**Yoga**

**Summary**

The term yoga refers to a heterogeneous matrix of philosophies and practices that originated in India and developed into a school of thought sometime between 150 and 500 C.E. Reinterpreted and redacted in multiple religious traditions over the course of its 2000-year history, yoga’s dynamic and discontinuous textual and performance traditions are far from monolithic. Modern yoga – a predominantly corporeal practice of postures and breathing techniques – developed in India in the 1920s and is not considered to be a direct successor of yoga’s classical or medieval traditions. Rather, modern yoga’s physical reinventions are emblematic of the accretions and innovations that attended India’s colonial and postcolonial relationship to transnational modernities. A reconfiguration of existing indigenous traditions vis-à-vis transnational influences, modern yoga is the embodiment of hybrid discourses including but not limited to: the international physical culture movement; the growth of scientific and medicalized discourses of the body; secularism; the doctrine of progress; esotericism both in the East and West; and transnational mobility and migrations of diaspora. In this way, modern yoga’s encounter with multiple modernities reshaped its theoretical and corporeal dispositions, forging a performance practice based on the individual accumulation of physical techniques for psychosomatic health, fitness, and personal development.

**The History of Modern Yoga**

The word yoga (Sanskrit ‘to yoke‘, ‘to join’), broadly speaking, refers to a network of disparate though related philosophies, theoretical precepts, and performance practices that originated in India and crystallized into a school of thought sometime between 150 and 500 C.E.[[1]](#endnote-1) At once capable of referring to philosophical frameworks, methods, and aims of practice, the semantic range and function of the word yoga[[2]](#endnote-2) is marked by a similar plasticity and polyvalence that characterizes its syncretic textual history and performance practices. Reinterpreted and redacted in several different countries and through several religious traditions in greater Asia (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Islam), the philosophies and practices of classical yoga are characterized by a common soteriology: the release of the human self from suffering existence through knowledge of ultimate reality.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Modern yoga, as a discrete field of study, emerged in the 1990s. Although the typology remains problematic, scholars nonetheless generally agree that the term modern yoga, as a provisional category,[[4]](#endnote-4) is useful in demarcating a predominantly postural form of yoga that gained ascendancy between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries from preceding forms of classical or medieval yoga. A transnational form of medicalized physical culture, modern yoga is characterized by a pronounced emphasis on the performance of āsana (postures) and breathing techniques.

Though modern yoga is commonly thought to derive either from a lineage of ancient yoga treatises such as the *Yoga Sūtra* (attributed to Patañjali ca. second to third century C.E.), or texts associated with the medieval Haṭha yoga tradition (‘yoga of forceful exertion’[[5]](#endnote-5) of the tenth and eleventh centuries C.E.), very few of modern yoga’s physical practices date from before the twelfth century.[[6]](#endnote-6) Rather, modern yoga’s postural foundations are rooted in nineteenth century redactions of classical yoga traditions, as well as a miscellany of esoteric preoccupations and physical practices culled from both east and west between 1860 and 1930. Nonetheless, Haṭha yoga’s medieval frameworks have bestowed modern yoga with the corporeal mechanics of prāṇāyāma (breath control techniques), āsana (fixed postures), bandha (locks) and mudrā (seals)[[7]](#endnote-7).

The birth of modern postural yoga is associated with the work of several key individuals: South Indian Tirumalai Krishnamacarya (1888-1989), his disciples, and contemporaneous practitioners Sri Yogendra (1897-1989) and Swami Kuvalayananda (1883-1966). Mobilized in India in the 1920s by T. Krishnamacarya and his contemporaries, the development of modern yoga’s postural forms was an innovative reinvention that reconfigured indigenous physical traditions vis-á-vis modernity and its attending influences: i.e. the international physical culture movement; the growth of scientific and medicalized discourses of the body; secularism; the doctrine of progress; esotericism in both the East and West; and an increase in transnational mobility and migrations of diaspora.[[8]](#endnote-8) Vivekananda's influential publication, *Rāja Yoga* (1896), is emblematic of many of these historical shifts and remains a seminal contribution to modern yoga’s secular and scientific orientation; its psychosomatic formulations of yoga were reiterated through a number of schools that actively propagated his teachings in Europe and North America in the twentieth century.[[9]](#endnote-9)

In the 1960s and 70s, modern yoga amassed and consolidated its transnational following, further syncretizing the preoccupations of wider influences including transpersonal psychology, the counter-culture hippie movement of the 1960s and the New Age movement of the 1970s. By the second half of twentieth century, postural practices had proliferated exponentially, and the yoga boom of the 1990s demarcated an era of commodification[[10]](#endnote-10) in which studio-run yoga functioned both as a fitness regime and as a healing modality intended for psychosomatic integration and personal development. By the latter part of the twentieth century, modern yoga (associated primarily with urban, Anglophone milieus) was being practiced in cities through North, South, and Central America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

In expressing the tensions of its encounters with colonial and postcolonial modernities, modern yoga embodies the colossal dexterity of the many traditions it claims to succeed. Flourishing despite disparate and often incongruous philosophical discourses, modern yoga manifests remarkable adaptability and bears the hallmarks of modernity’s legacies: pragmatism and progress, materialism and science, esotericism and vibrant experimentation. In this way, modern yoga’s ideals and practices have left their mark on countless visual and performing artists including Wassily Kandinsky, Rudolf von Laban, Paul Klee, Nicholas Roerich, Rudolf Steiner, Piet Mondrian, Constantin Stanislavsky, Ruth St. Denis, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Genevieve Stebbins, and Chandralekha.

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**References and Further Reading**

Alter, Joseph S. *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

(Investigating modern yoga’s emphasis on health and therapeutics, the book offers an analysis of the development of historical synergies between scientific and religious discourses in India. A chapter entitled, ‘Swami Kuvalayanada: Science, Yoga and Global Modernity’ is a valuable source of information regarding key personalities associated with the development of modern yoga.)

De Michelis, E. *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*. London: Continuum, 2005.

(Tracing the miscegenation of Patanjala yoga, Neo-Vedanta, and esotericism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the book offers a history of modern postural yoga vis-á-vis the trajectory of modern Hindu thought. Densely argued sections require a basic grasp of the classical yoga’s philosophical underpinnings.)

Singleton, M. *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

(A cultural history of modern postural yoga, the book considers the transnational physical practices that exerted an influence on modern yoga’s physical articulations in Mysore between 1900 and 1935. Influences considered include Ling gymnastics, international bodybuilding/wrestling practices and varied forms of stretching/strength regimens that accompanied the international physical culture movement.)

Sjoman, N E. *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1999.

(The book examines the relationship between modern forms of postural yoga and the yoga asanas [postures] illustrated in a nineteenth century archival manuscript (Srītattvanidhi) located in the Mysore Palace. Includes detailed descriptions of the varied physical practices associated with training at the Mysore Palace, an enumeration of archival yoga postures and a useful set of appendices.)

White, D G. ed. *Yoga in Practice.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

(With solid contributions from twenty-six yoga scholars and sources that span four major religious traditions [Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism], *Yoga in Practice* is a carefully assembled anthology of primary texts on yoga. Built out of the vitality of yoga's fractured, hybrid history, the book gathers a diverse collection of texts from India, greater Asia, and the West into an elegant whole. The book features an introductory essay by editor David G. White that would benefit any new reader with a broad historical overview of yoga’s varied textual traditions.)

Notes

1. Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. David G. White, ed. *Yoga in Practice.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*. (London: Continuum, 2005), 7. De Michelis, while noting the shortcomings of the category ‘modern yoga’, nevertheless articulates its provisional necessity in describing the basic differences between postural forms of contemporary yoga and preceding forms of classical/medieval theory and praxis. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. David G. White, ed. Op. Cit., 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Sjoman, Singleton, Alter, De Michelis, Whicher. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. De Michelis, Op. Cit., 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Mark Singleton*, Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)