

Exploring the Animal Element within Yoga

Hmmm... downward-facing dog, crow, cat, cow, camel. Has anyone else noticed there are quite a few animal-named postures in yoga? More than 50 in fact. Not only this but there is at least one animal-named pranayama (the bee breath or bhrumari pranayama) and there are more than 40 animal-named mudras (in wider Indian philosophy and practice). Are you curious as to why and how this came to be? Then read on.

Yoga was of course born in India, within an ancient culture that exuded a special regard for the fellow earthly inhabitants with whom they shared the Earth and world as they knew it. Many postures are thought to have been inspired by the world and creatures they witnessed around them, and given that India enjoys some of the most diverse regions on the planet, it is easy to imagine the sheer magnitude of diversity and wonder that the ancient people beheld. Much of this belief can still be seen in Eastern societies today. It stems from a belief in karma and the transmigration of souls; every other being on Earth is thought to be an ancestor or even a past or future self.

So... *connection* is a huge factor regarding the animal element within yoga. And as the word “yoga” translates as “union”, this is rather fitting. For me, no other posture actually reminds me more of our connection with other beings on earth than savasana (corpse pose). A surprising choice perhaps; but in fact quite apparent if we contemplate for a moment. Every-body on earth shall become a corpse at some point. Let us unite in and surrender to this shared vulnerability. We are all in the same boat. We have arrived here as a life on earth and then have to decipher how to go about life. Let’s support, help and care for each other in this shared existence. All the animal-based mythological stories and symbolism (e.g., birds being thought of as liminal, accessing both the heavenly and earthly realm and thus being able to carry us to new heights in our manner of being) entice us further to feel a connection with, respect for and compassion for all animals, even ones that may cause us harm as they know no better. Such teachings can be seen in the ancient yogic texts and in quotes of famous gurus and leaders:

“He was only following his dharma, his nature. It is the dharma of a scorpion to sting, and it is the dharma of a saint to save its life. He is following his dharma and I am following mine. Everything is in its proper place. That is why I am so happy.” The Saint & the Scorpion Dharma Story

“One is considered the best yogi who regards every being like oneself, and who can feel the pain and pleasures of others as one’s own.” Bhagavad Gita, 6,32

“For one with an open heart, the whole world is one family.” Swami Satyananda Saraswati

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” Attributed to Mohandas K. Gandhi

“I hold that, the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to protection by man from the cruelty of man.” Attributed to Mahatma Gandhi.

This feeling and notion of connection or union also stems from ahimsa (non-harming to all beings), a principle very important in many Eastern faiths and cultures, including Hinduism and Buddhism, and especially Jainism. It is interesting that ahimsa is pedestalled as the most important teaching within Jainism when we ponder on the fact that Jainism is sometimes thought to be a focus purely on the tool of yoga, a focus that then grew into a religion (and it’s sometimes not even really seen as a religion, but rather an ethico-metaphysical system). It makes sense then that there is such close connection with yogic teachings within Jainism. It is in Jain societies in India where the most compassion for animals can be seen; for example, it is Jain-run animal hospitals pinjrapoles (retirement homes) that care for as many cows as they can manage after the cows have “retired” from producing milk (rather than leaving them to fend for themselves on the streets). Ahimsa is perhaps not the very first yama purely by chance. It also feeds, nourishes and is inherently connected to all other yamas and niyamas (e.g., being truthful, not stealing, being charitable... these are all ultimately based on ahimsa).

There are a lot of mythical animals within yoga. Be it a hybrid horse/human or a duck with fish tails and lion paws (or some such concoction of creature parts). This can be interpreted as further symbolism of our unity; we are all ultimately one and all connected. Many revered mythical beings are also depicted on animal vehicles or as animal avatars. This can be interpreted in many ways: for example, 1) that they have a connection with the Divine or 2) that they are to be utilised by humans/gods, exploited by us/them. Concerning that latter point, indeed, despite a lot of evidence of compassion and respect, there is a lot contradicting this too. This points again to the strong correlation of yoga with Jainism, where there is no record of cruelty or exploitation and it is Jainism that ultimately has had such a profound influence on Hinduism and Buddhism (in particular on the Buddha), phasing out the practice of animal sacrifices and killing for meat. This was all still so early on, from around 500 BCE. This is one reason why there is a higher percentage of vegetarians in India than anywhere else in the world (roughly 40% of its population).

“Animals and Gods are two closely related communities poised like guardians on either side of the threshold of our human community.” Wendy Doniger of *Animals in Four Worlds*.

"The aim of Yoga is to realise that we are all connected. We share one heart, one consciousness, and one Divine Source. Yoga's method is to provide us with experiences that help us grasp this."
Sharon Gannon and David Life, *Jivamukti Yoga*

“We best find ourselves by losing ourselves in the service of others.” Attributed to Mahatma Gandhi.

When practicing each animal asana, then, we can be inspired by their capabilities as an animal and by the myths they are shrouded within in yogic philosophy. We can also begin the process of empathy (contemplating what is it to be a ... whichever animal posture we find ourselves practicing in that moment) and begin the process of opening up our hearts to connect with that which is common across all species. Let us surrender to this and live our lives in homage to this.

Acknowledging all of this and the wish to explore this animal element within yoga all the more and to share the findings has given birth to the Animal Yoga initiative. This is a social enterprise – 40% of all funds go to International Animal Rescue & Animal Aid, with the remainder being reinvested into the initiative. Animal Yoga offers classes, workshops and kids sessions devoted to the animal asanas, animal mudras, animal-oriented mantras and animal pranayama, all with the intention of seeking inspiration from the animal kingdom, fostering greater connection with our animal friends and our own animal nature and ultimately generating more compassion in the world towards animals. The foundation of Animal Yoga is ahimsa and daana (charity). Current yoga teachers (of any tradition) can complete the short specialisation training offered by Animal Yoga in order to share the practices in their neck of the woods and contribute to fundraising efforts on behalf of two great animal charities. See <http://www.animalyoga.org> for further information.

Still, lots of mystery (and even controversy) surrounding some postures and the role of animals within yoga remains; I trust that in time, the animal element within yoga will be researched more, practiced more and thus shall flourish more.

In Kindness & Compassion.

Written by Jenny Mace, Teacher/Founder of Animal Yoga

References:

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