

Editorial

THEODORA WILDCROFT

The Open University, UK
theo.wildcroft@open.ac.uk

SUZANNE NEWCOMBE

The Open University and Inform, UK
suzanne.newcombe@open.ac.uk

LAURA VON OSTROWSKI

University of Hamburg, Germany
laura.von.ostrowski@uni-hamburg.de

Adaptation and mutation have always been features of yoga's history.

(Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 33)

This special double issue emerges from the proceedings of the second 'Yoga Darśana Yoga Sādhana' (YDYS) conference held in 2022 in Kraków, this time co-sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Religions, Jagiellonian University, and the SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies, University of London, with the help of an international team of volunteer yoga scholars and postgraduate students. In 2016, the first 'Yoga Darśana, Yoga Sādhana' conference was held in Kraków and a special double issue of this journal (volume 11, issues 2–3) was edited in recognition of a major watershed in the organizing efforts of Yoga Studies scholars. The introduction to that special issue declared that:

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.

(Newcombe and Ciołkosz 2017: 117)

This observation of expanding academic understandings of yoga continues to hold true, with significant transformations in this area of study. In the years between these special issues, we have seen a rapid expansion in yoga scholarship, and the completion of a number of major projects, including the European Research Council funded 'Hatha Yoga Project' and 'AyurYoga' Project, both 2015–2020, as well as a UKRI-funded project to create a critical

edition of the *Haṭhāpradīpikā*, hosted at SOAS University of London and the University of Marburg (2020–2023).

At the 2016 YDYS conference, Yoga Studies research was proceeding in two main directions: from the study of pre-modern yoga, being largely but not entirely philological and Indological, and from the study of modern and contemporary yoga, being largely but not entirely historical and anthropological. In the subsequent years, these two discrete areas (of contemporary and pre-modern) have been increasingly bridged, a major landmark in this effort being the *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies* (Newcombe and O'Brien-Kop 2021).

Elizabeth de Michelis's ground-breaking definition of 'modern yoga' (2004) signposted the global prevalence of yoga in the modern world as something significant and with distinct features. But as much as her ideal-typical model helped delineate and galvanize a field of research, it has also been refined and reassessed (de Michelis 2020). Now that de Michelis's first publication is about to celebrate its 20th anniversary, it is increasingly recognized that there are significant elements of historical continuity between the early modern and pre-modern practices of yoga and the contemporary (Birch 2018; Birch and Singleton 2019). Moreover the diversity and interconnections between different forms of Asian physical and religious cultures on the development of yoga have only begun to be uncovered, making the tapestry of intercultural influences much more rich and broad than the initial European-Indian emphasis of academic research (Bevilacqua and Singleton 2023). Painstaking philological work of translating pre-modern texts in a range of languages continues, and exploring their implications on our understandings of yoga past and present continues (e.g. Cantú 2023; Mallinson and Singleton 2017). Historical research improves our understanding of the continuity between modern yoga and its early and pre-modern antecedents as well as the complexity and range of practices described as yoga.

New journals have been established, including *The Journal of Yoga Studies*, *Race and Yoga Journal* and *The Journal of Applied Yoga Studies*, and a recent special issue of the *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* (volume 14, 2023) was focused on 'The Sociology of Yoga, Meditation, and Asian Asceticism'. An impressive number of innovative and exciting doctoral theses and accompanying monographs have been published, across a range of disciplines. Sociologists, religious scholars, ethnographers, cultural scientists and academics from other disciplines are increasingly observing, analyzing, interpreting and describing developments in contemporary yoga.

There is still a dominant aspirational vision of slender, female flexibility and privileged calm in the images of yoga that dominate the marketing of a number of extremely profitable international industries (Bhalla and Moscowitz 2020; Webb et al. 2017). Yet differences in form and intention between the different presentations of yoga as historical practice, yoga as health intervention, and yoga as marketing meme, can be glaring (Telles and

Gupta 2020; Lavrence and Lozanski 2014; Mallinson and Singleton 2017). As the product of complex encounters between India and the rest of the world, contemporary uses of the term yoga can include: a physical and mental practice for health, wellbeing and personal growth; a metaphysical system describing the ongoing creation of the universe; a devotional, ritual practice, a system of ethics and other social practices for righteous living, and more. There have been new in-depth explorations into the development of yoga in certain cultural environments, for example in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century United States (e.g. Deslippe 2018; Foxen 2020) and Britain (Newcombe 2019), multi-sited comparisons (e.g. Miller 2024; Srinivas, Jeychandran and Roberts 2022), as well as explorations of institutional structures (Wildcroft 2020) and the embodied expression of yoga doctrine and philosophy (Ciołkosz 2022; von Ostrowski 2022).

Even the most abstract work of localizing and historically situating the diversity of yoga inevitably entangles the researcher in shifting sociopolitical debates. A lack of consideration of continuing colonial and neoliberal power dynamics was perhaps characteristic of much of the initial work framed as the study of 'modern yoga' (Di Placido 2021). However, more recent work has taken on critiquing the social-political ground of contemporary yoga as its central focus. Major works in this area include Cara Hagen's (ed.) *Practicing Yoga as Resistance: Voices of Color in Search of Freedom* (2021), Andrea Jain's *Peace Love Yoga* (2020), Amanda Lucia's *White Utopias The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals* (2020) and Shameen Black's *Flexible India: Yoga's Cultural and Political Tensions* (2023). Yoga(s) have shaped nations, cultures and communities, and been shaped by them in turn.

Unfortunately, this abundance of research outputs has not been accompanied by any comfortable level of institutional resources. As elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences, higher education faculties in many of our leading institutions are under threat. It is telling that many of the contributions in this collection are made by independent and doctoral scholars. Some major new research projects are hopefully underway, including a new ERC-funded project on mantra yoga. There are hopes that YDYS conferences are set to become bi-yearly, with the support of the newly organized Yoga Research Group. Nonetheless, this is a reminder that academic quality is little guarantee of ongoing funding, nor is independent funding a guarantee of institutional support. The YDYS 2022 conference, this special edition, and a number of the aforementioned projects, are too often the product of volunteer labour, in online meetings held in snatched moments, between scholars scattered across the world, in often-precarious employment.

Despite or perhaps because of this, one of the biggest impacts of yoga scholarship continues to be on yoga teacher training programmes, and trade publishing. Internationally, an MA in Yoga Studies from SOAS in the UK, Loyola Marymount University in the US or a small number of other providers, can function as an unofficial 'advanced' qualification for yoga education

providers. Scholars of yoga are contracted to provide content for accessible independent online educational platforms in Yoga and South Asian Studies such as Yogic Studies, the SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies, The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies or the German provider Yogastudien.de.

Books such as the forthcoming *Yoga Studies in Five Minutes* (Wildcroft and Sojkova forthcoming), *Is This Yoga?: Concepts, Histories, and the Complexities of Modern Practice* (Foxen and Kuberry 2021) and *Tracing the Path of Yoga: The History and Philosophy of Indian Mind-Body Discipline* (Sarbacker 2021) attempt to provide resources that are equally useful for the non-specialist academic as for the less-academic yoga practitioner. While yoga practitioners may differ on the validity they accord to such research as it emerges, there continues to be a 'hunger in the yoga community for writing about yoga that is critical, challenging, political, and relevant to life in the 21st century' (Horton and Harvey 2012: 181). Scholar-practitioner positionality was already an emerging topic of conversation in 2016 (Singleton and Larios 2020). By 2022, YDYS panel debates and informal conversations had moved on to the even more complex positionality of the scholar-activist, and will feature in the American Academy of Religion, *Yoga in Theory and Practice's* discussions in 2024. The complex ideological and financial entanglements of intellectual and cultural capital of yoga inside and outside the academy continue to be an understudied current influencing the academic trajectory of yoga studies.

The norms of neoliberal yoga culture, the institutionalization of spiritual abuse, and the legacy of colonialism on both practice and scholarship are newly emerging and highly relevant questions within the field. Work to address these issues includes: improving historical and empirical accuracy through innovative philological techniques; applying ground-breaking theories to up-to-the-minute data on yoga teacher working patterns; and in-depth fieldwork and archival work with communities of practice. But it also includes advising governmental bodies, consulting for yoga teacher bureaucracies, media interviews and many other forms of public engagement. Far from being a niche subject of interest, yoga is one of those subjects that the general public and public bodies alike now have opinions on, and it is increasingly part of our work to ensure that those opinions are better informed by actual and meticulous academic research.

That public engagement is likely to be affected by the impact of neoliberalism not just within the academy, but upon the communities of practice in which yoga currently thrives. It is hard to find robust data as yet, but a significant number of yoga teachers appear to be leaving the profession, new registrations on teacher training programmes are slowing, and rates of income have been frozen or falling for some time, in the Anglophone world at least. The position of yoga teachers in South and East Asia is too complicated to summarize here, but looking at the international picture, we can say that mainstream narratives continue to tout the apparent health benefits of yoga practice (see Augspurger in this volume). Medical researchers and app

developers are consistently looking for ways to automate the transmission of yoga for health, which may flatten out the depth and quality of teaching on offer to many. However, yoga as a practice culture is robust, and adaptable, and the issues faced by its practitioners are not unique in contemporary culture (see Clarke in this issue).

At the 2022 YDYS, academic papers were presented on such topics as: the origins of mantra repetition; early American yoga and the Indian independence movement; the purpose of enumeration in the *Tattvayogabindu*; the paradox of carceral yoga; the soteriology of straightness and much, much more. In this special volume of *Religions of South Asia*, we highlight the work mainly of new scholars in this field, with the majority of the contributions coming from early career researchers. In this volume we have sought to bring some of this new research into the permanence of written debate.

This special issue highlights new insights offered by historical and social scientific approaches to yoga in the modern world, offering yoga communities insight into current developments and paving the way for future research. It holds nine articles that can be usefully grouped into three areas.

We begin with three historical case studies important for understanding the development of modern yoga, from three scholars at different career stages. Victoria Addinall mines her MA dissertation for a fascinating look at Eustace Miles, a ground-breaking influence in ‘welcoming structures’ (Baier 2016) for the early development of yoga in Britain, with an article titled ‘Breath Culture and the Assimilation of Yoga in *Fin de Siècle* Britain: The Synthesizing Influence of Eustace Miles’. Iwona Kozłowiec supplies previously unstudied insights into the development of yoga in Poland, with ‘Yoga in Communist Poland: A Case Study of Tadeusz Pasek’s Teaching (1960–89)’. Finally, Beatrix Hauser provides an in-depth examination of the close contact between Christianity and yoga in post-war Germany, with ‘Improving Moral Posture: Female Pioneers of Hatha Yoga in 1950s Germany’.

The next three articles concern themselves with the detail of communities of practice in contemporary yoga. Nick Lawler begins the work of defining the ‘mainstream’ in modern yoga teaching, with ‘Situating “Mainstream” Yoga: A Survey of British Yoga Teachers’. Agi Wittich expands on her doctoral research into Iyengar Yoga with ‘Conceptualizing Motherhood in Yoga: Pregnancy-Oriented Iyengar Yoga’. Finally, Tova Olsson contributes an article considering the ‘provocative and tantalizing’ teachings of a controversial transnational yoga school focusing on its ‘use of secrecy, claims of authenticity and the construction of gender’.

Our last three articles explore the structures and processes of contemporary yoga in globalized contexts. Jens U. Augspurger explores the entanglement of scientific and marketing discourses with ‘“Yoga helps!?”: Problems between Efficacy and Legitimization’. Marissa Clarke applies the concept of the precariat to contemporary yoga teaching with ‘Yoga and the Gig Economy: Pandemic, Precarity and Yoga Teacher Labour’. Finally, Theodora

Wildcroft expands on her doctoral research to consider institutionalization and accountability in yoga teaching with “‘The Yoga Police Are Real’: Recent Reforms in the Institutionalization of Yoga Teaching’.

Once again, the variety of topics covered within this volume reflects just a small area of interest of contemporary yoga studies, just a fraction of the work presented at the YDYS 2022 conference, and just a taste of the work still to come.

As we write, many of our contributors will be preparing for the third YDYS conference, to be held in Hamburg, Germany, in 2024. Once again, this marks a transitional moment, not only in yoga studies, but arguably in the practice and teaching of yoga worldwide. Yoga appears to have become well-established as an area of study in many different academic disciplines. The establishment of yoga studies at conferences such as these enables the multi-disciplinary exchange of the latest research findings. Such exchanges are crucial when a variety of biased and incomplete narratives about yoga, its history and context continue to circulate.

There are many reasons to be hopeful about the future. As we look forward to another conference, we have our own wish list for the future of yoga studies. We hope that a year or two from now, the next YDYS special issue contains more research that brings together pre-modern and contemporary disciplines in dialogue, and more work into the development and practice of yoga in various jurisdictions, in East Asia and Africa in particular. It would be inspiring to see more constructive dialogue between scholars in the social sciences and humanities with the many scientific, particularly biomedical disciplines interested in the various practices of yoga; as so far at least, such conversations have tended to be rare. We also hope that the close relationship we retain with yoga practising communities can help bolster support for the fragile status of ancient language learning and the future of the humanities and social sciences in all our university institutions.

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