

[Yoga - Are Women Turning into Men?](#)

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Yoga - Are Women Turning into Men?

A swami of the Osho (formerly Rajneesh) International Commune of Pune, India, has brought back to life the late Rajneesh's zest for contrariness to established Hindu knowledge. Swami Satyavedanta stunned and embarrassed the worldwide yoga community last summer when he claimed that hatha yoga was catalyzing biological and attitudinal changes in thousands of women. In short, the swami observed, "Yoga is turning them [women] into men." It sounded like bad science fiction, or a kind of spiritual sexism. "Women who have been doing yoga for many years become more and more male. They grow facial hair, their features become hard and angular, their breasts shrink and their voices deepen." Swami Satyavedanta's conclusion is apparently based on observations and conversations with women attending the Osho Commune in Pune over the past few years, and echoes that of the avant garde Jain guru Osho (Rajneesh) who as far back as 1978 advised a young lady to stop hatha yoga and take up dancing. Osho also turned the headstand asana upside down by declaring it harmful for men in "destroying the evolution of man's sensitive intelligence."

In a statement that was carried by India's The Hindustan Times and The Independent in London the Osho swami warned, "The West is playing with eastern esoteric sciences like a child playing with fire." He continued in controversial waters, "It should be remembered that yoga was invented thousands of years ago by male Indian mystics for the bodies of male seekers. The chakras or inner energy centers of women are totally different from man and yogic asanas and exercises that can benefit one can do untold damage to another."

According to the swami, hundreds of Western women visiting the Osho institution have exhibited chronic health problems and obvious hormonal imbalances. Osho spokespeople say the commune has risen to the second largest tourist draw in India, just behind the Taj Mahal.

Down in South India, at equally touristy Pondicherry, the International Centre for

Yoga Education and Research was among the first to react to the Osho swami's comments. Deputy Director Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani lashed out in an editorial. "One doesn't know whether he [Swami Satyavedanta] is simply a publicist, out to make cheap publicity for himself by making flamboyant, outrageous statements, following in the footsteps of his guru, or whether he is - as alleged by the respected hatha yoga teacher of world renown, B.K.S. Iyengar - simply engaged in a direct personal attack on his yoga institute in Pune because of a long standing grudge which they have against him."

Mrs. Bhavanani forwarded a copy of the Osho article to Iyengar at his highly popular Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute, located, not surprisingly, in Pune. Iyengar responded to the Osho article in a letter to Mrs. Bhavanani: "Since 56 years of my teaching I have been attacked. But God gave me strength to carry on and I have done it and made yoga popular. Actually Rajneesh people have a grudge against me. The article you sent was a direct personal attack. It came in many papers. Only the Independent did not publish their reference to my institute. I encountered Rajneesh on some occasions. Since then, they attack through papers. I knew him before he was known to the world and after also. His father was coming to my house to learn yoga." In response to the Osho statement that the sexes are switching, Iyengar offered, "We have here more than 200 ladies. Not one has become masculine nor have men become feminine. I do not know why papers give undue importance to statements by people who have never done yoga nor have records to prove their charges."

Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani went for the jugular on the question of whether Osho has any business commenting on Hindu techniques: "Swami Satyavedanta is the disciple of a renegade Jain. Jains are not Hindus, and have nothing to do with Hindu sciences. Yoga is a Hindu science. Rajneesh knows nothing about yoga. He did not practice it, nor did he teach it. His was a hedonistic, permissive approach to the problems of life where everything goes. He was the antithesis of a yogi."

HINDUISM TODAY tried to contact Swami Satyavedanta to invite further comment on the controversy. The swami relayed our inquiry to Swami Veetan of the Osho Press Office at the Osho Commune. Swami Veetan sent several pages of extracts from Osho's (Rajneesh) writings against women doing hatha yoga or modifying it into a free-flowing, spontaneous dance form - which many worldwide yoga schools have developed into their yoga curriculum, long before Rajneesh adopted it. HINDUISM TODAY requested any corroborating data Osho Commune had on gender transmogrification - facial hair, deepening voices, etc. - but none was forthcoming nor any comment made on it. We asked if the Osho Commune is presently teaching

yoga asanas and breathing to women. Swami Veetan replied, "We are still experimenting with new ways of adapting this ancient science to the psyche of modern man." And if hatha yoga was taught at Osho in the past? Veetan answered. "In the past the Osho Multiversity has offered a wide range of Neo-Hatha Yoga classes but always in light of Osho's insight that it be practiced in a gentle, passive, surrendering way. In this vein, it is more a slow dance of spontaneous postures than a rigid discipline of gymnastic contortions." To our question on whether there are any other organizations advocating the Osho assertions, there was no reply.

In a final comment to HINDUISM TODAY Swami Veetan reinforced Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani's perception of alive-and-well Rajneesh libertinism: "I can tell you one thing, the new yogi will not be a serious, holier-than-thou ascetic but a laughing, loving, creative rebel who enjoys life in all its dimensions."

Sounding out a reaction to the Osho assertions, the International Centre for Yoga Education and Research asked fifty of its teachers to comment on women performing asanas and to relate their experiences of hatha yoga hormonal imbalances or other disruptive phenomena. Mrs. Bhavanani reports that "Everyone responded with righteous indignation. Everyone asserted that their own individual experience as well as the observation of their own students was that 'yoga made women more womanly, and men, more manly.' Everyone observed that yoga restores proper polarity, proper energy flows and balance, and gives a disciplined beauty to the body within one's own sexual format."

Bhavanani provided HINDUISM TODAY with excerpts from several of the yoga teacher responses.

La Reunion: Paula Payet, a secondary school teacher, says, "Western hormonal imbalance is created by the diet, lifestyle and Western medicines. Yoga is a balance to these negative and destructive practices."

London, England: Lakshmi Kumari, a student at the British College of Naturopathy and Osteopathy, points out, "The practice of yoga does involve the whole lifestyle, and whatever technique is applied, it has to be in harmony with the overall lifestyle. If a woman practices yoga with a male attitude - competitive, aggressive manner - her body might respond likewise."

Edinburgh, Scotland: Savitri Devi, a social worker, was wrangled: "Women who are being turned into men by practising yoga are not and cannot be practising yoga. As a woman I have personally experienced the awakening of my femininity like I've never felt it before." She cautions, "Yoga is not a series of muscle building activities as taught by many modern exponents, but is a conscious awareness, being in tune with the Self on all levels."

Savona Italy: Lima Devi, proprietor of an Indian craft shop comments, "Obviously, the wrong type of yoga will create hormonal imbalances...much of what is termed yoga today is not Hindu yoga at all, but an invention of Western materialists." She reflects that "the author has singled out only Western women. What does he have to say of Indian women, who are the most feminine in the world. Perhaps he has never seen the abundant feminine beauty, grace and charm which is apparent in the female contestants at the National Yoga Asana Championships held several times each year all over India."

Dayamatha Giri, who runs her own yoga school in Savona, says, "In ashtanga yoga the woman discovers the masculine and feminine principles are inside her, and through right means she achieves unity or equilibrium. Sadly, the practice of the wholistic concept of yoga - ashtanga yoga - is not common in the West."

Will this issue continue into the 1990's? As one yoga instructor aptly put it, "Let's just wash that man [Swami Satyavedanta] right out of our hair."

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