

Life - The Yogic Perspective

The who, what, why, where, when, and how of life – According to yogic philosophy

Ever wondered where we came from, why we are here, where God has gone? Who God's dad is, what the point of all this is, and why some people say a tomato is a fruit when it is quite clearly a vegetable?

I know I have. Fruits are normally sweet, and although...okay, from an early age I wanted answers to the questions that baffled humankind for centuries. I thought nobody knew, until I discovered yoga. Intuitively, we all know that love is the way forward, peace is better than war, and that tomatoes are vegetables. But why, why, why? – All this unnecessary stuff like poverty, promiscuous partners, pink pimples, and Piccadilly Circus pickpockets? If we all know we need love and do not like being hurt, why all the hatred, trouble, and war? If God is such a wonderful – whatever He or It is, then why has God gone and left us in this mess? Hmm...

I thought, thought, and thought about all this until I had two bouts of depression, one nervous breakdown, and cancer by 27. Good going huh? But guess what, I got my answer! This article explains in brief the science and philosophy that yoga taught me about life, and answers these questions:

How did we get here?

Who is God?

Where is God these days?

Why are we here?

What is the point of life?

Why does God not stop war?

When is the best time to pick tomatoes – summer / early autumn?

A brief background on yoga

Ultimately, the fountain of all knowledge is known as the Atman, or soul. But because most people are too concerned with Eastenders, the latest diet, or one of David Beckham's haircuts (i.e. events of global magnitude!), the yogis of India decided to make it their job to dive into the soul and pluck out the answers to life's deeper questions. It was by contemplating the Atman (soul) that these disciplined masters discovered the highest methods of meditation and yoga. And it was by the practise of these methods, that they became enlightened further. Then, by meditation and Divine grace, these spiritually erudite men were able to discern truths inaccessible by drama drunk, materially motivated minds obsessed with social status and stardom.

These truths, discovered over five centuries ago, were recorded mentally for safety, but were eventually written down in four volumes entitled the Vedas (literally meaning “knowledge”). These scriptures differed greatly from other spiritual writings in that they were full of methods, techniques, rituals, and practical ways in which the “Truth” of life could be extracted from the soul not just from books and lectures. Apart from these books being the original doctrines of Yoga itself, they also contained the complete genesis of life - Vedanta, medicinal and preventative applications of nature - Ayurveda, as well as sections on astrology, astronomy, mathematics, and alchemy. Because these books were not your average bedtime read, they did not exactly make the bestsellers list. But, over the last 1800 years, the knowledge of Yoga and the Vedas has enjoyed resurgence.

The resurrection of yogic philosophy is in no small part due to the sage Patanjali, who in the second century AD organised the great yogic science into eight clearly defined limbs known as Ashtanga. It is still this same system that leads most people towards the higher states of awareness that provide the answers to all life’s most perplexing questions.

I will now answer a few important questions from a Vedic / Yogic perspective.

Who are we? And how did we get here?

According to yoga, we are not just a body of flesh and bone, but we actually have three bodies (and I am not referring to you, Mr Jones, with the 2 Big Macs, large fries, and milkshake, tipping the scales at 16stone!). No matter what size you are, your flesh body contains a body of light and energy within it, and then a body of thought within that. So, wherever there is flesh, there is light, energy, and consciousness, giving credit to the popular expression, “his brain is in his pants!” Energy, and consciousness pervade every cell of our being.

But as well as this, we also have a soul, or an Atman. The soul is actually more powerful than all the other layers. Yoga points out that the soul is who we truly are. It states that we are not our thoughts (see worry, stress, and “I can’t stop thinking about it...”) neither are we our energy (see fatigue, idleness, and “but it’s my day off!”) And (thankfully) we are not the flesh (see obesity, anorexia, and “is that really me in the mirror?”). Our external bodies often give us pleasure, but not without a price. However, our true selves, our souls, are said to be immortal, all-powerful, and all knowing. Although in the flesh, this would create an unbelievably egocentric person, whereas, the soul is actually ego-less, wise, loving, joyous, and peaceful.

According to Yoga, our souls, which live on even after physical death, actually come from quite a powerful source, Parambrahma, or God, and are no different in essence to the illumined one, other than that they are underdeveloped; much in the same way as a baby is an developing model of its parents - smaller, less powerful, and smellier!

When the physical universe was created, we as souls or “children of God” were placed in the three bodies – thought, energy, and flesh, then hurled into the universe. First, we came down from God via the Divine Mother, or Shakti. Then we took a right and became Chit, universal consciousness, intelligence, love, and feeling. From there, we jumped over the cosmic cliff and became the waterfall of Purushottama or the Holy Spirit. Then we said goodbye to each other and became individual souls, Purusha or Atman. We collected our three bodies complete with egos, senses, and minds, and we were on our way.

So, that is who we are. A pure immortal, omnipotent, wise, loving, calm soul, wrapped in a body of thoughts and ideas, a body of energy, and a body of blood, bones, and a bulging belly.

Who is God? Where is God these days?

Well, this is the million-dollar question! Recent thinking has placed God in a human body with a flowing beard and cloak. We visualise Him (another bone of contention) as a cross between Richard Attenborough, Santa Claus, and what we would expect either the mysterious Mr Kipling or Jesus's Grandfather to like! We think of Him as sitting on a cloud, smiling benignly, waving at angels, and "watching over us" much like a shepherd lazily keeps watch over his sheep on hot Sunday afternoon in late August.

We sometimes think of Him as our creator, or our Father, but we often get disillusioned when He does not wave his magic God-wand and banish poverty, war, and people who we subjectively think are head-cases (until we decide to forgive them). Because we have limited Him to a human image, we expect Him to be a bit more like Superman, or Batman and use all His great power to destroy "evil" – which is so unclearly defined these days. Our understanding of God is poor. At best, we think he just keeps the old people happy, and at worst, we think He is responsible for death, disease, hair loss, and miserable sales assistants!

According to yogic science, God is the sole constituent of everything animate (including old square eyes who never gets up from the telly) and everything inanimate. To the yogis, there is nothing but God; He is the air, the sky, the sun, and He is in the souls of all living creatures. Although it sounds deluded, they did not arrive at this conclusion after taking mind-altering drugs or alcohol, instead they used extremely powerful meditation techniques to elevate their consciousness from the senses and body to the higher wisdoms of the soul.

What they discovered was that God existed in many states. In His purest form God exists as Sat or eternal Truth, which incorporates love, consciousness, and bliss. This description fits a growing number of people's idea of God – which is that God is not an individual, but an incredible feeling. The yogis then described how God sent out his consort, the Divine Mother, as a force called Shakti, who was composed of God's nature and qualities. After which point, Shakti divided herself up into God's two main parts again – consciousness, or Chit, and bliss, or Ananda.

Keeping up? From Chit came the souls, as mentioned earlier, but from the other aspect of Shakti, which was Ananda, came creation. It is related through yogic scriptures that from Ananda came another feminine energy called Maya, whose sole purpose it was to construct an illusionary universe. The keyword here is illusion. It was God's plan to create a world, which his children (us) could inhabit and grow in. Maya was endowed with four tools to create this delusion – time, or Kala, space, or Desa, creative vibration, or Aum, and the atom, or Anu.

So, after Maya constructed this universe, we were placed within it. Being wrapped in three extra bodies and let loose in a world that did not really exist was God's way of having a laugh, I suppose! But, very briefly, that is how we came into being.

So, who is God? Well, if we came from Him, then He is inside us, and if He created Shakti, Maya, and therefore everything from time and space to the atoms, then He is in everything around us. So, that is why the yogis claimed that God was more than an individual being, more like an all-embracing entity. In yoga, God is seen as omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent – the king of big brothers!

According to Christianity, there is the Father, the son, and the Holy Ghost. The same applies to yogic science when describing the nature of God. They say He is Om (the creative vibration in space, the elements etc) Sat (the pure form outside of creation) and Tat (present in the soul within each living being).

So, God is everything, but where is He and what is His nature? According to Yoga, He is above, around, and within us, and his nature is love, bliss, and peace.

Why are we here? What is the point of life?

If we accept what the yogis taught us about how we were born, it does beg the question, why? What was the point of all this? Well, it is explained that the relationship between God and us is paralleled in the relationship between a parent and a child. The primary reason most people want children is directly or indirectly based around love. Likewise, God wanted to express unconditional love to us, and be loved in return. So, he produced us, His little angels! Except, just like our children, we are rarely divine and often like our earthly children, we forget to return the unconditional love that our parents have tried to invest in us.

Why else do parents want children? Is it the fertiliser filled bum bags? Is it the spontaneous vocal alarm clock? Is it the wet knees, or vomit stained shoulders that rugrats gift you with? Probably not. It is more likely the fascinating first steps, the wobbly first words, and the daily developments that intrigue us. And just like God created the earth for us, parents enjoy providing the basic needs like a home, food, warmth, and a place to relax and play for their children. This provision of needs goes to make God's existence and our lives feel like they are truly worth living.

Another reason we have children, and God had us, is education. Apart from anything else, this world is just like a school. We should be learning new skills daily, not just for making money, but also for understanding other people, and looking into the spiritual aspects of life. We expect our children to study, work hard, and become qualified for a better life after school. Well, the scriptures of ancient India proclaimed that God is merely training us here for a better afterlife elsewhere.

So, that is why God put people here: to love us in the hope that we may love Him, to provide for us, and to educate us. Therefore, the point of life is to love God, provide some service for others in gratitude for what we have been given, and to continue to grow in our understanding of all things. But why grow? What is the point? That is also explained in the yogic scriptures. We grow to enter new levels of existence. Apparently, this earth is just one tiny part of creation. Other planes of existence are described in yogic texts, which are infinitely more beautiful and intelligent than our humble globe. But until you have understood life on earth and passed the test, you do not get to move on.

And what is the test? It is to remain happy, peaceful, wise, and loving throughout your life. How is that possible? Yoga! That is how. Yoga teaches us and gives us the experience of being in the consciousness of the soul for a few seconds or for hours at a time. Meditation, relaxation, breathing techniques, contemplation, and postures all help us interiorise and eventually attach ourselves to our soul and the Spirit rather than the undulating, emotionally fickle drama of the world.

Why does God not stop war?

This is easier to understand when two things are taken into consideration. Firstly, the scriptures explain that there is no death possible to the soul, so even though the body falls at death, the soul goes on, rests for a while, and is born again elsewhere. So, according to yogic science, death does not even exist, it is just a body dropping away! The second point is education. If a man decides to start a war and God steps in to stop it – what does the man do? He tries harder next time! And if he is directly punished via an “act of God” how does he respond – with fear, pain, and resentment towards God. And the man’s spiral of evil escalates with fury and vengeance.

God does not worry about saving lives, He knows that anyone who appears to die innocently will be brought to Him immediately and will not suffer at all. It is the will of God however that all deluded souls be given a chance to learn, grow, and experience His mercy and love as soon as they decide to improve their ways. Wouldn’t any parent forgive their child if they showed even the slightest remorse? God has many laws, the most effective of which is Karma, the relationship between cause and effect. God knows that each vagrant soul will have to suffer the sorrow they caused to others at some point in their existence, which is a tough enough lesson / punishment in itself.

So, God does not get involved in war. He has endowed us with free will after all. If He had wanted us to be perfect without having to learn, He would have created robots. He wants us to learn that war is not the right answer through experience. Souls like Gandhi, Jesus Christ etc demonstrated this to the world, and this is God’s way of helping us learn for ourselves.

When is the best time to pick tomatoes – summer / early autumn?

It is all down to the type, but also the greenhouse effect. So, the professional’s advice is to pick tomatoes when they are very slightly softer than firm, and as late in summer as possible, but no specific month. And remember never refrigerate tomatoes; they lose flavour.

- Neil Patel