CHAPTER 3

Shri Yogendra: Magic, Modernity, and the Burden of the Middle-Class Yogi

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There are a number of ways modernity produces the conditions under which the status of a guru takes shape as well as ways gurus as public figures reflect paradoxes and contradictions in terms of the development and communication of knowledge. In other words, as a discrete, specialized category of teacher, a guru is defined by modern ways of knowing in relation to a spectrum of discipline-specific designations for expertise, as well as by changing ideas about the limits and nature of knowledge. Although the idea of a guru invokes a sense of deep, profound, and inspired knowledge, the force of this invocation is a function of modernity's infatuation with the authenticity of the past and with ancient wisdom rather than an articulation of archaic history unto itself. In other words, gurus represent modernity, even though they do so indirectly by embodying what modernity seems to have left behind or lost touch with. Gurus are, to various degrees, self-consciously out of sync with the present, both in terms of time and place. This produces their particular authority as well as a range of paradoxes and contradictions.

This chapter is concerned with the paradoxes and contradictions embodied by one of the key figures in the early twentieth-century yoga renaissance, Manibhai Haribhai Desai, who as a guru adopted the title Shri Yogendra—after briefly calling himself Swami Yogananda—to define and teach his brand of yoga physical education in Bombay (now Mumbai) and New York. In ways that will become clear, Desai's role in the yoga renaissance is defined by the interplay of various kinds of knowledge and by the claims that he made in relation to these knowledges rather than by taking on disciples and thereby falling into the "guru slot." Throughout his career Desai remained very independent

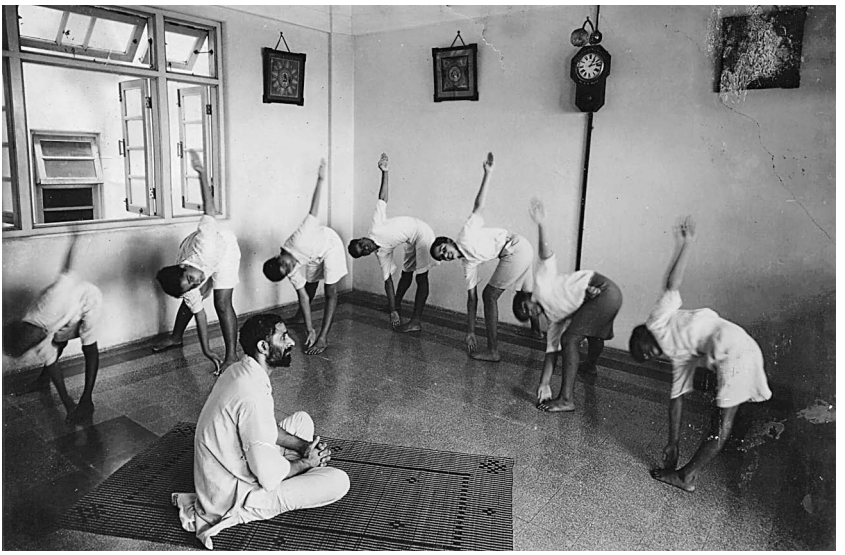

Figure 3.1:
Yogendra instructing schoolboys in rhythmic exercise. (With permission of the Yoga Institute, Santa Cruz.)

and published extensively, although almost exclusively under the banner of his own institute (Yogendra & Yogendra, 1939; Yogendra, 1934; 1940; 1966; 1975; 1978; 1997). In 1918 he established the Yoga Institute at the beachfront home of Dadabhai Naoroji. Now located in Santa Cruz, a neighborhood of Mumbai, it is the oldest organized yoga center in the world, a claim that has taken on considerable importance in light of yoga's place both in the contemporary moment of rapid globalization as well as in relation to yoga's claim to an ancient history of ideas and practices.

Thus, broadly speaking, two bodies of literature have a bearing on Yogendra's position and on understanding the development of his career in relation to modernity. One body of literature is concerned with the historical and philosophical identity of yogis, *saṃnyāsins,* and gurus as defined in the classical and medieval literature (see Eliade, 1958; Lorenzen, 1972; 2004; Olivelle, 1992; 1993, 2007; Fort 1996, 1998; White, 1996; 2003; 2009). A second body of literature focuses on the dynamics of Orientalism and the warp and woof of Hindu spirituality and mysticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Singleton & Byrne, 2008; Singleton, 2010; Urban, 2003; 2006; Shrinivas 2008; Syman, 2010; Williamson, 2010). Although intimately connected and recursively inspired, these literatures have quite different orientations and intellectual textures, the former being concerned with a delineated understanding of historical texts and the history of ideas, and the latter with a history of the present based on textual analysis. With respect to Yogendra's position in relation to the history of ideas, David Gordon White's 1989 article

"Why Gurus Are Heavy" is a directly relevant example of the former. An examination of White's argument provides critical insight on Desai's struggle with magic, alchemy, and sexuality in relation to his effort to sanitize, secularize, and rationalize the practice of yoga. With regard to the way the idea of a guru fits into contemporary practices—and articulates a dimension of Yogendra's persona—Kirin Narayan's (1993) *Refraction of the Field at Home: American Representations of Hindu Holy Men in the 19th and 20th Centuries* sheds light on how and why the figure of the guru is constructed and deconstructed in the context of modernity. Her analysis provides a frame of reference for understanding where Yogendra fits into the transnational refractions of globalized *gurudom*.

Desai's life is characterized by a number of transformations along lines that define the trajectory of modernity and colonial globalization in general. Desai was born in a village in southeastern Gujarat but lived in the cosmopolitan environment of Bombay. As a young man he traveled to the United States, spending three years in New York before returning to his village home. As the son of a Brahmin farmer and village schoolteacher, his friendship with Homi Dadina, son-in-law of Dadbhai Naoroji, and the philosopher Surendranath Das Gupta, as well as his correspondence with Rabindranath Tagore, characterizes the growth, plasticity, and a particular intellectual orientation of the middle class in early twentieth-century India (Bayly, 1983; Joshi, 2010; Kumar, 1989). After starting his education in the Gandevi village school, Desai's father enrolled him in Amalsad English School and subsequently, with ambitions for the Indian Civil Service, in St. Xavier's College, Bombay. Although Desai never completed his studies, his education brought him into contact with a number of wealthy and well-connected individuals who provided the means by which he was able to become a teacher of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* and one of the first individuals to modernize and popularize yoga. Building on interest generated by Vivekananda (Radice, 1998) and Aurobindo (Heehs, 2008; Minor, 1999), he worked to define yoga in terms of science, medicine, and physical fitness as well as in relation to questions of religion, education, and psychology. Perhaps better than any other figure in the yoga renaissance, he embodied an idealized and ultimately paradoxical synthesis of metaphysical fitness and physical philosophy.

Even though Yogendra's primary contribution to yoga was the development of rhythmic exercise regimens and the medical application of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, it is particularly noteworthy that he dramatically embodied the tension between yoga as philosophy and yoga as physical fitness, as these aspects of yoga in practice came to be disarticulated in the context of modernity (see also Kuvalayananda & Vinekar, 1963; Kuvalayananda, 1963; 1972). To some extent this may also account for the fact that although he was very successful in establishing the Yoga Institute, he never achieved the kind of public recognition accorded to individuals like B. K. S. Iyengar (Kadetsky,

2004), Swami Sivananda (Strauss, 2005), K. Pattabhi Jois (Donahaye, 2010), and Swami Yogananda (1946), who more definitively embodied clearly defined roles either as spiritual gurus or as masters of "traditional" *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*. Yogendra's eclectic, idiosyncratic, and holistic philosophy of evolutionary self-development based on rhythmic exercises proved to be a message with a specific gravity that prevented it from easily rising with the tide of popular globalization.

Desai's encounter with Paramahamsa Madhavadasji in 1916 changed the course of his life. While a student as St. Xavier's College in Bombay, Desai—a self-proclaimed skeptic—went with his roommate to hear a discourse given by Madhavadasji. Very soon he became a follower, leaving Bombay for his guru's ashram in Malsar, on the banks of the Narmada twenty-five miles upriver from Bharuch. Needless to say this abrupt change was not easy, and, with Madhavadasji's support, Desai, an only child, had to persuade his skeptical, worldly father to let him go. At Malsar Desai apprenticed with Madhavadasji, working out a relationship whereby he self-consciously did not become an initiated disciple (*saṃnyāsin*) but served as something like a junior chief of staff, translator, and scribe.

Madhavadasji is in interesting figure. Although details of his early life are vague and probably impossible to pin down (it is said he died at the age of 123 in 1921), he was born into a Bengali Brahmin household in the village of Shantipur, northeast of Calcutta in the Nadia district probably sometime in the late 1830s. He was educated at a missionary school in Calcutta, most likely Scottish Church College in the 1850s, and was trained in law. After practicing law in Bengal, he renounced the world sometime in the 1870s and became an itinerant *saṃnyāsin* teaching a devotional form of mysticism based on the *bhakti* tradition of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu as well as *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* for the treatment of health problems. According to accounts provided by his disciples, Madhavadasji lived and traveled in the Himalayas for many years and became an enlightened master of *haṭhayoga* based on this experience. Exactly how Madhavadasji reconciled the principles of Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇavism (Mukherjee, 1986; Chakravarti 1996; Broo, 2003; see also Lorenzen, 1995; 1996) with the tantric Śaiva alchemy of *haṭhayoga* (see Briggs, 1938; White, 1996) is unclear, but what he did certainly reflects an innovative synthesis that has become very common in contemporary practice.

Whatever the precise lineage of ideas and practices manifest in Madhavadasji's teaching, there is no question that he embodied the persona of a mystic—full beard; long, matted hair; black robes—and is commonly depicted seated on a tiger skin (although close examination shows it to be a leopard) with a begging bowl, *kamaṇḍalu* (water pot), and *paduka* (sandals) by his side (Azmi, 1994). By Desai's own account it is clear that Madhavadasji's focus was on absolute faith in God as realized through the constant chanting of his name: *Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Rām*. As he wrote to Desai in an early letter, providing

moral and spiritual support for his conflicted follower, ". . . Make your mind strong and adamant and abandon your father. What is going on is for the good. Purify yourself, this is a purificatory process. Remember, if you give up firmness of mind it will lead to catastrophe! Be quiet. . . . start the medicine by chanting the name of God (Shri Hari). Do not let go even for a moment without remembering Him" (Rodrigues, 1982: 42).

Despite the fact that his teachings concern ecstatic devotion to God, both Desai and Jagganath G. Gune, Madhavadasji's other primary "disciple," clearly indicate that their guru used *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma,* and various *kriyā* and *śuddhi* (purification) procedures to treat sick people who came to the Malsar ashram. Yoga is consistently and unequivocally referred to as a *technology*. As Desai's biographer puts it: "Much of the training was related to practical and pragmatic use of Yoga and the application of it in various situations of sickness and suffering. The cause of these problems had to be first studied and an intuitive skill of analysis had to be developed. . . . Thus the instructions continued from learning and observing to acting and resolving. A round of the 'sick ward' would end up with a wealth of information" (Rodrigues, 1982: 47). Although he was an enlightened mystic who is said to have performed miracles, including magical cures, Madhavadasji seems to have also been one of the very first to integrate much more down-to-earth physiological yoga into the rubric of nature cure as it—a distinctly European system of treatment—became a very popular form of modern alternative medicine in India at the turn of the century (Alter, 2000).

Many features of Desai's life before he met Madhavadasji are interesting, but it is important to note that after a serious bout of typhoid as a child he became an enthusiastic proponent of physical fitness, exercise, and wrestling during his teenage years in Amalsad.

> "The love for physical culture imbibed by Gulababhai's master continued. Mani [as Desai was known in school] got so fond of gymnastics and wrestling that he began to skip the moral science classes to get extra practice in the gymnasium. As he grew in strength his reputation also grew. Mani was hailed as a local Mr. Universe . . ." (Rodrigues, 1982: 20).

To whatever extent this interest grew directly out of the organization of school sports at the English School, it certainly set the stage for Desai's subsequent development of a program of athletic yoga and the incorporation of yoga physical fitness and ethics into the rubric of muscular Christianity, a broad-based, turn-of-the-century reform movement that linked morals, ethics, and character development to ideals of fitness, fairness, hard work, and self-improvement (Alter, 2004a; 2006; Hall, 2006; Knott, 2000).

To the extent that Desai's athleticism was encouraged by Gulababhai, the principal of the school in Amalsad, one can imagine that as a teenager

Madhavadasji might have had a similar experience some seventy years earlier when the Scottish Presbyterian Alexander Duff (1839a; 1839b; 1854) enthusiastically incorporated sports into the curriculum of his new college to build muscles and morals as a means by which to promote the development of Christianity among the middle-class youth of Calcutta. His legacy certainly had a discernable impact—although with recursive religious twists—on the thinking of two somewhat later, much more famous graduates of Scottish Church College, Narendranath Dutta (Swami Vivekananda), and Mukunda Lal Ghosh (Swami Yogananda).

When Desai left Bombay to join Madhavadasji at the ashram in Malsar, he started practicing *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*. Although the details of his training can be determined only indirectly, he apparently developed considerable skill and a high level of accomplishment. He became very adept, and it was on the basis of his ability to perform *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* exercises that he was drawn into the elite circles of Bombay. However, it was the publication of two books of devotional poetry—*Prabhubhakti* (*Devotion to the Lord*, 1917a) and *Hṛdayapuṣpāñjali* (*Prayers from the Heart*, 1917b)—and a Gujarati translation of Rabindranath Tagore's (1918) *Gitāñjali* that brought Desai to the attention of Sir Rustom Pestonji Masani, a prominent member of Bombay society. Masani invited Desai to his home in Versova, and by late 1918 Desai began teaching yoga to a small group, including Homi Dadina a wealthy member of the Pharsi community.

From the very outset, Desai conceptualized his teaching as directly related to health and healing. Founding documents of the Yoga Institute are in the form of medical admission records that show that students were enrolled as patients, Homi Dadina himself suffering from piles and "trouble with uric acid." This follows directly on what Desai had been trained to do in Malsar: "Many cases would be brought to the āśramā for relief and Paramahamsaji would pass on selected ones, at first very simple, to his beloved disciple. On one occasion a wealthy woman from Bombay came seeking help for pulmonary tuberculosis. The usual procedures were followed and one of the āśramā attendants gave the woman a clean piece of cloth (*vastra dhouti*) to swallow partially in order to remove mucous from the oesophagus and stomach" (Rodrigues, 1982: 47).

As letters indicate, Desai was often referred to as Homi Dadina's *yogi* or *swami* and was regarded as something of an exotic curiosity. However, treatment using the "technology" of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* proved effective to the extent that the demand for Desai's treatment began to increase. As several letters indicate, the elite of Bombay conceptualized yoga as a branch of nature cure or fit it into the larger bracket of *physical culture*, a fin-de-siècle term that encompassed a spectrum of different kinds of exercise and health regimens. As Morarji Jeram Trikamji puts it after five days of treatment at the Yoga Institute in early March of 1919: "My confidence in nature cure has been doubly

confirmed by the wonderful cure on myself within such a short period and I feel that the profound study of Swamiji Mani in the science of nature cure and Yoga . . . will not fail to [restore] health and vitality" (Rodrigues, 1982: 77). Following his success in Bombay, Desai and his benefactors made arrangements for a trip to the United States to promote the "technological Yoga renaissance" by building on the momentum of interest generated by Vivekananda and on sympathy for things Indian generated by Lala Lajpat Rai (Grewal & Banga, 2000; Gupta & Gupta, 1999), who was in exile in New York. Before departure, Desai—who was now referred to as Swami Yogananada—Dadina and Shapurji Sohrabji, another wealthy Pharsi patron, made a trip to Shantiniketan to receive the blessing of Rabindranath Tagore.

Desai and Dadina traveled to the United States via England, where they had very little success generating interest in "yoga therapeutics." However, after a very rough voyage they arrived in New York in mid-December 1919 and were reassured in their project through a chance meeting with Lala Lajpat Rai. Some indication of Desai's mood and motivation can be discerned from letters: "How much easier it would be if I can only induce those sleeping sages of the Himalayas to come to the West and open the eyes of the people who can never take anything for granted without direct perception. They need the bite of a snake before they can realize that it is a snake, and even then the trouble is that they will call it a scorpion. . . . In some ways, however, the Westerners are right. . . . They believe that in preference to a theory against a practice, they would rather have the practice. What is the use of knowing that fire burns, when you try to take a live coal in your hand" (Rodrigues, 1982: 90).

In the United States, Desai sought to promote yoga therapy as a practical form of alternative medicine. He did so by providing the proof of "direct perception" but also by invoking the power of the "sleeping sages." In a letter to Mrs. White, he wrote about yoga as the "Science of Sciences": "It is the oldest philosophy and science that has been known to humanity, formulated by those ancient forest sages of India. Think of five thousand years back when all the nations were in a state of barbarism, and this harmonious system of philosophy was preached in the Indian forests" (Rodrigues, 1982: 82). Significantly, Desai decided to capitalize on the American obsession with the extraordinary (see Syman, 2010) and agreed, in essence, to perform magic based on his yogic abilities to secure backing from the medical community for his goal of building a nature cure sanitarium. A number of leading physicians were invited to the flat where he was staying at Riverside Drive to watch as he inflated one lung at a time, changed the temperature of extremities at will, turned on lights with the electricity from his body, and stopped his watch.

Given how quickly Desai was able to secure help and support from a small cadre of individuals, including Dr. Charles W. Hack of the Life Extension Institute and Dr. A. G. Bell of the Hygiene Reference Board, his performances, along with his philosophical discourses, must have been persuasive. By late

spring 1920, a suitable location was found, and an estate was donated. On June 20, the Yoga Institute was formally opened in Harriman, near Tuxedo Park, New York. As in Bombay, the institute—also referred to as a yoga ashram—operated as a sanatorium, with Desai prescribing regimens of *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *dhautī,* and various *kriyās* under Hack's medical supervision.

In the light of his own magical performances, it is not surprising that the treatment provided by Desai at the Yoga Institute is characterized in different ways—rational and scientific based on the principles of yoga technology and also miraculous based on the mystical aura of Swami Yogananda's identity as a guru and swami. Although in some respects difficult to reconcile in practice, Desai was able to bring the rational and the magical together through the use of language and by invoking the wisdom of the past. Under the rubric of the institute he printed a brochure titled "Lost Science of 5000 Years Ago" and used this to promote a lecture tour.

While it is unclear how successful Desai was on the East Coast lecture circuit, titles of the talks that he gave indicate that he identified himself with—but sometimes sharply distinguished himself from—a range of different but closely related "New Age" philosophies, including spiritualism, Theosophy, New Thought (Morrissey, 2002), and Transcendentalism, as well as closely linked systems of health reform, primarily naturopathy, gymnastics, and physical fitness. Thus, he engaged directly with William J. Flagg's (1898) *Yoga; or Transformation* and met or corresponded with the religious studies scholar Dr. A. V. Jackson and Hereward Carrington of the Society for Psychical Research. Lectures titled "The Logic of Gymnastics" and "To Live a Hundred Years" as well as "How they Live in the Forests" seek to relate principles of yoga directly to the way Bernarr MacFadden and Benedict Lust were defining nature cure and physical culture.

In many respects the three years Desai spent in the southern Catskills of New York shaped his philosophy and his orientation toward the practice of yoga, even though his return to India in late 1922 set the stage for a kind of radically recursive reorientation of the subject. This reorientation began, in essence, through a chance encounter with a young scholar of Indian philosophy Surendranath Dasgupta who was returning to India from England onboard the same ship sailing from London to Bombay. Desai and Dasgupta, who had just published the first volume of *History of Indian Philosophy* (1922; see also 1927), had much to talk about. At the end of the voyage Dasgupta invited Desai to visit him in Chittagong where he was to be professor of Sanskrit and Bengali.

While Desai's experience in the United States—healing Catholic priests and teaching mysticism and rhythmic breathing to Boston Brahmins—seems exotic and out of the ordinary, it reflects the larger history of how holy men from India have been integrated into American religious experience (see Williamson, 2010). As Kirin Narayan points out, swamis and gurus like Yogendra

played an important if complicated and conflicted role in the history of American spirituality. They were regarded as occult, dangerous, and debauched practitioners of black magic by some and by others as sage wise men offering profound, exotic insights on transcendental consciousness and the nature of God. Against the counter-counterfactual of Vivekananda's physical presence and erudition at the Chicago World's Parliament of Religions 1893, many of the negative opinions against gurus and swamis carried over into the twentieth century from earlier missionary accounts—the bed of nails and hypnotic rope trick being iconic. But whatever the legacy of these prejudices, there was pervasive discomfort with what might be called the *body of the ascetic*—recall the magic performed at Riverside Drive—as this body was understood to animate flesh and blood holy men such as Desai.

An interesting footnote gives some indication of just how common it was for swamis to go on lecture tours during the roaring twenties. Having taken on the title of Swami Yogananda in the United States and using it as an official name upon his return to India, Desai confused his colleagues in New York when they read announcements that a Swami Yogananda was scheduled to give lectures on yoga and psychology in Philadelphia. This Swami Yogananda was, in all probability, Mukunda Lal Ghosh, recent graduate of Scottish Church College and future founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship (see Ghosh 1925, 1934, 1938), who had arrived in Boston from Calcutta in 1920. Ghosh gave lectures on the East Coast from 1921 through 1924, at which point he undertook a cross-country tour ending in Los Angeles. Apart from a brief return visit to India in the 1930s, he remained on the West Coast until his death in 1952.[1] His book *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Ghosh 1946) has become a classic text in the field of popular spiritualism and first-person comparative religion.

In his lectures, and with respect to the practical nature of yoga therapeutics, Yogendra was constantly faced with the problem of defining his uniqueness, claiming authority, demonstrating truth value, and at the same time distancing himself from pretenders of various sorts: one of the most notable was William Walker Atkinson (1902, 1908, 1922a, 1922b), who wrote many popular books on yoga under the pseudonyms Yogi Ramacharka (1903, 1904a, 1904b, 1906, 1909a, 1909b, 1931) and Swami Bhakta Vishita as well as the somewhat less prosaic Theron Q. Dumont. Although Yogendra took issue with "charlatans and demagogues" in the abstract, rarely if ever naming names, he was incensed by the way yoga was, in his view, being exploited, fetishized, mystified, and perverted by those with no direct, personal experience who willfully confused magic with healthy self-development and robust spirituality. In fact, however, there is little that clearly distinguishes Yogendra's writing from the likes of Atkinson, since many people were using yoga in various ways to define their own brand of hygienic spiritualism and metaphysical fitness.

As Kirin Narayan (1993: 495) rightly points out, many of the holy men who came to the United States in the early twentieth century returned again to India. Their encounter with various American traditions and audiences shaped their practice, and this recursive process has played an important role in the development of modern traditions. Upon his return, Yogendra put on *āsana* performances in Chittagong much as he had done in New York—causing a commotion among Dasgupta's middle-class educated colleagues—but he also set off along a track of discovery that follows the trajectory of yoga's purported precolonial history. It is important to understand this in relation to the problem of authenticity encountered in New York, as this brought underlying questions about the nature of Madhavadasji's experience into focus.

Returning to Malsar and Bombay to fulfill family duties following his father's illness, Yogendra became a businessman, marketing a product called YOCO book polish or varnish—sometimes confused with boot polish but a different product altogether—that prevented silverfish and termites from making short work of published material. Whatever else he learned from Dasgupta, the varnish used by the philosopher in the torpid climate southeast of Dhaka had direct, practical significance and textual value. Capitalizing on Dasgupta's innovative invention to preserve his personal library, Desai negotiated deals for the distribution and sale of YOCO, securing an international contract with Oxford University Press. Business deals required travel, and in early 1923 Desai used these trips around India to visit the Bohar and Tilla hermitages in the Punjab as well as sites in Lahore, Jammu, and Kashmir, where he hoped to find ancient yoga manuscripts.

While traveling and searching for manuscripts, Desai was also trying to secure support and find a new location for the Yoga Institute. An arrangement with the founder of Amritdhara Pharmacy in Lahore fell through when Vaid Bhushan *Paṇḍit* Thakur Datt Sharma, the famous *āyurvedic* innovator's son, died unexpectedly. Earlier Prabhanshankar Pattani, the diwan of Bhavnagar State, offered Desai property in Lonavala, but this offer was never formalized. Subsequently Jagganath G. Gune established Kaivalyadhama in the hill station between Pune and Bombay where the diwan had land holdings. Clearly Desai and Gune were in direct competition to secure patronage and public support for their very similar projects. At various points they stepped on each other's toes, Gune—referred to as an imposter by Desai's partisan biographer—being more persistent in his effort to secure support from politicians, princely estates, and captains of industry (Alter, 2004b).

Although it is not clear what Desai found by way of specific manuscripts while traveling in 1923, at the Bohar and Tilla hermitages he "came in contact with the oldest traditional institution of Goraksha and Matsyendra" (Rodrigues, 1982: 124). In a complex way these hermitages represent the illusive essence of the "lost science of five-thousand years"; they seem to locate, in time and space, the forest sages Desai had referenced in his New York lectures.

As detailed by David Gordon White (1996), Matsyendranath's disciple, Gorakhnath, may be given credit for founding the Nāth *sampradāya* in the thirteenth century. The Nāth yogis represent a tantric tradition of embodied alchemical practices that involve esoteric physiological procedures based on the principles of *sāṃkhya* and the internal hydraulic transmutation of channeled sexual fluids. What concerned the Nāth yogis was power, in both natural and supernatural manifestations (Pinch, 2006; White, 2003; 2009). They were bent on purposefully transforming reality. All of the primary *haṭhayoga* texts are directly associated with this alchemical tradition, which is a medieval permutation of older forms of Pāśupata and Kāpālika Śaivite asceticism (Lorenzen, 1972).

While the principles of *haṭhayoga* as internal alchemy have less than might be expected to do with what Desai did in the years following 1924, given that *haṭhayoga* has come to be synonymous with *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* as regimens of exercise, a brief consideration of the key elements is useful in gaining a perspective on the logic of Desai's inspired creativity as well as on the underlying, persistent contradictions in his role as a modern guru.

In essence, medieval *haṭhayoga* is concerned with magic and magical power and with using the body to change the nature of reality on all levels of experience. *Sāṃkhya* philosophy holds that the body is an evolute of natural elements that devolve through creation to increasing levels of complexity and impure amalgamation. This process reflects the flawed and contingent nature of the relationship between consciousness and things, as this relationship is animated by misperception. Following a logic that is manifest clearly in *sāṃkhya, haṭhayoga* seeks to stop the process of transformation that reflects flawed contingency. It does this by means of physiological exercises—on both the most gross and most subtle levels of materiality—that stop and reverse change and delineation. Thus, *haṭhayoga* involves stopping—by purposefully causing it to flow, mix, and transmute—the ejaculation of sexual fluids, stopping the breath, and stopping the flow of consciousness in the mind. As Eliade (1958) pointed out, in terms that are hard to articulate in a field clouded by the politics of Orientalism and nationalism, yoga is profoundly antihuman in the sense that human consciousness reflects the prejudice of humanism as the essence of being. Existential being is the problem. *Prāṇāyāma* involves breathing exercises to control the flow of breath to the point at which it can be stopped; in their numerical proliferation and endless permutation, *āsanas* delineate difference, working the body against the flow of the endless categorization of things. On another level, *āsanas* are said to produce—or perhaps just mirror—the requisite physiological strength and stamina to withstand the force of transcendent changelessness. Stopping the flow of semen stops reproduction, in the full mimetically materialist sense of the word, and captures the problem of consciousness, perception, and things.

As David Gordon White (1989) points out, gurus in the Nāth *sampradāya* are heavy—as the etymology of the title suggests they are—because in essence they embody the condensed, distilled, purified, and subtle form of semen, as semen is cognate with mercury in the natural world. "In terms of physical states, it is the perfecting of the body fluids, the transmutation of the body, and once again, the getting of density, impenetrability and immortality that is the ultimate end" (pp. 61–62). "Sperm is as essential to yoga as mercury is to alchemy. Only from sperm is it possible to obtain the *amṛta* by which the body is rejuvenated and made *siddha*. It is thus very valuable, and the necessity of having an optimum quantity of sperm in the body to fuel the psychochemical process is emphasized in every tradition" (p. 65). Although abstinence from sex obviously preserves sexual fluids, the *vajrolī mudrā* is a much more proactive active technique for refinement and purification. "The Tantric yogins conceived of the *vajrolī mudrā* as follows: by emitting one's semen into a woman and then drawing it back into the penis before withdrawal, one leaves behind the gross matter of the semen, and, in addition to the 'subtle' sperm, the energy of the blood inside the *yoni* or *garbha* is also drawn into the yogin. This is exactly what takes place in the purification, etc. of mercury in sulphur" (p. 66).

While obviously obscure and arcane, the primary *haṭhayoga* texts are unambiguously technical; indeed, their apparent obscurity is, in part, a function of descriptive literalism, a paradox at the very heart of magic. Thus, the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* provides instructions on how to wash the alimentary canal, perform urethral suction, and cleanse the sinuses, esophagus, and stomach by using water, cotton cord, and cloth. Along with the instruction for these procedures, the medieval texts explain that practice based on secret knowledge will produce magical powers, immortality, and, perhaps most significantly for the modern case in question, good health, immunity from disease, and cures for various ailments.

Unless one can, with complete honesty—and that is the rub—claim to be a perfected immortal and immune from all diseases or to have achieved a state of consciousness wherein one's continued state of being is just a reflection of the will to help others transcend the entanglement of reality, which is the existential if not essential heaviness of the guru's burden, it is difficult to know how to read the medieval literature. If *haṭhayoga* were simply nonsensical duplicity based on the cynical exploitation of credulity, the texts would not matter; *vajrolī mudrā* would not exist to be dismissed, and reproduced across time through a series of perverse erasures, edits, hints and indications. *Vajrolī mudrā* is for humans what YOCO is for texts; both come up short against time-bound consciousness.

In a general sense, albeit indirectly, Desai's insistence on being a householder yogi references the inherent structural logic of procedures such as *vajrolī mudrā* and the sexual alchemy of *haṭhayoga* more generally. In 1927

Desai married and settled in Bulsar. During this time he had children and focused on family matters and business but also continued to work on several yoga-related writing projects. He published several short, inexpensive booklets—*Breathing Methods, Way to Live,* and *Mental Health*—as the Yoga Health Series. In conjunction with this he also wrote several longer books that are very similar in content but appear under different titles: *Rhythmic Exercises* and *Physical Education*. Based on his research experience, *Rhythmic Exercises* contains a simplified program of *āsanas*. It was reviewed and promoted in the first of Bernarr McFadden's exceedingly popular magazines: *Physical Culture*. "This work combines the rarest features of the ancient and modern gymnastics as well as the Eastern and Western physical culture. Here is a scientific course of daily exercises based on the rhythm of breath. It is simple, scientific and workable" (Rodrigues, 1982: 139).

Following on the publication of *Rhythmic Exercises*, Desai continued writing and befriended Dr. John W. Fox, a medical missionary who was put in charge of the Brethren mission hospital in Bulsar. Fox showed great interest in Desai's ideas about yoga and provided helpful medical advice on a manuscript titled *Yoga Personal Hygiene*. Significantly, while they worked on the manuscript Fox invited Desai to observe his surgical work at the hospital, thus allowing Desai to further develop expertise in physiology and healing based on earlier apprenticeship with Madhavadasji and Hack's supervision in New York. *Yoga Personal Hygiene* was published in 1930, two years after *Rhythmic Exercises*, and was more directly concerned with the therapeutic benefits of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*. By 1933, while the Yoga Institute was still located in Bulsar, Desai reinaugurated the magazine *Yoga*—originally published in 1931—which carried articles on *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* as well as on Desai's interpretation of yoga philosophy applied to modern life. This concern with the applied relevance of yoga philosophy to every day life is also reflected in several other books such as *Life Problems*, which contains pithy epigrams on issues such as love, honesty, thrift, anger, and prejudice and on more general topics like religion, politics, and society at large. *Educational Review* compared him to Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, pointing out that the collection of epigrams was iconoclastic: "they are like bombs, intellectual bombs, destroying the old fogyism of reactionaries and hypocrites" (Rodrigues, 1982: 161).

After the death of his father in 1935, Desai made plans to move the Yoga Institute to Bombay, soon finding a location at "Beach View", Chowpatty. At this time the institute's publishing enterprise was at full strength and *Yoga*, in exchange with other similar publications, was going into worldwide circulation. Desai also began to invite public figures, such as the Sanskrit scholar A. B. Gajendragadkar, to give lectures under the auspices of the institute. In turn, he gave lectures at various venues, including the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute where he spoke on "Yoga for the Householders." As the national and international reputation of the Yoga Institute expanded, there was

need for more space. This again brought Desai into direct competition with Gune who was, by the late 1930s, very closely allied with both local and national politicians. Ultimately Gune, who had built an institute for the scientific study of yoga in Lonavala, in the hills between Pune and Bombay, succeeded in pressing his claim to establish a branch of Kaivalyadhama in Kandivali. It was not until after the war and independence in 1947 that Desai was able to build an expanded institute at a new location in Santa Cruz.

In outline and essence the developmental history of the Yoga Institute shows that Desai was very successful in attracting national and international attention and in promoting practical yoga training for health and education. Very explicitly—although with embodied contradiction, given his robes, long hair, and flowing beard—Desai spurned the designation guru, which he felt carried a heavy weight of formal responsibility and had been sullied by all manner of hypocrites and pretenders throughout history. To some extent the formal activities of the institute directly reflect Desai's identity as a modernizer of traditional yoga. Although he sometimes claimed to be preserving the purity of an ancient, classical tradition, most of what he wrote and did reflects the purposeful modification of practice to fit *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* into the rubric of therapy and rhythmic exercise. Like Gune he conducted experiments on the physiological effects of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, reporting on these in *Yoga* and in the new editions of his original books, using the results in his clinical work with patients who continued to come to the institute in large numbers.

It is important to note that up to the present the Yoga Institute has continued to evolve and develop as a modern center for research and teaching on yoga. To a large extent Dr. Jayadeva Yogendra and Smt. Hansaji Jayadeva Yogendra embody the modernity of this tradition. As the directors of the institute they have fully adapted Desai's innovations into a modern institutionalized system and represent the complex and dynamic ways the ineffable insight and authority of a guru is integrated into a spectrum of educational formats: workshops, camps, teacher training programs, and corporate seminars.

Desai's first book offering a course of daily, regimented practice appeared in 1928. By 1991 the twenty-fourth reprint was published under the title *Yoga Āsanas Simplified,* and the institute claimed that over 100,000 copies of the book were in circulation. Although Desai's book is not nearly as well known as B. K. S. Iyengar's (1966), the trajectory of popularity reflected in the sequence and rapidity of reprinting traces a line from the early twentieth-century development of physical culture and health reform up through the phenomenal diffusion of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* into the matrix of late twentieth-century self-improvement and globalized fitness branding and marketing. In most respects *Yoga Asanas Simplified* is written in the language of early twentieth-century American health reform. Desai's interlocutors are Bernarr McFadden, both directly and indirectly through the magazine *Physical Culture*

and through books and pamphlets such as *Brain Energy Building and Nerve-Vitalizing Course* (1916; see also 1895, 1900, 1919, 1935) and *Lecture on the Value of Air in Strength Building* (1909); Walter L. Pyle, who wrote *A Manual of Personal Hygiene: Proper Living upon a Physiological Basis* (1917); George Trumbull Ladd, who published *Elements of Physiological Psychology* (1911); William Lee Howard, who wrote *Breathe and Be Well* (1916a, see also 1910, 1915, 1916b); and R. Tait McKenzie, who published *Exercise in Education and Medicine* (1909). In dialogue with writers such as these, Desai's concern with the link between physiology and both mental and moral hygiene is unambiguously modern, in a distinctly early twentieth-century mode, which is visually reflected in the author as a young man wearing a one-piece bathing costume performing rhythmic *āsana*.

Desai's career from the late 1930s up until his death in 1989 also had a different trajectory that is captured both in his appearance as a sage old man with long hair and beard but also in the way he tried to reconnect mind and body, which had a way of drifting apart and then converging in different ways over the course of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. Desai's vision of yoga as an idealized form of practice was based on the principle of integrated, holistic synthesis and positive, developmental evolution.

As the physiological features of *asana* and *prāṇāyāma* training became more institutionalized and as their performance in various contexts came to define an extremely popular articulation of public culture, Desai grew increasingly concerned that yoga was being misrepresented and misunderstood. This is not to say that he articulated a clear and consistent critique of modern practice but simply that he expressed frustration in the complex, paradoxical, and contradictory role he was forced to play in relation to what he wanted to do on various different levels—practical, financial, and philosophical—what people wanted him to do, and what he was forced to stand for in the public sphere of metaphysical fitness: a discursive space that he played a prominent role in shaping and expanding.

Dogging this trajectory of postcolonial Orientalism are the problems of history, histories of ideas that shape popular, profligate, and more intellectual public understandings of yoga's origins, and the search for origins and authenticity. Toward the very end of his career, Desai turned to the *Yogasūtras* to define a point of reference for his understanding of integrated, evolutionary synthesis. However, his turn to the *Yogasūtras* at the end of his career was in fact a return, for in 1922 he ordered a copy from Oriental Publishers of Lahore and had it sent to him in New York. He first read it while staying at the Union League of Philadelphia and found that it "had surprising similarity to his own thinking" and that he knew the content of this classic work before reading it (Rodrigues, 1982: 222). As Desai's biographer suggests—closing the recursive loop of origins, the history of ideas, and Orientalism—an iconic guru in the tradition of classical yoga had identified a true disciple.

At the same time Desai continued to teach his brand of rhythmic exercises and a breathing technique called *Yogendra pranayama* (Rodrigues, 1982: 204). He also established other name brands: Yogendra Laya and Yogendra Nispanda Bhava (p. 206). He conducted extensive experiments on yoga efficacy, including a series on the treatment of asthma sponsored by a commission set up by the Government of India to establish the scientific basis for the practice of indigenous medicine and to evaluate medical claims (p. 212). However heavily involved in this enterprise and in the project of modernizing yoga Desai was, he remained deeply skeptical, as several books of his collected philosophical essays make clear. Several brief quotations from *Yoga Essays* (1978) and *Facts about Yoga* (1975) provide counterpoints to the many points of contradiction in his weighty career.

> Gurus who deal with yoga specifics are imposters either by design or accident, and in either case do not represent classic yoga which subscribes to the cycle of cause and effect. (1978: 157)
>
> What can a so-called yogin who is neither truthful nor free from emotional and moral depravities represent to the ECG and EEG instrumentation, when exhibiting *āsana*s, *prāṇāyāma*, *kriyā*s, *dhyāna* and the oft-quoted *Samādhi*? Of what use are such applications and evaluations based upon dismembered aspects of Yoga which are torn out of context and follow no traditional or classic methodology? As in the human body, none of the parts of Yoga are without relation to the others. . . . It is not for the modern man to upset this balance and call it Yoga; it is better that it be known by any other name so that the real image of Yoga not be distorted in the *pot-pourri* of modern progress. (1975: 46)

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NOTES

1. A further example of how crowded and confusing the field was is as follows. From 1919 through 1923 there was supposedly a Swami Yogendra Mastamani living on Long Island and teaching yoga in New York (Leviton, 1990). He is said to have founded an American branch of Kaivalyadhama, an institute that was established by another one of Paramahansa Madhavadasji's disciples, Swami Kuvalayananda. It is unlikely that Yogendra Mastamani is, in fact, Shri Yogendra, since at the time there was no "Shri Yogendra," only two different Swami Yoganandas. In any case there is probably no direct connection between the (mythical?) Yogendra Mastamani and Kaivalyadhama, since Kuvalayananda's institute was not founded in India until 1924.