

## **Selma our first female yogi**

*By Anna Bornstein*

We practice yoga – bending our backs, putting our legs behind the neck, standing on our heads while breathing from our belly or sitting absolutely still in a lotus position with our feet facing upwards and resting on our thighs. All with the purpose to learn how to handle the invisible life forces and with a feeling of opening up to something new. A few know that Selma Lagerlöf more than 80 years ago, was practising similarly. The grey haired old lady with a clear and steady gaze and a queen like pose meeting us in her latter portraits is carrying a secret. She is a yogi in disguise, a practitioner of unknown breathing techniques and exercises of concentration, an investigator of the unknown potential of thoughts. “The body is full of vibrations” she writes after only a short time of practice and realises that the pain in her hands obstructing her writing, has eased.

Selma has won world fame through masterpieces like.... She was rich, esteemed and respected but burdened by duties and mostly in pain because of her fragile health.

Her rheumatism was felt in her joints particularly in her arms, wrists and fingers. Even to walk became increasingly difficult day by day and she often had colds. Her ability to work was impaired, which worried her. It was when she received a little book in her hand with the writings of the Dane Johannes Hohlenberg “Yoga, studies in Indian philosophy of life”, she became interested. She started reading it to familiarize herself with the Indian thoughts about the common ground for human existence and unknown forces. The book contained directions about ways to control the body and facilitate personal experience of a deeper personal existence. Selma was not late in trying them out! A month or so after Selma had started to study Hohlenbergs book she writes in her diary: “I am very interested in the practice of Yoga. During two days I’ve tried with my hands. “I’m writing more easily than I’ve done for a long time. It might be the pen. But still it’s one of the most remarkable experiences ever.

One can just imagine Selma, in her solitude in her room with a quiet concentration explores the yogi breathing exercises which she has described in detail in a letter to a friend of hers. “Put on a comfortable loose clothing, sit down comfortably in an armchair, keep your hands in front of you as a bowl looking into them. Meanwhile breathe regularly in the pace of a clock’s ticking and think of your breathing. In a few minutes you’ll feel that the arteries of the hands swell and a strong pressure is felt...”

Selma felt a slight humming, quivering movement in hands and arms after having done this exercise for a few evenings. The pain in her hands became much better. A week later she writes: "The body is full of vibrations". After four months of practice she can walk around the farm which until then had been impossible. "I can't describe what courage you get when you realise that you have a command over your body. Not just sitting still and letting the body receive all illnesses". In 1920 before the celebration at the Swedish Academy, when Selma got a severe cold thinking she could not be present, she found a yoga exercise tailor made for colds. The exercise made her so healthy that not only could she walk but also enabled to give her speech, "The heavenly stairs" with a great feeling.

According to the Indian Yoga tradition the human being can with the help of exercises of concentration withdraw one's consciousness from the body and release from one's senses

Even while living on earth. In such a way she/he is considered to gain a perspective of the physical existence and get to know the immortal soul, that exists beyond time and space and is the source of life and consciousness.

The inner secret of yoga lies beyond the world of the senses and can't be grasped by words, Hohlenberg explains who was not a learned indologist but wrote from his own experience of yoga initiated by the famous yogi Sri Aurobindo. For him yoga is mostly a practical method.. Its teachings can, in the same way as "blinking of the stars, the veins in the wing of a grasshopper, the sound of dripping water" give a notion of something immeasurable stretching far over its boundaries". Maybe one can understand yoga through the arts he says.

It is not difficult to understand that Selma Lagerlöf with her intuition, and at the same time being a practical person was drawn to a learning like yoga not only as a knowledge of the powers of the soul but also by its methods opening up to deeper inner experiences.

The artist in her has experienced the joy of inspiration. But without a practical sense and willpower she would never have realised the usefulness of yoga or been able to pursue her intent to master it. Selma's life became long and productive. She lived another twenty years after having acquainted herself with yoga. If she continued her exercises during her last years one does not know. She became more and more secretive about her inner life as her thought penetrated deeper into the questions of life that the reality of the soul continued to intrigue her there is no doubt about.

How to exercise:

Summarised from "Yoga", by Johannes Hohlenberg.

Keep your attention steadily at one point and let all other impressions disappear. Unknown perceptions come unknowingly into consciousness and attracting the thought sideways, so that you in every moment find yourself in thought processes far from the starting point. They need incessantly to be stopped and the thought taken back to the original object of concentration. Through thorough and tireless practice these deviations become less frequent to finally be able and keep the object in your thoughts. It has an immense practical application. The secret with becoming successful in life is dependant on this ability. If you want one thing and understand to allow all your thoughts and actions concentrate on this, you will finally reach your goal.

Concentrate your attention on certain parts of your body e.g. the heart, your throat or your head or focus your attention in one hand or other body part so that you can't feel the rest of your body. Use your fantasy to help you along. On the actual part you can imagine a lotus flower with a burning flame in the centre. You can make the picture more complicated and imagine that the flame is your own soul. The concentration can be combined with control of the breathing.

Summarised from "Yoga, studies in Indian philosophy of life". Svenska andelsförlaget, Stockholm, 1917.