

A Yoga Guru of the Modern Era: The Politics of Preserving Tradition

Siddharth [00:00:01] I'm Siddharth Sharma, originally from India. I work in a software company.

Reva [00:00:07] In his early 20s, Siddharth was an active sportsman. He played cricket, volleyball, soccer and all this activity left his knees and shoulders in ruins.

Siddharth [00:00:16] I tore my ACL. I was twenty-five at the time.

[00:00:21] I first had my left knee surgery, 2005 summer, then 2005 winter I had my left shoulder and then in 2006, somewhere in March, I had my right knee done.

Reva [00:00:38] The surgery went well, but he was left at a great deal of pain. To help he turned to Ayurveda and Yoga two forms of traditional Indian medicine and spirituality, Siddharth says they changed his life.

Siddharth [00:00:51] My days were full of energy. I was eating right, so there was that benefit also. I was... My sleep was much better. That has been a very fruitful, very rewarding journey.

Reva [00:01:02] But Siddharth became interested in this kind of healing beyond what I could do for him physically.

Siddharth [00:01:07] And I kept exploring more. I got into the TV channels, got in touch with Baba Ramdevji.

Reva [00:01:15] Baba Ramdev is a guru in India, a spiritual leader and teacher with a large following.

Siddharth [00:01:19] And they were capable and genuinely concerned about the welfare of common man.

Reva [00:01:25] According to his website, Baba Ramdev's goal is to spread Yoga and Ayurveda across India. For practitioners like Baba Ramdev Ayurveda is a science. Part of it is what you eat and drink, and it can affect your physical health.

Reva [00:01:39] But it's equally important to understand how what goes in your body affects your spiritual well-being as well.

Siddharth [00:01:46] What Ayurveda talks about is so much particular about eating food, which are of *satvic* quality, which means which is the positive energy. Their thinking is, hey, what are the kind of food which could actually be very calming and uplifting to the system, to the mind?

Reva [00:02:09] The idea is that the food you eat has either positive or negative effects on your body, and the goal is to maximize food intake that leads to positive outcomes. There are energies associated with the food we eat and the water we drink, and consuming positive energy leads to better overall health.

Siddharth [00:02:29] For example, *daal* or pulses, lentils have protein and eggs also have protein. And you have a lot of seafood and animal food that also have protein, but they say some kind of protein is not good for the system. You don't want to ingest violence and trauma.

Reva [00:02:54] Ayurveda and Yoga go hand in hand. As you're putting the right things into your body with Ayurveda, you are strengthening your body and your mind with yoga postures, meditation and recitation.

Reva [00:03:06] Together, they're more than just a wellness routine. They form a complete lifestyle.

Reva [00:03:14] Keep in mind that these are very oversimplified and somewhat westernized explanations. For many, the practice is far more spiritual and transformative than simply changing their diet and exercise routine.

Reva [00:03:27] Practitioners follow many religious traditions, but despite different backgrounds many would agree that Ayurveda and Yoga are not just about the physical results, but spiritual ones as well.

Reva [00:03:37] It can be a complicated mix.

Dr. Svoboda [00:03:39] Ayurveda is a nonsectarian medical system.

Reva [00:03:47] This is Dr. Robert Svoboda, the first Western M.D. to also receive a formal degree in Ayurveda. What he says about Ayurveda applies to Yoga as well.

Dr. Svoboda [00:03:56] Even today, you will find Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian Ayurvedic doctors practicing.

Dr. Svoboda [00:04:08] The text themselves do mention a number of Hindu gods and goddesses in particular context, but there's nothing in there that specifically says you have to follow a particular belief system.

Dr. Svoboda [00:04:22] On the other hand, there is a definite belief that there is something that transcends the physical existence.

Reva [00:04:36] I asked him to explain this a little more — explain the purpose of yoga and Ayurveda together.

Dr. Svoboda [00:04:41] The purpose of yoga is to allow your body to be as stable as possible.

Dr. Svoboda [00:04:51] When your body is stable and your life force, your *pran*, is stable, then that will make it much easier to stabilize your awareness.

Dr. Svoboda [00:05:00] The real purpose of yoga is to make your awareness steady, and the purpose of Ayurveda is to make your body steady so they can work together very well. And that steadiness is very important.

Reva [00:05:18] This might sound vague, but Siddharth says that most of these concepts only make sense after one has begun practicing.

Reva [00:05:24] It's a feeling of wellness, not logic.

Reva [00:05:27] And in order to get to this feeling, one needs a Guru, someone well versed in Ayurveda and yoga who can guide you.

Dr. Svoboda [00:05:35] Know the word, *Guru*, and Sanskrit means heavy and the reason for having, using that word "Guru," there being weightiness, is to assist the student to understand just how important it is to have a a focused and well-grounded sense of reality and to to take in and possess *gravitas* in life. And the Guru is there to assist you to make sure you will maintain physiological balance while you're going through this transformation to become more aligned with spiritual reality.

Reva [00:06:22] Siddharth found his guru in Baba Ramdev as he was flipping through the TV channels.

Reva [00:06:33] Baba Ramdev began acquiring a following on his TV program in the early 2000s on which he would do his yoga practice for people to follow along. He blew up quickly.

Prof. Sarbacker [00:06:43] The lore is that Ramdev started out with the show on one of the cable TV networks only to later basically be able to buy it, in part given the fact that his show had been so wildly successful.

Reva [00:06:59] Professor Sarbacker has done extensive research on Baba Ramdev.

Prof. Sarbacker [00:07:03] I'm Stuart Ray Sarbacker. I'm an associate professor of comparative religion and philosophy at Oregon State University.

Reva [00:07:11] He estimates that the show has about now 85 million TV viewers and some one hundred and seventy countries and is one of the main sources of income and influence for Baba Ramdev.

Reva [00:07:22] As Ramdev gained popularity, he formed Patanjali Yogpeeth Trust, essentially a corporation that runs Baba Ramdev's business and research endeavors. The main offshoot, Patanjali Ayurveda sells Ayurvedic products.

Prof. Sarbacker [00:07:37] Everything from traditional herbal medicines and to things like bottled juice and water and cookies.

Reva [00:07:46] They have a website. You can order it online and ship it to the U.S..

Prof. Sarbacker [00:07:50] Yeah, yeah. In fact, when I was doing the research for the Modern Yoga Gurus essay, I spent a bit of time scrolling through the different menus of the products on one of the Patanjali websites.

Reva [00:08:03] This is Ramdev's greatest source of funds. And these products are found all over India from military stations to rural households. He claims that all foods, drinks, supplements produced by Patanjali are free of harmful chemicals and are Ayurvedic in nature — that they have positive immunity building properties. Not, of course, without some controversy.

Prof. Sarbacker [00:08:24] Ramdev has gotten in trouble a couple and a couple of occasions for making claims about the capacity of those products to heal diseases like HIV or cancer.

Reva [00:08:36] In 2020, in the midst of a coronavirus pandemic, Ramdev's brand, Patanjali, released a product called Coronil, which claimed to cure COVID-19. Amidst widespread backlash, he was forced to go on TV and say that it isn't a cure and instead, he said it would help strengthen a person's immunity against covid.

Reva [00:08:58] Ramdev's influence does not stop here. In 2006, he built the Ayurvedic Institute, where people like Dr. Svoboda could get Ayurvedic degrees, complete with an Ayurvedic hospital, multiple dispensaries and of course, yoga classes.

Reva [00:09:14] And you went to Patanjali Yogpeeth?

Prof. Sarbacker [00:09:17] I did visit Patanjali Yogpeeth as part of my my field research on Ramdev and was given a tour of the facilities which are quite extraordinary. I mean, it's something similar to a college campus. You know, there's a Ayurvedic hospital on site, there are research facilities where they're using various technologies to study the effects of yoga practice.

Prof. Sarbacker [00:09:44] Yeah, I had hoped actually to meet Ramdev himself and was actually in a waiting room and then eventually told that he was forced to leave the campus due to security concerns, which plays into, among other things, his stature as a kind of political figure and in some cases very polarizing.

Reva [00:10:13] With his many businesses, institutes and general omnipresence in Indian public life, Baba Ramdev has also become an influential political figure. He's been a huge supporter of Prime Minister Modi since Modi was elected in 2014.

Reva [00:10:30] Just like the United States, India is a religiously diverse democracy with a constitution that formally separates religion and government. But Modi and his supporters, including Baba Ramdev, openly advocate for India to be a Hindu nation.

Prof. Sarbacker [00:10:46] Ramdev is a complex character because on one level, I think he really wants to argue that yoga is a kind of universal technique, which is potentially a benefit to everyone in the world. But at the same time, he's taken very conservative social stances on issues like homosexuality, for example, both saying that it is a problem and that additionally, yoga can cure it.

external clip [00:11:19] This coming in: Baba Ramdev, the yoga guru now puts a dampener on the LGBT movement, he's called homosexuality an American disease. In fact, Newsmax has got an exclusive interview with Baba Ramdev.

Prof. Sarbacker [00:11:30] Ramdev, has been very outspoken and I think one of the things that's really marked his rise, or ascension, within Indian consciousness has been not only his ability to kind of reach these mass audiences through his yoga programs, but taking on issues like the dark money problem in India.

Reva [00:11:54] By the dark money problem, he means widespread political corruption. Baba Ramdev's political stances make it tricky to evaluate him as a public figure, and his massive accumulation of wealth has led many to question his authenticity. But Dr. Svoboda says it is possible that his modernized, capitalistic approach to Yoga and Ayurveda was necessary to prevent an ancient science and art form from dying.

Dr. Svoboda [00:12:21] There's a vast amount of Ayurvedic knowledge that was lost in between 1835 and 1920 when the British refused to support Ayurvedic education because they thought Ayurveda was just superstition and didn't have any value and modern ways of thinking were much more advanced. And it was the Victorian England approach to reality, which is we Englishmen are great and we're also white, and it is our responsibility as white people to to assist all of these other colored people to advance to the stage of civilization that we have. So that the British actively discouraged all forms of Indian knowledge for this period and large large amounts of knowledge were lost.

Reva [00:13:20] Shekhar Agarwal, a disciple Baba Ramdev, and now a close associate of his, echoed a similar line of thought. Agrawal is the CEO of Patanjali USA, the branch of Baba Ramdev's corporation that operates in the United States. According to him, Ramdev had to establish these multinational, multimillion dollar [00:13:39]corporations and institutions to gain authority in the rapidly westernizing India. [4.3s]

Agrawal: Yes, basically because Western science was not willing to accept that these findings,

Reva [00:13:51] By findings, he means the results of yoga and Ayurveda.

Agrawal: But because they [Baba Ramdev] do, they know this is a valid science and they want to bring it back.

Reva [00:14:06] Baba Ramdev created a brand, he used modern advertising techniques.

Agrawal: They modernize it. They put a lot of research also, and they they they, they, they they they made to do what modern men like to see. Very clean products made in a very clean way. And, and this was made... made available through, you know, five, eight, ten thousand centers all over the India.

So they build those kind of manufacturing process, and they opened up the stores everywhere and brought marketing awareness through TV channels... and people start seeing the result. And this transformation they brought out was Ayurveda as well as yoga also. So these two science were brought out to the common man, uhh by Patanjali Yogpeeth of India.

Reva [00:14:35] Ramdev built the kind of business that people in the West and young people in India would understand. By creating a brand, perhaps he thought he was saving a tradition that India was on its way to losing. And along the way, he gained unprecedented political, social and economic influence in the world's largest democracy.

Prof. Sarbacker [00:14:59] One thing that I would say is, you know, as a historian and philosopher of religions, Ramdev's status within Indian society, both as a guru and a driving political figure, cannot be overstated. The tension between you know Ramdev as this teacher of, you know, these sort of innumerable yogis and yoginis throughout India and his political role is that, as we've seen in the case of a number of modern yoga teachers, yoga teachers don't always live up to the sorts of expectations, you know, that their disciples put upon them. But at the same time, people have an experience of yoga that is very profoundly transformative. Really that comes into the equation when you're sort of evaluating his legacy as a yoga teacher. Without a doubt, he has introduced millions and millions of people, especially in the sort of rising Indian middle class, to the practices of yoga. And I would imagine and many probably benefited in terms of their personal health, whether that be mental or physical. But how do you weigh that against, you know, the sort of the political implications of the rise of Hindu nationalism in an increasingly much like we see in the United States, polarized population?

Prof. Sarbacker [00:16:32] It's a... it's a tough question.

Reva [00:16:37] For someone like Siddharth, the question gets answered by what he sees and feels happening in his own life, in his own body.

Siddharth [00:16:47] It's been 13 years Reva, at least more than 10 years. I've not taken a single medicine. When I go for blood donation, they do the test and they say, oh my God, they keep calling me, "you need to come because your blood profile is amped up." So what I'm saying is, you

know, there is that wisdom from ancient culture and it's not mainstream, and which has been tried and tested not for just five or 10 years or not on, you know, rabbits or mice, but on actual humans for generations.