

Guest Editorial

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For the last 20 years, a kind of standard format for introducing studies on yoga has focused on numbers of practitioners. Yoga—at least as a contemporary practice—was a new subject of study, and scholars were anxious to emphasize the significance of the topic. Today a substantially different introduction is needed. The most salient observation is no longer about how many people practise yoga, or how much they spend on these practices, but how, as a result of these growing numbers, the academic study of yoga and meditation has expanded.

Many demographic studies have noted that practitioners of ‘modern yoga’ and meditation are largely upper-middle-class with high educational credentials. This social background makes them particularly responsive to the growing body of academic knowledge on yoga. Provided with the necessary resources, they are keen to combine their weekly yoga routine with

1. Suzanne Newcombe researches yoga from social historical and sociological perspectives. Her book *Yoga in Britain: Stretching Spirituality and Educating Yogis* will be published with Equinox Press in 2019. She is currently part of an ERC-funded Research Project AYURYOG which is examining the histories of yoga, ayurveda and rasaśāstra (Indian alchemy and iatrochemistry) from the tenth century to the present, focusing on the disciplines’ health, rejuvenation and longevity practices.
2. Matylida Ciołkosz focuses her academic interests on the role of the embodiment in the formation and transformations of religious traditions. Her current research is focused on the relation between the kinaesthetic experience related to *āsana* practice and the interpretations of religio-philosophical concepts in strands of modern postural yoga. In her methodological approach, she combines the tenets of enactivism with cognitive linguistics and phenomenology.

systematic study of history and phenomenology of yoga. Whether to improve their credentials as yoga teachers, or to better understand the origin of their personal practice, they are eager to interact with scholars and benefit from their growing expertise.

The demand for this interaction is evident not only in the increasing presence of scholars during teacher training programmes, but also in a growing number of masters-level programmes exploring the history of yoga and meditation practices. These include the Master in Yoga Studies programme at L'Università Ca' Foscari in Venice, Italy (since 2013); the Master of Arts in Yoga Studies at the Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California (since 2013); a MA in Yoga Studies at Won Kwang University, South Korea (since 2001) and the Master of Arts in Traditions of Yoga and Meditation programme at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London (since 2012), that will soon be complemented by the new Centre for Yoga and Meditation at SOAS, opening in May 2018. The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (est. 1997) offers a variety of research positions and online courses related to wider aspects of yoga studies.

An early leader in the field of yoga studies was the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, which hosted an international conference on 'Yoga: The Indian Tradition' in 1988, but ceased to be an axis for yoga studies with the closure of the Dharam Hinduja Institute of Indic Research (1995–2004).³ Another significant one-off event was a conference on 'Yoga in Transformation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on a Global Phenomenon' held at the University of Vienna in September 2013.⁴

Shorter programmes and courses have been offered at the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, as well as at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, where the first Yoga Studies Summer School took place in 2017. Organized at the university's Institute for the Study of Religions, the Kraków event brought together over 40 participants from all across Europe and North America—some of them MA students or PhD researchers, all of them yoga practitioners or teachers, all looking to broaden their understanding of what yoga is through adopting a critical, academic attitude towards it.

Interestingly, both the summer school in Kraków and the programmes in Charlottesville have combined theoretical elaborations of the topic with experiential sessions. Such an approach is a response to the need to merge the attitude of a yoga teacher with the insight of a yoga scholar—a necessity at times when yoga studios proliferate at an astounding pace, and with them

3. Conference proceedings were published as David Carpenter and Ian Whicher (eds.), *Yoga: The Indian Tradition*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.
4. A conference volume publication is forthcoming, *Yoga in Transformation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on a Global Phenomenon*, in the series 'Wiener Forum für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft' ('Viennese Forum for Theology and the Study of Religions') Göttingen: V&R University Press.

the numerous (and often under-informed) interpretations of what the term 'yoga' is supposed to mean. The meeting of a yogin and a yoga scholar has the potential of making the former more knowledgeable and critical in their evaluation of yoga, and the latter more empathetic towards the contemporary, often very eclectic yogic practices. Many cosmopolitan yoga teacher-training programmes are now seeking input and guest lectures from academic scholars on yoga on their practical courses.

This special issue of *Religions of South Asia* is born out of this expanding area of study and collaboration between contemporary practitioners and established academic methods of study. The articles in this volume were all first presented at an international 'Yoga Darśana, Yoga Sādhana' conference hosted in Kraków, Poland in May 2016. The Krakow conference was initiated by Matylda Ciołkosz and Robert Czyżykowski of the Institute for the Study of Religions, Jagiellonian University and was co-sponsored by the Modern Yoga Research network established by Elizabeth de Michelis, with the help of Mark Singleton and Suzanne Newcombe. This collaboration brought new momentum to the organizational and integrating efforts of yoga scholars.

Over 100 people attended this event, which had 60 academic papers or keynotes on the schedule. The mix of those attending was notable, as it demonstrated yoga as a rapidly expanding area of interest in Eastern Europe and former Soviet countries. Although most of the participants and attendees were from Europe and North America, a few Asian and South American scholars were also present. The selection of papers offered in this volume reflects the wide range of subjects covered in the conference and the range of established and new scholars attending. Other papers from the conference have appeared in *Studia Religiológica* 50 (2), (2017).⁵ Two Krakow conference papers will also launch a new open-access, online *Journal of Yoga Studies* 1 (1) in May 2018.⁶

Although there were studies on yoga prior to the publication of *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004), Elizabeth de Michelis' book can be seen as defining an understanding of 'modern yoga' as a distinct subject of study. Her typology of 'modern yoga' has been crucial for articulating what has been a rapidly expanding field of study. Of course, the disciplines of Indology, Philology, Anthropology and Study of Religions have long been interested in yoga in

5. Karl-Stéphan Bouthillette, 'Hermeneutic Praxis: The Yoga of Reason(ing)': pp. 103–15; Hanna Urbańska, 'The Twilight Language of Svānubhava Gīti by Nārāyaṇa Guru—Analysis of Selected Stanzas in the Light of *Tirumantiram* and Other Tamil Literary Sources': pp. 117–29; Agata Świerżowska, 'Yoga as Synthesis. Yoga as Revival. Eugeniusz Polończyk's Vision of Yoga. Contribution to the Study of the History of Yoga in Interwar Poland': pp. 173–88. All in *Studia Religiológica* 50 (2), (2017).
6. Philip Deslippe, 'The Swami Circuit: Mapping the Terrain of Early American Yoga': pp. 5–44 and Seth Powell, 'Yogis Etched in Stone: Sixteenth-Century Visual and Material Evidence of Śaiva Ascetics in Complex Non-Seated Āsanas at Vijayanagara': pp. 45–106 in *Journal of Yoga Studies* 1 (1) (2018) <https://journalofyogastudies.org>.

India. But the novelty of the study of modern yoga lies in its exploration of how historically and geographically distinct practices termed 'yoga' have developed into contemporary practices. There is an interesting process of self-reflection as contemporary practitioners return to the traditional methods and subjects of study to inform and reinterpret their understandings of contemporary practices.

The academic study of yoga has also needed to respond to yoga as a political issue. Since the late 1990s, yoga has become increasingly associated with a popular Indian nationalism. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has leveraged yoga as a tool for promoting his popularity, accepting the endorsement of the celebrity yogi Swami Ramdev in his campaign and promoting the visibility and funding of yoga in various spheres since he achieved office in 2014. In 2008, the Hindu American Foundation launched a well-publicized 'Take Back Yoga' campaign, criticizing popular presentations of yoga which they saw as Westernizing, commercializing and sexualizing what they want to emphasize is a profound and meaningful Indian spiritual tradition. In turn this has inspired further reflection from both 'westernized' yoga practitioners and academics studying yoga alongside issues such as decolonialization and intersectionality, with the new academic journal *Race & Yoga* reflecting some of these contemporary critical enquires. As well as coming to terms with the post-colonial globalized world, contemporary yoga scholars and practitioners are dealing with wider cultural preoccupations of how contemporary yoga practice can both reinforce and at times subvert the gender and power imbalances reflected in the wider societies.

While biomedical studies promoting the physical and psychological benefits of yoga and meditation continue to accumulate, greater integration is needed with the insights of Humanities and Social Science scholarship on these subjects. What exactly is being practised as yoga or meditation, how it is understood, and what effects it has cannot be entirely captured in short-term biomedical trials looking for particular beneficial effects relating to specific health conditions. The preoccupations and concerns of contemporary practitioners can only be addressed by greater understanding of their traditions. Academic studies on yoga and meditation, in turn, are reframed to address contemporary interests.

There are currently two major research projects funded by the European Research Council specifically addressing these contemporary concerns. The first is the Haṭha Yoga Project, based at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and aimed 'to chart the history of physical yoga practice by means of philology, i.e. the study of texts on yoga, and ethnography, i.e. fieldwork among practitioners of yoga'.⁷ Some of the preliminary results of this pursuit are discussed in this volume in the paper by Daniela Bevilaqua, the project's ethnographer. The second project is Ayuryog, based at the

7. The Haṭha Yoga Project, <http://hyp.soas.ac.uk/>, ERC Project Number: 647963.

Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies at Vienna University and at Inform at the London School of Economics. Its aim is to examine ‘the histories of yoga, ayurveda and *rasaśāstra* ... from the tenth century to the present ... [and] to reveal the entanglements of these historical traditions ... trac[ing] the trajectories of their evolution as components of today’s global healthcare and personal development industries’,⁸ Though not featured in this volume, several papers summarizing the project’s preliminary findings were presented during the 2016 Kraków conference.

Entanglement, an inevitable characteristic of the trans-sectarian and trans-cultural phenomenon that yoga has become, is the theme of the first article in this volume, by Karen O’Brien-Kop. The author re-evaluates the description of Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* as ‘classical yoga’ by highlighting the extent to which the concepts and images found in Patañjali’s work were used by various communities in a dialogic environment. She argues that during the ‘classical’ period of fourth- to fifth-century India there was not a singular tradition of ‘classical yoga’ or a set of separate discourses of yoga isolated within discrete religious traditions. By closely examining passages from Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, she explores how dialogue between traditions has always been a feature of yoga and meditation practices.

Daniel M. Stuart’s article seeks to fill the gap between contemporary Western mindfulness practices—such as Jon Kabat-Zinn’s ‘Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy’—and traditional Burmese insight meditation. Contesting the view that the secularized concept of mindfulness is completely removed from its Buddhist roots, the author presents the figure of S. N. Goenka (1924–2013) as a neglected link between the global mindfulness meditation movement and post-colonial India.

Daniela Bevilacqua discusses the understanding of the term *haṭha yoga* among contemporary representatives of Indian ascetic orders. Basing her presentation on extensive field research, she contrasts her informants’ testimonies with available textual sources. Thus, she draws attention to the similarities and discrepancies between the textual tradition studied by philologists, and the living performative tradition that may only be accessed through ethnography.

This volume then features two articles specifically on the tradition of yoga taught by B. K. S. Iyengar (1918–2014). Iyengar’s presentation has been particularly influential in its depth of exploration of the postures—*āsana*—which dominate contemporary practice of yoga. As much as Iyengar’s *Light on Yoga* (1966) has been considered a ‘bible’ of modern yoga, the Iyengar tradition has been characterized by rigorous training of teachers and emphasis on innovation and change. Two different aspects of the developing Iyengar tradition are highlighted here. First, Matylda Ciołkosz questions the degree of

8. Entangled Histories of Yoga, Ayurveda and Alchemy in South Asia (AYURYOG), <http://ayuryog.org/>, ERC Project Number: 639363.

orthopraxy characterizing Iyengar's *āsana* practice and argues that adaptability and transformation are inherent in Iyengar's method. To make her point, she discusses the understanding of *āsana* as a complex structure built of minimal semantic units, and the potential of such an understanding to enhance proprioception. The second paper, by Agi Wittich, summarizes the development of 'women-oriented yoga practices' within the Iyengar tradition. Based on extensive interviews with Iyengar yoga teachers, it looks to reconstruct the history of women's practice within Iyengar yoga, and the perception of their authenticity and legitimacy by long-time practitioners.

Mayme Lefurgey's review of the application of postural yoga in elicitive peacebuilding processes points to the potential of embodied yogic practices in healing personal traumas and facilitating social change. The author also ponders to what extent the ideas presented in the *Pātañjali Yogaśāstra*—such as cultivation of inner peace, non-violence, and non-judgment—are in harmony with the goals of peacebuilding praxes and may hence contribute to their effectiveness.

In the final article, Alex Wolfers contributes a review of the literature on Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), an extremely influential figure in the creation of independent India. Aurbindo, known in later life as the 'yogi of Pondicherry', was a scholar, revolutionary, poet, philosopher, mystic and guru. As Wolfers notes, there has been extensive work on various angles of Aurbindo's life and influence, but little research on the multifaceted nature of this individual. Wolfers' contribution will be an invaluable aid for future scholars interested in exploring Aurobindo's legacy.

The variety of topics covered within this volume reflects just a small area of interest of contemporary yoga studies. Modern yoga studies are very much linked to the relation of global modern yoga practices to the living history of yoga in India. In this regard, it fits into the narrative initiated in 1893 by Swami Vivekananda's participation in the Parliament of the World's Religions—that of bringing yoga to the West as a timeless gift of spiritual depth. Although more recent historical research is complicating and challenging the importance of Vivekananda in popularizing yoga, the orange-clad swami still remains a figure of paramount importance and influence. If India can indeed transform the world through this gift of yoga—as the swami had intended—what exactly does that mean? This volume highlights some of the breadth and depth of new research in contemporary yoga studies.