

Yoga Traveling

Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective

Beatrix Hauser *Editor*



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Introduction: Transcultural Yoga(s). Analyzing a Traveling Subject

Beatrix Hauser

Abstract This book focuses on yoga's transcultural dissemination in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the course of this process, the term "yoga" has been associated with various distinctive blends of mental and physical exercises performed to achieve improvement in terms of esotericism, fitness, self-actualization, body aesthetics, or health care. This introductory chapter surveys the development of modern yoga studies as a new field of academic inquiry in the humanities and social sciences. It shows how the emergence and diversity of today's postural yoga provides rich source material for understanding the process of cultural diffusion and knowledge transfer. With a cursory glance at the sources and approaches in the historical and philological study of Indian yoga the chapter then argues that yoga never constituted a monolithic or homogenous entity. The remaining section explores how recent ways of theorizing global spaces, transnational flows, and cultural interactions can inspire and facilitate the analysis of present-day yoga and its dynamics and thus provide a provisional outline for the notion of transculturality in relation to the study of yoga's global circulation. This leads to a brief synopsis of the following chapters.

There are more flavors of Hatha Yoga in the West than ice cream.

Choudhury 2000, xiii

There is probably no tradition that has been construed as more timeless, more intrinsically authentic, more inherently Indian than yoga.

Alter 2004, 14

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With reference to its Indian origin, yoga has become a mainstream activity in many parts of the world.¹ Today the term is applied to a variety of bodily practices commodified in the name of spirituality, lifestyle, and health. Positioned at the beginning of the twenty-first century, yoga is also big business in the wellness sector: according to the 2008 *Yoga in America* market survey, Americans spent \$5.7 billion per year on yoga classes and products, almost double the amount from the previous survey (2004) and it is still on the rise.² Claiming a piece of the pie, the Indian Ministry of Tourism showcases yoga in its advertisement of India as a contemporary healthcare destination.³ If one considers globalization in terms of cultural flows rather than economic markets, yoga provides rich source material for understanding the process of knowledge transfer—preached, exported, translated, appropriated, touted, assimilated, and modified at various stages along its worldwide journey. In the course of this process, the term yoga has been associated with various distinctive blends of mental and physical exercise performed in order to achieve some sort of improvement—or even perfection—whether conceived of in terms of esotericism, fitness, self-actualization, body aesthetics, or healthcare. The essays in this volume seek to explore some of the turning points in yoga’s historico-spatial itinerary and their relevance to its current boom. The authors focus on central motivations, sites, and agents in the circulation of posture-based yoga as well as on its successive (re-)interpretation and diversification, touching upon questions such as: Why has yoga taken its various forms? How do time and place influence its meanings, social roles, and associated experiences? How does the transfer into new settings affect the ways in which yogic practice has been conceptualized as a system (its ontological status)? On what basis is it still identified as (Indian) yoga? The analytic perspective used to tackle these questions is inspired by recent debates on transcultural phenomena; namely, the conviction that simplistic notions of culture as a territorially bounded and homogeneous social entity and derivative concepts such as diffusion and acculturation are insufficient to conceptualize the dynamics and plurality of yoga and the network of practitioners that exist in today’s globalized world.

The triumphal course of yoga around the globe started more than a hundred years ago. Its beginning is generally associated with the Hindu reformer Swami

¹ This introduction has greatly benefited from Suzanne Newcombe’s and Anne Koch’s critical reading and feedback of an early draft. My sincere thanks go also to the two anonymous referees for their helpful suggestions.

² The 2008 *Yoga in America* market study surveyed 5,050 respondents and was conducted on behalf of the *Yoga Journal*. Whereas the number of yoga practitioners (15.8 million) had stabilized vis-à-vis the journal’s previous 2004 survey, the expenditure on equipment, clothing, vacations, and media had almost doubled (www.yogajournal.com/advertise/press_releases/10, accessed 17 January 2011). On the growth and marketing of yoga in the United States see Syman (2010); also Philp’s book *Yoga Inc.* (2009), which is based on journalistic research.

³ The Indian government promotes yoga as a “tourism product” along with Ayurveda and medical treatments (e.g., surgery, transplantation, dental care) on its website at <http://www.incredibleindia.org>; see also <http://indiameditourism.com> (accessed 17 January 2011); and see Nichter’s contribution (chapter “The Social Life of Yoga: Exploring Transcultural Flows in India”).

Vivekananda and his speech at the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago (1893). Vivekananda's interest in yoga was motivated by the reformist search for cultural roots that could provide a modern vision of Hinduism. In his view, yoga could function as a form of applied philosophy suitable for the liberation of lay people committed to both contemplative and scientific thinking (first and foremost the Hindu elite who favored monistic Neo-Vedānta). However, his image of Hinduism also reflected contemporaneous elements of Western esotericists' interest in the sacred wisdom of India.⁴ Vivekananda saw yoga as the path to "self-realization," a means for unlocking the potential divinity of a single human being and thereby also serving society as a whole. With these aims in mind he promoted *Raja Yoga* (published 1896; literally, "Royal Yoga") as the supreme path to liberation—alongside the yoga of true knowledge, devotion, and righteous action. Referencing a collection of aphorisms called the *Yogasūtra* (circa second/third century CE⁵), Vivekananda conceived of Raja Yoga as a spiritual and rather disembodied discipline that focused on meditation (*dhyāna*), concentration of mind (*dhāraṇa*), the withdrawal of senses (*pratyāhāra*), and ethical rules (*yama* and *niyama*—in short: prohibitions and obligations) rather than on the performance of a series of postures (*āsana*). A healthy body served as the precondition for this soteriological encounter, but not as an end in itself. Like his contemporaries, Vivekananda was rather critical of wandering yogis who publicly demonstrated their ability to perform acrobatic postures and "magic." In British India these yogis were condemned for their apparent this-worldly objectives, manipulative powers, and impure if not criminal practices. Against this backdrop, educated Hindus developed their own vision of true yoga.⁶

Around the same time, India was also impacted by the international physical culture movement, which led to the recognition of new athletic regimens.⁷ In keeping with principles espoused by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), physical strength gained social value by virtue of its capacity to ward off the degeneracy of modern times. And freestanding gymnastic exercises aimed at the holistic development of mind, body, and spirit (inspired by the work of Pehr Henrik Ling), as well as calisthenic training (common in the British military), were introduced into the Indian educational system.⁸ Joseph Alter's sophisticated study on *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (2004) demonstrates how in the 1920s those physical yoga exercises and acrobatic postures

⁴ This is convincingly argued by De Michelis (2004).

⁵ As with other early Indic sources, it is difficult to date the *Yogasūtra*. In this case estimates range from the fourth to the second century BCE, to as late as 150–500 CE. According to Whicher (1998, 41–42), Michaels (2004, 267) and Gharote et al. (2006, xxvi) current evidence suggests that the *Yogasūtra* as a collection was compiled between the second/third century CE and only in retrospect ascribed to Patañjali.

⁶ Singleton (2010, Chap. 2) and White (2009, 2012a, 15).

⁷ See also Singleton's contribution in this volume (chapter "Transnational Exchange and the Genesis of Modern Postural Yoga").

⁸ Singleton (2010, Chaps. 4, 5, and 6).

silenced by Vivekananda became the subject of laboratory research and therapeutic use and were, with patriotic zeal, identified as the Indian equivalent to Ling's movement cure. By establishing through scientific means the physiological benefits and efficacy of yoga postures, contractions, and purificatory procedures, Indian scholars hoped to substantiate the truth of ancient Hindu wisdom.⁹ Alter argues that this medicalization of posture practice was crucial for the emergence of what is today known as Hatha Yoga.¹⁰ Mark Singleton's *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2010) complements and expands upon Alter's work by exploring the various discourses, motivations, and contexts that shaped yoga into the particular form that existed in India by 1940; a yoga that had by then absorbed several strands of physical culture. In a largely nationalistic and partly anti-colonial spirit, the (new) performance of yoga exercises had developed into a system for gaining a strong physique and enhancing one's manliness. Static postures (*āsana*), energy locks (*bandha*), and breathing techniques (*prāṇayāma*) were supplemented by calisthenic and cardiovascular exercises based on muscle contraction and repetition. These aerobic exercises included the sun salutation (*sūryanamaskār*), the "Hindu push-up" (*danḍa* – Hindi: *danḍ*), elements of local physical culture (from *vyāyām*, wrestling; and other martial arts), as well as foreign exercises that originated in gymnastics and muscle control (promoted in India by world-famous bodybuilders active at time).¹¹ Due to royal patronage, one of the main centers of this yoga renaissance and transformation was Mysore, where several present-day yoga gurus acquired their proficiency.¹² By the time of India's independence in 1947 this new hybrid form was called Hatha Yoga, henceforth the key designation used to distinguish a "secularized," body-oriented yoga from its alleged counterpart: "spiritual," metaphysical yoga. Yet in a strict sense, even primarily physical (Neo-)Hatha Yoga¹³ incorporates esoteric ideas: today's emphasis on relaxation, intuition, positive thinking, mental healing, and harmony can be traced back to late nineteenth-century Euro-American esotericists and psychologists and their interpretation of Hindu spirituality.¹⁴ Singleton concludes that posture-based yoga was the result of a "dialogical exchange between para-religious, modern body culture techniques developed in the West and the various discourses of 'modern' Hindu yoga." He also argues that despite frequent reference to ancient Indian scriptures and medieval body-oriented *haṭhayoga* "contemporary posture-based yoga cannot really be considered a direct successor of this tradition."¹⁵ Furthermore, postural

⁹ On science as a hegemonic force producing asymmetries between Western and non-Western approaches to the world see Alter (2004, 17, 28–31).

¹⁰ Alter (2004, 77).

¹¹ See Sjoman (1996, 53–58), Alter (2004, 28), and Singleton (2010, 198–206). On various Indian forms of exercises see Alter (1992, Chap. 5); on the sun salutation see Goldberg (2006), Bühnmann (2007, 32–33), and Alter (2004, 23).

¹² Sjoman (1996).

¹³ I owe the term "Neo-Hatha Yoga" to De Michelis (2004).

¹⁴ Singleton (2005, 2007).

¹⁵ Singleton (2010, 5). The phrase *haṭhayoga* originated from medieval tantric sources, e.g., the fourteenth-century treatise *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*.

yoga was limited to exclusivist circles of young men and by no means a common practice in pre-independence India.

These are just two glimpses from the entangled transnational history of today's yoga. An awareness of these twists and turns in the interpretation of what yoga is and does opened up a new field of academic inquiry: the "present's just past" of yoga (to use Alter's expression), which was still pervaded by vague memories, oral accounts, and hence a high degree of looseness. Elizabeth De Michelis' groundbreaking study on *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (2004) deserves credit for outlining what is now generally termed "modern yoga studies" as a subject in the humanities and social sciences. In quick succession, several scholars convincingly argued that the stereotype of a modernized yoga adapted to "Western rationalism," vis-à-vis a mystical Hindu past was not only naive, but a myth. Their studies emphasized the ways in which modernity was already present in nineteenth-century Indian notions of yoga and that assumptions based upon a concept of yoga as a coherent historical tradition lacked factual foundation. In light of these findings, today's global image of Hatha Yoga as a gentle, recreational, feminized, pacifist, and non-competitive practice reflects fairly recent discursive strands rather than any inherent and/or elemental features of yoga. Therefore, if one takes a closer look at the social phenomena of postural yoga as they developed over the last decades one is invariably led to analyze the production of values, practices, networks, spaces, and perspectives that transcend national borders and are, in fact, generated vis-à-vis an idealized Other associated with Indianness.

In late 2009, an interdisciplinary group of scholars from Europe and the United States met at the Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies at Heidelberg University in order to discuss the specifics of present-day yoga and its global appeal. They investigated questions such as: For what reasons do people engage in yoga classes? How did particular social environments shape the practice of yoga and how did these situated practices in turn influence the perception and experience of body and self? In what ways has the spread of yoga served as a social and cultural incentive that inspires and reorients general ways of thinking about health and human well-being? The present volume is the result of this intellectual encounter.¹⁶ The collection begins by looking at some historical issues: first, the transnational genesis of modern postural yoga in India (Singleton); second, the overlapping subcultures interested in yoga and magic in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century (Newcombe); and third, the impact of imagined *kunḍālinī* experiences on Western psychology as a discipline and on psychotherapeutic diagnosis (Hofmann). The next section focuses on contrasting and inconsistent receptions and (re)shapings of global postural yoga in Germany. It thereby

¹⁶ Special thanks to Pirkko Markula (University of Alberta) and Klas Nevrin (Stockholm University) for their substantial contributions to the conference's debates and outcome. I am very happy that Mark Singleton joined this book project to present his recent research, unpublished at the time of the Heidelberg conference.

offers clues for understanding the production of situated meanings that are located at the interface of local and global spheres. The authors emphasize the impact of yoga instruction as a sociolinguistic genre on the perception of body and self (Hauser); the choice of yoga practice as an individualized strategy for coping with the pressures of a post-Fordist labor market (Schnäbele); and the sociopolitical conditions under which (until recently) yoga classes in German schools had to be disguised in order to bypass widespread concerns against yoga as cult (Augenstein). The last part of the book explores perspectives held by transnational networks of yoga consumers: their recent affiliation with the ecology movement (Strauss and Mandelbaum); the co-creation of an Indian idealized yoga-location by tourists and local entrepreneurs (Nichter); and the production of social, human, and body capital by means of joining a local yoga studio or international yoga retreat (Koch). Apart from a shared academic interest in the worldwide dissemination of bodily practices associated with yoga, the authors clearly differ in their use of the transcultural lens; a lens that provides descriptive terms, serves as a heuristic concept for understanding the motors and dynamics of globalization, or sets its sights on a larger epistemological landscape. Although extensive discussions followed the conference sessions, this collection does not seek to level the differences that arose. In fact they serve as useful representations of the participants' various disciplinary perspectives, located in social anthropology, sociology, psychology, history of religions, and education.

Although yoga constitutes a case in point to consider the transnational flow of ideas about spirituality, health, and well-being; to conceive of yoga as a social practice that has been negotiated, reframed, and partly invented in the last 100–150 years is highly contested. Doing so may not only challenge the experiential reality of yoga practitioners (by virtue of emphasizing its discursive nature) or upset those who hold the *Yogasūtra* in high esteem for its wisdom and timeless truth. Most notably the commodification and business opportunities associated with yoga have caused a series of proprietary claims on yoga-related goods and services: in the United States alone, 2,315 yoga trademarks, 150 yoga-related copyrights, and 134 patents for yoga accessories have been registered by 2005.¹⁷ And in 2008, the Indian government began to register yoga postures in the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) in order to substantiate their Indianness and thus prevent sly entrepreneurs from patenting cultural know-how as their own.¹⁸

¹⁷ See Fish (2006, 192) who relies on David Orr's article in *The Telegraph*, dated 20 September 2005 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/3324013/India-adopts-fighting-position-to-hold-on-to-ancient-yoga-poses.html>, accessed 1 March 2011). Unfortunately, Orr neither provides the source of his data nor over which time span it is based. According to R. Saha and Sangeeta Nagar at the Patent Facilitating Centre in Delhi, devices for yoga practice (rather than yogic exercises) have been patented in the United States since 1978 (http://www.indianpatents.org.in/yogic_june06.htm, accessed 15 May 2012).

¹⁸ The TKDL is intended to protect various kinds of cultural knowledge and houses several projects. The initiative to register yoga postures is a collaborative project run by the Indian Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Department of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy) and the Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga (MDNIY) in Delhi; see <http://www.tkdil.res.in/tkdil/langdefault/common/Abouttkdl.asp?GL=Eng> (accessed 22 February 2011).

Furthermore, the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) launched a campaign to “Take Back Yoga,” claiming the Vedic origin and fundamentally Hindu character of today’s posture practice.¹⁹ In light of these realities, it is important to clarify here that the authors of this book do not appoint themselves as judges of questions of ownership, authenticity, or the morals of transnational appropriations; rather, their aim is to describe and analyze social phenomena that are part of a globalized world. In one way or another, their analyses all share the common theoretical supposition that cultural practices are not static but inherently hybrid and prone to change. Moreover, some of the authors have practiced yoga for many years and wish to reflect upon their own insights, this time from an academic perspective.

Mapping Diversity, Dynamics, and History

This book connects to the growing field of modern yoga studies in the humanities and social sciences. One of the first scholars to define this new field in its development over time and also its systematic breadth was Elizabeth De Michelis.²⁰ She provided terminology that was extremely useful as an introduction to the subject matter and as such it was quickly taken up by others. De Michelis regards modern yoga (in her spelling Modern Yoga) as the product of an interaction that began in the mid-nineteenth century between Western esotericists interested in Hinduism and the more or less Western-educated Indian reformers associated with the Hindu Renaissance.²¹ Analyzing several forms of yoga that originated and flourished in and beyond India in the decades after Vivekananda’s speech at the World’s Parliament of Religions, De Michelis identifies two major developmental strands: that of “modern psychosomatic yoga” (MPsY) and that of “modern denominational yoga” (MDY). Whereas the first category refers to a gradual secularization and medicalization of posture practice and breathing techniques, thus a movement that is only loosely structured and socially fluid, the latter category comprises several sectarian groups in which particular yoga practices—observances, controlled breathing, and meditation—are central to their specific belief systems.²² In the post-World War II era, these modern psychosomatic forms developed along opposite trajectories: De Michelis classifies those yoga schools emphasizing physical practice as “modern postural yoga” (MPY) and distinguishes them from “modern

¹⁹ See Meera Nanda on “‘Owning’ Yoga.” in *Himāl* (www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/3550-owning-yoga.html, accessed 1 March 2011).

²⁰ For helpful overviews on the growing number of historical, sociological, and anthropological studies on modern yoga see De Michelis (2007), Newcombe (2009).

²¹ De Michelis (2004, 2); in Chap. 6 she gives a detailed account of her taxonomic divisions.

²² Examples of the latter category (MDY) are the Brahma Kumaris and Sahaja Yoga.

meditational yoga” (MMY) in which mental practices are stressed.²³ Following this typology, the recent worldwide yoga boom is clearly linked to “modern postural yoga” (MPY).

The contrast between meditative techniques identified as yoga and rather mundane yoga postures has been noted by academic scholars and yoga enthusiasts alike. The difference correlates historically to the distinction between Raja Yoga as a largely mental discipline promoted by Vivekananda and the concept of (Neo-) Hatha Yoga, which focuses on body practice and kinesthetic experience. However, this distinction is more schematic than real. “In yoga,” Alter argued, “it is pointless to try to define where physical exercise ends and mental meditation begins,” due to the Hindu notion that mind and body are intrinsically linked.²⁴ Mental activity is subsumed under the physical as one of many senses, constituting a perceptual reality that stands in contrast to the potential achievement of disengaged higher consciousness.²⁵ From this perspective, yogic discipline cannot manifest purely as an objectification of the body, it is equally conceived as a subjectification of the self.²⁶ Also, with regard to the anthropological paradigm of embodiment, one could classify meditation and purification techniques as bodily practice because both require “somatic attention” (Csordas).²⁷ De Michelis’ ideal-typical categories thus have a weakness since they imply a vital difference in approaching yoga as belief system *or* as a set of physical exercises.²⁸ Although this distinction does indeed reflect a particular modern discourse on yoga, to oppose these categories altogether is problematic, both in the Indian context and in the allegedly secularized, late modern, post-industrial settings where the boundaries between health behavior, self-cultivation, and religious aspirations are increasingly blurred, where there is often no clear line between spiritual practice and psychosomatic self-help.²⁹ Moreover, De Michelis’ model did not account for those representations of yoga that circulate primarily in India (e.g., yoga championships or the politicization of yoga), a constraint she herself mentions.³⁰ Although her typology was extremely helpful in opening the field of modern yoga studies, the categories she outlined quickly reached their analytical limits. While they exemplify common ways that

²³ According to De Michelis, Iyengar Yoga is a paradigmatic form of MPY, whereas the yoga of Chinmoy can be classified as MMY.

²⁴ Alter (1997, 92).

²⁵ White (2012a, 7).

²⁶ Alter (1992, 92).

²⁷ For the concept of embodiment see Csordas (1990, 1993).

²⁸ In search of a descriptive model to map coexisting and partly overlapping forms of modern yoga, one might more appropriately view the “spiritual” and the “physical” as the x and the y axis in a coordinate system, charting each variant of yoga along these axes.

²⁹ The emergence and glorification of self-care in post-traditional societies has been explored by Ziguira (2004). The assumption of a particular Hindu view, however, recalls the difficulties in defining Hinduism (see Lipner 2004; Malinar 2009).

³⁰ De Michelis (2004, 189). In 2008 De Michelis suggests a fifth category: the “Neo-Hindu style of Modern Yoga” (2008, 22) including, for instance, mass yoga camps in a Hindu-nationalist spirit (Alter 2008).

yoga schools distance themselves from each other (i.e., emic arguments that constitute a distinct discursive field), they do not help theorize the multiple and competing logics used to interpret and circulate yoga, or the ambivalent manifestations and shifts in overall systemic orientation (its ontological status) that occur while practices and ideas remain. The mimetic process of deciphering and encoding yoga escapes a simplistic dialectic of mind and body, religious versus secular. However, in fairness to De Michelis' intent, the proposed terms were meant as provisional and "convenient" working concepts that in spite of their capital letters were not put forth as dogmatic and absolute types.³¹ Her contribution should be understood as an invitation for further elaboration and verification.

Several works have been published on the twentieth-century dissemination of yoga within particular national contexts, such as within Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.³² These studies, written from the scholarly perspective of the host nation, either implied or explicitly suggested that a hitherto foreign set of ideas and/or practices were part of a gradual process of cultural absorption. With regard to yoga in post-World War II Germany, Christian Fuchs identified four periods: (1) the "consolidation" of dispersed individuals interested in yoga from 1945 to 1955; (2) the "institutionalization" of yoga instruction between 1956 and 1966; (3) the emergence and "organization" of a yoga movement between 1967 and 1979; and (4) the "professionalization" of teacher training and quality management between 1980 and 1990.³³ With regard to the United Kingdom, De Michelis distinguished three different time periods: (1) the "popularization" of yoga from the 1950s to mid-1970s; (2) the "consolidation" from the mid-1970s to late 1980s; and (3) the "acculturation" of yoga from the late 1980s to date.³⁴ These types of regional studies are of great significance since they highlight the social conditions that invited and accompanied the gradual acceptance of yoga in the Western hemisphere. Yet by their emphasis on stages of cultural integration they tend to suggest a strict bilateralism and a one-way diffusion that proves delusive to any systematic analysis of multidirectional flows and transnational developments. Although the spread of yoga differed historically from country to country—for instance in regards to the yoga pioneers who shaped the initial yoga imagery in Germany and in Britain—it would be incongruous to conceive of an explicit British yoga practice or the Germanization of Indian yoga.³⁵ Moreover, as mentioned earlier, no fixed set of ready-made mind-body techniques existed for export to the West prior to this transcultural encounter.

³¹ De Michelis (2004, 7).

³² See Fuchs (1990, 2006), cf. Schnäbele (2010), De Michelis (2004), Newcombe (2007, 2008), Ceccomori (2001), and Syman (2010).

³³ Fuchs (1990, slightly extended in 2006) uses the German terms: *Konsolidierung*, *Institutionalisierung*, *Organisation*, *Professionalisierung*.

³⁴ De Michelis (2004).

³⁵ In the 1960s, yoga in Germany was mainly Sivananda Yoga, whereas in Britain Iyengar Yoga dominated.

Some recent research has focused on yoga practitioners and their long-distance travel, engaged upon improving not only posture practices but also the self. The quintessential destination of this “pilgrimage” is, not surprisingly, India.³⁶ Social anthropologist Sarah Strauss followed visitors of the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh, India back to their respective home countries and explored the ways in which they integrated and transformed yoga and notions of yogic life in their everyday life. Following the various strands of this global network she conducted multi-sited fieldwork in India, Switzerland, Germany, and the United States, evaluated in *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures* (2005). Although this study only cursorily refers to Indian yoga practitioners, Strauss makes an important point: whereas Indians practitioners appreciated (Neo-)Hatha Yoga for its scientifically proven efficacy, non-Indian followers regarded yoga as a metonym for spirituality and valued its holistic dimension.³⁷ In other words, the same type of yoga knowledge and exercise that was taught at one exemplary site was seemingly framed in at least two different ways—and probably produced contrasting experiences to some extent. Regrettably, it was beyond the scope of Strauss’ investigation to analyze the underlying reasons for these experiential differences; instead, the spread of Sivananda Yoga Centers into several countries seemed to indicate the existence of a globally shared yoga culture that transcended national boundaries. Similarly, the geographer Anne-Cécile Hoyez provided a multilayered analysis of how the circulation of yoga influenced the social construction of global space, considering the world-wide distribution of yoga centers, the travel routes of yoga gurus and practitioners, the spread of yoga providers and its impact on urban landscapes, as well as the influence of regular yoga practice on spatial categories at home.³⁸ Although based on interviews with yoga practitioners in France and India (including tourists), her study shows how the circulation of yoga cannot be reduced to bilateral relations but is linked with overlapping national and global networks, discourses on the historic spread of yoga, and also the symbolism of yoga places, here understood in reference to Gesler’s “therapeutic landscapes,”³⁹ Hoyez shows how the identification of ailments and medical preferences correlate with the assessment of environmental features of yoga ashrams (in India, the United States, and South Africa) that were considered and compared in terms of their therapeutic potential, that is to say as socially negotiated global imaginaries. However, both Strauss and Hoyez are silent in regards the asymmetries involved in these transnational productions. For example, these global sites of yoga—whether in India or elsewhere—are neither created nor shared with equal means: who is in the position to travel, to define, to push, to communicate, to translate?

Both the speed of information flows and the mobility of people have unquestionably accelerated tremendously since the 1990s, and new analytic models have

³⁶ On the concept of pilgrimage in this context see Burger (2006).

³⁷ Strauss (2005, 116).

³⁸ Hoyez (2005).

³⁹ Hoyez (2007).

been developed to grasp the dynamics of a cultural interconnectedness that now clearly goes beyond geographic and national boundaries. But before I turn our attention toward the ways in which these challenging circumstances, concepts, and theoretical models are addressed and reflected upon in this volume, let me provide a few historical notes on yoga and cultural change—although space does not permit a comprehensive overview of yoga scholarship undertaken by Indologists and historians of religion.⁴⁰

Sources and Approaches in the Study of Indian Yoga

The emphasis in this collection of essays on yoga's transcultural trajectory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries does not stem from an assumption that contemporary yoga inherently differs from past practice by virtue of the (in)consistency of transmission. Cultural change did not interrupt one homogeneous practice of yoga at only one point in time; therefore, today's yoga cannot be read in reductive fashion as a consequence only of globalization, of modernity, or of British colonialism. More accurately, several indicators show that the historical development of yoga was itself transient, fragmented, ambiguous, and subject to alteration.⁴¹ Contrary to popular belief or self-proclaimed adherence to an ancient Indian tradition, even premodern yoga cannot be understood as a singular, cohesive system. Imagining the development of yoga as a family tree with Indian roots, a substantial trunk of "tradition," and several more or less globalized branches is a modern trope for a complex formation that more appropriately resembles a huge banyan tree with several intermingled aerial roots that make it difficult to recognize where the tree begins and where it ends, how it is absorbed by other plants, and that it may, in fact, be the product of multiple distant origins.⁴²

From the perspective of Indologists, the metamorphosis and plural meanings associated with "yoga" correlate with the general vagueness and semantic breadth of the term itself. In *Yoga in Practice* (2012), David White states that "every group in every age has created its own version and vision of yoga."⁴³ He goes on to point out that the range of meanings associated with the term "yoga" is wider than for almost any other word in the Sanskrit lexicon. More than 3,000 years ago—long

⁴⁰ For further readings see Whicher (1998), Whicher and Carpenter (2003), Jacobsen (2005), Samuel (2008), and White (2012b), to mention only a few recent publications.

⁴¹ Jacobsen (2005, 17), Whicher and Carpenter (2003, 1), Singleton and Byrne (2008b, 5), Samuel (2008, 178), and White (2012a, 2).

⁴² In popular yoga literature the simplified genealogical tree is commonly used: see Tietke (2007) in his "5000 years" [sic] of yoga. Recently, Lipner (2004), 24 employed the banyan metaphor to explain Hinduism(s).

⁴³ White (2012a, 2). In the following I shall focus on semantics relevant to grasp the development of modern Hatha Yoga. For lack of space I do not elaborate on interlinked concepts such as *bhaktiyoga*, *jñānayoga*, *karmayoga*, *rājayoga* and others whose meanings were subject of several classical and medieval Indian texts.

before a recognizable system called yoga had emerged—the term was used for yoking an animal and for the yoke itself. It was also a metaphor for a time of war (in reference to the yoke on a warhorse).⁴⁴ Even when the term began to appear regularly in Sanskrit literature (between 300 BCE to 400 CE) it meant many different things and “union”—a common translation in today’s yoga manuals—was only one of many interpretive options. According to White, yoga has variously signified:

a conjunction of planets, . . . a constellation, . . . [a mixture of] substances, . . . a device, a recipe, a method, a strategy, a charm, an incantation, fraud, a trick, an endeavor, a combination, . . . an arrangement, zeal, care, diligence, industriousness, discipline, use, application, contact, a sum total, and the Work [sic] of alchemists.⁴⁵

Yet even this list does not exhaust the meanings that have existed over time. Thus, it is by no means clear that the notion of yoga as it appears in a given primary source refers to the same subject matter when found in another manuscript assembled thousands of years later. Very likely we are also faced with a multiple homonym so that broad clusters of semantic meaning emerge only in relation to specific groups of texts.⁴⁶

For the reasons stated above, the main current in linguistic yoga research follows a hermeneutic approach, seeking to evaluate yoga as a historical and pluralistic phenomenon. There is a rich collection of Indic scripture that variously concentrates on yoga and invites a broad spectrum of interpretations. Whether and in what respect this scriptural knowledge reflected ascetic ideals, religious practice, or metaphysical concepts is disputed.⁴⁷ Apart from celebrated root texts like the *Yogasūtra* and sections of the *Bhagavadgītā* and *Upaniṣad*, the main texts that relate to modern posture practice appeared between 1350 and 1850 CE.⁴⁸ Referencing a tantric theory of the human body with its energy centers (*cakra*) and energy channels (*nāḍī*), they promote the manipulation of the physique and codify yoga as a system of purificatory techniques, controlled breathing, and postures—thus constituting what came to be known as the (tantric) *haṭhayoga* tradition. *Haṭhayoga* literally means “violent effort” or “the yoga of force,” suggesting increased self-mastery for attaining a goal, possibly supernatural powers, immunity from illness, or immortality if not outright union with god. According to Jason Birch the main implication of describing this type of yoga as forceful is, however, an allusion to the tremendous effects of its techniques.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid; for a present-day lexicon entry “yoga” and its diverse meanings see Alter (2004, 11).

⁴⁶ Singleton (2010, 15).

⁴⁷ On the *Yogasūtra* and its interpretation see Whicher (1998); for other foundational and “classical” yoga texts see White (2012b).

⁴⁸ Sjöman 1996; some Indologists assume that what came to be known as the tantric tradition was antedated by the practices of renunciators between 900 and 1200 (see overview by Newcombe 2009, 987), or as early as the sixth century CE (Whicher and Carpenter 2003, 8).

⁴⁹ For a profound discussion of the term *haṭhayoga* see Birch (2011); compare the translations by Alter (2004, 24), Bühnemann (2007, 11), Staal (1993, 71), and White (2012a, 15).

Prominent among these texts is the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*, a fourteenth-century treatise written from the perspective of a spiritual adept.⁵⁰ Other texts such as the *Śivasamhitā* and the *Gheraṇḍasamhitā* have a distinct literary and philosophical flavor, at times purposely oblique. They were not intended as tutorials but supplemented an embodied tradition that was transmitted from master (*guru*) to lifelong student. These medieval texts seem related to earlier views on yoga in particular as a method for controlling the natural activities of mental organs. Still and all, we must assume that competing meanings did exist since sources use the term in reference to ontologically diverse categories such as a strand of philosophy and also the goal of a specific yogic practice.⁵¹ Hence, text-based hermeneutic interpretation has variously discussed yoga as a philosophical ideal of ascetic living, a theory of consciousness, and a set of guidelines with which to face death.⁵² In addition, the scope of primary texts on the subject of yoga can either be widened to include commentaries on associated aspects and topics or limited to only a few major treatises. Similarly, one may focus on pre-*Yogasūtra* sources or on sources ascribed to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, or even related to Muslim practice.⁵³ Therefore, Alter points out that the “somewhat arbitrary” selection of primary texts will influence what aspects dominate the interpretations of yoga.⁵⁴ As Ian Whicher and David Carpenter remark, we cannot know what influence these texts actually had, and whether the sources that attracted the most academic attention were indeed authoritative.⁵⁵ Whereas colonial India and Hindu reformers valorized some texts—prominently the *Yogasūtra*—others were silenced for their apparently “perverse” content, such as the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*.⁵⁶ For these reasons, it is highly problematic to trace modern postural practice back to textual sources, creating linkages that envision a direct line of succession from the *Yogasūtra* to medieval *haṭhayoga* texts and then to the Hindu-reformist visions of true yoga.⁵⁷

One strategy for bypassing the vagueness of the term “yoga” is to focus on the history of actual posture practice by means of scriptural and visual sources that allow for the comparison of *āsana* names, of descriptive remarks, and images. To come straight to the point, even when using this approach it remains difficult to establish a consistent yoga tradition. The early descriptions of *āsana* found in primary sources are very brief; matching the text’s poetic meter they are of limited use in identifying a posture. In some manuscripts the illustrations even differ from the textual description altogether; in other examples the procedure for an *āsana* was

⁵⁰ The date of the Indian source is disputed (see footnote 5). Here I follow Alter (2004, 21) although Bühnemann (2007, 7) assumes that the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* was composed in the fifteenth/sixteenth century CE.

⁵¹ Jacobson (2005, 4).

⁵² See Malinar (2009, 254–256), Jacobson (2005, 9), and Schreiner (2009).

⁵³ On Islamic thought in relation to yoga see Jacobsen (2005, 19) and White (2012b, Chaps. 7 and 15).

⁵⁴ Alter (2004, 20).

⁵⁵ Whicher and Carpenter (2003).

⁵⁶ See Sjomán (1996, 56) for Dayananda Sarasvatī’s account on yogis destroying manuscripts of the latter category; cf. Wujastyk (2009, 200–203).

⁵⁷ See Sjomán (1996, 37 and 40), Whicher and Carpenter (2003, 6), Bühnemann (2007, 20–21), White (2009, 246–247), Singleton (2010, 5).

changed over time.⁵⁸ Most notably, the specific number of canonical postures varied, regardless of the generalized symbolic notion of 84 postures (in some sources listed as 8,400,000).⁵⁹ According to the *Yogasūtra*, yoga should be performed in a firm, seated position only so as not to distract the meditating person. Composed roughly a millennium later, the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* listed only 15 essential postures; the *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* would later mention 32; and the *Śivasamhitā* a total of 84, describing only four in detail.⁶⁰ One well-preserved manuscript dated 1737 substantiated the total of 84 with illustrations of each posture.⁶¹ Another treatise with pictures from the Palace of Mysore (dated 1811–1868) described 122 postures, 80 basic and 42 additional *āsana*, each with a few verses on name and performance.⁶² In the twentieth century, we once again find renowned yoga gurus building their fame on 25 postures (Yesudian), or taken to the other extreme on 200 postures plus related exercises (Iyengar).⁶³ The TKDL, housed under the auspices of the Indian government, has even documented “from antique texts” a total of 900 yoga exercises!⁶⁴ This raises the question of what is

⁵⁸ On the discrepancy between image and textual description see Gharote 2006, xxxii. An example of a changed posture is *kūrmāsana* (tortoise pose): its present-day performance clearly differs from its textual counterpart in the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*.

⁵⁹ Bühnemann (2007).

⁶⁰ Sjomann (1996), Bühnemann (2007), and Singleton (2010, 29). According to White (2012a, 10, 17) there was reference neither to postures nor controlled breathing in sources antedating the ninth century CE.

⁶¹ Bühnemann (2007, 143–145).

⁶² Sjomann (1996).

⁶³ Both yoga gurus published tutorials that were translated into several languages: *Yoga and Health* (Yesudian and Haich 1953, Hungarian original from 1941), and *Light on Yoga* (Iyengar 1966). Since the publication of the latter, Iyengar has continued to develop and vary exercises.

⁶⁴ In June 2010, the TKDL had reportedly registered more than 900 postures (see Emily Wax, “The Great Yoga Crackdown,” in *The Washington Post*, 23 August 2010; download at <http://www.tkdil.res.in/tkdil/langdefault/common/PressCoverage.asp>, accessed 12 January 2012). Unfortunately, the TKDL did not provide information in regards to its method of data collection or evaluation. However, on its homepage it lists 38 seemingly authoritative books as “sources of information,” all of which are authored, translated, and published by Indians (between 1920 and 2008) and include both historical and modern texts. (<http://www.tkdil.res.in/tkdil/langdefault/common/SourceInfo.asp?GL=Eng>, accessed 12 January 2012).

This extraordinarily high number of yoga postures is substantiated by the Lonavla Yoga Institute in Pune, India: on behalf of the institute, and subsidized by the Indian government, Manohar Laxman Gharote et al. (2006) compiled an *Encyclopedia of Traditional Asanas* with about 900 entries, including up to 100 different applications of a particular *āsana* and then several entries without any description of the content or technique. This reference book is methodologically problematic because it does not differentiate between *āsana* names used in primary sources, in secondary literature, and in popular twentieth-century books about yoga. For instance, it describes a version of *unmukha-pīṭha* suitable “for the pregnant woman” (Gharote 2006, 326), although before independence women were excluded from learning postural yoga. Elsewhere Gharote (2006, xxxvii) refers to “asanas” from Celtic, Egyptian, and Mexican civilization.

Cf. Bühnemann (2007, 179–290). In her study on yoga postures mentioned in Indian manuscripts between 1625 and 2003, she discovered a total of 351 different *āsana* names, several of which refer to similar postures. Admittedly some positions described in early texts are absent in modern yoga curricula, e.g., *tapakāsana*, hanging upside down by feet tied on a rope see Bühnemann 2007, 51, 151).