

# Jung and Yoga – Meeting of East and West (Part 2)

“My criticism is directed solely against the application of yoga to the peoples of the West. The Spiritual development of the West has been along entirely different lines from that of the East and has therefore produced conditions which are the most unfavourable soil one can think of for the application of yoga. Western civilisation is scarcely a thousand years old and must first of all free itself from its barbarous one-sidedness. This means, above all, deeper insight into the nature of man. But no insight is gained by repressing and controlling the unconscious, and least of all by imitating methods which have grown up under totally different psychological conditions. In the course of the centuries the West will produce its own yoga...”<sup>1</sup>

The above quote provides a valuable insight into the world of Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), in terms of his stance regarding the psychological and spiritual meeting points of yoga between the East and West – or not as the case may be. With his fiery and determined disposition, he was adamant in his dissuasion of Westerners practising yoga. In light of this, the purpose of this second article is to articulate his views for discussion whilst answering two clear aims. The first is to explore the reasons for his direct disapproval. Secondly, to see what relevance his views could mean to a 21<sup>st</sup> century Western yoga practitioner. This offers you, the reader, an invitation to possibly reflect on what these findings could mean for you.

## **MY QUIET REBELLION - A CATALYST TO EXPLORE MORE**

When I first read Jung’s paper ‘Yoga and the West’ (the above quote is its final paragraph) as part of my first MA degree, the vehemence of my reaction was enough to alert me that this writing was important. I knew I was being intellectually and emotionally challenged which I found very uncomfortable. Turning my familiar ‘dismissive’ rebellious defence (a typical Bengali trait) into a child-like curiosity, I wanted to find out what this man was talking about. In order to help me be flexible-minded, I wanted to understand this alternative Western perspective of yoga. Jung was, and continues to be, a highly respected psychiatrist and psychotherapist (and creator of Analytical Psychology). From his lectures and writings, it is evident that he was also on his own long and turbulent Spiritual journey, in search of a truth and meaning. His 20 volume Collected Works captured the various ‘inner pilgrimage’ reflections (along with its many struggles) and subsequent theories he proposed throughout his working life. I realised my own discomfort stemmed from unsettling confusion about how his theories could relate to my own situation. I was a hybrid fusion of two cultures – born into an Indian Brahmin family, its roots based in Calcutta, and a long established priest-ancestry in Hinduism, yoga and Spirituality. Yet my birth in the late 1960s and ‘childhood’ home (including my socialization, education

and political influences) was in the industrial heartland of Birmingham. How could Jung offer me another insight upon my own Spiritual journey?

## **JUNG AND YOGA – ESTABLISHING HIS FRAME OF REFERENCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS**

The basic driver of Jung’s work was to increase his understanding of the unconscious (personal and collective) part of Self, the large psychic container that he considered held the key to man’s individuation. The psyche (soul) was considered as the totality of being and existed as a self-regulating entity. It constantly adapted to both internal and external forces and influences, to maintain some level of homeostasis. It was through the action of movement between pairs of opposites that enabled this self-regulation mechanism to occur, and the unconscious was considered a crucial part of this process. For example, if there is an over tendency towards being busy, the psyche would create ways to alert the individual to regain a sense of balance, by encouraging ways to relax and ‘be’. If the quiet call was not being heeded, then more overt scenarios might be created. In terms of the unconscious, it was considered to consist of two facets - firstly the repressed hidden parts and secondly, the creative potentiality that exists within man. In terms of the repressed parts of self, this consisted of all life experiences deemed too overwhelming, painful or distressing



and redirected out of view of conscious awareness and into the unconscious – until the individual was ready. The Jungian journey (in the form of analysis) towards individuation involves many steps, initially bringing the unconscious contents into consciousness awareness. By making sense of this ‘information’ and meaning for the individual, this would lead to a greater ‘self-understanding’. Its eventual integration as part of the psyche would contribute to a growing sense of wholeness, whilst also providing a mechanism for repairing any psychological fragmentation.

Coward<sup>2</sup> suggests that Jung had two reasons to focus on opening up the unconscious. Firstly, as a psychiatrist, he was required to maintain an objective observer role with his patients. He believed that the only possible way to do this was to become increasingly aware of his own psychological history and his behaviours stemming from unconscious dynamics. Secondly, Jung regarded that all unconscious contents were real, therefore provided legitimate subjects for psychological enquiry.

### JUNG'S POSITION ON YOGA

Coward<sup>3</sup> describes how for Jung the purpose of spiritually developing the personality was to attain a

state of yoga. He regarded India's understanding of yoga involved both psychology and philosophy. From his own general understanding of Eastern philosophy, in order to be respected as a philosopher, it is assumed that one will have accomplished their yoga through the discipline of a spiritual development process.

Jung's reference to yoga was not restricted to its established position and meaning within India's classical paradigm (as one of the six dharshanas of Indian philosophical thinking) or to Patanjali's systemized Ashtanga model. Instead, he was looking at this concept through a different set of lenses, belonging to a Western empiricist and scientist, who grounded his theories on observations and experiments. As already discussed, the basis of Jung's life's work involved his increasing understanding of the unconscious part of self, where the unconscious was the subject to be observed. He came to regard this enquiry as if it were a scientific experiment. He believed that to be able to observe another, the observer needed to be fully aware of his own nature and personality. Citing Jung<sup>4</sup>:

“The concept of the unconscious is for me an exclusively psychological concept, and not a philosophical

concept of a metaphysical nature..... the existence of unconscious processes ... is derived simply and solely from experience.”

Jung's growing interest with his own unconscious through his own self-analysis resulted in various psychic experiences. Whilst struggling to find explanations through his processing default through logic and rational thinking, he looked to Eastern philosophy (and to yoga in particular) for validation and answers. He also realised that yoga enabled, citing Coward<sup>5</sup> “broadening and heightening one's experience of consciousness, by stimulating one to an increased awareness”. Jung was very clear in warning Western enquirers that when it came to yoga, it was vital to maintain an objective stance. This was to avoid the potential for psychic confusion through ingesting culturally and philosophically alien concepts. By simply copying Eastern practices without any conscious ‘intellectual digestion’ and processing, this would result in the student becoming an imitation, a carbon-copy without any depth and substance. He warned that to abdicate a Western scientific bias would be unwise, especially when engaging with such abstract Eastern concepts. Coward suggests that for Jung, contact with the East provides a way of redressing





a homeostatic imbalance with the Western psyche. Accessing Eastern concepts could provide that valuable prompt for the seeker to find answers within their own cultural context. Jung was observant of the East's respect and practice of the intuitive at the expense of developing a scientific outlook, just at the West had developed a strong outer intellect at the expense of its own roots to an inner intuitive and spiritual self. Both could learn from each other and citing Coward<sup>6</sup>, he describes that for Jung:

The West must not simply attempt to copy the Eastern spiritual yoga, or the East blindly adopt Western science. Each should study the other and gain inspiration from its example, but each must pursue its own development within its own historical consciousness.

Summarising, there appears to be two reasons why Jung considered the importance of studying yoga. Firstly, it was within Indian philosophy that he found meaning and validation of his own psychic experiences and reality. Secondly, yoga offered the modern Western man a wider and richer sense of consciousness beyond that offered by the collective's left-brain dominant awareness. This provided a way to redevelop regard as well as connection with an intuitive sensitivity, and a psychic redress of homeostatic balance. Yet Jung remained fervent in his views (which centred on six themes) of the warning against Europeans' adoption of yoga in terms of practice and philosophy. This will now be discussed.

### **THE WESTERN ENCOUNTER WITH YOGA - PERCEIVED LIMITATIONS THROUGH A JUNGIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Jung<sup>7</sup> was aware of how the Western mindset was greatly influenced by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance. The result was that 'relevant awareness' existed within a narrow state between science and philosophy/religion. Eventually, with the increase in scientific and world discovery, the importance placed upon the will and intellect (with its dependence on evidence) overtook any dominance that the subjective spiritual and religious experience once offered. This only further encouraged a psychic split within man's reality. Experiences

processed rationally through logic were valued and held in conscious awareness, whilst everything else was rejected and relegated to the hidden unconscious. Coward<sup>8</sup> highlights Jung's assumption that Western man's ignorance of his own unconscious might become revealed whilst encountering unfamiliar concepts. He suggested that exploring Eastern philosophical constructs might provoke two sorts of scenarios; firstly, any concepts considered 'strange' or 'odd' might actually be the projected fears that cannot be readily owned or admitted to. Secondly, when a person 'adopts wholesale' the Eastern way of being, at the expense of disconnecting with their own cultural heritage, this could result in an internal psychic chaos. A chosen disregard of any rational processing of experience might only encourage an imitation existence, especially when there is little understanding of the psychic changes involved. For both scenarios, the consequences could simply further inflate the will and split with the unconscious dimension, and potentially lead to neurosis.

Yet, Jung also recognised how connections with the East could be highly beneficial for the soul-hungry Western seeker. Not only could explorations provide parallel connections with one's own culture, but also provide the much needed impetus for valuing once again the importance of one's inner-life and intuitive function. Coward<sup>9</sup> citing Jung: "scientific as well as artistic and religious creativity may directly depend on sensitivity to the intuitive process of the unconscious". The following is a precis of Borrelli's<sup>10</sup> commentary on Jung's views regarding yoga, whilst grouped within the 'six themes'.

#### **1. Observing People**

Jung observed that the increased outer rejection of traditional American and European values and personal heritage revealed some level of inner rejection – of self as well as an avoidance of one's soul. Any practices considered spiritually-focused must involve some connection with the inner-self. In psychological terms, 'this would mean meeting the unconscious and becoming aware of the pained and fearful parts of self. If there is an avoidance to meet this 'dark side' then

the depth, or spiritual, experience will not be possible. Jung considered that Westerners practising psychic Yogic practices, without engaging in any psychological processing, would simply be practising them for distraction and avoidance of contact with their own psyche.

#### **2. Jung's way of dealing with critics**

Jung was aware that techniques used in Analytical psychology (including dream analysis, meditation with mandalas and active imagination) were similar to those used in yoga. He was both sensitive and nervous about any associations considered as 'non-scientific' or mystical. His integrity was vital to his own standing, particularly in his professional fields of psychiatry and psychology. Therefore, by criticising yoga, he was able to deflect unwanted attention away from both himself and his theories.

#### **3. Archetypes - The Development of Religion**

Jung's theory of archetypes is regarded as providing the much needed understanding of religious symbolism and its meaning within spiritual practice. Symbols chosen by faiths reflect modes of functioning and contents of psychic energy for each culture, and therefore are powerful reminders of the symbolic thinking held by these collectives. Jung viewed archetypes as developing religions; they provided the interaction between the conscious and unconscious. Jung was clear that religious structures held within Germanic and European 'tribes' were very different from those in the East, including symbolisms used by different philosophies and religions. He viewed that by taking on another culture's symbolism, meaning and construct inferred a denial of one's own ancestry and roots, leaving one feeling ungrounded and uprooted. As a result, many Western students were not prepared for yoga and its whole framework, and its resulting impact on their psychic processing.

#### **4. Yoga - An analysis**

Jung regarded yoga as a method by which the libido (life force) is 'introverted' and liberated from the bondage of opposites. This process of withdrawal (pratyahara) exists at that pivotal stage between external



exercises that support the relaxed state and the interior phase of concentration on images, leading to a process of inner-knowing. By focusing on a single item, conscious awareness is lowered thus activating the unconscious. Attention is moved away from the personal ego and into the unconscious. It is at this point where opinions differ. For Jung, the higher states of consciousness existed within the unconscious. For yoga, the unconscious contents are viewed as a distraction to accessing pure consciousness, which is considered to house the higher states of consciousness. Therefore, yoga's practices are aimed at directing attention towards this pure consciousness, whilst being mindful that a psychic framework is in place to hold all experience. Jung viewed yoga's aim as equivalent to that of individuation – it is simply that its psychic direction and constructs are different.

## 5. The differences between Eastern and Western religions

Jung accepted that psychic activity consists of the facets of energy processes including reactions, functions and compensations for achieving homeostasis. How this is handled in religions was generalised by Jung. The Eastern religions, whilst feeding the interior-life, are introverted focus and Spirit is held with a cosmic awareness through inner-practices. The Western focus is extrovert, object oriented and thinking-biased, with the mind relegated to a lesser relevance. He viewed Western seekers of Eastern religions and practices as their psyche's way of compensating for a spiritual imbalance.

## 6. Yoga's equivalent in the West

Jung proposed that the psyche contains the potential for self-liberation, which is the purpose of individuation. Yoga too offers that same potentiality for a freed inner-state. With this awareness, he suggested that if there is a sense of lack within one's inner-life, instead of copying alien spiritual techniques, one needs to be encouraged to find an equivalent within their own cultural context. Therefore, practising yoga techniques are to be used to work towards a growing conscious self, and not simply perfecting the practices per se.

## DISCUSSION

In light of what has been raised so far, it is clear that Jung was adamant that Westerners should be discouraged from practising yoga, and his presented reasons appear plausible. However, as someone who sits on the fulcrum whilst living within two inherited cultures, and for all of us whose lives involve some connection to yoga, I think there are three points to consider:



### 1. PRESERVING ONE'S CULTURAL CONTEXT

I can understand Jung's warning that adopting a deference towards an Eastern way of being might involve an inner psychic-splitting of self, leading to denial and avoidance of parts that no longer 'fit the model of a Yogi'. I have questioned this when I have encountered individuals who have chosen to abdicate connections to an inherited identity (including their birth name) in order to take on another. I wonder if these parts of self cease to exist or simply become displaced, as Jung would term, into this unconscious. Yet, what about inclusivity and respecting the psyche's potentiality to hold more possibilities than one framework? Jung was of his time and his theories need to be taken in context of when and where they were written. He was born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into a strict Calvinistic family. His upbringing was influenced by a rigid and proud Germanic patriarchal culture, with its adherence to rules and regulations as well as highly valuing the thinking self. At the time these theories were written, there was growing unrest in an unstable Europe. The 1930s were also a time of growing Nazi ideology

and its preservation of the supreme Aryan race, whilst scapegoating its own shadow onto what they considered to be inferior races. Might this have influenced Jung's urge and need to protect his own culture? The irony is that within the Brahmanic culture, this same ideology exists as the caste system and its expectation that no caste-strata must mix to avoid contamination. Over the last 80 years, there has been a massive global opening up and exposure to 'other ways of being'. Through increased migration, travel, education, media, communication means and information availability through the internet (providing gateways to worlds at the touch of a keyboard), all have contributed towards offering a potential for greater awareness, understanding and tolerance. I quietly smile when I consider how Jung, in his need to preserve one's cultural context, actually contradicted himself. In the theory of the unconscious and its negative aspects, Jung and his colleague Neumann chose to use examples from other cultures as representatives. My MA dissertation was based on critically challenging the Jungian use of the Goddess Kali as a representation of the negative unconscious feminine. My research established how only selective parts of her identity were revealed, and subsequently applied, to fit their theory. The discussion continues!

### 2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN PSYCHES

His ideas about the differences between Eastern and Western psyches seem credible, especially when one considers how the former is introvert-oriented, whilst the latter sits at the opposing extrovert pole. This is reflected with how each culture has created their specific philosophical-orientations. Within Indian culture the unconscious, the sensitive intuitive faculties and the physical body are recognised, valued and integrated as part of the established spiritual-psychic framework, thus making assimilation of psychic experiences much easier. Such a framework also provides a greater capacity for the strength required to hold the tension that's created when opposites compete for dominance. Whereas for the Western person, might their internal wiring be



different? With a cultural conditioning focused on externalizing awareness through intellect and will (i.e. left-brain functioning), and experiences backed by evidence are deemed as valid might suggest that it is. Jung also offered that in comparison, the West has had far less exposure to an established spiritual framework. The dominant Christian-influenced structure does not hold the same level of reverence as the East does for the physical body or psychic unconscious. Therefore, the Western psychic framework could be considered less prepared for what arises from the outcome of psychic practices within yoga. With the 'thinking tendency', and less awareness of the intuitive faculties, processing these experiences can become arduous and potentially destabilising for mental processing and for staying present.

Is there any current evidence for this theory? Recently I was invited to take part in research being carried out by Danny Hinton<sup>11</sup>, a Doctoral researcher based at Aston Business School within Aston University. The focus for his PhD research is to look at how ethnic minorities perform in cognitive ability tests for selection. There is evidence to suggest that performance is negatively affected, and one hypothesis is because differing cultures offer variance to meanings of words, thus affecting the ability to choose the correctly assigned answer. I am convinced that failing my 11+ plus exam, as did both of my sisters and all my Indian friends at primary school, was because we all struggled with verbal reasoning as we just 'didn't get it'. Yet, we all went on to pursue left-brain dominant degrees and careers in science, medicine and engineering, including to doctoral level. So, even though we were all educated in British schools, was our inherited Indian-wiring a contributing factor? I shall have to wait and see what Danny's research concludes.

### 3. RECOGNISING A WESTERN APPROACH TO YOGA

As a seasoned yoga teacher, trainer and therapist who has been trained within the Western education system whilst having my spiritual yoga roots well planted in my Indian ancestry, I am continually amazed to see how yoga is developing. I can understand

how Jung's theory of the collective psyche's need to continually redress balance applies here. With the West's preoccupation and deference towards the 'thinking self', it has been at the detriment of its psychic soul and physical body – on a personal and collective level. Therefore, it is totally understandable how, for the last fifty years and within the thousands of taught classes, yoga's practice has centred primarily on asana, breath-work, and relaxation/meditation practice. Its rising popularity might be explained as an answer to feeding the spiritual hunger and poverty that has grown. Maybe the time is coming to consider developing further from this now established framework, to recognise the existence of the rich unconscious. Through my own therapy process, my psychotherapy client-work and my group work in my psycho-spiritual development courses, I observe how accessing the unconscious can be a truly magical and transformative process towards wholeness. Yet, I also appreciate how one needs to be prepared, guided and supported through such enquiry. Without engaging conscious awareness or understanding, it can be counter-productive and unwise. That's why a Guru was sought in times of spiritual development, and how I see parallels existing within the therapeutic relationship. I am excited at the growing attitude towards evolving yoga in the West, and within my work at Praxis yoga, I am actively involved in making this happen.

This draws me the end of Part 2 and my shared enquiry with you. Through both articles, I have invited you to embark on an exploration of the rich, colourful and complex world of Carl Jung, through his perspectives of the psyche, the Indian Chakra system and his considerations regarding this alien Spiritual framework called yoga. By fulfilling both aims for this enquiry, I hope you have felt stimulated to find out more, even to explore your meanings to any adverse reactions you may have felt whilst reading this or my previous article. Each sensation is a call for attention and possible action. In light of Jung's suggestion: 'In the course of the centuries the West will produce its own yoga', as far as I am concerned the

discussion has only just begun. I look forward to receiving your thoughts and reflections. Thank you.

## REFERENCES

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## ENDNOTES

1. Jung, 1969 'yoga and the West' – Collected Works 11 p.537
2. Coward (1985, p.5)
3. Coward (1985, p.3)
4. Jung (1953-1979) Collected Works 6 "Psychological Types" para. 837.
5. Coward (1985, p.7)
6. Coward (1985, p.9)
7. Jung ('yoga and the West' Collected Works 11 p.538)
8. Coward (1985 p.22)
9. Coward (1985 p.23)
10. Borrelli as edited in Coward (1985) p.79-92
11. Hinton, D (2013)