

Introduction

The History and Philosophy of Yoga

The history of the physical and mental disciplines referred to collectively as “yoga” extends into the distant past of India’s religious and cultural heritage, perhaps as far back as 2,500 years or more. Yoga has played a crucial role in the development of the doctrine and practice of a range of Indian religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, and its influence has extended out of India to touch nearly all parts of the world, especially in the past two centuries. Its manifestation as a popular mode of physical and athletic culture in Europe and the Americas in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries represents one chapter in a fascinating history that has seen both great change and remarkable continuity. The goal of this work is to examine a wide range of meanings and permutations of theory and practice that are associated with the term “yoga,” and thereby bring coherence and nuance to our understanding of its historical formulations and contemporary manifestations.

In the contemporary context, the range of ideas and practices commonly referred to as “yoga” is represented, in large part, by a constellation of transnational traditions emphasizing the physical practice of yogic posture (*āsana*), often without apparent connection to sectarian religious commitment or identity. The term “yoga” may bring to mind images of a room of practitioners bent into various shapes, such as the “lotus posture” (*padmāsana*), the “warrior pose” (*vīrabhadrāsana*), and the “head[stand]” posture (*śīrṣāsana*). In this context, yoga exists as a form of nonsectarian, if not secular, body discipline or as a vaguely Indian- or Hindu-inflected spirituality, in contrast to the more tangible sectarian doctrines and practices

of mainstream institutional religion. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes evident that even the most athletic or calisthenic forms of yoga have their roots in Indian traditions that have complex philosophical and religious histories behind them. Modern yoga is the product of a process that bridged the worlds of Indian spirituality and European physical culture, laying a foundation for its extraordinary international and cross-cultural appeal. Modern yoga has been sculpted to suit modern aspirations and inclinations that are the common heritage of a cosmopolitan culture that crosses the boundaries of modern nation-states and traditional societies. The success of yoga in the modern era is, in part, a function of the entrepreneurial spirit of its formulators who consciously sought to bridge cultural worlds in the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Such innovation remains unabated into the twenty-first century and is likely to stretch well into the future.

The term “yoga” is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root \sqrt{yuj} , which is cognate with, and roughly equivalent to, the English infinitive verb form “to yoke.” This meaning provides one of the most basic and universal definitions of yoga, as a “yoking” or disciplining of the body and mind. In explicitly theistic or monistic contexts, this yoking may also refer to the “union” of one’s innermost self or soul (*ātman*) with a personal deity (*devatā, īśvara*), a supreme self (*paramātman*), or an impersonal absolute reality (*brahman*) through devotional or contemplative practice. These two senses of the term, as “discipline” and as “union,” which are among a number that will be explored in this work, give a sense of the spectrum of interpretive possibilities available with respect to understanding what the Sanskrit term “yoga” means. Yoga, as such, might be conceived of as referring generically to a method of disciplining mind and body, a mode of practice not unique to any particular religious or philosophical tradition—thus making sense, for example, of the expressions “Christian Yoga” or “Jewish Yoga.” It might alternately be framed as a particular vision of achieving spiritual liberation through insight into or identity with an ultimate being or reality, such as that expressed in the Hindu Vedānta formula equating the individual self (*ātman*) with absolute reality (*brahman*). Though a number of central concepts link together the range of definitions of yoga, it nevertheless varies dramatically in meaning, scope, and purpose within the various contexts in which it is found. Examining the theory and practice of yoga in its various historical situations brings to light the ways in which yoga has unique

and distinctive manifestations, while at the same time illustrating how the practices of even the most thoroughly modernized forms of yoga can be, and often are, understood within conceptual frameworks established in their premodern ancestors.

Although references to yoga are pervasive in the history of Indian religion and philosophy, considerable disagreement persists among different Indian religious traditions over the degree of centrality of yoga within the spiritual path. Yoga ranges from being viewed as essential to spiritual realization, to being an aid to it, or, conversely, to being an impediment to or distraction from the goals of the religious life. Its practices have also often been viewed as a means to gain power or mastery over the world as much as a way to obtain spiritual knowledge or liberation. The image of the yoga practitioner (the *yogī*, *yogin*, or *yoginī*) is, in many cases, deeply informed by the great powers they are said to obtain through their disciplining of body and mind. Such powers may be alternately viewed as an impediment to spiritual liberation, as indicators of spiritual progress, or as facilitating the compassionate activity of an enlightened or liberated being. In some cases, yoga has been critiqued as overly ascetic in its orientation, as a form of self-mortification that causes undue pain to the practitioner and thereby impedes their progress toward spiritual liberation. The great range of understandings, interpretations, and applications of yoga in the Indian tradition are, in part, a function of these varied viewpoints on its purpose and efficacy.

This study is focused on the origin and development of yoga in its Indian contexts, primarily within the Indian religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, with an eye to its impact on other traditions in India and beyond.¹ Yoga has been explored and explained at greatest length and in most detail by scholars and practitioners within Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, who frequently sought to define and defend yoga in connection with their core religious and philosophical principles. It is within these traditions that yoga has found its broadest range of formulations in terms of theoretical understanding and practical application. The role and function of yoga varies significantly within these sectarian divisions of the Indian tradition as well as among them. Formulations of yoga are also affected, over time, by major shifts in Indian philosophy, literature, and ritual practice, such as the advent of pan-Indian traditions of scholastics (*śāstra*), personal devotion (*bhakti*), and ritual extension (*tantra*) over the

course of the first millennium of the Common Era. Likewise, encounters with Islam and Christianity, and with European cultures during the colonial and modern eras in India, shaped Indian religion, philosophy, and physical culture, and thereby the formulation of yoga, in important ways. These shifts culminated in the transformation of yoga into a popular transnational phenomenon in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the elevation of yoga within India to a status as iconic of Indian, and especially Hindu, spirituality and even of the Indian nation itself in the twenty-first century.

The scope of this work is broken down into historical eras with topically focused sections, augmented by discussions of academic issues in the contemporary study of the theory and practice of yoga, such as questions regarding the origins of yogic concepts and practices, the role of founding figures in yoga traditions, the relationships between Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and other traditional formulations of yoga, the content of major texts, and the social and cultural contexts in which yoga developed. Emphasis is placed on the ways in which yoga is seen as a means of obtaining power and mastery over the world, termed the *numinous* dimension of yoga, as well as a means to achieve deep insight and freedom from worldly pain and misery, referred to as the *cessative* dimension of yoga. This numinous-cessative dynamic is connected to broader issues regarding the relationship between renouncer and householder traditions in Indian religion, in which other-worldly and this-worldly orientations are represented. It is also related to important philosophical and theological questions regarding the goals of the practice of yoga and the nature of liberation as it is represented in relative states of embodiment and disembodiment and of worldly perfection and transcendence. These issues extend in various ways into the formulation of modern yoga traditions, where the mundane goals of material success, personal health, and communal well-being exist in tension with more soteriologically oriented inclinations and aspirations. Overall, this study aims to provide a nuanced philosophical (phenomenological) examination of the conceptual and pragmatic frameworks utilized in the theory and practice of yoga in its different eras, framed within the historical (sociocultural) contexts in which they were developed and utilized. As such, it aims to find a middle ground between scholarly works on the topic that have, respectively, principally focused on the description of yoga philosophy and practice, such as Mircea Eliade's *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (1954) and Georg Feuerstein's *The Yoga Tradition* (1998), or on the social, political, and economic forces in

yoga's history, such as Geoffrey Samuel's *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (2008).

For those primarily interested in the origin and structures of modern yoga traditions, chapters 1 and 8 together provide an overview of various definitions of yoga and the principal structural elements and formulators of modern yoga traditions. Chapter 1 introduces a number of concepts used throughout the text and a broad chronological framework for understanding the development of yoga traditions over time. Particular focus is placed on the issues at stake in defining yoga, given its wide semantic range, with an emphasis on an approach that validates both generic and contextual meanings. Chapter 2 focuses on the prehistory of yoga as represented in the earliest theorized strata of yoga or "proto-yoga" practices in the Indus Valley Civilization and the Vedic tradition. This includes a discussion of theories regarding evidence for the origin of yoga in the Indus Valley Civilization and a discussion of the models of ascetic practice and agency found in the *brāhmaṇa* (priestly) literature of the Vedic tradition, the earliest documented form of Hinduism. Building on this foundation, chapter 3 examines the emergence of the yogic-ascetic paradigm in the mainstream of the emergent orthodox traditions of *brāhmaṇa* asceticism and the respectively heterodox *śramaṇa* renouncer traditions of Jainism and Buddhism.

Chapter 4 examines the classical Hindu model of yoga, the "yoga view" (*yoga darśana*), referred to as Pātañjala Yoga, Sāṃkhya-Yoga, Yoga Philosophy, or simply as Yoga, drawing upon Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* and the larger *Yogaśāstra*, the primary discourse (*sūtra*) and treatise (*śāstra*) texts of the *yoga darśana*. The first part of the chapter focuses on the conceptual framework of the Yoga philosophy in relationship to the ontology and metaphysics of the Sāṃkhya system of Indian philosophy, introducing the shared vision of reality in these two systems. The second part of the chapter focuses on the *aṣṭāṅgayoga* or "eight-limbed yoga" system of practice as developed in the *Yogasūtra*, with an emphasis on how the practice of yoga is presented as a discipline for realizing supernormal accomplishments and powers (*siddhi*, *vibhūti*) of perception and action, leading ultimately to the attainment of spiritual liberation (*kaivalya*). Chapter 5 focuses on the emergence of yoga as a recurrent topic within the Hindu epic and narrative literature (*itihāsa-purāṇa*) and in priestly scholastic and legal treatises (*dharmasāstra*). Emphasis is placed on the elevated status of yoga and its human and divine practitioners within the *Bhagavadgītā* and Hindu

Purāṇa literature and the mainstreaming of yoga into householder culture as represented by the integration of yoga into the Hindu legal (*dharmā*) and philosophical (*darśana*) literature.

Chapter 6 explores the role of yoga within sectarian and scholastic treatises of the classical *śramaṇa* traditions of Buddhism and Jainism within the context of the flowering of Indian philosophy in the early to mid-centuries of the first millennium of the Common Era. Particular attention is paid to the development of Buddhist and Jain path literature that situates yoga within systematic presentations of doctrine and practice that delineate the stages on the path to spiritual liberation. Chapter 7 examines transformations of yoga with respect to emerging paradigms of personal devotion (*bhakti*) and ritual extension (*tantra*) in medieval Indian traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. It also provides an overview of the principles of the formative Siddha, Mahāsiddha, and *haṭhayoga* traditions of this era, with significant attention to their relationship to Hindu and Buddhist tantric traditions and the development of modern modes of yoga practice that draw upon their methodologies. Chapter 8 focuses on modern yoga traditions and contemporary practice, demonstrating how modern yoga traditions represent a fusion of Indic and modern cosmopolitan, especially European, forms of bodily discipline, philosophy, and spirituality. It also provides an overview of a range of prominent gurus and institutions in modern and contemporary forms of yoga, emphasizing the role of entrepreneurial teachers in their formulation and documenting the ways in which modern yoga is connected to and disconnected from its premodern counterparts, in some cases in unexpected and counterintuitive ways.

The study of yoga in its various manifestations sheds light on a number of aspects of Indian religious traditions, including their philosophies, theologies, rituals, and soteriologies. Yoga embodies and reflects conceptions of the nature of the religious life as framed in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, and other traditions. In the modern era, yoga has become iconic of India itself, taking the form of a global and universalizing Indian physical culture and spirituality that has transcended its sectarian origins. As a popular transnational phenomenon, it has thrived at the boundaries between the religious and the secular and among a multitude of cultural and religious identities and commitments, from Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain to Sikh, Christian, and Jewish. The examination of these roots and branches of yoga provides insight into the history of Indian religion and spirituality and into

our contemporary globalized and cosmopolitan world culture. The impact of modern yoga extends from the realm of personal physical, spiritual, and religious practices and commitments to the larger spheres of economics, politics, and public health on a national and global level.

Though this study is intended primarily for students and researchers at the collegiate or university level in Religion, Philosophy, and Contemplative Studies, it also is addressed more broadly to nonspecialists and students of yoga who seek a foundational understanding of yoga in theory and practice in the Indian traditions and a sense of the continuities and discontinuities between modern traditions of yoga and their precursors. With that in mind, it is hoped that the following will be of interest and useful for a range of readers, from scholars of Indian religion and philosophy to practitioners of modern yoga systems and all of the various permutations in between.