Kundalini Vidya:
The Science of Spiritual Transformation

By Shivarpita Harrigan, Ph.D.

We live in an unprecedented time when science is validating ancient teachings regarding the great mysteries of the world and when information about those mysteries is becoming readily available. Astrophysicists tell us that the universe suddenly burst forth from an endless void and continues to expand with countless spiral galaxies hosting planets teeming with life (1). Eventually, they say, it will thin itself back to void, only to burst forth again in an endless cycle, like the great cosmic exhaling and inhaling of Vishnu (referred to in the ancient sacred texts of India) which manifest and dismantle the endless cycle of universes throughout the eons.

A remarkable emergence of life is also demonstrated at human conception as the spirals of DNA in ovum and sperm unite in a surge of vitality that sets cells vibrantly multiplying, racing to form the precursory brain, spine line, heart, and body of a new human being. Modern science tells us that the unique characteristics of the forming baby are due to genetic and environmental variables. Vedic science agrees and adds the essential elements of karmic destiny and divine design. The entering soul’s subtle temperament and particular physical characteristics, as well as the situation into which they are born, are based on a karmic pattern established in past lives. The incoming souls receive the container and conditions best suited to help them carry on their spiritual endeavor, based on the qualities they have developed up to this time. The architect and builder of the new vessel is the divine power within, who knows how to manifest every cell of the human organism according to this subtle, individual, template. The divine within then takes up residence in this newly formed container, and another adventure in the journey to spiritual realization begins. Before the time of the dissolution of energies and dismantling of elements of the human vehicle that takes place at the end of a life, the person has the opportunity to improve his or her spiritual status and potentially reach Self-realization. This is the purpose of the divine play in which we live.

Quantum science reveals the continuity of macrocosm and microcosm and indicates that as light waves radiate into vibrating particles of matter, they are actually one on the continuum of existence, and the universe is an interconnected, living web of relatedness and probabilities, each thing inexorably affecting another. Reality is, in fact, as many great spiritual traditions describe it, a non-dualistic, non-material, self-aware, and self-sustaining matrix of consciousness that radiates at varying frequencies from the subtlest glimmer to the densest gross matter (2). Biologists, sociologists, and psychologists use field and systems theories to understand the hidden dynamics and formative blueprints that underlie and govern action in nature and human behavior (3). Mind-body researchers point to the ability of mind and prayer to cure disease, and parapsychologists investigate the extraordinary abilities evident in some human beings. In short, western science is validating some of the basic tenets held by the world’s spiritual traditions and the testimonies of mystics.

Evolutionary visionaries posit that the physical and mental faculties of the human species became, at some point in pre history, refined enough to support the spiritual endeavor. They further contend that it is now poised on the evolutionary verge of an enormous advance in the spiritual capacity of the species as a whole (4). Experts in anthropology, mythology, and psychology have shown us
underlying symmetries in the world’s spiritual images and fundamental consistencies in shamanic methods. These indicate shared transcendent themes and ritual-piqued altered state responses, the knowledge of which has been preserved in the spiritual wisdom of diverse cultures and eras of the world (5). Students of mystical experience and consciousness likewise have found dependably similar experiences reported by advanced spiritual practitioners from varying religious traditions (6). More recently, neurotheological researchers have monitored consistently demonstratable patterns of brain function that characteristically occur during transcendent experiences in religiously diverse subjects and have specified a “God part” of the brain that is active during spiritual experiences (7).

All of these phenomena point to an underlying principle that unifies and informs all of existence. Some refer to this all pervasive non-material self-awareness as Absolute Reality, the One, or Pure Consciousness. It is called Brahman in the ancient Vedic philosophy of India. Quantum theology tells us that this One, Pure Consciousness, is the ground of being, the underlying unmanifest Reality. It is the nature of Pure Consciousness to manifest, as it obviously has the power to do. The universal sacred power of the One that makes manifestation possible is called Shakti in Vedic philosophy (Shvetaashvatara Upanisad, v1-3). Shakti is the divine power that permeates everything, that is, in fact, everything in the phenomenal world, no matter how subtle. The inseparable manifestation of Absolute Reality, Shakti is the All in the One, the manifest figure shimmering on the invisible ground of Pure Consciousness and cascading out in a wondrous display of manifest diversity. Because of this generative quality, Shakti is referred to as the divine mother. She is the cause of all the apparent reality in which we live, the divine presence in everything. The entire universe is the expression of her capacity and her exquisite variety. She is the entire apparent reality, from the subtlest to the densest aspect. She is the great mystery who hides within the wonders of her own manifestations. Shakti is the All that emanates from the One. In the individual person, the inner spark of Pure Consciousness is called Atman, and the living divine power that evolves from it is called Kundalini Shakti, the sacred omnipotent potentiality within.

It is this inner divine presence that gives us awareness and talent and drive. It is the essential source of desire, and it is our spiritual director. With our free will, we choose what we do with that gnawing, burning fire within, and it is that pivotal, ongoing choice that makes our life sacred or profane or unremarkable. The great spiritual traditions of the world address the human challenge of life, this struggle to find peace from our restless frustration, with many beautiful and effective theories and practices. Revealed spiritual texts state that finding this divine source and merging with it is the very purpose of life, the only solution to our deep craving, and the ultimate destiny of all. Using varying terms, these systems teach the way to experience the divine core of our beings and of life, to quench our drive for oneness. The esoteric theoretical frames of these practical teachings have many names, including perennial philosophy, monistic idealism, and mysticism. In Sanskrit, this universal spiritual paradigm is called Vedanta, and the science of its application to the individual is called Kundalini Vidya, knowledge of the divine within. The great monist philosopher and spiritual adept Adi Shankaracharya, expounder of Advaita (non dual) Vedanta, himself sang the praises of Shakti, the Divine Mother, in his beautiful hymns describing her capacities. “Without Shakti, the divine power, Absolute Reality, Shiva, is unable even to stir” (Saundaryalahari, v1).

Within every human being abides the Divine inner dweller, Kundalini Shakti, who is the most refined and potent manifestation of the One, Shiva, the unmanifest Source of all, from whom she is inseparable, yet with whom she yearns to re-merge in profound infinite conscious stillness. It is her relentless, steadfast purpose to bring us to spiritual fulfillment through the union of herself (and her manifestations, which include energy, mind, and discernment) with the One. Much more profound, subtle, and potent than mere vital energy, this sacred inner presence and power is light and love and life itself. This indweller is revered in all spiritual traditions by whatever name is chosen to refer to her (or him or it), be it Divine within, Holy Spirit, Divine Mother, Christ Consciousness, Shekinah, Tara, etc. It is she who empowers our striving for spiritual attainment and who is relentless in her efforts to guide, help, and urge us to this goal.

The human body, energy system, mind, and discernment are the container of Kundalini Shakti (see Fig.1). The condition of these four coverings determines the way in which she is able to manifest in our lives. In her contained state, reserved in the subtle Root center at the base of the spine, Muladhara chakra, she actively maintains all the capacities of human functioning and awareness, giving us life and managing our talents. When, due to one of many possible causes, she is released, the subtle body (energy, mind, and discernment) must be sufficiently strong and clear to properly host her dynamism at a higher level (see Fig.2). The specific condition of the subtle body at the moment of her release determines the kind of Kundalini
rising a person will have, which is described according to which one of the possible six routes (nadis) and levels (chakras) the rising Kundalini is able to reach at that time. In cases where she is thwarted by subtle body blocks and weaknesses, her struggles to redirect and elevate her rising and thus improve her condition are felt by the person as unusual and/or uncomfortable experiences. The more she strives to reach her goal, merging with her Beloved Shiva at Bindu, the pinnacle of the subtle central axis, the more the person is alerted to her presence and her predicament. These subtle sensations can be misinterpreted by the experiencer as a physical, emotional, or psychic problem and the situation is sometimes labeled a spiritual problem (DSM IV, V62.89) or spiritual emergency. However, the problem is not with Kundalini Shakti but with her container.

The challenge and responsibility of the spiritual seeker, whether they are preparing for the initial release of Kundalini Shakti or striving to improve a rising they already have, is to clear and vitalize the dwelling place of the Divine power within so she can function freely and not be constrained by the limitations of her subtle body container. It is the unrelenting mission of Kundalini Shakti to bring us to union with the One so we can enjoy spiritual realization. Since human beings possess free will, she must rely on our cooperation and support in this endeavor. Though patient and obliging, she will not rest until that goal is attained, and if necessary, she will give us increasingly strong signals that her agenda is the prime directive. We may temporarily assuage the discomforts of an incomplete rising with mitigating energy treatments or stupefying symptom suppressors, but Kundalini Shakti will not be dissuaded from her purpose. She will always try again with renewed vigor to improve her status and meet her goal. Therefore, the only solution to an uncomfortable Kundalini rising is a spiritual solution, one that will improve the rising, not just reduce our discomfort. We must ultimately comply and cooperate with the spiritual agenda of Kundalini Shakti. It is the very discomfort of an impeded rising that finally forces us to resort to a spiritual solution. Only then will we focus intently on our healthy spiritual life so Kundalini Shakti can be properly supported with a vitalized and correctly flowing energy system and a one-pointedly focused mind concentrated on the spiritual goal. Then she can succeed in her efforts to redirect and/or elevate her rising. Attempts at symptom suppression, if successful, can yield only temporary relief and may further complicate and delay improvement of an obstructed or unstable rising. Addressing the cause of the discomfort, the incomplete rising, is the only way to find an eventual elimination of symptoms. Therefore, whatever the cause of the initial rising, be it life trauma or devotion, the only way to complete a rising is through spiritual focus and effort.

The great spiritual traditions preserve in their esoteric branches the sacred inner teachings of their particular view of the universal spiritual science of Kundalini, whether it is called Kundalini or Kaballah, the ascent of Mount Carmel, or an unnamed oral...
lineage. They maintain methods to protect sincere seekers from making errors that would be harmful to their spiritual process and cause distress. Spiritual life is based on correctly understanding and following the perennial, universal wisdom conveyed in scripture and explained by the spiritual masters, sages, saints, adepts, and holy ones throughout history who exemplify the full human potential that is possible with spiritual realization. These are the Kundalini experts of the world’s spiritual traditions, and it is they who maintain the inner teachings of their tradition. The exoteric branches of the spiritual traditions of the world offer basic introductions to the principles of spiritual life through religious structures designed to prepare the masses. The external church rarely mentions Kundalini science overtly but simply points to the possibility of spiritual experience and encourages ethical, devotional practices and good works. When a prepared seeker intently desires and strives for spiritual realization, guidance comes from the inner lineage itself. Kundalini Shakti, by whatever name she is thought of, is the divine spiritual director within who lovingly embraces the sincere seeker into spiritual life and leads him or her to the ultimate destination, reunion with the One.

People with an active Kundalini process may experience some of the many features possible in a Kundalini rising, including the following: feelings of being different and incomplete, energetic and light experiences, elevated sensitivities, atypical physical symptoms, altered states of consciousness, special talents and perceptions, psychic and healing abilities, mystical experiences, heightened awareness of inner life, expanded world view, deep spiritual longing, and a host of other non-ordinary symptoms and meta normal capacities.

The many variations possible in Kundalini risings can mystify those who do not understand the causes and intricacies of Kundalini process. Some Kundalini risings happen spontaneously due to a life shock, not due to spiritual effort. The experiencer may not even remember such an event, as it may have taken place in a previous lifetime, and the person came into this lifetime with the rising, which showed itself at some karmically ripe moment (Bhagavad Gita II.40, VI.43). Some risings catalyzed by life trauma can be more difficult, as they are less stable, may include special capacities, may strain the subtle system, and may not be supported by healthy spiritual lifestyle. The uncomfortable side effects of such a deflected rising or impeded rising are sometimes referred to as a spiritual problem or a spiritual emergency. The problem, however, is with the individual’s subtle body, and never with the Divine within, which is persevering valiantly to improve the person’s spiritual life. In so doing, the subtle vital energies are engaged to attempt an improvement, and the individual can feel this action as it is reflected in their mind or body. Often, these experiences are not comfortable. Difficulties experienced in a rising, as has been already mentioned, are actually a call to heightened spiritual effort, increased discernment, skilled guidance, healthy lifestyle, and correct spiritual methods. Yogis praise the spiritual benefits of a Kundalini rising because they know that a healthy rising is the only way to attain the spiritual goal. They reverence the awesome power of the divine within, Kundalini Shakti, and respect the risks involved in stirring her to release and active striving for the goal. Therefore, they regularly practice the tested and approved spiritual methods of their lineage sincerely and correctly with perseverance for a long time in order to succeed in their spiritual purpose (Yoga Sutras I.14). By whatever name, Kundalini Shakti is the means to this end.

A Kundalini rising is a blessed responsibility that initiates the individual’s inner development. With sincerity and discernment, a spiritual seeker can skillfully prepare for a healthy rising, correct a rising that is misdirected or blocked, and guide to fulfillment an incomplete rising. When the rising is improved and a healthy spiritual life is firmly established, past difficulties can be more efficiently addressed and can gradually subside. When Kundalini Shakti is properly supported, she creates a potent, transformative process that can open the person to profound spiritual awareness and realization. Then the Kundalini rising yields a comfortable, pleasant, subtle, and deeply rewarding spiritual life.

References

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ICR’s 27th ANNUAL CONFERENCE and RETREAT

2012 and Beyond: A Spiritual Perspective

Much has been written and spoken about what was predicted to take place this year—2012. It remains to be seen how much has been understood and correctly interpreted.

Aside from the current day to day challenges of 21st century life, the interpretation of the Mayan predictions concerning the future of the human race is paramount in the minds of many today. On the one hand, some interpret the ending of the Mayan calendar in December of this year to imply the "end" of humanity as well. Other views range from outright rejection of the 'end theme' to the need to search for safe havens from the expected earthly destruction. Still others consider 2012 to be a year of intensified multi-level change ushering in a new era in the evolution of human consciousness. This process is occurring at this and every moment. Let us rise to the occasion with compassion and selfless love. We are all participating as an expression of the all encompassing creative intelligence.

This year we will examine 2012 and look beyond through our presentations which include:

- Forces working upon the physical Earth are directly linked to forces driving each individual, culminating in a new Earth and a new Era in the evolution of human consciousness. At no time in the past has human awareness of our existence and survival as a species been felt and experienced by so many and in such a varied and intimate manner. Dramatic changes in human awareness are being manifested in several dimensions of existence including our physical home and our internal world.

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Bri. Joan Shivarpita Harrigan, Ph.D. Having practiced, studied, and taught Raja yoga and Advaita Vedanta for over thirty years, Joan has been tutored in traditional Kundalini science since being initiated as a brahmacharini in the Shankaracharya tradition in 1987. She is the designated successor in the lineage of Kundalini specialists represented by Swami Chandrasekharanand Saraswati and is the author of Kundalini Vidya, The Science of Spiritual Transformation. Her doctoral dissertation at The Pennsylvania State University investigated the effects of Hatha yoga postures and breath awareness focus on stress. She is director of Patanjali Kundalini Yoga Care at the Oneness Sanctuary in Knoxville, TN, USA. PKYC is a spiritual guidance service for people in Kundalini process. Joan is also a psychologist in private practice with a specialty in spiritual issues.

Patanjali Kundalini Yoga-Care is a spiritual guidance service based on traditional Kundalini Science, which is an ancient scripture-based system for understanding and improving spiritual life. PKYC offers assessments of Kundalini process and provides individualized spiritual practices taught during small two-week retreats that educate and support each participant in a safe spiritual container. Follow up is maintained through regular spiritual direction sessions and returnee retreats. Spiritual education is available through the Self-Illumination Therapy Training Program. Joan may be contacted at: Tel: (865) 531-2004 E-mail: kundalini@kundalinicare.com Web site: http://www.kundalinicare.com

2012 & Beyond Through the Eyes of Vedic Astrology Jyotisha, the ancient astrology of India, has been used for many centuries as a predictive tool for anticipating future events. It performs this function by recognizing and interpreting karmic patterns in the life of an individual. This presentation will compare the system of yugas or ‘ages’ described in the Vedic tradition with the cycles of the Mayan calendar. It will also look at coming events in the light of karma at both the individual and collective level, and how these changes can be understood in the light of evolution. Michael Bradford has been involved in research on Kundalini and the evolution of consciousness for more than 30 years. In 1977 he travelled to India where he spent six years serving as a volunteer worker for the Central Institute for Kundalini Research, founded and directed by Pandit Gopi Krishna. In 1995 he began studying vedic astrology with Hart De Fouw and has been...
seeing clients and teaching since 2003. Michael is a long-time board member of ICR, and currently works as both a computer consultant and as a Vedic astrologer.

To Know Beyond, Look Within
To get a spiritual perspective on our lives and the world ‘beyond 2012’, we must look within. Individually and collectively our future is contained in our biology and consciousness. Our body and nervous system contain the living blueprints of evolution, created by that extraordinary conscious energy known as Kundalini. Kundalini and its contact points, the Chakras, reflect our evolutionary potential both at the personal as well as the universal level. In Sanskrit, three brilliant words express this idea - 'Pind mein Bramhand', which means ‘The universe lives in the body’. In order to know ‘beyond’ we have to look within. In this presentation, we are going to explore step by step how the energy of Kundalini and the chakras is not only connected with evolution in the past, but will also inform us about the future. This exploration will be from a spiritual point of view but will also connect to the emerging culture of the future - its politics, economy, education and environment. Jivasu’s (Pradeep Kumar) teachings are named as Naturality — to ‘to live according to our innate nature’. Jivasu is a meditation teacher and a faculty in McMaster University Acupuncture Program in Canada. While living in Sivananda ashram – India, he had his first awakening which slowly brought him the experience of ‘wholeness’ and ‘freedom from psychological fear’. His insights on Kundalini have been shaped by thirty years of spiritual study and practice. Direct experiences of Kundalini energy have made Jivasu aware of the power and potential of this creative force within us and also shaping the world in which we live. He is the author of many books including: Meditation: A Path of Wellness, Authenticity and Freedom; Chakras: Centres of Evolution and Involulion; Freedom from Fear and Naturality.

Between East and West: Gopi Krishna and Tontyn Hopman
Drawing on Tontyn’s autobiographical notes, his daughter Rhea will describe how a life-long relationship ensued between Pandit Gopi Krishna and Tontyn Hopman, after their meeting in Kashmir in 1950. Pandit Gopi Krishna was instrumental in assisting Tontyn to understand his own, natural Kundalini awakening. Later he assisted Pandit Gopi Krishna to come to the West. For many years Tontyn acted as Pandit Gopi Krishna’s secretary in Zurich and repeatedly assisted him in India and Kashmir. The well known Jungian psychologist James Hillman and Tontyn formed a friendship at the time Pandit Gopi Krishna and Tontyn met. Over decades in Switzerland this continued to assist to balance the influences from East and West in the spiritual development of Tontyn. Visionary paintings by Tontyn will demonstrate both some of the difficulties and clear insight possible with Kundalini. Rhea concludes by describing the influence of Kundalini on her family. To this effect she will show some of her mother’s artwork, as well as her own, demonstrating the impact of Kundalini on her own creativity, years after her own contact with Pandit Gopi Krishna.

Rhea Quen Hopman started her career in 1982 as a Creative Expression Art focaliser (self expression and self-development through art for both children and adults) and in 1987 took a further training with Prof. T Andreasen in Educational Kinesiology. She has run a private practice in Cambridge, England since 1982. In 1995 she began to explore her own creativity, resulting in four separate bodies of work depicting four progressively deeper levels of consciousness. These include paintings, pastel drawings and films. Rhea has exhibited at the ‘International Conference of Light, Colour and Sound for Health’ at Queen’s College, Cambridge University in 2001, amongst other places, and repeatedly presented her work at the International Association of Pre-, Peri- and Postnatal Psychology and Medicine in Heidelberg as well as lecturing to the Cambridge Jung Cir-
Kundalini to effect brain changes and transform an average person into a cosmic conscious sage? Though admittedly a rare event, Gopi Krishna’s life certainly spoke to the fact that this transformation can happen in one lifetime and his vision of an empirically based investigation of Kundalini is yet to be fulfilled. Susan will discuss the current state of yoga and ponder its future as she shares her experience of Yoga as a discipline for spiritual development. Susan Grace has a B.A. in Journalism from the University of Oregon, and works for a major media company. She offers a weekly donation based yoga class in the little town where she lives south of San Francisco, California. Susan took yoga teacher training with a physical therapist, and teaches a gentle yoga with therapeutic applications. She has also taught kindergarten yoga, engaging the children through fun little yoga tunes she composed just for them. Susan tells students she will only teach what she has tried to live and practice herself and that we are all teachers to one another. Her passions are family: her husband of 32 years, 3 grown children, and 4 grandchildren she adores. She also enjoys golf, swimming, meditative walks at her local beach, and especially cultivating a lifestyle dedicated to inner exploration. She is a long-time member of the Kundalini Research Fdn. and ICR.

Kundalini: A New Paradigm, a New Story, a New and Brighter Future. Through the lens of his personal life journey - using stories and verses, and sharing personal experiences and knowledge, Scott Hiegel will describe his own experiences with Kundalini energy and how this intelligence within led him to live a simpler and more healthy life in support of this process. He will describe some of the physiological and psychological manifestations of his Kundalini process, and share certain spiritual and personal practices he used to heal and grow as well as to learn to love at a deeper level. In particular, he will focus on the 12-step method of recovery. He will also describe the new state of consciousness he has arrived at and how this is the future destination of the whole future race. He will also discuss: 1) How the rebirth process of Kundalini is a natural biological potential in the human body with a normal progression and rhythm. 2) How individuals and collective humanity are moving toward a much more advanced and glorious state of consciousness through the mechanism of Kundalini and the evolution of the human brain. 3) How humanity is currently retarding and distorting this natural process of evolutionary growth through a wrong way of living and behaving. 4) How Gopi Krishna’s Kundalini hypothesis has the potential to change the thinking as well as direction of the human race. It provides new insights and answers to important topics and issues like the next destination of human evolution, doomsday predictions, the 2012 phenomenon, the evolution of the human brain, and the current crises facing the human race. 5) Different aspects of the bright and glorious future that Scott believes awaits the human race. Scott Hiegel lives in the Washington D.C. area and runs a consulting and spiritual direction business called Solquest. He has been experiencing an ongoing Kundalini process since the mid 1990’s. His interests include helping people and businesses to grow and prosper, working the 12 step programs, which has helped him through the rigors of his Kundalini process, and reading books by Gopi Krishna and other mystics. One of his greatest loves was helping to raise his 20 year old daughter. Scott is in the process of completing a book which details his life story and Kundalini experiences as well as includes 48 verses that portray the journey of a rise from normal consciousness to a more expanded consciousness as well as the beauty of the human soul.

Music: A Gift to Inspire Us All Music has the power to engage us in self-knowledge and also the ability to lift our souls to spaces beyond the drama of everyday life. At this year’s conference we would like to create a musical experience made up of your favorite inspirational music that moves you into a higher state of awareness. Choose your favorite piece of music and share a few words about how this music inspires you. This is an opportunity to share a part of yourself through the power of music.

To contribute to this musical interlude, please let us know by sending us the title of the piece you have chosen no later than July 15th. If you do not feel comfortable, we can share your description of the piece that you would like to share, by proxy. This presentation will be an experience created by you and all of us will be the receivers of this beautiful gift.

Reflections An open forum where all are invited to share their thoughts on how the content of the conference sessions might positively impact on our lives as we go forward. Vitold Kreutzer and Beverley Viljakainen who has been a student and practitioner of yoga for fifty years and blesses the day she stumbled upon it. Her studies have focused primarily on Vedanta, Patanjali Yoga, the teachings of J. Krishnamurti and, more currently, Eckhart Tolle, T’ai Chi and Qi Gong.

Conference Closing

For more information or to REGISTER online go to: www.icrcanada.org/store and click on Events Registration OR mail payment to: ICR c/o D. Pond, 165 Valley Crescent - RR4, Markdale, ON N0C 1H0
The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards
(Pub.: Simon & Schuster 2012, pp. 298)
by William J. Broad
Reviewed by Beverley Viljakainen

This is a book that needed to be written. Not only has William Broad shed much needed light on what yoga has become since it left India early in the late nineteenth century, but he has also provided his readers with a breadth of perspective that enables us to ask good questions about the yoga we practise. The book’s timing is also appropriate because modern yoga, as Broad says, is at a crossroads: it can address the growing incidence of and concerns around injuries and become a viable recommendation and practice for more optimal health or it can follow the track of profit-motivated denial of the risks and unsupported claims of yoga’s benefits.

An award-winning science journalist and yoga practitioner since 1970, Broad acknowledges that the focus of his book is “practical”, concerned primarily with what science tells us about postural yoga. “If this book succeeds,” he writes, “it does so because it limits itself to a poorly known body of reductionist findings.” Primed for a lot of measurable, quantifiable science, the reader may be pleasantly surprised at the sensitive and knowledgeable way the author touches on what traditional Eastern spirituality encompasses, i.e., meditation and mindfulness, liberation, and enlightenment. He admits to viewing the scientific process as “limited and unable to answer the most important questions in life”. His epilogue is especially uplifting, exploring as it does what may lie beyond the current emphasis on the more physical aspects of yoga.

Broad was surprised to discover the major role science has played in modernising yoga, that is, fixating it on health and fitness according to American academic sports establishment criteria that hold “maximal oxygen uptake”, also referred to as “VO2 max” to be the gold standard of physical fitness and exercise physiology. In yoga, there is no heaving chest, pounding heart and racing blood, attributes that science can measure. Quite the contrary, in fact, given the generally calming, decelerated effects of yoga. Not surprisingly then, science has found no evidence to suggest that yoga strengthens the heart or increases oxygen consumption even as practitioners continue to report having more energy, a greater sense of emotional well-being and increased mental clarity. The studies have found yoga to have a beneficial effect on depression and high blood pressure, heart rate, stress and hypertension that can bring on strokes. Some research suggests that inverted postures such as the headstand may trigger stroke. Science, in general, has raised significant doubts about some of modern yoga’s boasts.

Woven through the book is a sometimes humorous account of the cast of characters that brought yoga to the West. That it took a particular type of ‘yogi’ to be wooed into making the trip is probably safe to say, and we all know that, once away from home, almost anything goes, especially in America! Fortunately, there still exists, even in the West, a parallel universe where the focus of both teacher and student is based on the more traditional understanding of yoga as a way of life that can help us realise our fullest human potential as well as enhancing our health. No advertisement, fee schedule or liability insurance is involved; however, “when the student is ready, the teacher does [still] appear.”

Perhaps what this very readable book does best is to invite us to consider more deeply what we want from yoga, this once ancient teaching, one of the six schools of Indian philosophical thought, now modernised often beyond recognition. Understood and done properly, this ancient philosophy and practice may help us glimpse what it means to be connected to the Mystery that brought us here.

Beverley Viljakainen has been a student and practitioner of yoga for fifty years and blesses the day she stumbled upon it.

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