transformational in every aspect of my life. I regard myself as a work in progress. Yoga to me is an evolutionary, and indeed evolving, science, and orthodoxy needs to be challenged wherever it plants itself like a roadblock to progress. Of course, what is worth keeping will survive and continue to nourish future generations; whatever is moot and expendable will be proven so.

I am confident that Ganga's contemporary vision of yoga and the many tools he shares will be catalysts to aid readers in cultivating personal transformation. By combining ancient disciplines with cutting-edge knowledge and insights, this book can make yoga a living part of growth and development for those who practice any level of yoga and who have an interest in how yoga can be pertinent to modern living.

Ganga's lifelong study of yoga has not ossified into rigid modes of belief; indeed, his thinking is as flexible and improvisatory as his practice. His discipline is matched by his iconoclasm, his respect for the past by his courage to question authority in elucidating a new vision of yoga. Our human species' need to evolve has never been more critical. Yoga is one of the tools that can help us make that evolutionary leap and I believe this challenging book can help us redefine who we are and where we are going.

INTRODUCTION

*Awakening Insight—
Ganga White's Approach to Yoga*

by Mark Schlenz, PhD

Ganga White has led the evolution of yoga in America for nearly four decades. He helped host yoga's arrival in this country during the sixties and seventies. He nurtured its development through the remainder of the twentieth century. Today, he remains at the forefront of yoga's ongoing transformation into the twenty-first century.

Once an officer in the Sivananda organization, Ganga established the first yoga centers in Los Angeles and several other major American cities. In 1968, his newly created White Lotus Foundation offered one of the first in-depth yoga teacher training programs in this country and established the working model for numerous programs that have since proliferated. Ganga's departure from Sivananda stimulated a major transformation in yoga's growth. Disillusioned by financial and ethical scandals involving the swamis, Ganga broke ties with traditional hierarchies of India, led the White Lotus to independence, and rededicated the foundation "to the development of the total human being" and to "elucidating a free, open, and contemporary approach to yoga." Since then, thousands of yogis now teaching in the United States and around the world have trained with Ganga at White Lotus and share his liberating perspectives with thousands more of their students.

As a leader of yoga's modern development, Ganga has always been nourished, rather than bound, by the past. Today, yoga's current popularity has given rise to a myriad of new market-driven forms and newly minted yogis. Much of what is currently marketed seems completely cut off from the vast richness of yoga's deep history. Yoga's

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age-old potential for fundamental transformation of the whole person is too often diluted to appeal to fashionable desires for physical attainments. Ganga's scholarly study and thorough immersion in the literature, philosophy, and techniques of ancient yoga traditions inform and inspire the evolution of his own dedicated practice and teaching. With this deep grounding, Ganga's innovative contributions build upon the vital essences of yoga's timeless gifts without subservience to archaic institutions or doctrines.

While many current yoga trends seem to disregard historical contexts, others tend to romanticize the past, fetishizing certain practices and depriving them of relevance to our current situations. Ganga's deeper understanding of yoga's many traditions recognizes how various practices emerged from specific historical, cultural, and social conditions and, even more important, how they have been consistently adapted as these conditions have inevitably changed through time. This dynamic sense of history nourishes Ganga's efforts to make yoga more relevant to our present *and* to our future. Through all its manifestations, yoga has always offered liberatory alternatives to rigid hierarchies that threaten the survival of the human spirit. At this moment, that spirit, and in fact all life on the planet, is more threatened than ever before. Our present potential for global annihilation, whether by our explosive weapons of mass destruction or by our escalating devastation of our own ecosystem, requires new orientations to preserve the human spirit's potential for creativity, healing, and love.

Incorporating essential wisdom from yoga's heritage with progressive insights of science and modernity, Ganga's evolutionary approach makes yoga more applicable than ever to addressing the overwhelming problems that currently confront every person. The crux of his insight is that we can certainly change the future of our species by constantly developing the ways we perceive and value our individual selves. Through constant self-examination and ongoing reflection, one's personal yoga

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practice becomes an invaluable tool for continual self-discovery and transformation.

Ganga's insights into dynamic principles animating the asanas enable his students to approach the poses as unfolding paths to personal evolution rather than as cul-de-sacs of arrested perfection. His teachings empower his students and allow them to let their own experiences guide them into deeper possibilities of personal growth and freedom. That is why this book, in contrast to so many yoga books written to formulas and dictates of the publishing market, offers principles rather than prescriptions.

Most yoga books currently published exploit niche market appeal by prescribing specific practices that promise certain benefits to particular audiences. Many claim the ancient authenticity of a particular tradition or lineage of teacher for their authority. Others rely on charismatic teachers or celebrities to underwrite their inflated promises. A growing number of hybrid approaches claim benefits only possible through newly created combinations of yoga with something—almost anything, it seems—else. *Yoga Beyond Belief* presents a unique, non-dogmatic, integrative vision of contemporary yoga. It is an inspiring manual for beginners and experienced students alike.

What most available books share in common is the premise that they can give you something special by *telling you how to do yoga their way*. In this book, by contrast, Ganga *shows you how you can learn to do yoga your way*. What Ganga shares in the following chapters is not based on passed-down authority, fashionable popularity, or eclectic gimmickry. It is based on working principles of careful inquiry, experimentation, and observation.

Those of us who have had the fortune to learn from Ganga have learned much from watching his characteristic responses to questions from students. Perhaps an alignment he suggests contradicts an instruction a student has been taught by another teacher or has

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readsomewhere, and so the student asks which is the right way. Older students who may have heard this question posed and answered more than once before know not to expect a definitive, or even the same, answer from Ganga.

What we know to expect instead is a demonstration of sincere inquiry, often enlivened with his spontaneous wit and infectious laughter. Almost invariably Ganga will experiment in the pose with the juxtaposed alignments before commenting on their relative merits and limitations as they might apply to different bodies, physical conditions, or stages of learning. Despite the newly discovered insights he might share in any instance, the consistency of his response is that it is definitely based in his immediate investigation as it builds upon his lifelong experience. Attentive students learn that this process, not the particular answer to any particular question, is the lesson.

That lesson is generously and repeatedly shared, along with splashes of Ganga's wit and stories, throughout this synthesis of his life's work. After providing a holistic overview of yoga traditions, *Yoga Beyond Belief* shares a wide range of functional principles, practical skills, and realistic attitudes that will empower you to evolve your own yoga practice. It encourages processes of self-discovery that will truly free and deepen your practice and your life and, so, enrich our world.

The introductory chapter, "Standing On the Shoulders of the Past," inspires an evolutionary perspective for contemporary yoga practitioners. This perspective is strengthened in the next chapters of the book through a comprehensive survey of various yoga forms in "The Many Yogas" and through a detailed analysis of the origins, history, and psycho-physical-spiritual principles in "Hatha—The Yoga of Sun and Moon."

In the book's central chapters, the practical insights of an evolutionary perspective are applied to specific aspects of Hatha yoga practice. "Finding the Ah Ha! in Hatha—Principles, Hints, and Insights into Yoga Practice" deals directly with many of the overarching ques-

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tions, internal techniques, and attitudes yogis grapple with in developing a sustaining and dynamic personal practice. A practical context for pursuing a lifetime yoga practice is strengthened with more applications of concrete insights and experiential observations in “The Internal Alchemy of Hatha Yoga” and in “Useful Styles and Modes of Practice.” Together, the contents, experiments, instructions, recommendations, and insights offered in these central chapters can liberate yoga students to learn from their own yoga practice and become their own yoga teachers. Practical considerations become particularly focused in “Injury, Pain, and Healing,” where insights for healing and for learning from injury are offered from the author’s experience.

The last group of chapters returns to a deeper exploration of philosophical contexts of yoga traditions in relation to contemporary practice. Yogic mappings of the subtle body are considered from an evolutionary perspective in “The Chakras—The Play of Matter and Energy.” Then the nature of daily life itself is explored as a personal path of unfolding enlightenment in “Meditation Is Your Life”; in this chapter he shows that the real essence of meditation is free from obligatory, routine practices and techniques. Finally, “Spirituality, Enlightenment, and the Miraculous” reconnects the practical with the philosophical and rejoins the personal with the planetary as the evolutionary potential of the human spirit is reoriented to a liberating navigation of inquiry and insight. This final chapter challenges established definitions of enlightenment and presents a new, accessible vision of spirituality for modern times.

Attentive readers will learn how to apply insights offered here to their own experiences. Yoga students of all levels, from beginner to teacher, will learn to form and answer questions about their own practice through their own inquiry. As a result, this book offers yogis the most important benefits of yoga. *Yoga Beyond Belief* offers approaches to yoga that open possibilities for deep and liberating transformations of the self. It can certainly help guide all readers to an awakening of

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insight, free of archaic dependencies and romantic beliefs, and ready to meet the accelerating challenges of the twenty-first century.

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