

Transnational Exchange and the Genesis of Modern Postural Yoga

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Abstract This chapter will explore the emergence of posture practice (*āsana*) as the primary facet of yoga in the modern, globalized world. Prior to the modern period, *āsana* was rarely treated as the principal aspect of a yoga *sādhana*. In the medieval systems of *haṭhayoga*, from which it is sometimes claimed that today’s popular forms derive, posture was subordinate to other practices, such as breathing (*prāṇāyāma*), purification (*kriyā*), concentration (*dhāraṇā*), and sound work (*nāda*). During the 1920s and 1930s, postural yoga began to be assimilated into the modern yoga project begun by Vivekananda. Perhaps most importantly, Shri Yogendra and Swami Kuvalayananda developed postural systems greatly informed by Western science and medicine, and by the international physical culture movement. Over time, *āsana* became modern, scientific, and legitimate in the eyes of the world, thanks to their efforts and to those of others, such as Tirumalai Krishnamacharya. *Āsana* also interacted and partially merged with Western traditions of therapeutic gymnastics, “spiritual” movement and dance, while shedding many of the esoteric aspects and bizarre practices of the original *haṭhayoga*.

Introduction

Yoga in the modern, globalized world has become virtually synonymous with the practice of posture (*āsana*). For millions of people today in Europe, America, and Australasia, the primary association of the word yoga is with stretching regimes aimed at the improvement of health, and often tied to “spiritual” development. However, this is a situation which is quite unique in the long history of yoga. Until recently, *āsana* was not commonly the mainstay of a traditional yoga *sādhana* (course of practice), including the body-oriented *haṭhayoga*. This is not to say that *āsana* was somehow “invented” in the modern period, but that its function and

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status is often vastly different now than it ever was in pre-modern Indian traditions. This sea-change in the predominant connotations of the word “yoga” came about during a relatively short period in the early decades of the twentieth century. It was the result of a complex transnational exchange of ideas and practices within the larger context of what we might term “the yoga renaissance.”¹

The principle factor informing yoga’s transmutation into a system of stretching for health and fitness is the broad and multifaceted tradition of modern gymnastics, which swept the world from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. In India, a variety of European gymnastics traditions cross-pollinated with the modern discourses of yoga. At the same time, Europeans and Americans were appropriating and blending these new export forms of yoga according to their own understandings of the body and its place within “spiritual” practice. Yoga, as it is popularly conceived today, is the outcome of this dialogical exchange between para-religious, modern body culture techniques developed in the West, indigenous Indian *āsana* practice, and various English-language discourses of yoga that began to emerge in India from at least the time of Vivekananda (1863–1902) onwards. This chapter considers some of the most important stages in the development of modern posture-based yoga practices.

I will be using the term “transnational anglophone yoga” to indicate certain systems of yoga that began to appear in India, Europe, and the United States from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. There are many varieties, but they are all characterized by the fact that they cross cultural and national bounds, and are transmitted through the medium of English. I prefer this phrase over the more commonly used “Modern Yoga,” insofar as it simply describes the phenomenon and avoids the suggestion that we are talking about a unified and categorical body of discourses and practices.² It also obviates the question as to whether practices are inherently “modern” (beyond mere contemporaneity), and may help to move the inquiry beyond a simple cataloguing of the modern versus the “traditional” aspects of practice. This can have the important methodological advantage of preventing history from sliding into typography. Finally, it serves to make a distinction between English language, export forms of yoga, and “grass roots” Indian traditions (whose medium is Sanskrit or an Indian vernacular, and which are not for the most part involved in the global flows that are the defining feature of transnational anglophone yoga) without offering any *a priori* judgments as to the superiority, or greater authenticity, of the one over the other.

I begin with a short background on transnational anglophone yoga. *Āsana* was often absent from early modern formulations of yoga such as those of Vivekananda, and it was not really until the 1930s that posture began to be widely accepted as a primary feature of yoga practice. One reason for this was that *āsana* practices were associated with low-caste mendicants, who were anathema to caste Hindus, the new English-educated Indian middle class, and the colonial authorities. Furthermore, extreme postural austerities had long been a focus of the European ethnographic gaze, and were subject to ridicule and scorn. Little was known about the deeper

¹ This chapter is based on my book *Yoga Body: The Origin of Modern Posture Practice* (2010).

² The term “Modern Yoga” was first theorized by Elizabeth De Michelis (2004).

meaning of *yogāsana*, but they were nonetheless often the target of censure. For this reason, pioneers of transnational yoga like Vivekananda excluded instruction on *āsana* from their teachings, so as to make it palatable to their audience.

This same period saw the rise of a new, worldwide fervor for physical culture, which was itself closely linked to the rise of militant nationalism. Across Europe and Asia, people were embracing new technologies for building the body in the interests of nation. India was no exception, and the decades either side of 1900 saw a dramatic rise in the popularity of modern physical culture. Many borrowed European techniques of gymnastics and bodybuilding, and merged them with indigenous practices. One eventual result of such mergers was the now-dominant mode of postural yoga practice. There were several key players in the emergence of a physical culture-oriented yoga, including, perhaps most importantly, Swami Kavalayananda, Shri Yogendra, and (more indirectly) Tirumalai Krishnamacharya.

In Europe and America, the newly emerging forms of postural yoga began to be assimilated into already present traditions of women’s gymnastics. Some of these traditions grew out of the German *Gymnastik* movement, while others developed within “unchurched” Protestantism in the United States. At the same time, postural yoga innovators like Shri Yogendra were explicitly borrowing from these women’s gymnastics traditions in the adumbration of modern day, health-oriented yoga practices. I claim that the female dominated, stretching classes of today’s Hatha Yoga can be more profitably seen as developments within the Western “harmonial gymnastics” tradition than within Indian *hathayoga* per se.

Perhaps nobody has been as influential within posture-based, transnational yoga as T. Krishnamacharya, whose disciples (such as B. K. S. Iyengar) have been at the forefront of the popularization of *āsana* outside of India for at least half a century. During the 1930s, Krishnamacharya developed a system of dynamic *āsana* practice which was to become the basis for the many variants of Power Yoga, Vinyasa Yoga, Vinyasa Flow Yoga, and the various aerobic practices which often characterize yoga classes in the United States and elsewhere today. Known now as Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, this mode of practice represents a powerful synthesis of *hathayoga* principles likely influenced by popular pedagogical gymnastics.

Situating Transnational Anglophone Yoga

From the early to mid-nineteenth century onwards, certain sections of the educated Indian population began to sketch out a new vision of Hinduism which would be suited to the needs and aspirations of the day. Syncretic in nature, this modernized Hinduism sought to present a unified vision of Indian religion which would counter colonialist claims that Hindus were backward and superstitious in their beliefs and practices. The cultural organization known as the Brahma Samaj is perhaps the best known mouthpiece for this new vision of Hinduism, which drew on European philosophy, Unitarianism, and Western esotericism, as well as creative reinterpretation of Indian scripture.³

³ See De Michelis (2004) and Halbfass (1988).

Note also that “Hinduism” is itself a modern coinage. The term “Hindu” was used by early Muslim invaders to indicate the religiously and culturally diverse people inhabiting a particular region, i.e. the South Asian subcontinent. “Hinduism,” on the other hand, is a construct that arose from the emergent discipline of comparative religion and was not (prior to this period) a standard self-designation for Indians. Its usage is closely linked to efforts to articulate a cohesive philosophical, religious, and cultural identity for modern India, such as those by Brahma Samaj leaders Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) and Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–1884).

Swami Vivekananda was himself a member of the Brahma Samaj and imbibed many of Sen’s teachings. Sen had begun to adumbrate a revivalist version of “yoga” based on a modern, scientific vision of Hinduism, and Vivekananda was to greatly advance this project. He traveled to the United States and participated (without a prior invitation) at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in September 1893, where he made a profound impression on his audience. His book *Raja Yoga* (1896), part practical manual, part commentary on Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*, was immensely important in the development of Western understandings of yoga. Many of the popular yoga guides published in Britain and America during the succeeding decades bear clear traces of his influence, and in some ways *Raja Yoga* can be considered as the public face of the transnational yoga renaissance.

The Status of *Haṭhayoga* in Transnational Anglophone Yoga

From the perspective of popular yoga today, the most striking thing about *Raja Yoga*, and many of the manuals which follow in its wake, is that they are devoid of teaching about *āsana*. In fact, Vivekananda uncompromisingly rejects the “entirety” of the physical practices of *haṭhayoga*: “We have nothing to do with it here, because its practices are very difficult, and cannot be learned in a day, and, after all, do not lead to much spiritual growth.”⁴ Elsewhere in his writing and speaking, Vivekananda routinely criticizes the practice of *āsana*, and similar slights against its efficacy and propriety are evident in much of the practical literature of yoga up to and beyond the 1930s.

There are important reasons for the dismissal of *āsana* practice from the new, modern corpus of yoga. For several centuries prior to Vivekananda, ascetics performing extreme bodily postures had become the stock-in-trade image of everything that was wrong with Indian religion. These images included some of what we would today recognize as *āsana*-practice, but also various other kinds of bodily mortification (*tapas*) such as holding one arm in the air for several years until it atrophied and the nails pierced the flesh of the palm; being buried alive for weeks on end; the ubiquitous bed of nails, and so on. Due to repressive measures on the part

⁴ Vivekananda 2001 (1896, 20).

of the colonial forces in India from the late eighteenth century onwards, large groups of “sannyasins,” “yogis,” “sadhus,” and “fakirs” (interchangeable terms in the East India Company lexicon) were forced into a life of mendicancy and yogic showmanship, thereby fulfilling post-hoc, well-established expectations of what a yogi should do.⁵ While images of such figures (first in sketches, and later in photographs) had a distinct shock value for the European gaze, they were hardly the basis for a dignified Indian cultural revival. It is easy to see why they were deemed inappropriate for inclusion within the new yoga formulations of Vivekananda.

A similar hostility towards the practices and practitioners of *haṭhayoga* can be seen in the work of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the co-founder of the Theosophical Society (est. 1875) and one of the most outspoken and influential interpreters of Indian religion of her day. Blavatsky claimed in 1881 that “neither modern Europe nor America had so much heard [of yoga] until the Theosophists began to speak and write.”⁶ While certainly hyperbolic, the claim is not altogether without reason. Expressions of disdain for *haṭhayoga* are frequent and striking in Blavatsky’s work, as well as in the writings of her disciples. Alongside Vivekananda, the Theosophical Society helped to create the impression that *haṭhayoga* (along with *āsana* itself) was false, dangerous, and backwards. It would have no part in the new versions of yoga that Blavatsky and her organization would be so effective in promoting.

Similar attitudes are even evident in the first translations of *haṭhayoga* texts, such as those of Srisa Chandra Vasu. Vasu’s were among the first and most popular editions of “classical” *haṭhayoga* available to a wide, English-speaking audience.⁷ Vasu was an energetic contributor to the “Sacred Books of the Hindus” series, which was edited by his brother, (Major) Baman Das Basu. In the spirit of the Brahma Samaj, and of Vivekananda himself, this series sought to promote a more liberal and broad interpretation of the Hindu scriptures which would be suited to modern, educated society in India. Vasu’s works include such titles as *A Catechism of Hindu Dharma* of 1899 and *Daily Practice of the Hindus* of 1904, both syncretic visions of a unified Hinduism in theory and in practice. Not surprisingly, his translations of *haṭhayoga* texts bear many of the same judgments that are to be seen in the works of Vivekananda, Blavatsky, and others. In Vasu’s view *haṭhayoga* practitioners are characterized by “bigotry and ignorance” and readers are warned to beware of “the danger of degenerating into haṭha Yoga.”

In sum, there was little room in the new formulations of Hindu yoga for the *āsana* practices of *haṭhayoga*. It would take several more decades before posture practice would begin to be accepted into the fold of the new Hindu yoga.⁸

⁵ See Pinch (2006).

⁶ Blavatsky (1982, 104).

⁷ See Vasu (1895) and (1915).

⁸ Vasu (1915, 2 and 42).

The Physical Culture Revival

To a significant degree, popular posture-based yoga came into being as a result of interactions between the textual tradition of *hathayoga*, the neo-Hindu yoga renaissance, and the international physical movement. It is a striking coincidence that the staging of the first modern Olympics (in Athens in 1896) coincided with the publication of Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga*, and that the first ever modern bodybuilding display took place on 1 August 1893, the very day that Vivekananda himself arrived on Western soil.⁹ Transnational anglophone yoga began to gain popularity at the same time as an unprecedented, worldwide fervor for physical culture. Their encounter would eventually yield some of the most characteristic systems of postural yoga today.

The nineteenth century saw the rise and spread of a number of new gymnastics systems, most influential of which was perhaps the Swedish gymnastics of Pier Heinrich Ling (1776–1839).¹⁰ Systems based on Ling's work were commonly part of a project of nationalistic “man making”: That is to say, building better bodies for use in the service of homeland. Physical culture was imbued with a clear ideological discourse, which valued manliness, morality, fair play and faith in God, and their embodiment in the world. In England, this cluster of ideology and somatic practice was developed and nurtured in public schools, becoming known as “muscular Christianity.” The new athleticism was not confined to schools, however, but spread far and wide through the agency of charitable missionary agencies like the Salvation Army and the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), and via the armed forces abroad.

Ling gymnastics was developed as a system of therapeutic movement (also being known, in fact, as “movement cure”). In a further layering of transnational exchange, it seems that Ling himself had taken inspiration from Chinese gymnastics. His, and other methods of free-standing, holistic exercise, emphasized care of the whole person, in a way that prefigured the “mind body spirit” emphasis of the YMCA, and of many branches of transnational yoga. Through the anglicized Indian schooling system, Ling gymnastics became extremely widespread in India, where it quickly prevailed over the previously predominant Maclaren gymnastics, which required costly apparatus and installation.

This paradigm of a health and hygiene regime for body and mind based on posture and “free” movement was to be formative in the emergent Indian physical culture movement, and would eventually shape both the practice and the conceptual framework of the new Hatha Yoga. For example, Vasu, in his 1895 translation of the *Gheraṇḍasamhitā* asserts that the various postures to be found in the book are “gymnastics exercises, good for general health, and peace of mind.”¹¹ While this may well be true, it also indicates the prevalence of a modern discourse of

⁹ Dutton (1995, 9).

¹⁰ See Dixon and McIntosh (1957) and Leonard (1947).

¹¹ Vasu (1895, xxv).

gymnastics over and against the context of earlier *hathayoga* and the unaccustomed paradigms it represented (such as the raising of *kunḍalini*). Such comparisons of *hathayoga* and Swedish gymnastics were extremely common. Their use value was to provide a convenient and intelligible explanation of the function and form of *āsana*, and to some extent circumvented the need to engage with the rather more abstruse *hathayoga* theory. As we shall see, this association was solidified and greatly elaborated in the 1920s and 1930s by the pioneers of modern Hatha Yoga Shri Yogendra and Swami Kuvalayananda.

Bodybuilding

The term “bodybuilding” was coined in 1881 by the YMCA physical culturist Robert J. Roberts. But it is Eugen Sandow (1867–1925), the international star of physical culturism, who takes credit for initiating a worldwide revolution in bodybuilding, through his many publications, correspondence courses, and lecture tours. By the time of his trip to Asia in 1905, Sandow was already a legend in India.¹² Indeed, many physical culture experimentalists of the next generation remember Sandow’s visit to India as a defining moment in their career, and stories about Indians challenging Sandow to trials of strength abound. Generally, in these narratives, Sandow declines the challenge because he recognizes—it is implied—the superior strength of the opponent. It is easy to see the importance of such stories in building the image of the Indian titan. Sandow’s system was certainly influential in shaping the indigenous exercise revival from which modern postural yoga would emerge. Indeed, Joseph Alter has provocatively claimed that it was Sandow, and not Vivekananda or Shri Aurobindo, who exerted the greatest influence on popular modern yoga.¹³ In the hands of many, systems like Sandow’s (and also that of the American Bernarr Macfadden, 1868–1955) were reshaped into systems that combined Western and “indigenous” modes of exercise in order to build better bodies. One of the names that was given to this kind of project was, in fact, “yoga” (although in this context the term did not yet necessarily imply the practice of *āsana* but a range of physical culture exercises including lifting weights).¹⁴ New Indian heroes of physical culture emerged, such as the international wrestler Ahmad Bux, the famous Gama the Great, and (Prof.) K. Ramamurthy, who claimed to be able to deadlift three times more weight than Sandow himself, and whose blends of yoga and modern bodybuilding were important forerunners of the 1920s postural revival.¹⁵

¹² See Budd (1997, 85).

¹³ Alter (2004, 28).

¹⁴ Singleton (2010, 95–111).

¹⁵ See Alter (2000).

Young Men's Christian Association

No organization had a greater influence on the shape of physical culture in India in this period than the YMCA. Indeed, it was in the creation of hybridized, but distinctly Indian form of physical education that the “Y” contributed most significantly “to the making of modern India.”¹⁶ Their physical culture programs were designed to bring about moral and spiritual reform through proper use of the body, in much the same way as “muscular Christianity” was. These programs aimed at the even development of the threefold nature of man—mind, body, spirit—as symbolized by the famous inverted red triangle logo devised by YMCA thinker Luther Halsey Gulick. As such they were of a piece with the “holistic” vision of many systems of early European gymnastics. Within India, the YMCA encouraged the development of programs which combined Indian and Western physical culture. It was Harry Crowe Buck (1884–1943) who first incorporated the practice of *āsana* into the YMCA programs in the early 1920s,¹⁷ but the YMCA’s nurturing of the spirit of cross-cultural fusion in physical exercise no doubt facilitated the experimentalism of early *āsana* pioneers before this time, and outside the formal confines of the organization itself.¹⁸ The YMCA not only altered the cultural status of physical education in India (which had been extremely low before), but also shaped the ontological function of bodily exercise. Partially as a result of this, modern postural yoga came to be perceived as a system for the holistic development of the individual in “mind, body and spirit,” arguably a significant departure from the aspirations of traditional Hindu renouncer yogis.¹⁹

Degeneracy Narratives and Nationalist Physical Culture

From the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a growing awareness in India of the possibilities that physical culture held to raise the nation out of the “degeneracy” in which it was perceived to have sunk, and to lead them towards autonomous rule. This sense of degeneracy was in large part the result of stereotypes of the “effete Indian” promulgated by the colonial powers in contrast to the idealized, European “muscular Christian.”²⁰ For example, Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the international scout movement, considered the task of colonial education in India as being “that great work of developing the bodies, the character and the souls of an otherwise feeble people.”²¹ Physical education programs, mainly based on

¹⁶ David (1992, 17).

¹⁷ Johnson (1979, 177).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hausner (2007).

²⁰ Rosselli (1980).

²¹ Sen (2004, 94).

Ling and Maclaren, were widespread in India. However, one of the outcomes of the colonial man-making project was the realization that the techniques and methods learned by Indians could be turned against their rulers.²² The degeneracy myth itself became a powerful goad for Indians to build their bodies in the service of independence. While the new Indian physical culture movement retained a permeability to Western techniques (based on a deep appreciation for the benefits that modern exercise technology could bring them) it was often directed towards the overthrow of colonial authority.

Although the move towards independence is perhaps best remembered today within the framework of Gandhian non-violent resistance, the freedom struggle also involved a substantial element of “acts and threats of violence by revolutionary groups,” as Lise McKean has pointed out.²³ Reworking and modernizing the image of the heroic *saṃnyāsin* (renunciant holy man) struggling to oust the foreign oppressor, authors like Bankimchandra Chatterjee did much to popularize a new movement of militant physical culturism, the breeding grounds of which were the new *akhāra*-gymnasia. His novel *Ānandamath*, published in the early 1880s, was often interpreted as the assertion of a new religio-nationalist heroic identity for (Hindu) Indians, and was a key factor in the creation of a belligerent modern nationalist consciousness²⁴. Key cultural figures like Sarala Debi (1872–1945), and Vivekananda disciple Sister Nivedita (née Margaret Elizabeth Noble, 1867–1911) drew on this spirit, as did Aurobindo Ghosh, the radical extremist and future modern yoga guru, who was himself inspired to translate Bankimchandra’s novel in 1909. This physiological nationalism often referenced the mythos of the “fighting yogin” of yore, and the exercise regimes that were propagated were often referred to as “yoga.” Clandestine fighters, like Sri Raghavendra Rao (pen name “Tiruka”) traveled around the country instructing potential revolutionaries in “yoga techniques”: “Outwardly, it was the teaching of yogasana, suryanamaskara, pranayama and dhyana,” he wrote, “[but] at its core it was much more: preparation in physical fitness and personal combat methods . . . Thus ‘yoga training’ and physical culture became household words.”²⁵ Tiruka studied with some of the most illustrious yoga teachers of the day, including Swami Sivananda, the Raja of Aundh, and Paramahansa Yogananda, as well as with a range of physical culture luminaries like Rajaratna Manick Rao.²⁶ A famous wrestler, gymnast and militant revolutionary, Rao was a major figure in the semantic slide of the term “yoga” towards militant physical training (including combat training, fighting with weapons, and general fitness training with the

²² Rosselli (1980).

²³ McKean (1996, 73).

²⁴ Chatterjee (2005).

²⁵ Tiruka (1983, x).

²⁶ The Raja of Aundh pioneered the modern system of *sūryanamaskār*, which was at the time not generally considered a part of yoga. He is included here for the influence his system has had on modern posture practice.

expressed end of fighting). His most famous student, Swami Kuvalayananda (see next section), was quite simply the most influential proponent of postural yoga in India in the early twentieth century: It is not unreasonable to suggest that without him, *āsana* practice would not have gained the respectability and popularity that it did. Although it would be misleading to claim that modern posture practice uniquely arose from militant physical culture, this was certainly one of its definitive influences. Similar “militant” yoga regimes persist today, most notably in the mass *āsana* practices of groups like the Hindu nationalist RSS (Rasthriya Swayamsevak Sangh).²⁷

Swami Kuvalayananda

It is important to remember that during the period under investigation, postural yoga was still very much in a process of creative development. In other words, many of the forms of practice which today pass for “yoga” in most of the globalized world were still to be formulated, and the final shape of modern posture practice was still in play. Swami Kuvalayananda (also known as Jagannath G. Gune, 1883–1966) was perhaps the most significant figure in promoting a modern renaissance of postural yoga as therapeutics and physical culture. As well as his training in physical culture and combat with Manick Rao, Kuvalayananda studied yoga (mainly *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*) for 2 years with the Vaiṣṇava guru Paramahansa Shri Madhvadaṣji (1789–1921), who encouraged him to establish the teaching and research institute Kaivalyadhama, in Lonavla (near Mumbai) in 1921. Using the discourses and the paraphernalia of modern science, Kuvalayananda and his team set about presenting to the world the physiological benefits of *haṭhayoga* techniques, and legitimizing them in medical terms, and within a therapeutic paradigm. At the same time, he set out to “evolve a system of physical culture based on Yoga and to take steps to popularize that system.”²⁸ Kuvalayananda worked at governmental level to popularize these new, physical, culture-inspired yoga sequences across India. Often dynamic in nature and performed to a drill count, some of these sequences are preserved in his book *Yaugik Saṅgh Vyāyam* (“yogic group exercise”) of 1936. The mode of practice presented there may have been an influence on the aerobic postural sequences developed in the 1930s by T. Krishnamacharya in Mysore (of which more below). Kaivalyadhama’s in-house journal, *Yoga Mīmāṃsā*, first published in 1924, and Kuvalayananda’s book *Āsanas* of 1931, did much to spread his message of a health and fitness-oriented yoga practice through India and the world.

²⁷ See Alter (1994) and McDonald (1999).

²⁸ Gharote and Gharote (1999, 37).

Shri Yogendra

Like his contemporary Kuvalayananda, Shri Yogendra (also known as Manibhai Haribhai Desai, 1897–1989) took up yoga after many years of intensive study in modern physical culture. Also like Kuvalayananda, this reorientation occurred after meeting the guru Paramahansa Shri Madhvadasji. In his youth, Yogendra's passions were wrestling, gymnastics, and physical culture, and these were the forerunners to his work in yoga. Indeed, Yogendra's writings on yoga are greatly influenced by the exercises, and the rhetoric, of modern physical culture. He set up his Yoga Institute near Bombay in 1918, and the following year traveled to America, giving what may be the first ever *āsana* demonstrations on US soil in 1921.²⁹ On his return to India, Yogendra directed his energies to providing scientific corroboration for the health benefits of yoga, and to creating simplified, accessible *āsana* courses for the general public. Yogendra perhaps did more than anyone (barring Kuvalayananda) to develop the kind of health and fitness-oriented yoga regimens that dominate the transnational yoga scene today, and to bring yoga out of secrecy and obscurity into the public eye. Yogendra's book *Yoga Asanas Simplified* of 1928 is a manual of *āsana* which "represents the essentials of yoga physical education."³⁰ It consists, in large part of free-standing, dynamically performed exercises from Ling gymnastics and from Johann P. Müller's enormously influential "system" of callisthenics and personal hygiene.³¹ Although Yogendra dismisses Müller's system (along with the methods of Sandow, Delsarte, and MacFadden) as inferior fads, it is clear that he is deeply influenced by the techniques and discourses of international physical culture. His early publications, like *Yoga Asanas Simplified*, fed the growing appetite for information about *āsana* among health and fitness faddists of the time.

Iyer and Sundaram

Also important here is the work of the bodybuilder K. V. Iyer (1897–1980), who was the most high profile advocate of Indian physical culture at the time. He would often appear in international physical culture magazines, striking Grecian poses and showing off the "enormous development" of his body. Iyer's teaching and his popular correspondence courses were the practical expression of a "blending of the two Systems" of physical culture and yoga.³² His student, collaborator, and friend in this enterprise was Yogācarya Sundaram, who ran the Yogic School of Physical Culture, and the two men regularly conducted lecture/demonstration tours

²⁹ Rodrigues (1997, 96).

³⁰ Yogendra 1989 [1928], 62.

³¹ Müller (1905).

³² Iyer (1930, 43).

together around the country. Sundaram's *Yogic Physical Culture* of 1928 is one of the earliest and most successful photographic do-it-yourself manuals of Hatha Yoga reconceptualized as gymnastics, personal hygiene, and bodybuilding. Sundaram reasons that although yoga used to be an entirely spiritual discipline, sedentary modern men and women might "utilise it as a system of physical culture."³³ His and Iyer's synthesis of bodybuilding and yoga presented a path to religious wholeness through the aesthetic perfection of the body, just as Sandow had conceived of his system as a "religion." It also responded to the nationalist degeneracy narratives examined above: Through this synthesis, writes Sundaram, "the sons of India [might] obtain super-strength to make their Mother an equal sister among Nations!."³⁴

New Thought Yoga

Originally a breakaway faction of Mary Eddy Baker's Christian Science movement, New Thought was a popular, para-Protestant movement which preached the innate divinity of the self, and the power of positive thinking to actuate that divinity in the world, to the ends of greater personal health and wealth.³⁵ It is no exaggeration to say that elements of the New Thought ethos are to be found in a majority of popular anglophone yoga primers of the early twentieth century, and it seems to have been taken for granted, both by New Thought writers and popular yoga writers, that positive thinking, auto-suggestion and the this-worldly framework of New Thought were identical with the techniques and ends of yoga. Yoga books rubbed shoulders with New Thought books in the catalogues of popular esoteric publishers like L. N. Fowler and Co., and yoga manuals are often full of advertisements for New Thought titles. Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga* was itself imbued with New Thought metaphysics, and subsequent authors like O. Hashnu Hara, R. Dimsdale Stocker and Sensanath Devendra Ramayandas were instrumental in reinforcing the impression that New Thought was simply a modern day expression of Indian yoga.³⁶

The work of Yogi Ramacharaka is a particularly vivid example of this kind of intersection, and represents, in Carl Jackson's words, "the outer limits of New Thought's deep infatuation with India."³⁷ Ramacharaka was in all likelihood the pen name of the Chicago lawyer and New Thought luminary William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), who authored a steady avalanche of yoga manuals and New Thought self-help books between about 1903 and 1927. His book *Hatha*

³³ Sundaram 1989 [1928], 4.

³⁴ Ibid. 129. For more on Iyer and Sundaram, see Goldberg (forthcoming) and Singleton 2010, 122–129).

³⁵ See Jackson (1975).

³⁶ De Michelis (2004, 168).

³⁷ Jackson (1975, 537).

Yoga, or the Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being of 1904 is an early example of Hatha Yoga recast as Nature Cure and New Thought. While making clear that yoga postures are nothing but the circus tricks of fakirs, the book does recommend a range of gymnastic exercises combined with advice on personal hygiene, both set within the characteristic New Thought framework of autosuggestion and affirmation. It is a very clear example of the way yoga was being reformulated according to the tastes and needs of the day.

A number of unaffiliated Indian yogis operating on the West Coast of America in the early 1920s (as opposed to Westerners posing as Indians) emulate and expand the kind of New Thought-inspired physical culture that we see in Ramacharaka. They include figures like Yogi Gherwal, Yogi Wassan, Yogi Hari Rama, and Bhagwan S. Gyanee. Perhaps the best known “New Thought yogi” of the time, however, is Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952), who would later author the immensely influential *Autobiography of a Yogi*. In 1923 the *Boston Post* called Yogananda “the Coué of gymnastics” in reference to Emile Coué’s hugely popular doctrine of positive thought and mental healing.³⁸ Yogananda’s techniques of muscular isolation through will power were almost certainly borrowed from the work of the world-famous bodybuilder Maxick, and melded discourses of yoga with those of New Thought-inspired physical culture. Yogananda’s brother, Bishnu Charan Ghosh, himself a world-class bodybuilder, developed Maxick’s system of “muscle control” (authoring a book of the same name in 1930) and fused it with a physical culture-oriented Hatha Yoga, which he taught widely. Ghosh’s most famous student is Bikram Choudhury (b. 1946) whose 26 posture system, known as Bikram Yoga, is very popular in the United States, and continues the physical culture orientation of Ghosh’s yoga experiments.³⁹

Harmonial Gymnastics

One of the most important strands of yoga’s transnational development is the tradition of women’s gymnastics which grew up in Europe and America during the nineteenth century, and which I will refer to here as “harmonial gymnastics.”⁴⁰ These regimes, often developed by and for women, privileged the physical as the locus of access to the divine, in what was sometimes a self-conscious rejection of the Calvinist denigration of the body within Protestantism.⁴¹ These systems of stretching and “rhythmic breathing” in many cases prefigure the practice and theory of contemporary transnational Hatha Yoga. In many ways, the typical transnational

³⁸ Following Yogananda (1925, 44).

³⁹ More on Ghosh, Yogananda, and the New Thought yogis can be found in Singleton (2010, 129–141).

⁴⁰ With reference to Sydney Ahlstrom’s term “harmonial religion” Ahlstrom (1972).

⁴¹ See Fuller (2001).

Hatha Yoga class of today arguably owes more to these traditions of women's gymnastics than it does to the *hathayoga* systems handed down in the history of India.

The harmonial gymnastics tradition is exemplified in the work of the American Genevieve Stebbins (1857–c.1915), who had studied the theory of dramatic expression of François Delsarte (1811–1871) and reconfigured it into her own distinctive system. Her work, along with others, initiated a veritable Delsarte craze in the United States. Stebbins was a member of the Church of Light, “an order of practical occultism” with links to the influential esoteric group the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, and she brought these esoteric influences to bear on her system which also incorporated the gymnastics systems of Mackaye and Ling, as well as Indian influences.⁴² When, in *Raja Yoga*, Swami Vivekananda states that the postural practices of *hathayoga* can be found in “Delsarte and other teachers,” he is probably thinking of the harmonial gymnastics regimes popularized by Stebbins.⁴³ Her book *Dynamic Breathing and Harmonic Gymnastics* of 1892 is a combination of callisthenic movement, deep respiration exercises, relaxation, and creative mental imagery within a harmonial gymnastic framework. It is, in Stebbins' words, “a completely rounded system for the development of body, brain and soul; a system of training which shall bring this grand trinity of the human microcosm into one continuous, interacting unison.”⁴⁴ Stebbins' “American Delsartean training regimen” includes most of the elements that one would expect to find in a modern Hatha Yoga class, and was probably instrumental in paving the way for the popular conception of yoga as another means to “stretch and relax.”

Another influential figures in the merger of yoga and harmonial gymnastics is the Memphis-born, self-styled *yoginī* Cajzoran Ali (b. 1903). Ali's method, as set out in her *Divine Posture Influence Upon Endocrine Glands* of 1928, locates the key to the ultimate spiritual truth of yoga in the individual body, and draws deeply on the understandings of the body popularized by New Thought. Her course of posture training and “breath culture” is designed to bring one into harmony with the God who is “individualized within you,” and her “harmonial” yoga model is an important early precursor of New Age versions of (postural) yoga which emerged in the West from the 1970s onwards.⁴⁵ Similar experiments were going on at the same time in Britain, with the likes of Francis Archer and Mollie Bagot Stack, the founder of the most influential of women's gymnastics organizations in pre-WWII Britain, the Women's League of Health and Beauty. Stack had learned some yoga postures and relaxation techniques during a stay in India in 1912, and later incorporated them into her exercise regimes for modern British women (though never referred to as “yoga”).⁴⁶ Once again, however, we have a combined program of dynamic

⁴² On the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor see Godwin et al. (1995, ix).

⁴³ Vivekananda 2001 [1896], 20.

⁴⁴ Stebbins (1892, 57).

⁴⁵ Ali (1928), 15, see also De Michelis (2004), 184–186.

⁴⁶ Stack (1931).

stretches, rhythmic breathing, and relaxation within a “harmonial” framework which closely mirrors the creative modulations of many of today’s Hatha Yoga classes. One compelling explanation for the apparent disjunction between such classes and more traditional Indian procedures, then, is that the latter stems in large part from the modern traditions of quasi-mystic body conditioning and callisthenics devised for women during the early part of the twentieth century. The fact that “harmonial” forms of exercise were the accepted and dominant modes of practice for women in the West well prior to the yoga booms of the 1960s and the 1990s may also help to explain why contemporary Hatha Yoga classes are, demographically speaking, also dominated by women.

T. Krishnamacharya

The contribution to transnational postural yoga of T. Krishnamacharya (1888–1989) is second to none, mainly thanks to the propagation and development of his teachings by influential students like K. Pattabhi Jois, B. K. S. Iyengar (his brother-in-law), Indra Devi, and T. K. V. Desikachar (his son). Although Krishnamacharya’s teaching career spans seven decades of the twentieth century, it is the years spent in Mysore, from the early 1930s to the early 1950s, which have arguably had the greatest impact on the formation of radically physicalized forms of yoga around the globe. It was during this period that Krishnamacharya elaborated a system of practice based on aerobic sequences of *āsanas* joined by dynamic and repetitive linking sequences. The fashionable Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga method, as taught by K. Pattabhi Jois, is a direct development of this phase of Krishnamacharya’s teaching, and has inspired many of the spin-off forms (like Power Yoga, Vinyasa Flow Yoga, and Power Vinyasa Yoga) which have burgeoned, particularly in America, since the early 1990s. According to the orthodox account of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga’s origins, the system derived from an ancient text entitled *Yoga Kurunta*, which was transmitted to Krishnamacharya by his Tibet based guru, Rammohan Brahmachari, and subsequently discovered and transcribed by Krishnamacharya.⁴⁷ While this story may be true, it is also clear that the text functioned as a creative “teaching tool” throughout Krishnamacharya’s life, and that its content changed according to the pedagogical needs of the master.⁴⁸ Given this, and the fact that Krishnamacharya only taught these sequences during this period in Mysore, it is worth investigating the possible that in developing such an intensely aerobic *āsana* method system, he was (like other modern yogis we have considered) responding to the pervasive physical culture zeitgeist of the time.

In 1933 Krishnamacharya began teaching *yogāsana* at the Jaganmohan Palace in Mysore, under the patronage of the Maharaja of Mysore, Krishnaraja Wodiyar IV

⁴⁷ See introduction by Eddie Sterne in Jois (1999, xv–xvi).

⁴⁸ For more details, see Chap. 9 of Singleton (2010).

(1884–1940). The Maharaja was an avid supporter of physical culture education, energetically promoting the cause of the YMCA in Mysore state, and appointing a full-time organizer of physical education there from 1919, (Prof.) M. V. Krishna Rao. Thanks to Rao, the “indigenous system” of physical education was greatly revived in the state.⁴⁹ The Maharaja was also the patron of Iyer (see above), and of Iyer’s student and teacher in Mysore, H. Anant Rao, who ran a branch of Iyer’s gymnasium in the same wing of the Jaganmohan Palace where Krishnamacharya taught yoga. Krishnamacharya’s remit was to teach yoga to the boys of the extended maternal royal family, the Arasus. It is noteworthy that, in the palace records, Krishnamacharya’s yoga classes are consistently categorized as “physical culture” or “exercise,” and are often mentioned alongside non-yogic physical activities. For example, in the palace report of 1938/1939 we read, “Sports, games and scouting continued to receive considerable attention. The boys entered the Dasara and other athletic Tournaments. A batch of students attended the Palace Yogasala.”⁵⁰ These reports strongly suggest that the *yogaśālā* was principally conceived as a forum for developing the physical capacities of the young royals, with Krishnamacharya’s classes seemingly functioning as an optional counterpart to physical education lessons. Significantly, a comparable version of dynamic *āsana* practice is still taught to children at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in Chennai, where the teaching is known as *śruṣṭīkrama* (literally: disciplined steps).⁵¹

It is important to note that this conceptual melding of *āsana* and physical culture was not confined to the royal classrooms of the Jaganmohan Palace, but was widespread in the schooling system across Mysore State and, indeed, across India, largely thanks to Swami Kuvalayananda (more on this below).⁵² While Krishnamacharya no doubt added distinctive personal innovations, it would appear that the modality of practice is very much in keeping with standard pedagogical gymnastics of 1930s India. The relatively rapid progression of postures, together with a standardized drill count and the dynamic linking sequences, are all suggestive of the kind of practices that would have been familiar to many school students across India. On the basis of the history of yoga’s merger with physical culture examined above, then, it is easy to see why such practices would have been considered suitable by Krishnamacharya for this particular time and place. Indeed, a similarly dynamic form of group *āsana* practice for youth had already been developed by Swami Kuvalayananda, whose work at governmental level in India had helped his innovations spread far and wide. It is possible that Krishnamacharya (who made a research trip to Kuvalayananda’s institute in 1933) drew on these modes of practice in the development of his powerful, aerobic Hatha Yoga synthesis.

⁴⁹ Kamath (1933, 27).

⁵⁰ Following the *Jaganmohan Palace Administrative Records*, here in reference to the year 1938/1939, 9.

⁵¹ Ramaswami (2000, 15).

⁵² See Singleton (2010, 203–206).

It is also possible that such modes of practice drew, in turn, from the influence of Scandinavian gymnastics in general, and in particular from the Primitive Gymnastics of the Dane Niels Bukh (1880–1950), whose system was second only in popularity in India to Ling.⁵³ Bukh’s system offers a complete course of stretching and strengthening exercises, graded (like the Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga sequence) into six progressive sequences. At least 28 of the exercises in the first English edition of Bukh’s manual are strikingly similar (if not identical) to yoga postures occurring in Pattabhi Jois’ Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga sequence or in Iyengar’s *Light on Yoga*.⁵⁴ Moreover, the dynamic, “jumping” format of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga is also present in Bukh’s system, alongside the deep, “rough,” *ujjayi* type breathing that also characterizes other forms of Asthanga Yoga. I point these similarities out not to suggest that Krishnamacharya borrowed from Bukh, but to indicate how closely his system matches one of the most prominent modalities of gymnastic culture in India at the time.

Conclusion

It would be easy to conclude from evidence of the kind presented above that postural yoga was “invented” or “created” during a relatively short period of time in the early twentieth century. It seems to me, however, that this would be incorrect, and perhaps a function of a kind of categorical thinking that inhibits more nuanced historical investigation. Within the transnational postural yoga community, in particular, there is a marked tendency, when faced with this kind of information, to want to know which postures are old and which are new, and to overlook larger contextual questions. One might speculate that this is in part a residual habit of mind left over from the controversy among yoga practitioners created by Norman Sjoman’s *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace* (first published in 1996) which claimed a recent derivation for many of the individual postures in the *āsana* lexicon of Krishnamacharya and his students (in particular the standing poses). Sjoman’s work is certainly far more nuanced than this trend gives it credit for. Above and beyond the perils of “origins speak” (especially when it comes to the ways that humans have used their bodies through time), this way of proceeding draws attention away from a far more interesting and rich quarter of inquiry: How cultural, religious, and philosophical meanings become attached to physical practice, whether it be yoga or gymnastics, and how these accreted meanings inevitably change the way people approach these disciplines. Such a focus tells one far more about the cultural meaning of a particular posture (or set of postures) than does the attempt to hang a date on it.

⁵³ Gray (1930, 7).

⁵⁴ Bukh (1925) and Iyengar (1966).

Now, it is true that “gymnastic” systems from the early twentieth century did in fact routinely utilize positions that would today be instantly recognizable as yoga *āsana*. Physical culture journals are full of representations of these postural shapes. Some of these postures are obviously new additions to the postural canon of yoga, and some are obviously not. But this kind of itemization stops short of saying anything about the broader contexts within which these postures were employed, and the transnational exchanges which informed their meaning. To take one instance: A shape very much like shoulder stand (*sarvāṅgāsana*) was the emblem of the British Women’s League of Health and Beauty during the 1920s. It was not associated with yoga, but rather had its own characteristic set of meanings. It helped one to stay young, trimmed fat around the waist and so on. A similarly shaped posture is also to be found in medieval Indian *haṭhayoga*, where it is called “a secret in all the tantras.”⁵⁵ What is important here is not whether the Women’s League posture is old, nor even whether it is derived from pre-modern Indian yoga per se, but the accretions of cultural meaning which make it distinct from the posture in the Indian *haṭhayoga* systems. In probability, the “modern,” cosmetically-oriented posture was inspired by Indian yoga traditions. But it is no longer the same posture as that outlined in *haṭhayoga* texts.

The same holds true for modern, anglophone yogas more generally: By virtue of their position in a dynamic, transnational nexus of knowledge and practice, in which divergent discourses compete for ascendancy, it makes little sense to speak of a single, unitary yoga. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, to do so would be to enact a kind of “genesis amnesia” which views history as a *fait accompli*, or as pure synchrony.⁵⁶ When Vivekananda declared, in *Raja Yoga*, that “From the time it was discovered, more than 4,000 years ago Yoga was perfectly delineated, formulated and preached in India,” he is invoking those very “mysteries of pre-established harmony” and “prodigies of conscious orchestration” that Bourdieu sees as generative of the appearance of objective meaning.⁵⁷ However, transnational yoga is anything but objective. It grew, perhaps like all tradition, out of a dialectical exchange between precedent and innovation according to the needs of the day, and it continues to mutate and develop. What is important about yoga in the modern age, however, is the unparalleled pace of change, and the quite bewildering range of meanings that have become attached to it since at least the nineteenth century, as yoga began to expand and adapt beyond the borders of India.

⁵⁵ *Gheraṅḍasamhitā* 3.32, translation mine.

⁵⁶ Bourdieu (1977, 79).

⁵⁷ Vivekananda 2001 [1896], 134.

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