

# JOY: The Journal of Yoga

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## **The Truth about Being a Yogi: Giving and Forgiving- An Art of Moral Self Interest**

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"...The old avatar looked up, slowly waving his hand in front of my face. He gazed into me, deeper than anyone had ever been allowed. Not a word passed between us in those brief moments he read my soul as he read his own and knew a stranger as he knew himself. The unanimity this man felt with all life on earth mystified me."

In 1972, the late sun streamed through large, bulletproof, street-side windows in a California military surplus store. I sold guns and ammunition by day and participated in a weapons smuggling ring by night. At that time, we called ourselves "revolutionaries" flying armaments from California through Honduras to the Sandinistas of Nicaragua who were attempting to overthrow a CIA backed Contra government. Both the Sandinistas and the Contras committed human rights violations aplenty; my job, as I saw it, was staying alive, and I took my cue from the CIA - my decision being coldly capitalistic and sadly apathetic towards humanity. I returned at the age of nineteen penniless from Israel - where I'd been running from the police on narcotics charges - to the United States, via New York's Kennedy Airport - where I was clubbed twice in one night by a guard for the crime of not having a place to sleep. In my home state of California, the first job I found threw me in with a less than sterling group.

I tell this youth's story because although, as a senior citizen, I am a long-time mystic and yogic priest, I do not wish to be sanitized by those who lend weight to my robes. The social satirist and activist, Dick Gregory, once offered, "I am a home grown boy, not dropped here from the moon." I was born to walk the path, but not born a yogi. I wallowed in the same mud as the other barnyard animals. Staying alive is a baseball bat to the knees; it is a humbling experience.

Like all humanity, I am simultaneously a student and a teacher. I have seen something of this world and have somewhat to teach, yet, I have much more to learn. During those adolescent years, I met an aging yogic avatar and poet (composer of the world famous song Nature Boy), Eden Ahbez. He stepped lightly into our military storefront in search of campsite goods for his digs in Desert Hot Springs, and we undertook the first of almost two decades of life altering conversations, helping me survive youth and gather myself along the journey as a man. At that first meeting he, with his waist length white hair and long beard, blew his bamboo flute and recited his famous lyrics to me, and when he spoke the final stanza, "The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return..." I stood in the middle of the store sobbing. I really did not know what else to do; I felt no love – only emptiness, regret, depression, and anger.

"You have such a well of peace in your eyes," I said.

The old avatar looked up, slowly waving his hand in front of my face. He gazed into me, deeper than anyone had ever been allowed. Not a word passed between us in those brief moments he read my soul as he read his own and knew a stranger as he knew himself. The unanimity this man felt with all life on earth mystified me.

"My friend, I would give anything to experience the harmony I see in your eyes. All I feel is rage." I appeared much as any other young man, however, inside I felt ancient and exhausted.

"Then do this for me," he said. "Give. Give the best of yourself to the world, and your world will change, and you will change. It won't happen overnight. These things take time." And, as an afterthought, "You'll be okay," he said; for all I could see, the old man appeared to have traveled a lifetime pure and unscathed by the universe. At that instant, I was thinking what an uncertain and frightening world this is. I was thinking an hour passed since my last drink. It is only in retrospect I realize no one arrives at their present position in the cycle of samsara, life and death, untouched. We ride the crest of an unending learning curve where we must be given the time and space to err and grow, and be forgiven our human trespasses. First query: when one commits the crime of living at the expense of other's lives, seeking forgiveness from others becomes yet another crime. So, where does one turn? The weapons that moved through my able hands had taken lives, and this I found abominable. "I am a monster," I thought.

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One of my favorite stories from the Upanishads concerns a woman on a long journey who decides to take a nap. One afternoon she falls asleep with her careworn feet pointing towards the local temple. The monk in charge views this as an insult and anxiously chastises the woman for pointing her bare feet toward Brahman. The woman calmly awakens to the monk's indignation, considers her trespass and replies, "Show me where Brahman does not exist, and there I will point my feet."

The Judeo-Christian interpretation of Western (originally Eastern) spiritual doctrines traditionally teaches that we are separate from, yet, created by and in the image of God. A handful of Christian and Jewish mystics espouse that we are a manifest quality of God.

However, in the Eastern philosophical and spiritual tradition of Vedanta – Hinduism's tomb of revelatory doctrine that includes early descriptions of yoga and the hoary literature of the Upanishads - humanity takes the profound plunge that our finite energy and God's infinite energy are one and the same energy; that atman, the finite self, and Brahman, the infinite self are one and the same – the universe, humanity included, is God – God is the universe and more. Like Eden Ahbez, one may know all of life as one knows one's self. It is written in the Tao Te Ching that the wise sage need never leave his abode to know the world.

Whichever train of belief one intuitively, East or West, the life-broadening message stands clear and universal: we are not human beings having a spiritual experience, rather, we are "divine spiritual being" experiencing the human condition. Our second inquiry then becomes obvious, "Why are we here; why as humanity?"

When I consider the above query, my mind reels back to a time before I committed to the path: I was seventeen and found myself in a foreign country unable to speak or read the language. I was homeless, living out of an airport restroom, sleeping in public lobbies, and at the mercy of those who might offer me a handout. For a self-centered, Levi clad, Calvin Klein shirt wearing, middle-class American, this radical shift in lifestyle was a rude initiation into the human condition. By the time my cycle of initiation brought me relative stability – a few years of ups and downs – I became a bitter and unforgiving drunk, a young man who viewed the human race through a gripping, illusive anger.

The art and science of yoga believes we are born out of a dynamic universe to evolve on the corporeal plane through challenges this life affords us; to master interior harmony through practicing life within exterior homeostasis. We are born into humanity because a human being is the only sentient being capable of using its own mistaken perceptions and resulting crises about its illusive condition to transcend that condition. Humanity is here to transcendently evolve an awareness of its divine self by using Maya, its created crises and illusions. Eastern philosophers, religious practitioners, and spiritual metaphysicians are fond of saying, "Nirvana, final liberation, is found in the midst of samsara." Living is a transcendental practice, and one of our greatest hurdles to transcend is the challenge we face in holding tight to our illusions while riding the flowing tsunami of a dynamic universe. If the yogic plunge that finite and infinite energy are one is true, how can an individual grow in awareness of the divine self – a finite aspect manifest of the infinite flowing universe – when one becomes staid in opinion and unforgiving in thought, deed, and action? Struggling with Maya, we are challenged to perceive dharma, the truth of our yogic path.

We approach life like a battle demanding we develop a white-knuckle grasp on our survival weapon - the ego -, which must be "correct." Ironically, this ego cannot be correct until it learns to renounce its worldly position and allows us to flow in awareness of our divine self. One of the original definitions of yoga is "the art of renunciation"; that renunciation being to master living in the world while not being of the world. Certainly, we live in a world of relative right and wrong. Though, in practicing the rest of yoga's definition - to yoke, unite, return, or flow back to the divine self - one must renounce one's position of attachment to being right or wrong, else impede the current of union. Forgiveness is paramount to mastering yoga's deepest truth and goal: to realize the divine self and live in awareness of the divine creative infinity that illuminates itself and infuses its energy throughout the universe, beating inside every human cell.

The Vedas also tell us that which we know only too well; walking the road of life is like walking along a razor's edge.

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In practical terms, how does one begin forgiving the deepest pains this world dog-piles upon us? How do we transcend the intense emotional crises of child abuse, abandonment, acts of murder and terrorism, unrequited love – and, what of the promise that God will always take care of us, which flies in the face of massive homelessness and starvation and natural disaster?

During the sixties and seventies, I listened to folk singer Bob Dylan's composition, Masters of War, whose vitriolic lyrics and searing vocals infuriated a nationalistic fifties generation with his stinging question of government that has "...thrown the worst fear that can ever be hurled, the fear to bring children into this world." In the new millennium, the call to wrath doesn't appear to be near an end with last week's suicide bombings in London's underground. A mother lost her son, and a husband his wife.

Regardless of political ideologies or social strata and crossing all geographical boundaries, being alive at this time in history, we awaken to our days with insecurity and a sense of hopeless vulnerability. We seethe over the trust invested in our churches and our public leaders. We need to locate a space, a jumping off point in the tempest of our lives where we can initiate an understanding of what forgiveness is not; it is not an altruistic act of forgetting or compromise. Knowing that forgiveness does not depend on altruism allows us an anger escape valve. We are furious, but, we will rise above it because forgiving is not a selfless process of denial; this is step one. With this, we begin a slight loosening of the white-knuckle hold on an ego that refuses to budge.

We brave the next step in the storm by understanding that to live unforgiving is to breathe ferocity. God, Brahman, Source, The Infinite Self, The Finite Self, The Divine Self – as you wish – is not here for good or bad, better or worse, happiness or anger; it is simply here to become, and it cannot stop flowing. This is what is meant when yoga speaks of dispassion as the path to truth. Living in passion we live out of harmony with our divine self because the true self simply is the energy to become; it produces no anger, suspicion, sadness, or bliss. Letting go of anger we practice harmony with who we are. Not to forgive is fighting a battle against our self that spends us, drags us down, and depletes our immune systems leaving us open to emotional and physical disease. The next step then is realizing that forgiving is a selfish act and that being selfish, in this sense, is a moral imperative. Forgiveness is knowing that our universe is in flux.

Realizing that our only true position is one of accepting change and not holding tight is comprehending that acceptance does not mean lying down on the job; acceptance of change - dispassion - is the creative practice of wresting power. It is an act we do for ourselves, for our own peace of mind and good health. Forgiving is an individual act of energy conservation. Perhaps you have taken something from me – money, love, or pride – yet, I have it within myself to stop you from going any further, from stealing anything more. When one has been slighted philosophically and physically, it takes energy to regroup. I won't allow you to rob me of the energy I require to make my passage work at this juncture. Through forgiveness, I will stop you in your tracks.

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The "fore" in 'forgiving' means "ahead of its time."

By accepting the human condition before an incident of that condition occurs in our lives, we naturally tend to walk our path with tolerance. The condition we accept is that in a universe where the only truth is change, humanity has the ability to succeed, the ability to fail, and the responsibility to practice. We practice refining the energy output through positive thoughts and deeds. However, if your date is ordered to work late at the office, and he or she must miss an important event, you are not unforgiving because you understand that the nature of human commitment is in reality a promise only to "stack the odds" in favor of successfully keeping that commitment in the face of an ever-changing universe.

I've heard it said that the only true, unchanging element in this universe is The Source. Not so! If you are of an Eastern mindset, you know that God or Brahman or Tao is at first unborn and undifferentiated. The Source then gives birth to itself in the material world as The Ten Thousand Things, or we say, "differentiated" manifestations of the one energy. The implications for me are that creative source has a flowing direction from the simple to the complex, and that this is a constant state of change.

If you are of a Western mindset, then you know that the loving God of the New Testament is a change in numerous ways from the wrathful, feared God of the Old Testament. You know that The Father (God) is known in this life through his manifestation as The Son (God's intelligence) that creates The Holy Ghost (the material universe manifest of The Father). The flow or changes of The Holy Trinity represents the one in the many and the many in the one.

To accept change as inevitable, and to work towards compassion for the human race, whose practice is to live on the learning curve of change, and to tolerate that practice within the time constraints of a single life will not always lead to perfection, is to live a bit more graciously and with harmony and an inch closer to an awareness of our flowing divine self. Flowing, we do not cling to our egos. We do not fight the battle as much as witness it. We conserve energy and lead healthier lives in body, mind, and spirit.

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The "giving" in "forgiving" means to give space/time, to practice the allowance of tolerance and understanding in its time. I wanted to give, to achieve a state of peaceful coexistence with my universe like my mentor, the old avatar. However, try as I might, the giving did not seem to exist within me. "Be a nice fella!" I demanded of myself expecting transformation. It is exceedingly difficult to transform and transcend when you don't give a rat's ass about others and it is only by accident you've sobered up long enough to realize that you don't like yourself. I needed to eradicate that self-contempt gnawing away at me like a caged animal eating his own excrement before I felt any degree of compassion or charity towards the world.

I avidly read everything about yoga that I could find, and I discovered that every school of yoga and all practicing yogis had, each in their own styles, come to a common conclusion; we humans are born as a microcosm of the great macrocosm, Brahman, The Source, God. We are not born out of evil or sin, and we are not born missing anything. Karma, a vastly misunderstood concept, is not punishment, because The Source simply is; it does not make moral judgments and hand out punishments. We have everything within that we require to succeed since "within" and "without" are essentially the same. I discovered that I was and will continue to be God. A preposterous statement by Western standards, yet accepted in the East as a simple truth for as long as the Ganges has run its course. People worship on the banks of the Ganges, not because it is clean, but because the river is Brahman in its beauty at sunset and in its filth at mid-afternoon. God is the process of being. Show me where God does not exist? Even in religious philosophies and systems that migrated from the East to the West, this truth that God is infinite reigns supreme. In the kabala, one of Judaism's most ancient mystical doctrines, it is said that we live within the body of God; that nothing happens outside of God. When Brahman manifests itself as an evil deity, I may shake my fist at God, but I cannot deny God's existence.

As a Jew and a yogi, I ceased kicking myself, forgave myself my trespasses, and offered myself absolution without any middleman or ritual. I found the key to moving forward in my life rather than living in the past and drowning in a sea of regrets; first I must give myself a deep, complete moment of forgiveness. Next, I must accept that as the universe changes, as God has changed throughout eternity, I too have the power to change.

The definition of yoga once again expanded; the true yogi must break with personal history. So, we practice asana, yogic postures, and performing an impossible back-bend with our eyes wide open we lose our history and establish a new perspective of our world and our increased ability to function within it. Every time we master an asana, we leave behind a piece of impossible history, raising our self-imposed limit on the possible; and if we practice deeply and with commitment, we catch a glimpse of infinity, our divine self. The yoga of forgiving begins with giving to one's self by forgiving one's self.

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Nature Boy

"There was a boy  
A very strange enchanted boy  
They say he wandered very far, very far  
Over land and sea  
A little shy and sad of eye  
But very wise was he

And then one day  
A magic day he passed my way

And while we spoke of many things  
Fools and kings  
This he said to me  
"The greatest thing you'll ever learn  
Is just to love and be loved in return."

-Words and music by Eden Ahbez

My friend and mentor, Eden Ahbez, passed away years ago. I remember the day he admonished me to practice giving, and that he told me I would be okay - that my world would change and I would change. Simple words, when enlightened, carry profound truth.

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