

On Yogi Bhajan
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In the late 1970s—my gosh, it's been that long ago--I lived in Los Angeles for a year. I don't remember how I found out it existed, but just about every day I would drive to an ashram—a center of Eastern thought and practice, and believers lived there--to take an hour-long yoga class. I learned eventually that I was getting the kundalini form of yoga, and that the ashram was the creation of a Sikh guru from India who went by the name of Yogi Bhajan (1929-2004).

Yogi Bhajan lived on the premises or nearby, I wasn't sure. Other than that he was a revered figure to his followers, I knew nothing about him at the time. I saw him once getting out of a car and entering the ashram—older, a white beard, a flowing robe, surrounded by an entourage, like a grand dignitary—but that was it. I never heard him speak or read anything he wrote, I wish now that I had. I've learned about him some in the years since. Here, I'll deal with a book of his.

What I did know back in those L.A. days was that the yoga classes, and just being around that energy, if you know what I mean, was working well enough for me to be looking forward to driving the couple, three miles down Robertson Street--or was Robertson Boulevard? Robertson something—to the ashram from where I was living. My time there left me feeling more centered in myself, clearer, calmer, and just all around more grounded, saner.

The yoga classes were taught by followers of Yogi Bhajan, both men and women. They were Americans and tended to be young, late twenties was typical. They were dressed and groomed in Sikh fashion, at least at that time: Head to toe in white cotton. Turbans for the men, long lightweight scarves wrapped around their heads and then over their shoulders for the women. For men, a long tailored shirt that came to around their knees, and for women, something similar, I guess it could be called an overdress.

Leggings for both men and women; tights-like, though looser than tights. Sandals, or something that gave that appearance anyway, I'm doing this from distant memory. The men had long hair and beards. The woman had long un-styled hair. Rimless glasses for both men and women. No make-up on the woman. The overall effect was otherworldly, austere, not of this time and place, a self-presentation akin to that of Catholic nuns in traditional dress. Although I don't want to go too far with that characterization; my image of them now, all these years later, is of them being smiling and upbeat, and despite their outward appearance, very contemporary, cool, with-it.

As time went along, I made the acquaintance of five or six of these young, youngish, under thirty-five anyway, Sikhs. They were converts, having joined the sect in their late teens or twenties. The first thing that stood out to me about them was their physicality and personal presence. They were lean and fit and clear-eyed, very healthy looking, and they had a centered, calm, confident way about them. They connected with me, they were there with me, and when they spoke with me they leveled with me, no games, straight ahead, genuine, and they respected me and listened to me and showed concern for me. The men radiated a quiet potential for fierceness; don't-tread-on-me came through strongly even though tacitly, they didn't announce it, posture around trying to look tough or formidable, anything like that. The women were proud and dignified and graceful, flowing. Both men and women reflected, again unstated or understated, a palpable sexuality. I picked up that they were committed to traditional gender roles and family relations, including strong loyalties of husbands and wives to one another and love and concern for children. I was struck by the contrast between them and the people I dealt with in the rest of my life, and, frankly, the contrast between them and me, very much in their favor. I was impressed.

The people I met at the ashram didn't talk about their pasts, but I learned later that many of them had been what were called

hippies at the time. School dropouts, drug histories, failure to connect in positive ways with the larger society, adrift in their lives. It was clear they had gone through a remarkable transition into proud, grounded, centered, formidable individuals who had become part of something larger than themselves that gave their lives meaning and importance; they seemed at peace and content. However it happened, Yogi Bhan and his ideas, the way of being he advocated, his example, the circumstance he provided, transformed their lives for the better. As a professional educator, I was particularly intrigued by his obvious effectiveness as a teacher. He got things across; he made things happen.

These Sikh devotees arose every morning at 4:00 a.m. and did two hours of yoga and meditation as a group. At their invitation, I managed to join them twice, perhaps three times, but despite seeing the value of that practice, it was beyond me at that time to keep it up. They gave serious attention to their diets. I ate meals with them and recall large pots of vegetables, legumes, that kind of thing. No red meat, no junk food, no alcohol, no caffeine. There wasn't an ounce of fat on any of these people, and the shoulders of both the men and women filled out those outfits they wore, and their calf muscles were noticeable in the leggings they had on. So different from the fleshy, neutered-looking, benign individuals I encountered in the rest of my life back then and encounter now, and, again, so different from me, especially in those days, I'm somewhat better now.

While I can't say I thought about it hard at the time—I wish I had—I drew some general conclusions from that encounter with the Sikhs in Los Angeles, which, as it has turned out, have had a lasting impact on me. The most central one is that our ability to live with honor and effectiveness, with self-respect and personal peace and satisfaction, is rooted in our physical and mental health and wellbeing. Our first job in life is to, a term for it, hone our instruments: that is to say, get our beings in the best working order possible.

Since that time in L.A., I've done yoga and attended to nutrition and avoided anything—drugs, alcohol, obesity--that I thought would detract from the clarity of my mind or my overall capability. Or I have *sort of* done that. The yoga has remained pretty much a series of exercises, and I could have, should have, gone at it a lot harder. I wish I had incorporated meditation into my daily routine. I could have eaten much better. I wish I'd taken off that last ten pounds. Generally, I wish I would have escalated the engagement with this aspect of my life—gone at it 90 or 95%, or even 100%, instead of 75%--and am intrigued by why I didn't, what kept me from doing it. Yes, what has prevented me from making a good thing into a really good thing? But even what I have managed to do has had positive outcomes for me.

I'm moved to get into all of this because these days I am focused inward, on what it's like to be me, my experience of being alive, and improving in that dimension of my existence. I want to be more grounded, centered, firm in my being, more at peace, happier than I am, and all-around healthier. I've escalated the yoga; I miss fewer days now. I do some cardio exercise daily. In my case it's been a rowing machine. I have a bad back and can't stand for very long. I've begun meditating. Periodically during the day, I attend to my breathing, only that, for, say, a minute or so. I'm eating better, no junk at all these days, and I've cut back on alcohol, and I've taken off some needed weight. No drugs of any kind, including prescribed ones that aren't absolutely necessary. I've worked to get the jangliness and the distractions and the clutter out of my life. I've dropped cable television, the apartment is neater, and I've cut down on darting around, the up-down-up-down, this-that-this-that pattern I had fallen into.

And it is paying off: moment to moment, it's a better experience of being alive for me than it has been and, the central point here, it's created a better base for living more authentically (more as the person I really am), and more autonomously, purposefully, and effectively. That's been an encouraging

outcome and I'd like to keep improving in these regards in the next months and years.

In this thought, I'll comment on excerpts from one of Yogi Bhanjan's books, *The Laws of Life: The Teachings of Yogi Bhanjan* (Kundalini Research Institute, Kindle Edition, 2014). I'll do what I've done elsewhere in this site, including in the very first two thoughts back in 2007, which seems so long ago, "On Foucault" and "On Mishima." I'll quote from the book—set in, smaller type—and then offer my own thoughts on that passage.

So, Yogi Bhanjan and then me:

The fundamental frequency is "I am, I am." This is the oldest law, it is the newest law, and it is the first law. "I am, I am." Beyond that, nothing is going to make you happy and nothing is going to seem very good.

So vitally important: I need to realize—really know, not merely know--that I exist, I am alive, I am conscious, I am volitional. And more, that I am unique, one of a kind; I'm me and no one else. And that I am mortal; I will die. I am, I am.

You must understand, the only way that you can be recognized by the world is if you become your own identity.

I don't know about this. The fact of the matter is you can be recognized by the world (I assume Yogi Bhanjan means in a positive way) if you give it what it wants and expects from you, and that may have little or nothing to do with your own identity and what you really ought to be doing with your life. If becoming your own identity doesn't fit with what goes over at any particular time, the world might ignore you, not recognize you at all, or it might recognize you by coming down on you hard. But if that happens, those are simply the dues you have to pay in order to live an honest life and reap the positive consequences—self-respect, true happiness--from doing so.

You want to be beautiful. To whom? How many of you are beautiful for yourself? Have you become beautiful and said, “I look beautiful to myself”?

Too many people are beautiful to the world but not to themselves. I think of the old song by Ricky Nelson back in the early ‘80s—I wonder if anyone remembers him these days—called “Garden Party.” The chorus went, “But it's all right now, I learned my lesson well. / You see, ya can't please everyone, so ya got to please yourself.”

If you are you, then all things will come to you. The law of happiness is “Let things come to you.” What comes to you will make you happy. What you go after shall make you miserable. The going after it will make you sweaty and miserable. Then, when you get it, you can't handle it.

I like the idea of letting things come to me instead of constantly chasing after them as I have tended to do. I need to let things come to me more, to be more patient and let matters unfold in their own time. But that said, I don't want to go overboard with it. There are times when I need to go after things with all I've got. There is a tendency I pick up in Yogi Bhañan's writings toward either-or, this-or-that, always-and-never thinking that I find simplistic and easy. *Sometimes*, not every time, what comes to me will make me happy, and sometimes it won't. Sometimes going after it will make me sweaty and miserable, and sometimes it will bring me peace and happiness. Sometimes when I get what I pursue I won't be able to handle it, but sometimes I will be able to handle it very well indeed. My view is that it is best to have a wide and varied personal repertoire of responses and initiatives available to me, and to use the one, alone or in combination with other ones, that best gets me what I want to achieve in life. I don't want to be locked into just one way of being. In this example, I need to know how to let things come to me, yes, but I also need to learn how to go after them.

Each human being is capable and is competent and is manufactured to live pure under all circumstances.

I'd put it that each human being is *potentially* competent and is manufactured to *possibly* live pure. Each person needs to work hard to realize his or her competence and purity; it doesn't just come automatically. There is passivity in Yogi Bajan's outlook that gives me pause.

You cannot do anything outside which is not inside. When you are solid inside, the outside shall come.

I think it is possible to do all sorts of things outside that are not inside, and to do them well, and to get acknowledged positively and rewarded for doing them. The question is whether those "not inside" things will give us serenity and gratification, and whether on our deathbeds—and before that as well--we will approve of what we have done with our lives. Being solid inside is a necessary but not sufficient condition to living well. That point I've been making: good things won't necessarily come to us, we have to make them happen. All to say, living a life we can be proud of involves concurrently working on our insides and, as well, bringing about good outsides.

You are the victim of your own weaknesses. Once you get into them, then you only have to get out of them.

When we are being mistreated or shortchanged by the world, it helps to look hard at how what is going on is due to our own weaknesses. When we do that, almost always we'll see that our own weaknesses are contributing to our problem, which can include the tendency to victimize ourselves in the light of circumstances or other people victimizing us; without meaning to, we pile on ourselves. When we identify those weaknesses, yes, get out of them, but again, it's not going to just happen, we have to

work with all we've got in us to make it happen. Yogi Bhanan's phrase ". . . then you only have to get out of them" makes it sound easier than it most often is.

You cannot be subjected and subdued if you don't agree to be. Without your own consent of defeat, there is nothing that can defeat you.

An empowering thought. We don't have to agree with our defeat. Even if they burn us at the stake, we can disapprove of them and what's happening and stand tall and proud as they light the flame. We always have the power to say "No!" to what's going on. They can't take that posture away from us, and we shouldn't give it to them.

The simple law of life is that you can always learn, and you should learn from every situation.

Yes, in every circumstance, whether things are going well or poorly, we can learn from what's happening. We need to train ourselves to ask ourselves, what can I learn from this situation? And, how can I put this learning to use?

The Law of Karma is, "As you sow, so shall you reap." Therefore, be intuitive and don't sow what you don't want to reap. If you are reaping the belief that the world is destruction and pain and no good, you are also sowing it. If you stop sowing it, you will find that it won't grow. Therefore, the keynote in life is not to sow what you don't want to reap.

I don't know that we reap what we sow in every instance, but it happens often enough that we need to take into account the distinct possibility that what goes around comes around. If we don't want to live with harshness and pain in our lives, we shouldn't be putting it out there in the world. Which is not to say there aren't times to strike out ruthlessly and fast at the world—that general

point I find myself making here, there's a time and place for just about everything. But be very careful about it, because it could come back to bite you.

In us, there is a viciousness that is satisfied by hurting others. But then, we ourselves are hurt for enjoying their pain. It is a psychological truth. The law is, when you hurt somebody, you will be hurt equally. Whatever pain you sow for others, you sow for yourself, and then you have to reap it.

Here I go again: in *some* of us there is viciousness satisfied by hurting others. Or at least we're satisfied in the short run. The Law of Karma, or at that tendency anyway: we might well get back the hurt we inflict. Live by the sword, die by the sword. It seems best to look for ways of defending ourselves and those we care about and maintaining our places in the world without seeking revenge and dealing out pain.

So cause no cause and start no sequence for which you do not want to face the result.

Yes.

Before speaking, the first law is: you must know why you are talking. You must know for what you are communicating. What do you want? Do you want to put somebody down, or put somebody up?

And not just with speaking. Before doing anything, we need to come back to our goals, reference ourselves in them: What exactly am I trying to accomplish here? What are my intentions in this circumstance? Are those the best ones, the right ones?

Whatever you have said should be true, and it can only be true if you prove it. Otherwise you are lying. A lie is a frustrated truth spoken to save time and space.

We need to ground our expressions, all our actions, in the truth. How do we know that what we believe to be true, presume to be the case, is indeed a fact? I wouldn't use the word lying as Yogi Bhanan does here, which to me connotes an intentional untruth. Most often, people believe they are referenced in the truth when they actually parroting what they have heard or that's in the wind; they haven't thought it through for themselves or tested it against reality. If we want things to work, in the world and in our own lives, we need to realize that what we assume to be true or feel is so is not necessarily actually the case. To a reasonable level of certainty, we need to be able to prove to ourselves—ourselves, not others—what we are convinced is so is indeed so and thus a sound guide to thought and deed.

Whenever you meet anyone, exalt him or her. Share the best experience of your life. Offer the best of your life. Do it with both heart and head.

Yes, attend to how you are with other people. Although here again, there is the need to be able to do whatever is called for in a particular circumstance. There are times when you need get up to leave the room and shut the door behind you. We need to be healthy and clear enough to know when to exalt and when to head out for greener pastures.

Love more and demand less.

The last song from the Beatles "Abbey Road" album: "And in the end, the love you take/ Is equal to the love you make."

If you love, you can't leave. There's nothing that can leave if you love.

I wish I could ascribe to this laudable sentiment. I believe my experience in life has taught me that there are times when even

though you love it's best to leave. It's a last resort, but it is a resort.

Be thankful.

And the thankfulness is for the gift of life. I am, I am.

What's particularly challenging about getting in the best possible physical and mental shape as an allowing condition to living well is that you and I have to get this job done at the same time we are doing what we have to do day to day to get through our lives--our jobs, relationships, getting the bills paid and the grass cut, all of it. It's not as if we can stop the world and just work on this project.

I haven't gone into the details on exactly how to take this challenge on because I really don't feel the need to. As far as I can tell, there are a lot of ways to go at this; there isn't just one best approach.

I've written about yoga here, and I really believe in it. I do kundalini yoga—or kind of; for better or worse, I've made some changes in it--but I'm not in any position to say it's the best version of yoga out there. There's hatha yoga and kriya yoga and Bikram yoga, all sorts of different ways to do yoga. My layman's sense is that they all work well. Check around and get into whatever type of yoga is available and feels right to you. Take a yoga class or check out a book or video at Amazon or get the advice of a friend. The key is to do whatever form of yoga you choose regularly.

It looks to me as if it is the same with meditation. There are all kinds of approaches, and they all work. They all get you to slow down and calm down and focus and center and directly experience being alive. So look around and try some of them until you find one that seems right for you.

The same with nutrition. If you get it in your head you want to eat in a way that best contributes to your capability to live as

well as you can, you'll do it. The information is out there readily available.

There are a lot of books around on Eastern thought and tradition. I'm not suggesting you should read the book by Yogi Bhanan I used in this thought (by the way, it has a lot of meditation techniques), or that his approach is better than anyone else's. His followers have set up a 3HO Foundation (Healthy, Happy, Holy). You could check out its web site, which has all sorts of activities and programs and recipes and so on, and see what you think.
<http://www.3ho.org>

Really, I'm just trying to get my life done well, and I've found that the things I've talked about here have been helpful in this regard. I hope this has been food for thought, and that you take what's here where it ought to go for you.

My yoga teachers said "Namaste" at the end of classes. It's a Sanskrit word that means "I bow to you."

Namaste.

