

# Introduction

## *Yoga and Landscapes*

This book explores the practice of Yoga in regard to a systematic technique of performing concentration on the five elements. It examines some ideas that also concerned the pre-Socratic philosophers of Greece. Just as Thales mused about water and Heraclitus extolled the power of fire, Indian thinkers, theologians, and liturgists reflected on how the elements interweave with one another and within the human body to create the raw material for the experience of life. In a real and metaphorical sense, according to Indian thought, we live in landscapes and landscapes live in us.

For more than 3,500 years, India has identified earth, water, fire, air, and space as the foundational building blocks of external reality. Starting with literary praise of these elements in the Vedas, by the time of the Buddha, the Upaniṣads, and early Jainism, this acknowledgment had grown into a systematic reflection. This book examines both the descriptions of the elements and the very technical training tools that emerged so that human beings might develop regard and consideration for them. Hindus, Buddhists, and Jain Yogis explore the human-earth relationship each in their own way. For Hindus, nature emerges as a theme in the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, the Yoga literature, the epics, and the Purāṇas. The Yogis develop a mental discipline of sustained interiorization, known as *pañca mahābhūta dhāraṇā* (concentration on the five great elements) and as *bhūta śuddhi* (purification of the elements). The Buddha himself also taught a sequential meditation on the five elements. The Jains developed their own unique reflections on nature, finding life in particles of earth, water, fire, and air. They also developed their own form of sequential elemental meditations.

Indian culture recognizes the elements and the senses in myriad ways, encoding them into the rhythms and rituals of daily life. Rituals begin with

the kindling of a small flame, the lighting of incense, the sprinkling of water, the preparation of offerings of flowers and food. Such practices acknowledge human embeddedness in and indebtedness to nature. They also express an underlying grammar for ritual writ large. Personal rituals and large public rituals incorporate the honoring of earth, water, fire, air, and space.

The book begins with an exploration of the celebration of the five elements in Indian literature chronologically, starting with Vedic texts and extending into Buddhist, Jain, and later Hindu literature. It also includes an exploration of select descriptions of contemporary field encounters with element-based rituals in India and in North America. In addition to a systematic look at how the fundamentals of physical constituents help enfold the human person into a sense of connectedness with inner and outer landscape, this book also explores some aspects of other beings in this landscape, animals that are other than human. Animals reflect possibilities of human consciousness, speaking to human connectivity with an unknowable past. Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain literature abounds with animal fables and instructive past life animal narratives. Concern for animals throughout Indian history can be seen in Aśokan proclamations requiring the protection and feeding of animals, cow shelters, and in current animal welfare activism. Various campaigns seek to save the tiger, the elephant, the Himalayan antelope, and even the feral urban dog. Humans and animals live in a web of interconnectedness. This book seeks to provide some appreciation for what is possible in both the inner and outer realms of the living landscape, within the elements of human and animal physiology as expressed through and within the wider world.

Yoga as explored in this book goes far beyond the familiar physical practices of poses and breathing exercises. The word *yoga* originally referred to the yoking of horses to a chariot, and a plow to oxen. It eventually gained association with yoking the mind and exerting control over the outflow of the senses. By time of the middle Upaniṣads the word *Yoga* came to refer to specific spiritual disciplines and eventually became a catchall phrase in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain literature for religious practice. Yoga as a path of spirituality appears in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the Yoga Upaniṣads, the texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism, handbooks for the practice of Jainism, and, by the middle of the current millennium, in manuals for Haṭha Yoga.

The emergence of Yoga as a cultural phenomenon within America and Europe can be traced to the lecture tours of Swami Vivekananda in the 1890s. This was preceded in New England with the Transcendentalist fascination with the *Bhagavad Gītā* as well as with the notion that the yogi somehow dwells outside societal confines. As has been well documented by historians of modern

Yoga, Paramahansa Yogananda was among the first of many immigrants from India who introduced and adapted Yoga-focused practice for Western consumption. During the 1960s, counterculture poets and philosophers expanded the reach of Yoga and meditation among the young people seeking alternative lifestyles. Many Yoga-focused communities took root in the 1970s, such as Yogaville (Swami Satchidananda), the Himalayan Institute (Swami Rama), various Yoga Vedanta Centers (Swami Vishnudevananda), the Sri Chinmoy meditation network, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda), and several others. After a lull during the 1980s, partly due to various scandals that plagued some organizations, a resurgence of interest occurred in the 1990s with the emergence of younger, female teachers, most notably Swami Chidvilasananda (a disciple of Swami Muktananda) and Mātā Amṛtānandamayī Devī (Ammachi).

At the same time, a new physicality was injected into the practice of Yoga. Disciples in the lineage of Krishnamacharya opened studios worldwide dedicated to the perfection of Yoga Āsana. These included Yoga Works, established in Santa Monica, California, by Chuck Miller and the late Maty Ezraty and now franchised worldwide, the B. K. S. Iyengar network of studios, and the Hot Yoga popularized by Bikram Choudhury. More than 35 million Americans are now estimated to practice Yoga regularly.<sup>1</sup>

Along with this increase in popularity, scholarly interest in the study of Yoga flourished. Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) published the first comprehensive study in the West of Yoga traditions based on his doctoral dissertation at the University of Paris (1933), which was later adapted and translated into English as the book *Yoga, Immortality, and Freedom* (1958). This book surveys the far reach of Yoga. It documents the intersection of Yoga with various religious and philosophical traditions, including Buddhism and Jainism. Students of Eliade at the University of Chicago conducted research for decades that advanced knowledge of Yoga, theoretical and applied.

Several Yoga worlds now run in parallel. One world of Yoga promulgates physical practice in studios, meditation centers, and increasingly in clinics, schools, colleges, universities, and even churches and synagogues throughout North America. Various professional organizations have emerged to manage aspects of this public Yoga, including Yoga Alliance and the International Association of Yoga Therapists.

Another world of Yoga can be found in more religious or devotional settings, including the many Hindu and Jaina centers that have been built by members of the Indian immigrant community since the 1980s, as well as the Vedanta centers that date from the nineteenth century, and the meditation

centers that were built in the early twentieth century, primarily by Paramahansa Yogananda.

Academic study comprises a third world of Yoga discourse. In India, fifty-four colleges and universities have received authorization to offer a Diploma as well as Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral Degrees in Yoga.<sup>2</sup> Graduate degree programs in Yoga are offered at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, the Ca' Foscari University, Venice in Italy, and Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Scholars have both celebrated and critiqued the Yoga movement. In earlier publications, I have surveyed various modern studies and many translations of the *Yoga Sūtra*,<sup>3</sup> including the analysis of modern Yoga in India by Joseph Alter which explores scientific studies of Yoga in India and suggests that Yoga evades politicization;<sup>4</sup> the discussions by Sjoman taken up later by Mark Singleton that attest to hybrid influences at the Mysore Palace that combine European body culture with Yoga practices;<sup>5</sup> and Elizabeth De Michelis's assessment of Yoga as a form of public esotericism that brings "solace, physical, psychological or spiritual in a world where solace and reassurance are sometimes elusive."<sup>6</sup> I have also edited a book on the relationship between Yoga discourse and the post-modern issue of ecology.<sup>7</sup>

More recent scholarly analyses have pointed to the multivalency of Yoga throughout history. David Gordon White's edited volume *Yoga in Practice* presents original texts of Yoga from the various schools of Hinduism as well as Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, and Sikhism. Geoffrey Samuel's *Origins of Yoga and Tantra* similarly examines classical sources in regard to Yoga, as does the volume *Roots of Yoga* co-edited and co-translated by Mark Singleton and James Mallinson.<sup>8</sup> Each of these works continues a tradition established by scholars of the nineteenth century seeking to find textual affirmation of Yoga theory and practice.

Alongside these decidedly Indological studies, several theoretical critiques of Yoga have examined modern Yoga and its expression in India and throughout the globe. Andrea Jain has analyzed the commercialization of Yoga suggesting that the "selling" of Yoga often results in compromises in regard to its original intent, but that sincere expressions of Yoga can be found in India as well as abroad.<sup>9</sup> Farah Godrej explores the paradoxical quest for authenticity within modern Yoga, pointing out that in some ways its contemporary practice serves to reinforce "neoliberal subjectivity" while in other ways it provides a counter-narrative to conformity, a way of resisting cultural hegemony in any form.<sup>10</sup> Christopher Miller has published a study of the annual Yoga Day movement initiated by the Government of India in 2015 and ratified by the United Nations. Yoga Day envisions a Yoga that will create more productive workers.

This is perhaps somewhat at odds with the original intent of Yoga, which in its meditative forms is used more as a respite from the world than as a tool to improve GDP. Miller notes that “Modi’s domestic brand of therapeutic yoga does in fact serve as an instrument of biopower as it primarily focuses on the production of an efficient, healthy, docile, and stress-free labor force.”<sup>11</sup> Many of these studies suggest that a subverting of Yoga has taken place. As the title of Andrea Jain’s book asserts, what was once subversive and countercultural, both in India and throughout the world, has been transformed into a mainstream commodity.

The methodology employed in this study of Yoga in relationship to elemental concentrations does not fit into a strictly Indological category, though it includes textual analysis and translation. Nor does this book offer a sociological descriptive approach or analysis of the practice of Yoga, though it does describe Yoga practices and many field experiences. Rather, in keeping with my own disciplinary training and prior research projects, this book is a work of constructive theology. It seeks to explore how various Yoga texts and practices and social realities regard the intersection between the human being and nature as expressed through the five elements and animals.

One task of the theologian is to find and offer inspiration to help redress or even redeem the all-too-obvious difficulties that surround and sometimes overwhelm the human condition. The impetus for writing this book came from a concern for what has now been named “nature deficit disorder.” As noted by Richard Louv, a deep disconnect from nature has imperiled a sense of well-being for many persons.<sup>12</sup> This was not the case in my own life, which from childhood has been deeply rooted in a sense of nature connection. A sustained connection with the natural world has provided solace in times of trouble and a strong foundation for a happy life. For this I am abidingly grateful. This research has been undertaken to honor my teachers and family who have consistently valued and fostered a close relationship with the natural world.

Some may find this work to be fanciful or even incorrect, protesting that Yoga and meditation and the religions of India are designed to release a person from nature, not to embrace nature. However, as scholar George James, a student of environmental activist Sunderlal Bahuguna, has noted, the world to be negated is “not the world of nature” but “the world of . . . politicians [and] technicians,”<sup>13</sup> those who seek to instrumentalize and abuse nature rather than understanding or appreciating nature. James’s book-length study of the Chipko and related environmental movements in India can paraphrased as follows: “Nature is not the problem; human industrialization and the manipulation of nature are the problem.”<sup>14</sup>

This book examines Yoga literature from multiple religions on the topic of the elements and animals. From this literature, a sense can be gleaned not of a disdain for the elements in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, but a concern to develop intimacy, to perform rituals that reinforce a connection with the most foundational aspects of reality.

It is not the intent of this book to create a Romantic vision of the Indian subcontinent. The environmental problems of India are immense. New Delhi, the capital of India, suffers from the worst air quality in the world. Garbage lines the highways and byways of India. Untreated industrial and human waste foul India's rivers. The deleterious effects of overpopulation can be seen as cities fail to cope with basic housing needs and villagers by the millions move to the cities.<sup>15</sup> However, it would be oversimplistic to blame the religions of India for its current predicament. Ecological degradation in India can be more readily traced to the aftereffects of European colonization and the slowness of governments and individuals to respond to the throwaway ethos of globalized consumerist economies.

Writing this book has become an occasion to reflect back on a five decade career as a theologian. The task of the theologian, in addition to knowing history and languages and philosophy, requires that we observe and interpret culture. We also participate in a feedback loop of our own experience as the ground for our hermeneutical endeavors. In my twenties, a time of uncertainty and growth, my research focused on the issue of human agency and will, resulting in the book *Karma and Creativity*. Ethics, personal and global, as well as child-rearing, occupied my thoughts and concerns during my thirties, during which I published *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions*. Comparative religious thought and grappling with philosophical pluralism guided the work of my forties and the appearance of *Reconciling Yogas: Haribhadra's Collection of Views on Yoga with a New Translation of Haribhadra's Yogadr̥ṣṭisamuccaya*. The fifties presented an opportunity to honor my teachers and professors, many of whom passed in the early years of the new millennium, through an in depth study into the philosophy and practice of Yoga, the mainstay and wellspring for my own well-being; hence the publication of *Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom*. And now, in my sixties, reflections on the ritual and liturgical aspects of religious practice have brought forward the current work.

This book places Yoga ethics within a global context. Yoga, as we have seen, means connection. Despite colonialist insistence that Yoga implies hatred for the world,<sup>16</sup> the evidence from the texts and from the material presence of temples and ongoing practices within daily life tells a different story. Yoga, regardless of tradition, seeks to honor the five great elements. It also encourages

discovering kinship with animals. Though far more suggestive than comprehensive, this book seeks to provide some appreciation for what is possible through Yoga in both the inner and outer realms of the living landscape.

